The Tears of a Clown: Masculinity and Comedy in Contemporary American Narratives

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THE TEARS OF A CLOWN:
MASCULINITY AND COMEDY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVES

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[Insert poignant dedication here.]
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ABSTRACT

_The Tears of a Clown_ questions the pervasive narrative that men have begun only recently to realize the limitations society places on them as men. Feminist scholars of masculinity contend men now are starting to see masculinity as an unattainable ideal that restricts, oppresses, and frustrates them. This questionable claim functions as a rhetorical move to create simultaneously a space for male voices in feminist discourse and to validate masculinity studies as a field of inquiry, which seemingly needs no legitimization when one considers the popularity of gender studies in the academy and the value such work can bring to our understanding of politics, history, culture, and society. My study uses an analysis of comic texts to glean information about the fluctuating ideological script of postwar American masculinities. My contention is that the comic—comedy, humor, and laughter—functions as a viable way for men to redirect and sublimate the fear, anxiety, and anger they experience as men. Since many associate this strategy for dealing with emotion as “kidding around,” few people, even within the academy, take humor and laughter seriously. Therefore, it does not betray masculinity’s requirement that men remain stoic and instead serves a vital social function. By close reading comic texts, I reveal the diverse ways male protagonists employ this strategy, and in the process, I reveal the importance of the comic in understanding the relationship between the male subject and society.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Now if I appear to be carefree
It's only to camouflage my sadness
And honey to shield my pride I try
To cover this hurt with a show of gladness
— Smokey Robinson and the Miracles,
“The Tears of a Clown,” 1967

The January 2007 issue of Vanity Fair featured a “provocation” by perennial gadfly
Christopher Hitchens entitled, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.” A coy Hitchens poses the question,
“Why are women, who have the whole male world at their mercy, not funny?” Despite the title’s
underlying misogyny, the essay argues that women ultimately wield power in heterosocial
interactions, which Hitchens also presumes are implicitly heterosexual; hence, humor is less vital
to women’s everyday conduct than men’s:

If I am correct about this, which I am, then the explanation for the superior funniness of
men is much the same as for the inferior funniness of women. Men have to pretend, to
themselves as well as to women, that they are not the servants and supplicants. Women,
cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates. (“Why”)

Hitchens suggests that men need to develop senses of humor as a socializing strategy to woo
women, while women themselves have no practical need for such strategies, since they are
judged primarily on their physical appearance (“Why”). Despite the heteronormativity and sly
essentialism of these remarks, Hitchens may be onto something regarding humor and gender.
True, he does perpetuate the widespread conflation of biological “sex” with sociocultural
“gender,” but his comments on men’s increased production of humor may insinuate that this
form of verbal play is a popular and acceptable form of social behavior for men, though certainly
not unique to them. One may even argue Hitchens’s comic tone is itself evidence of insecurity
regarding the power women allegedly possess in social situations.

Social science research supports, to a degree, this gender divide regarding humor.
Investigation as the “world’s leading scientific expert on laughter,” reviews research into gender
and humor. It concludes women laugh regardless of their audience, but men demonstrate
restraint, feeling more comfortable laughing in homosocial situations (28). When speaking with
women, men limited their laughter, though not necessarily their use of humor. “In summary,” Provine notes, “females are the leading laughers, but males are the best laugh getters” (28, Provine’s emphasis). Furthermore, a study of how children used humor in Belgium, the United States, and Hong Kong found—across all three cultures—males were “the principal instigators of humor, and this tendency was already present by six years of age, when joking first appears” (29). Though Provine does not clarify such a point, one may presume that the ability to provoke laughter is a skill one acquires through social interactions and mimicry, especially considering the delayed development of humor-producing capabilities until around the age of six.

One should steer clear of essentialist notions of the relationship between gender and humor when interpreting this research. A more precise version may be, “Studies have shown subjects identifying as masculine tend to provoke laughter better than their feminine counterparts, while those same counterparts laugh more than the masculine subjects who tend to provoke the laughter in the first place.” Generally speaking, in these heterosocial interactions, men feel more encouraged and more comfortable to create and deploy humor while women seem more likely to respond to such humor with laughter (whether they do so because they have better senses of humor, feel an obligation to be polite to the attempted joker, or are less obligated socially to restrain the physical “dis-order” prompted by laughter in unclear). From the disparate texts mentioned above—Hitchens’s casual social analysis and Provine’s review of scientific research—I draw two conclusions: (1) many men find humor to be an acceptable mode for social interaction, both with other men and with women, and (2) men tend to restrain their laughter in a cautious manner that may suggest the exhibition of laughter is somehow deliberate, strategic, or closely monitored.

Before proceeding any further, I wish to clarify the terms I will be employing during my discussion of the comic, as often these terms become quite slippery, even within humor studies. Paul Lewis emphasizes the need to delineate the terminology in the critical study of humor (Comic 8), and I follow his lead. Very simply put, I draw the following distinction when interpreting the comic in film and literature: comedy is a genre, humor is a mode, and laughter is an act. Comedy is a broad umbrella term for narrative works that feature humor and follow a

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1 I break here from other discussants of comedy, like Geoff King, who argue, “Comedy in film, generally, is probably best understood as a mode, rather than as a genre, if these various different degrees of comedy are to be taken into account. Comedy is a mode—a manner of presentation—in which a variety of different materials can be approached, rather than any relatively more fixed or localized quality” (2, King’s emphasis). Similarly, T. G.A.
comic trajectory. In line with this comic spirit, comedies usually lead to an optimistic, reassuring conclusion—the “happy ending.”

Aristotle’s brief discussion of comedy in the extant copies of Poetics define it as “an intimation of characters of a lower type […] the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain” (59). To this end, comedy features a playful, harmless distortion of reality, one which focuses on characters who nevertheless remainrecognizable and empathetic. For Northrup Frye, comedy mocks a character’s lack of self-awareness; ultimately, the “social reconciliation” of such an individual is comedy’s objective (452). I favor Gerald Mast’s explanation: “The comedy (a) upholds the values and assumptions of society, urging the comic character to reform his ways and conform to the societal expectations; or (b) maintains that the antisocial behavior of the comic character is superior to society’s norms” (20). As one sees, “comedy,” therefore, may have different aims, but is always grounded in the ideology of its culture of origin.

The OED Online offers the following etymology for “comedy”: “a compound, either of καθαρος revel, merry-making, or of its probable source, κόμη village + ὀιδός singer, minstrel” (“comedy, n. 1”). This suggested combination of “revelry,” “village,” and “singer” highlights two important aspects of comedy as a genre: celebration and community. Traditionally, comedy explores, tests, tweaks, but ultimately celebrates the values of a culture. Even though it may achieve some success elsewhere, this genre is always initially situated in the culture from which it originates, and, as a result, it is further situated within a time period and geographical space. For example, a comedy that fares well in Oslo in 1902 may not be as well received or understood in Stockholm in 1902 or in Oslo in 2002. This fluid reaction to a work of comedy makes comedy difficult to study at times, since jokes may be esoteric or topical, and references can become dated and irrelevant. This same difficulty also explains why we must study comedy, and it makes comedy a rich resource for analyzing what Raymond Williams has called “the structures of

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Nelson separates comedy and satire: “The first is that the difference between satire and comedy is best described in terms of reader-response. If your laughter contains an element of anger or moral disgust, you are responding to the wit or humor as satire. If these elements are absent, you are responding to it as comedy” (25). Jan Walsh Hokenson admittedly alternates between “comedy” and “comic mode” (20). In my study, satire is a mode. I favor viewing comedy as a genre because I do not view the inevitable deviation from genre conventions as a reason to discard comedy’s designation as a genre. Furthermore, like André Bazin, I see “the comic” as a mode that operates within comedy (qtd in Horton 3). I feel separating the two is a useful delineation.

2 The obvious exception here is black comedy, which tends to aim for an unsettling, inconclusive ending. For example, Stanley Kubrick’s dark comedy Dr. Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb ends with the destruction of the world, ironically contrasted with Vera Lynn’s song, “We’ll Meet Again.”
feeling.” Therefore, a historicized close analysis of comic texts can mutually inform the personal and social histories of the given period as well as the text itself. I agree with Linda Hutcheon that access to the past is “entirely conditioned by textuality” (16); therefore, we can create what Van Wyck Brooks calls a “usable past” not just for writers, but for society. Underlying most comedies are its culture’s values and idiosyncrasies, idols and foes, hopes and fears. From a structuralist perspective, genres such as comedy negotiate basic tension within a society; the resolution indicates what the text’s culture of origin believes, decries, and wishes to simultaneously present and perpetuate. Such qualities led influential film theorist André Bazin to observe, “Comedy was in reality the most serious genre in Hollywood, in the sense that it reflected, through the comic mode, the deepest moral and social beliefs of American life” (qtd. in Horton 3).

Perhaps the defining “style” of comedy, humor operates as a mode—a mood, really—and, as a result, is the most difficult quality to pin down within “the comic.” Humor aims to amuse, but what amuses one individual may elude, confuse, or even anger another. Consequently, humor must be read closely alongside the “structures of feeling” to determine adequately how it serves the values and attitudes being elevated and celebrated within the text. Popular sentiment hastily defines humor as “that which causes laughter.” This definition is only partially true, and modern theorists of laughter, such as Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, have complicated this simplistic understanding. Humor, in its attempt to please, reassure, and entertain, may inspire laughter, but it also may only inspire a feeling of mirth or a smile. An

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3 Raymond Williams acknowledges defining “structures of feeling” is difficult to define, so I excerpt his definition here: “‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize the distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology.’ It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences. An alternative definition would be structures of experience” (132, Williams’s emphasis).

4 Scholars like film historian Thomas Schatz have embraced the structuralist understanding of myth to contend genres, in the words of Sarah Berry, use “their narrative patterns […] to temporarily resolve particular cultural tensions. However, as [Claude] Lévi-Strauss suggests, such stories only provide a temporary resolution of these tensions and therefore must be told repeatedly in various ways” (214).

5 These theories of laughter are, nevertheless, theories. Robert R. Provine remarks that Bergson’s theory “show[s] clear symptoms of philosopher’s disease—an overly optimistic estimate of the power of naked reason and a dependence on anecdotal evidence” (16). Provine concedes, and I agree, that Bergson’s true contribution to the theory of laughter is his emphasis on the social aspect of laughter.
audible laugh is not necessarily the end goal of humor (or comedy, for that matter), nor is it always a sign of humor’s presence. In order to glean its social significance, laughter must be understood as related to and separated from humor.

As Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick assert, “like all cultural practices, laughter has a history, a history that reflects tensions of class, race, gender, and sexuality” (269). The polyvalence of laughter makes it worth investigating because laughter is not simply a sign of pleasant approval. As we will see in the following chapters, laughter may be indicative of frustration, anger, resistance, dissent, the regulation of others, or relief. Also, unlike humor, one can easily discern laughter’s presence in texts by the author’s literal use of the word “laugh” (or its conjugations) and its various synonyms, like a “giggle,” “snicker,” “guffaw,” “cackle,” “chuckle,” “chortle,” and so on.

This dissertation proposes, therefore, that a subject’s use of humor and laughter can function as an illuminating act of personal and social behavior, rich in meaning regarding his or her identity, community, and understanding of the relationship between the two. American society, founded on classical liberal notions of the individual from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, requires a collective effort for maintenance and perpetuation. Laughter can be one means for understanding how the subject negotiates the basic tension between a belief in individual autonomy and the societal need for a communal identity. These struggles over maintaining one’s independence and the collective nature of ideals like nationalism lay at the heart of American masculine identity.

In his outline of American masculinity, Robert Brannon identified four major tenets, the third being “The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance” (12). He situates stoicism and strength, both physical and emotional, as central to American performances of masculinity. The hegemonic ideal dictates that men’s expression of emotion is effeminate and, therefore, unacceptable. I contend, however, that humor and laughter, because of their connotations as playful and “not serious,”6 serve as socially acceptable means for expressing the fears and frustrations of American masculinity. Through an understanding of theories of laughter, one can interpret men, or at least male characters in literature, as using humor and laughter to draw attention to and negotiate the inevitable tension between the unstable, temporal

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6 This perspective on comedy seems rather ancient and staid; even Aristotle remarks, “Comedy has had no history, because it was not at first treated seriously” (59). Unsurprisingly, comedy receives roughly a few paragraphs in Poetics.
ideals of their personal visions of ideal masculinity (since these definitions change quite drastically based on various intersecting factors) and the lived experience of being a man. Since using humor is analogous to “kidding around,” its implications escape extended critical inquiry; if we challenge such a hasty dismissal, we can wrestle with the very real conflicts in men’s lives, conflicts which bare consequences for other men, women, children, and even larger political and social dynamics.

Society has not always accepted laughter or its alleged curative potential (i.e., the folk wisdom that “laughter is the best medicine”); in fact, the concern over the ethics and implications of laughter has a complex history.\(^7\) In a well-known series of letters, Lord Chesterfield instructed his son, Philip, on how to be a proper gentleman. One of the most often cited of these letters dates March 9 1748, in which the father warns his son about the impropriety of laughter:

Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it: and I could heartily wish that you may often be seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter; they are above it: they please the mind, and give a cheerfulness to the countenance. But it is low buffoonery, or silly accidents, that always excite laughter; and that is what people of sense, and breeding should show themselves above. (72)

Certainly Lord Chesterfield spoke for himself and not for his society as a whole; James Boswell recorded Samuel Johnson’s famous criticism that the letters taught the “morals of a whore” (qtd. in Boswell 144). What this passage demonstrates, however, is a connection between laughter and masculinity. For Lord Chesterfield, a man laughing is unsightly because he appears foolish, poorly bred, and common. A man of good breeding—that is, an aristocrat like Lord Chesterfield himself—does not laugh because when one does laugh, it shows a lack of control over one’s body. Furthermore, laughter reveals a body out of order—a body that is transgressive, disruptive, and disrespectful to social propriety. Chesterfield’s understanding of masculinity requires restrained emotion, manifested physically in a controlled, rigid posture. Men’s dominant position in society requires that they have control not only over their emotions, but their bodies as well.

\(^7\) For more on this history, consult Stott, pp. 127-145.
Nearly three centuries later, Lord Chesterfield’s concern remains remarkably timely. While society is certainly more accepting of a man laughing in public, there is still a sense of proper time and place as well as a proper manner of laughing. The President may laugh, but it seems preferable for him to smile politely, and he certainly must not show other signs of “disorder,” like crying. One need only remember the derision President Bill Clinton faced when he cried in public, prompting Barbara Gunnell to write in the *New Statesman*, “should the president of the most powerful nation in the history of the world do his grieving so publicly? Great leaders should surely be more resolute and stoical” (“Tears”). Such expectations of one’s leaders echo the expectations of masculinity, too. Despite this prejudice, possessing a good sense of humor—that is, the ability to provoke laughter—is seen as manly, as demonstrated by Christopher Hitchens’s aforementioned essay. Humor and masculine performance seem to be strongly related, as many contemporary comedians maintain a distinctly “masculine” persona: they drink, they smoke, they curse, and they often womanize. They’re *cool*; they’re *men*—and proud of it.⁸ Examples would include Richard Pryor, George Carlin, Eddie Murphy, Andrew Dice Clay, Ron White, Bill Hicks, Sam Kinison, Denis Leary, and Chris Rock. These men are among the most successful comics of the past forty years, yet while they inspire laughter in their audience, they rarely laugh themselves, aside from the occasional pause marked with a self-satisfied chuckle. Their penetrating gaze suggests their ability to cause others to laugh and lose corporeal control of themselves; this ability empowers them.

I do not intend for the preceding statements to discount the role humor and laughter play in women’s lives; rather, that focus is outside the scope of this dissertation, though it is worthy of investigation. In fact, a formidable body of criticism exists on the topic, fueled by feminism in the latter part of the twentieth century. Work by Nancy Walker, Regina Barreca, Zita Dresner, and Linda Morris (to name but a few) effectively explores the history of women’s humor, recovers “lost” women humorists, and demonstrates the political and social potential of humor to either resist oppression or to further women’s interests. Though this work has admirable intellectual intentions, the political agenda underlying and inspiring it often muddles its contribution. Many scholars’ conclusions about “women’s humor” are exclusionary and

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⁸ Admittedly, some recent comedienne, like Sarah Silverman and Lisa Lampanelli, blur the lines between a traditionally feminine physical appearance and a style of humor that is savage and scathing, a style which is often seen as masculine. I would dispel any suggestion that humor is gendered, though; I raise this point only to avoid an essentialist misstep that would suggest *only* men can adopt this persona.
essentialist, serving their feminist ideals more than the material itself. For example, Regina Barreca writes,

    without subverting the authority of her own writing by breaking down convention completely, the woman comic writer displays a difference code of subversive thematics than her male counterparts. Her writing is characterized by the breaking of cultural and ideological frames. Her use of comedy is dislocating, anarchic and, paradoxically, unconventional. (“Introduction” 9-10).

Of course, not all women’s humor is radical or even progressive, and statements like these disingenuously privilege this brand of humor as “authentic” women’s humor. Some humor by women is, in fact, quite conservative, celebrating the status quo and what some feminists have called the “domestic ideology.” Consequently, the feminist revision of American humor has excluded select women writers because of their politics; Dorothy Parker, Anita Loos, Moms Mabley, Lily Tomlin, and Whoopi Goldberg were lauded, while domestic humorists like Shirley Jackson, Phyllis McGinley, Alice Childress, Erma Bombeck, and Jean Kerr were overlooked or received considerably less critical attention than their more politically “digestible” peers. 9 Betty Friedan memorably jeered the latter writers in her landmark book, The Feminine Mystique. While she freely admitted they were “good craftsmen,” she scathingly remarked that the “Housewife Writers” were “like Uncle Tom, or Amos and Andy” (109). For Friedan, these women hypocritically glorified the domestic life while leading quite successful careers outside the home: “Shirley Jackson makes the beds, loves and laughs at her son—and writes another book. Jean Kerr’s plays are produced on Broadway. The joke is not on them” (110, Friedan’s emphasis). It seems the tables have turned now, as none of the five women receive the critical attention they deserve, while figures like Parker continue to experience critical popularity. 10

Despite the considerable amount of work on “women’s humor,” limited attention has been paid to masculinity and comedy. This is not to suggest male comedians and humorists have

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9 As of 2012, Shirley Jackson’s work remains in print, largely because of her widely anthologized story, “The Lottery” and two rather dark novels, The Haunting of Hill House and We Have Always Lived in the Castle. Alice Childress and Erma Bombeck are still in print, for the most part, but one would be hard pressed to find Jean Kerr and Phyllis McGinley, even though the latter won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1961. None of these women has yet been the subject of a critical biography, despite the popularity they enjoyed while alive.

10 Dorothy Parker remains the most “popular”; Catherine Keyser’s Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modern Magazine Culture (Rutgers University Press, 2010) and Sean Zwagerman’s Wit’s End: Women’s Humor as Rhetorical & Performative Strategy (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010) comprise two of the most recent critical discussions of Parker’s work.
not been studied—far from it. But how men as men (as Michael Kimmel puts it) use humor has been largely neglected as a revelatory discourse for gender studies, at least in literary criticism. Searches of “masculinity” and “humor” as well as “manhood” and “humor” into the MLA Bibliography provided less than 20 combined results; “women” and “humor” yielded over 300. The only monograph I have come across is John Mayfield’s Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humor in the Old South, which precedes the time period I wish to focus on in this dissertation. At the outset, Mayfield states, “This is a book about values and identity in the Old South. It uses ideas about manhood to examine those values, and it uses humor to explore manhood” (xiii). While my study shares an interest in how humor informs our understanding of manhood, I’m equally interested in the role of comedy and the performative act of laughter. Furthermore, Mayfield’s study is a historical analysis that makes little use of gender or comic theory; my intervention argues for the value of both in understanding the dynamics of gender and the comic. I propose integrating philosophical work on humor into masculinity studies to offer an insightful re-evaluation of selected comic texts by men since World War II. By carrying out this endeavor, I hope to not only offer new readings of these novels and films, but to show the various anxieties men have experienced in this time frame. Also, I hope to challenge the idea that men are only recently coming to realize the pressures placed on them by patriarchy, a system that actively creates and perpetuates the masculine ideal. While I do not intend to pinpoint the moment when men become cognizant of this anxiety over the performance of masculinity, I do hope to show that the end of World War II marks an intriguing rupture in men’s understanding of themselves as gendered beings within American society. The comic becomes a fruitful means of examining this shift because, as Sara Crangle recently observed, “Two world wars and a lengthy economic recession in the first half of the twentieth century may well account for the shift from venerating the triumphant laughter of the self to a broader intellectual contemplation of the interrelationships between self, other, and laughter” (111). How writers create comic moments, how first person narrators use humor, and how laughter as a physical phenomenon manifests itself in the chosen texts are three points of entry for such an analysis of gender and humor.

A survey of the philosophical discussion of laughter offers a useful starting point for interpreting how humor and laughter function in literature. As John Morreall’s 1987 anthology The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor shows, the theoretical investigation into the nature of laughter and humor is nearly as old as philosophy itself. Morreall’s text includes excerpts from
ancient Greece through contemporary America, and many well-known philosophers—including Plato, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, and George Santayana—have contributed their own interpretation of what René Descartes deemed “this inarticulate and explosive voice we call laughter” (22). Yet, despite this extended critical treatment, the subject of laughter (and similarly humor and comedy) is still not taken as seriously as drama. The binary of comedy and tragedy has been unfairly aligned with frivolity and solemnity, respectively, and this prejudice continues to this day. Awards committees for literature and film rarely recognize humorists and comedians, and comedic actors seem second-rate in terms of accolades when compared to their dramatic counterparts.

Prior to the late nineteenth century, most theories of laughter fell into two general categories: superiority and incongruity. Plato’s Republic is an early proponent of superiority theory, as Socrates concludes one should avoid laughter because it amounts to taking pleasure in the pain of others (13). The German word schadenfreude echoes this sentiment. For my purposes, however, the most useful articulation appears in Thomas Hobbes’s 1651 treatise Leviathan. Extending Socrates’s concern, Hobbes writes:

_Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able._

(52, Hobbes’s emphasis)

For Hobbes, laughter is the malicious celebration of one’s sense of superiority over another. Of course, this superiority is entirely subjective, requiring an idiosyncratic sense of dominance over an Other. This articulation, however, is particularly helpful in terms of laughter and identity because by laughing at another person in the Hobbesian sense, one unconsciously defines him- or herself against that Other, thereby revealing how one self-identifies. When the white leaders of the Southern town laugh at the black teenage males clamoring for coins in the battle royale scene in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, they define themselves as being _not_ black, _not_ teenagers,
and *not* poor. Coincidentally, this shared mirth at the expense of the black teenagers creates community among the men, which I will come to momentarily. Before that, however, I wish to address the second category of laughter: incongruity.

According to John Morreall, incongruity theory surfaces in the writings of Frances Hutcheson, but Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer help to more fully articulate it (26, 45, 51). In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes,

> In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.* (47, Kant’s emphasis)

Rather than laughing derisively, therefore, Kant proposes one laughs over his or her inability to logically explain a disruption in order, an incongruity. Because one’s sense of rational order has been challenged, but that challenge’s threat to the long-term order has been diminished or ended, one can laugh as a means of acknowledging the absurdity. For example, if a penguin was to enter a classroom, but then was to turn around and leave, the threat to rational order would be defused, and one can laugh out of safely being in a state of reflection over the previous confusion. Laughter, in this sense, is a bodily phenomenon that allows one to handle unexpected ruptures in the expectations of the everyday.

The turn of the twentieth century saw two significant developments in the theorization of laughter and humor: Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* and Sigmund Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, in 1900 and 1905, respectively. Although his long essay is entitled *Laughter*, Bergson concerns himself with what he calls “the comic spirit” (2). He does not work toward a concrete definition of laughter, though, because he views it as a “living thing” (2). The comic is distinctly human, yet it has “no greater foe than emotion” (4); to this end, laughter appeals instead to intelligence (5). Unlike earlier theories, laughter, for Bergson, is a social act, not an individual one: “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (6). In fact, he argues there is no laughter without others, for laughter creates community and more importantly, it becomes a means for society to police, instruct, and correct its members’ eccentricities. What the group laughs at, he argues, is “mechanical inelasticity” (10, Bergson’s emphasis)—that is, the inability of the subject to respond and appropriately react to his or her environment. If a man trips over a rock, it is funny not because he is foolish (as Hobbes might argue) or because the viewer does
not expect it (as Kant would contend), but because he failed to alter his path to avoid the rock. Instead, he remained rigid, like an automaton; his mechanical nature—this quality of being a thing instead of being a human—is the essence of the comic. When one laughs, therefore, it is meant as a corrective (21). Arguably, one may connect Bergson’s articulation with Hobbes’s and the superiority theory, since he who laughs is laughing at someone. The key difference, however, is that Hobbes’s understanding of laughter emphasizes the way one laughs to separate oneself from the target of derision; for Bergson, the laughter is the means by which he or she who laughs hopes to bring the target back into the group. The idea Bergson proposes ties into his greater interest in consciousness because it advocates an active, conscientious participation in the world as opposed to an automatic, routine existence marked by passivity. Laughter, therefore, is reformative, not dismissive.

Unlike Bergson, Freud views laughter as a retreat from society’s constrictive tendencies rather than a way of reintegrating “outsiders.” From Freud’s perspective, Crangle notes, “jokes are opportunities to be free of social pretence or happily rediscover something familiar, including our childish natures” (112, Crangle’s emphasis). His theoretical exploration of laughter expands the “hydraulic theory” of laughter: one laughs as a means of releasing nervous energy. Freud differentiates between humor, the comic, and wit; however, for this project, I want to focus on Freud’s ideas broadly. Like Bergson, Freud’s explanation of laughter connects to his larger theoretical project. The Freudian unconscious is separated into the superego and the id; the superego is the moral compass, while the id is characterized by aggressive impulses of a violent or sexual nature. The superego expends a considerable amount of energy suppressing these impulses; laughter, Freud suggests, allows for the venting or partial release of this pent-up energy. He writes, “this yield of pleasure corresponds to the psychical expenditure that is saved” (145, Freud’s emphasis), which is to say laughter is positively correlated with our level of repression of this unconscious desires. Laughter has a personal function in regulating the psychical energy, allowing for a safe purging of nervous tension. Freud explains that laughter is particularly responsive to tendentious jokes—jokes that are sexually or violently aggressive. Laughter, therefore, helps one cope with everyday life and its intrinsic pressures to social expectations for conformity and restraint.

Relief theory is particularly helpful for understanding what Freud calls “tendentious” humor—that is, aggressive jokes with sexual or violent elements. Relief theory is therefore
applicable in analyzing black comedy, because this mode often uses laughter as a coping mechanism for handling the larger absurdity and raw reality of the world the reader is being subjected to by the text. The humor, consequently, can be read as either a “release” from the stress of the moment or the inadvertent result of life’s ultimate absurdity. At the end of Dr. Strangelove, when Slim Pickens rides the bomb that will inevitably destroy the world, the laughter is not one of celebration. Rather it is the needed release of anxiety over the distinctive possibility of nuclear conflict because of the madness and ineptitude of our world leaders.

In a 1965 Time article on the black humorists, Leslie Fielder insists, “‘Black humorist’ fits anyone worth reading today. It's the only valid contemporary work. You can't fight or cry or shout or pound the table. The only response to the world that's left is laughter.” Laughter is the only rational reaction, and black comedy and relief theory speak to humanity’s ultimate inconsequentiaity as well as its inability to control and bring order to the world around it. Relief theory, consequently, becomes particularly useful in understanding absurdist elements of postwar American fiction, including desperation, angst, and frustration. This study examines the relationship between men’s reactions to the historical moment and its expectations of men. The three humor theories will serve as a toolbox for analyzing the diverse masculinities being articulated and performed in the selected texts. Humor is a device, I contend, through which men express anxieties that hegemonic masculinity often requires them to stifle. Applying these theories uncovers these “redirected” responses subjects have toward the behavioral and psychological expectations of their gender, their time, and their place within society.

Equally important to my project is the work of gender theorists and scholars. In 1990 Judith Butler published Gender Trouble, her radical reassessment of the nature of “gender” and its role within feminist discourse. From this work, the concepts of “gender performativity” or “gender as performance” emerge, as Butler argues that “acts, gestures, [and] enactments” are “fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (173, Butler’s emphasis). The implication, therefore, is that any connection between one’s “natural” sex and one’s behavior is arbitrary, an illusion, created socially, and naturalized through repetition. Butler concludes, “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (179, Butler’s emphasis). Gender, ultimately, is “thoroughly and radically incredible” (180, Butler’s
emphasis). The argument Butler posits de-stabilizes categories of “male” and “female,” while also viewing “masculinity” and “femininity” as creations legitimized through reiterative acts. Gender roles, like the texts I will examine, are fictions, structured narratives that show the influence not only of the author/subject, but also the ideologies which initiate and enable such textual and social performances to arise.

*The Tears of a Clown* examines how characters in both novels and films attempt to perform gender within socially prescribed definitions while they simultaneously demonstrate through humor an awareness that they are failing to do so to their own (and perhaps society’s) satisfaction. The fatal irony here is that these characters feel anxiety over a gender performance that is not clearly articulated, but rather assembled through the observation and internalization of other performances and through the policing efforts of social institutions like the family, the media, religion, public culture, and one’s peers. Yet, these men often operate under the false illusion that gender is natural, and their inadequacy is a defect, resulting in an anxiety which, in the cases of these texts, leads to humor. Such a performance, originating in an unstable, constantly changing “script,” is doomed to fail. Ironically, the very performance of hegemonic masculinity that society suggests through its various discourses and institutions requires men to remain silent and stoic about the pressures, uncertainties, and inadequacies they experience in their attempts to present themselves as “naturally” manly. In American society, to voice dissent is perceived as *not* masculine. It is my contention that humor in the various incarnations I discuss below becomes a means for expressing (explicitly or implicitly) these anxieties, of filtering these pressures into a socially acceptable mode.

Because laughter has been viewed as unbecoming and comedy is often seen as binarily opposed to the more “serious” (and therefore legitimate) tragedy, the critical attention and appreciation of this phenomenon has been limited, yet noteworthy. Recent examples of studies of humor in contemporary American culture include Paul Lewis’s *Cracking Up*, Glenda R. Carpio’s *Laughing Fit to Kill*, and Bambi Haggins’s *Laughing Mad*. These studies, however, give limited attention to masculinity and its connection to the production and implementation of humor. Indeed the true brilliance of humor and masculinity is the public “mask” both utilize to deter serious analysis. Comedy as a genre of play and fancy often masks its subversive potential, just as the “naturalization” of masculinity through media saturation and claims of “eternal” or “primal” manhood usually prevent its fluid, contingent nature from being uncovered or
Gender theorists like Judith Butler have been quite content dismissing gender as a relative, arbitrary fiction. Scholars of masculinity have followed suit, claiming men will be liberated if they acknowledge the constructed “nature” of masculinity. This answer is all too simple. I respond to this misguided claim by contending that an analysis of comedy shows the political and social realities of challenging gender expectations. While I view this project as coming out of work in feminism and queer theory, I also take issue with claims within masculinity studies that feminism “liberated” men by drawing attention to the social construction of gender. An extended study of how men use humor reveals how men have long been anxious about expectations of them, at least as early as 1952, the publication date the earliest text I discuss, *Invisible Man*. Humor provides a practical (albeit temporary) solution to the limitations of gender expectations. The challenge now should be in providing men with solutions, rather than revealing to them what humor shows to be already self-evident. The radical claim I posit is that comedy does important cultural work because it revises our notions of masculinity by demonstrating men’s inability to satisfy gender expectations and by showing that failure is comical and premised on faulty premises from the start.

The texts I have selected illustrate how men manipulate and are being manipulated by definitions of masculinity that they see as insufficient and oppressive, while simultaneously realizing that they do not have an immediate way out. In 1974, Gloria Steinem wrote,

True, no group of people gives up power voluntarily, and therefore women can never relax efforts to overthrow the structures of patriarchal power. But there will be male allies like [Marc Feigen Fastau, author of *The Male Machine*]; men who also want a world in which we can shed the crippling stereotypes of sex or race, and become the unique individuals we were born to be. (xv)

The liberal feminist solution—deputizing men to become involved as gendered beings—often overlooks the real structures men have been placed into by a patriarchy which paradoxically privileges and restricts them. It problematically concludes men just need to “shed the crippling stereotypes,” as if such an action were oblivious to men and easily, immediately enacted. In his 2000 book *The Gendered Society* (and subsequent editions in 2004 and 2008), sociologist Michael Kimmel states, “Men are just beginning to realize that the ‘traditional’ definition of masculinity leaves them unfulfilled and dissatisfied” (342). Indeed masculinity studies, as Bryce
Traister notices (287), hinges upon a manufactured notion of crisis—masculinity *in* crisis, masculinity *as* crisis—as the starting point. However, using a Freudian notion of humor—that is, humor serves to “release” the anxieties and pressures surrounding an issue—we can see that men subversively and circuitously use humor and laughter as a means of exploring and expressing their frustrations over the social expectations of them as men. This dissertation will highlight the different styles of humor and laughter men employ to challenge notions of gendered humor, but will also examine how issues of race, class, historical moment, sexuality, religion, geography can cause variations in masculinity (and therefore, in issues affecting men’s lives). I would hope, perhaps naively, that this type of analysis would show feminists and (supposedly unaware) American men alike that their concerns are actually closer than one may initially think them to be. Furthermore, by negotiating between a masculinity in crisis and an eternal, essentialist masculinity, I want to show that masculinity is flawed, yet not in a way that aligns men and women as victims of patriarchy. Men and women are more alike than they are different, but to argue that masculinity has problems with patriarchy to the same degree femininity does renders the important analysis of the feminism irrelevant. I consciously resist this dismissive argument in this study.

So, to summarize, my project proceeds from four premises, which it will also try to make increasingly self-evident in the process:

1. Comedy is a genre men have employed to explore the anxieties and frustrations they feel in a socially acceptable manner. Because comedy is largely perceived culturally as playful and not serious, it is permissible as a way to vent uncertainties and aggravation. This perception has also led to limited critical attention about the relationship between men and humor. Although feminist scholars like Regina Barreca and Nancy A. Walker have noticed trends in how women use humor, these trends can just as easily be found in men, too. Feminist analyses of women’s humor are often premised on a subtle assumption of essential as well as universal womanhood. As a result, these studies usually do not consider the countless factors that structure each woman’s identity.

2. Neither men nor women have a shared style of humor. Understanding men as gendered subjects is incredibly complex because each man’s identity is based not only on his race, ethnicity, class, religion, geographical location, historical
moment, body, physical ability, etc., but on how he perceives these aspects of his identity, the significance he places on them, and the way in which he is forced to or allows them to influence his sense of self. To complicate this further, these factors are constantly in flux.

3. Language fundamentally operates within performances of gender, as subjects use it to describe themselves, align themselves within or against larger definitions or categories, and articulate their sense of who they are, their needs, desires, and rights. Scholars like linguist Deborah Tannen draw attention to the role of gender in communication\textsuperscript{11}; I invert this emphasis to suggest communication is crucial to our understanding of how subjects perform gender. Language is not only how we articulate who we are, but it is fundamental to the performance of this identity, including our gender.

4. Following Harry Brod’s lead, R. W. Connell and James Messerschmidt have advocated “taking a consistently relational approach to gender” (837). In my dissertation, the study of masculinity is inseparable from studying not only how men interact with other men, but how they interact with women. All of the male protagonists discussed in The Tears of a Clown identify as heterosexual; therefore, a close analysis of their interactions with women reveals not only how they identify as gendered subjects, but usually as sexual subjects, too.

Humor is not inherently racial, gendered, or class-based, although trends may arise in how members of these groups create, deploy, and respond to humor. Rather it is a collection of devices that an author draws from as necessary. The humor a writer uses in a text can be used to uncover subtle commentary on the nature of gender, race, class, etc. Trends regarding how certain groups use humor may be identified, but these trends still speak for only a portion of said group. My goal is to undermine any essentialist notion of humor or identity to show that the anxieties present in masculinity are radically different based on one’s race, ethnicity, class, religion, geographical location, historical moment, physical ability, body, etc. My goal is not so

\textsuperscript{11} In her bestseller You Just Don’t Understand, Tannen writes, “There are gender differences in ways of speaking, and we need to identify and understand them. […] Taking a sociolinguistic approach to relationships makes it possible to explain these dissatisfactions without accusing anyone of being crazy or wrong, and without blaming—or discarding—the relationship. If we recognize and understand the differences between us, we can take them into account, adjust to, and learn from each other’s styles” (17).
much to argue how African Americans use humor, for example, but rather how Ralph Ellison uses laughter in *Invisible Man* to articulate issues the narrator has concerning his personal performance of a “black masculinity.”

Chapter Two attempts to answer why there is so much laughter in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* by suggesting it allows Ellison to comment on the narrator’s increasing sense of a self-identity while simultaneously situating the author in conversation with Continental philosophers. Although several critics have analyzed the role of the comic and comedy in *Invisible Man*, few have offered extended treatment of the role of laughter in the text. Indeed, one is hard pressed to read very far without coming across the narrator laughing or being laughed at. My argument offers a reading of the role of laughter in the novel by focusing on key “confrontations” in the text. I contend that Ellison’s use of laughter puts into practice the theories of laughter articulated at the turn of the century by Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson, respectively. Laughter is not only a way to relieve the anxiety faced by the narrator; in fact, it is often used to degrade and control the narrator or, in many instances later in the novel, becomes a means by which the narrator asserts his agency and presence in the face of opposition. An understanding of the theories of laughter shows how Ralph Ellison is addressing them and revising Bergson in particular. I connect this philosophical discourse with recent discussions of black masculinity in the text to show how humor allows the narrator to handle the constraints placed on him by hegemonic ideals of masculinity, but also a way to democratically assert his presence in the face of racist and sexist ideologies. Furthermore, putting Ralph Ellison into conversation with Freud and Bergson reveals the transnational nature of this most American novel.

Chapter Three takes up the following debate within critical discussions of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*: How does Humbert make himself worth listening to—even sympathetic? I embrace a gender studies framework in addition to theories of laughter to argue that Humbert’s humor constructs everyone besides himself as a comic butt, worthy of our derision. To this end, we empathize with his situation because he cannot escape it, though fate seems to have initially spurred it on. Key to my argument is that insightful feminist critiques neglected to discuss Humbert as a gendered subject himself. If we proceed from the idea that Humbert is himself a man performing masculinity, we can see how his humor serves to position him as a alpha male figure within an articulation of masculinity that is distinctive to white, heterosexual, American
males of the 1950s. Humbert “seduces” the male readership by embracing a hegemonic masculinity that deems him hypermasculine and therefore worth modeling. To accomplish such a goal, he portrays women as nags or harlots and men as either grotesque or queer (or both). These comic renderings earn the audience’s laughter, simultaneously endearing Humbert to them while securing the scorn of the presumably male readership for the rest of the other characters.

Chapter Four discusses how the binary of boy and man is employed by American military propaganda, but dispelled by several black comedies of the late 1960s and early 1970s so as to call for a social “rescuing” of young men being drafted to fight in a dehumanizing,emasculating war. At the outset, I engage a debate over the roots of black humor to suggest that while not aligned in mode, William Blake and black humorists align philosophically in their concern for the individual, celebration of the child, and denunciation of social institutions. Employing his innocence/experience binary as a model for understanding boyhood/manhood, I contend that Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Altman, and Hal Ashby— in Slaughterhouse-Five, M*A*S*H, and Harold and Maude, respectively—denounce the cultural myth that war turns boys into men. The humor of these narrative attacks individuals and social institutions who threaten these boys’ welfare. These texts insist on the boys’ innocence—and the imperative for society to protect it.

Slaughterhouse-Five shows a young man traumatized by the war, and the ongoing use of “So it goes” that uses indifference to indirectly inspire action. The narrator’s resignation fuels a need to respond. In M*A*S*H, the highly skilled surgeons regress into boyish antics as a coping mechanism for dealing with the horrors they confront daily in the operating rooms. Furthermore, they fiercely work to protect their young (and predominantly male) subordinates while subverting the authority of anyone who actively works to uphold a false power hierarchy. I engage feminist readings that argue the attack on Captain Houlihan is misogynistic, arguing instead that her uncritical allegiance becomes dangerous and therefore subjects her to the same onslaught faced by her colleague (and occasional lover) Major Frank Burns. Finally, in Harold and Maude, I show how director Hal Ashby and screenwriter Colin Higgins offer a parade of allegorical figures representing oppressive social institutions that vie for the attention of and control over Harold, the alienated young male protagonist. Maude, the elderly concentration camp survivor, simultaneously reveals to him the restraints of social institutionalization and the corrupting influence of wars (and, by extension, wartime service). Her liberation of Harold is a
symbolic liberation of one of the “flowers” who has been drafted and sent to Vietnam, though the film makes no mention of Vietnam aside from a brief pan of a military cemetery. Combined, these texts embrace a disturbing brand of comedy that provokes audiences to pay attention and resist this ideological attack on America and, in particular, the physical assault on its most vulnerable members: the young.

Chapter Five reappropriates the term “drapetomania” from nineteen century American medical discourse and employs it as a term for understanding how the corporate entertainment industry handles the potential threat to their hegemony by African American male artists, particularly satirists. “Drapetomania” initially intended to explain why seemingly happy slaves would want to run away. This bafflingly delusional use of medical discourse reveals how a racist white hegemony pathologized the basic human need for desire to both deny African Americans agency and humanity by deeming such innate desires as mental illness. I argue we see this same culturally damaging work today at the turn of the century, when Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* condemn the way corporate interests stifle subversive voices in the television and publishing industries, respectively, by portraying the artists as mentally unstable. The literal madness these protagonists experience is symbolic of a narrative superimposed on these individuals by the media, who are also owned by these conglomerates with diverse interests. I extend this concept into contemporary popular culture as a way of understanding how the media handled Dave Chappelle’s departure from *Chappelle’s Show* not by trying to understand his exploitation and censorship, but by psychopathologizing him as mentally unstable.

Chapter Six discusses film comedy’s contribution to these ongoing debates over hegemonic masculinity. By utilizing the strategies I’ve demonstrated in the readings of canonical and (arguably) soon-to-be canonical texts in the previous four chapters, I show how recent film comedies do, in fact, engage in sociopolitical discourse regarding gender. With *Talladega Nights* as my focus, I argue that films like these—along with television programs like *American Dad* and *The Colbert Report*—create a hypermasculine image of manhood as stoic, self-righteous, and hubristic. Then, this individual is consistently proved wrong by those marginalized individuals—women, children, racial and sexual minorities—around him. Audiences can view these “corrections” as proof of the stifling and ineffectual nature of these images of masculinity. Furthermore, they show male audience members who may have internalized these restrictive
ideological notions of contemporary manhood that they do not properly function and that they need to be discarded in favor of a more sensitive, practical model. To this end, comedy is quite serious and can perform vital social work for its viewers by playfully (and covertly) wrestling with larger political and social questions of its times, since comedy itself can never be truly divorced from its moment of inception, which offers the strongest reading for how it may be interpreted.

To do this significant work, I engage work from sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, and other disciplines for a rich project that shows a fusion of foundational and recent scholarship in gender studies. My contribution is consequently twofold: I engage comic theory and show its importance and value to ideological analysis, calling for a greater employment of such theory in analyzing comic texts for their sociocultural value, and I offer an analysis of masculinity that encourages fellow feminist scholars of masculinity to revise the faulty premises that undergird our vital critical project. In doing so, I believe we can obtain a richer understanding of masculinity while also reconsidering how feminist methodologies can work to strengthen masculinity studies and how masculinity studies can complicate and strengthen feminist methodologies.
CHAPTER TWO

Extravagant Laughter in *Invisible Man*

...laughter produces, simultaneously, a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders. Heartily laughing together at the same thing forms an immediate bond, much as enthusiasm for the same ideal does. [...] laughter can turn into a very cruel weapon, causing injury if it strikes a defenseless human being undeservedly.


Preparing for the forthcoming publication of *Going to the Territory* in 1985, Ralph Ellison wrote “An Extravagance of Laughter,” ostensibly an apology to Erskine Caldwell, the author of the 1932 best-seller *Tobacco Road*. The novel served as the basis for Jack Kirkland’s popular 1933 stage adaptation, which ran for over three thousand performances on Broadway until May, 1941. In 1936, Ellison, new to the city after three years studying at the Tuskegee Institute, had attended a performance of *Tobacco Road* at the Forrest Theatre, and the newcomer was so amused by the play that he broke into an “extravagance of laughter” (“Extravagance,” 617, Ellison’s emphasis). Ellison recounts,

While I wheezed and choked with laughter, my disgusted self dramatized its cool detachment by noting that things were getting so out of control that Northern white folk in balcony and loge were not catching fire and beginning to howl and cheer the disgraceful loss of self-control being exhibited by a young Negro who had become deranged by the shock wave of comedy set in motion by a troupe of professional actors who were doing nothing more extraordinary than portraying the outrageous antics of a group of Southern whites who were totally imaginary—a young man who was so gross as to demonstrate his social unacceptability by violating a whole *encyclopedia* of codes that regulated proper conduct no less in the theater than in society at large. (“Extravagance,” 654, Ellison’s emphasis)

I draw attention to this passage not only because of the comedy of the situation, but because it illustrates Ralph Ellison’s astute awareness of the power of both laughter and humor. The varied words he invokes in discussing his percussive laughing—“wheezed,” “choked,” “so out of control,” “social acceptability,” “violating”—demonstrate the violence and transgressiveness of
laughter, both in its fundamental ability to disorder the body with grimaces and convulsions as well as to disrupt an otherwise “civil” social gathering. Laughter at this moment, for Ellison, becomes a cathartic response to an amusing entertainment imbued with sociopolitical meaning; however, to his fellow theatergoers, it signals a disrespect and disturbance that is indicative of what they perceive to be disgraceful social conduct. Therefore, as Ellison “apologizes” to Caldwell, he also meditates on the nature and power of laughter as a social force.

Although this essay appears thirty-three years after Ellison’s monumental achievement, *Invisible Man*, one senses that Ellison had always been aware of the power of laughter. Interviews with and essays by Ellison reveal he was familiar with critical work on laughter, including Charles Baudelaire’s “Of the Essence of Laughter” and Henri Bergson’s *Laughter*. Furthermore, throughout *Invisible Man*, there are over one hundred instances of laughter: the narrator laughs, is laughed at, hears others’ laughter, stifles his own laughter. Indeed one would be hard pressed to read three or four pages of *Invisible Man* without coming across one incarnation of laughter, and yet the issue has received limited critical attention. It is my contention, however, that the laughter cannot be overlooked in understanding the text. Rather, it is vital to the fictive world Ellison crafts within the novel—a blend, like blues, of tragedy and comedy. By reading *Invisible Man* through twentieth century articulations of both the causes and functions of laughter, I intend to show not only the crucial role of laughter in the narrator’s ongoing (perhaps naïve) quest for selfhood, particularly his attempt to perform a socially viable rendition of black heterosexual masculinity, but also to further reinforce Ralph Ellison’s place as an intellectual blending of traditions, including, but not limited to, folk culture, imaginative literature, and Continental philosophy. This chapter posits Ralph Ellison at the center of a complex intersection of African American, American, and world literatures, revealing his deliberate revising and subverting of several traditions to offer a work of stunning originality and insight. Through this artistic endeavor, Ellison uses the personal and social action of laughter to


\[13\] I prefer “the narrator” instead of “Invisible Man” because the term only works after the fact, since the narrator is, arguably, not aware of his invisibility until the final hundred pages and even then, what invisibility constitutes is unclear.

\[14\] Cynthia Willett briefly discusses laughter in her essay. Ellison has often been read as a comic writer. Earl H. Rovit draws attention to the irony of the text and aligns Ellison with Ralph Waldo Emerson. James R. Andreas views the narrator as a comic hero; he puts Ellison in the tradition of Geoffrey Chaucer, Charlie Chaplin, Herman Melville, and (again) Emerson. For further discussions of Ellison and the comic or humor, consult W. M. Fruhock, William J. Schafer, Marcia R. Lieberman, and Gillian Johns.
illuminates the influences on and models for black masculinity, offering a commentary on the
effective denial of selfhood by a hegemonic authority that is predominantly white, male, and
heterosexual. Much as his encounters with women inform his manner of dealing with men and
attempt for self-realization (Tate 164), laughter serves first as a traumatizing force from
manipulative men of power before the narrator is able to re-appropriate its potency as a means of
resistance.

The title *Invisible Man* invites readings of the character as a gendered being, and recent
criticism by Kimberly Lamm, Riché Richardson, and Daniel Y. Kim among others has examined
the novel’s engagement with cultural discourses of black masculinity. Lamm reads the visuality
of the narrator alongside the collages and paintings of Romare Bearden, an African American
artist, a friend of Ellison’s, and the subject of Ellison’s 1968 essay, “The Art of Romare
Bearden.” Lamm places the men together to demonstrate how both respectively work to “remake
the ‘canvas’ of black masculinity” (813). Attention to Bearden, Lamm asserts, complicates
Ellison’s theme of invisibility, as both men “suggest that individual attempts to change the
cultural images through which black men are most often seen need to be recognized by other
black men in order for those changes to garner collective momentum” (818). Therefore, an
investigation of black masculinity in *Invisible Man* must consider the narrator’s response, both
mentally and physically, to the damaging representations of black men in American culture, a
concern I address later with a discussion of Sambo figures within the narrative. Riché
Richardson extends intersectional approaches to studies of identity by emphasizing the role of
place in the formation of the self. With a focus on the South, she argues that many American
writers have portrayed black men of the region as “cowardly, counterrevolutionary, infantile, and
emasculated” (6). She extends this commentary to *Invisible Man*, suggesting scenes like the
“Battle Royal” and the encounter with Trueblood imply “geography’s potential to contain or
even destroy the body” and, therefore, that the South as a space for social and political
interaction is “inescapable and indispensable in dialogues on African American subjectivity”
(132). Daniel Y. Kim examines Ralph Ellison and Frank Chin to show how marginalized
masculinities (African American and Asian American, respectively) are articulated in response to
and reaction against white hegemonic power’s emasculation of minority men. The damage
caused by this emasculation surfaces in metaphors of “division, feminization, and
homosexualization” (2); consequently, texts like *Invisible Man* sometimes operate with a “latent
homophobic logic” to rebut these attempts by the dominant masculinity to emasculate them (60). Although these readings occasionally veer into sociological territory that would have frustrated Ralph Ellison, they also show literature’s value as a historical testimonial to the intersections of race and gender culturally, regionally, and socially. Furthermore, these critiques work within a larger developing discourse of masculinity and identity that can even lead to answers regarding how hegemony works to regulate alterity as well as how gender dynamics remain in a constant state of flux.

My argument extends this analysis of black masculine identity in *Invisible Man* by considering the personal, social, and political uses of laughter. Laughter is often erroneously associated with mirth, but Ralph Ellison broadens this understanding in *Invisible Man* by suggesting its derisive as well as unifying capabilities. To illustrate Ellison’s engagement with the polyvalence of laughter, I isolate four “confrontations” in the novel as indicative of the plural forms laughter takes in *Invisible Man* as well as what it ultimately reveals about the narrator’s struggles to define and perform masculinity: the Battle Royal, the showdown with Dr. Bledsoe, the final encounter with Tod Clifton, and the climactic riot. In each of these moments, laughter is not only key to how Ellison depicts the situation, but also represents a fundamental shift in the narrator’s understanding of himself and his station in society. Laughter is an essential aspect of the narrator’s ongoing reinvention of himself in terms of his relationship with the respective group he is defining himself either with or against, so I will utilize an intersectional framework that considers geography and historical moment to discuss how the novel uses laughter to theorize black masculinity. My contention is that laughter can offer readers insight into recent debates over black masculinity in the text and Ellison’s commentary on black manhood in postwar America. In addition, laughter as a motif in *Invisible Man* reveals the anxieties men feel as men, as well as the fraught relationship between the subject and his society as he negotiates and renegotiates a gendered identity.

What Ralph Ellison demonstrates, and what I hope to illuminate, is that laughter is by no means a frivolous reaction, ripe with gaiety and whimsy, but rather a complex response to a

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15 The terms “masculinity” and “manhood” are used interchangeably, and understandably so, since the dictionary is vague in how these terms should be separated. For my purposes, “masculinity” refers to the social script provided to men through peers and institutions like the media and the family that prescribe how men should and should not conduct themselves as social beings. “Manhood,” on the other hand, refers to the lived experience of being a man. The separation being that Ellison, like many writers, has commentary to offer the attentive reader regarding not only the conduct expected of the narrator as a man, but also the experiences the narrator has as a man in society. These terms are closely linked, of course, but need to be delimited.
multitude of stimuli, requiring careful attention to parse out its implications. Critics who have
discussed laughter in *Invisible Man* so far, usually as part of a larger argument not about the
text’s humor or comic nature, tend to reduce laughter to a singular cause or effect. For example,
Cynthia Willett takes a Freudian perspective on laughter, suggesting it “gives [the narrator] some
distance” and “allow[s] him to externalize some of the pain he feels,” thereby labeling comedy a
“significant, cathartic force” (216). In her essay, laughter is a coping mechanism, employed to
assist the narrator in handling the daunting racial oppression he faces as an Other in the
segregated South, but also in the “integrated” North. While surely this is an undeniable, crucial
function of laughter within the text, Ellison’s invocation of laughter is certainly not limited to
this purpose. I would posit that this interpretation of laughter is somewhat antithetical to
Ellison’s larger intellectual project. In “The World and the Jug,” he chides Irving Howe (and
Northern white liberals alike) for “telling us the meaning” of the lives of African Americans
while “never bother[ing] to learn how varied it really is” (156). While I do not believe critics
should be confined to the expressed wishes of the author being studied, Ellison makes an astute
observation regarding the limited purview of white critics attempting to glean the African
American experience from texts by African American writers. By this I mean critics like Willett
presume laughter must be a response to racial oppression. Surely Ellison would not discount this
in part, but this explanation fails to explain the instances of derisive and celebratory laughter that
appear time and time again. A more expansive understanding of laughter reveals not only the
complexity of the African American experience, but also shows Ellison transcending the
constraints of the social protest novel. Ellison readily admits that “there is also an American
Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain”
(“World,” 159), but that does not mean that humor or laughter is racialized, nor does it suggest a
sole, or even dominant, function for laughter by one community.

The first chapter, sometimes known as the “Battle Royale,” is a defining moment for the
narrator as it marks a key shift in his understanding of himself as a social being as well as
initiating the picaresque journey that will take him from the South to the North and eventually
underground. The narrator recounts the dying words of his grandfather: “Live with your head in
the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em
to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” (16). This caustic
request serves as a charge to the narrator’s father and presumably the narrator himself, who is

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shocked by the uncharacteristic words, since he had seen his grandfather as “the meekest of men” (16). One can safely assume, therefore, that for the narrator to behave in the prescribed manner—a manner that is contrived, subversive, manipulative—would be the opposite of “meek,” both empowering and masculinizing. The grandfather had not done so during his life, and consequently, his grandson’s perception of him is rendered in terms of powerlessness, passivity, and emasculation. This valediction haunts the narrator, implicitly linking interactions between whites and blacks to issues of masculinity and power, both socially and personally. It resonates with the narrator in his exchanges with white men throughout the novel, and it serves as a frame for the battle that follows.

On graduation day, the narrator delivers a speech about the role of humility in social progress. The popularity of the speech leads to an invitation to a “gathering of the town’s leading white citizens” (17), which at this time, of course, implies a room of middle class white men. Indeed, the room is full of typical representatives of the middle class, from bankers to merchants to lawyers. In a setting common to comedy, the atmosphere is described as “complete anarchy” (23)—a world, that is, turned upside-down. The tenor of the room degenerates as the black teenage boys are forced to fight while the rowdy white audience jeers. Despite the savage treatment he and his peers receive, the room calms and the narrator—perhaps still startled—naively believes he is in friendly company. A man points toward a rug covered in coins, crumpled bills and gold pieces, informing the narrator it belongs to him. The friendly demeanor is undermined, however, by a blond man referring to the narrator as “Sambo” in a patronizing gesture of faux camaraderie (26). This allusion conjures up iconography closely tied to blackface minstrelsy and the demeaning portrayal of African Americans on the stage, on screen, and in visual culture. Stereotyping of this sort, Joseph Boskin has argued, “simplifies the process of perceiving other people and things” (251). Deeming the narrator “Sambo” allows the man—unnamed, no doubt, to stand in for white men more generally—to reduce him to an object, robbing him of selfhood and agency. It furthermore emphasizes the refusal of white masculinity at the time to recognize black masculinity as equal, but rather as comical. Henri Bergson seemingly supports this notion; Boskin notes that “The Sambo figure personifies Bergson’s conception of the comic machine-person” (258). The negro, as Bergson discusses in his essay, is perceived as comic because according to the “logic of the imagination,” which Bergson distinguishes from the “logic of reason,” when one sees a negro, one views him as “a white man
in disguise” (41). Racism, quite obviously, is inherent to the perception of the “comic machine-
person”; the narrator is not a person, but an automaton expected to carry out certain stereotypical
behaviors for the amusement of the white audience. In doing so, he is denied both his
masculinity and his humanity.

However, the Sambo comment is just one part of the ongoing degradation the narrator
faces in the “Battle Royal.” Forced to scramble for money and gold on an electrified rug, the
narrator’s laugh expresses fear and embarrassment as he watches his peers battle one another for
the white audience’s delight:

I crawled rapidly around the floor, picking up the coins, trying to avoid the coppers and
to get greenbacks and gold. Ignoring the shock by laughing, as I brushed the coins off
quickly, I discovered that I could contain the electricity—a contradiction, but it works.
Then the men began to push us onto the rug. Laughing embarrassedly, we struggled out
of their hands and kept after the coins. (27)

The room is full of laughter, but its functions are varied, contingent upon who is laughing. While
the narrator laughs as a way to distract himself from the shocks and hide his shame, the white
onlookers do so to build camaraderie among the group and ridicule their black guests. “The men
roared above us as we struggled,” the narrator recalls about the clash. The “Battle Royale” serves
a metaphor for black men’s attempt to survive in society organized by and around white
hegemonic power in addition to proving themselves as men by patriarchal conventions, despite
the increasing inability to do so under the aforementioned power. The polyvalence of laughter
shows not only the complexity of this most human response, but also laughter’s role in coping
with anxiety and oppression as well as being brought into or exiled from “the group.” Laughter
also accentuates the surreal quality of the scene, a world reminiscent of a dream—a world that
seemingly defies logic. The narrator’s laughter allows him to navigate this uncertain setting, a
defense mechanism against the assault of unseen enemy.

Charles Baudelaire’s essay on laughter, which Ellison alludes to in “An Extravagance of
Laughter,” suggests, “Laughter is satanic; it is therefore profoundly human” (148). To this end,
laughter reveals one’s insecurities and cruelty, fueled by egoism and inherent wickedness. The
concurrent laughter of the whites, a social laughter compared to the personal laughter of the
black teenagers, ironically reinforces their perversely power-hungry community while
“disrupt[ing] the room” (29). When the narrator accidentally mentions “social equality,”
however, his words penetrate their damning laughter, causing it to linger “smoke-like in the sudden stillness” (31). Up to this moment, the white men present had played upon their own perceptions of black masculinity as primal and hypersexual as means to lessen its threat. Here, though, the narrator’s ability to disrupt their revelry points toward a sense that language is powerful and potentially unwieldy. For the first time, his ability to speak shows the narrator his ability to establish his presence and possibly cause change. Valerie Smith contends, “When he decides to write his own story, he relinquishes the meaning generated by other ideologies in favor of one that is primarily self-generated” (43). Language provides agency as well as a tool for resistance. Laughter, like language, becomes a masculinizing, empowering force throughout the text, although it is often undermined by individuals and institutions who try to control the message. The narrator seemingly privileges writing over speech. In (re)creating his story, the narrator wavers between an ironic, scathing Dostoevskyian voice and a celebratory, democratic Whitmanian voice. Both forms of expression resonate with assertiveness and intensity. Like laughter, the first person narration insists on the existence of the self and the presence of the narrator as a black man in a white society.

In line with the surreal nature of the “Battle Royale,” the chapter concludes with a dream in which the narrator attends the circus with his grandfather. The grandfather, notably, refuses to laugh at the clowns, as one might expect for such a scene. It is unclear whether this restraint comes from his refusal to mock another, his refusal to be disrupted by laughter, or his denial of any humor in the situation. He tells the narrator to open the briefcase he received at the meeting, where the narrator finds a cryptic note: “To Whom It May Concern […] Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33). This realization on the narrator’s part, however, does amuse the grandfather, and the narrator awakens with his laughter “ringing in my ears” (33). The laughter in this instance is obstructive, vocalizing the futility of the narrator’s predicament. The grandfather, as a representative of the narrator’s past, fates his grandson to an errant life. The scene connects to the grandfather’s warning at the outset of the chapter, creating a unified frame around the Battle Royale scene. It also seems to suggest that the narrator’s ongoing exploitation and emasculation has only just begun, as he “graduates” into society and must set out on his journey, similar to that of Huckleberry Finn. Like Finn, he is running and must eventually withdraw from society all together; unlike Finn, however, there is arguably no progress and no conclusion. The narrator’s infantilization by white men serves to mitigate his potential power and his efforts at self-
definition and actualization. At this moment, laughter seems like the only rational response to the absurdity of this world, but as the narrative develops, Ellison will move beyond such a defeatist, limited understanding of laughter’s social function.

Unfortunately, his college experience only continues this disenfranchisement; this time, however, it is a well-respected African American administrator who impedes the narrator’s efforts. The narrator’s day with Mr. Norton and consequential confrontation with Dr. Bledsoe further prevents his attempts at self-fulfillment, albeit unavoidable in the social climate of the time. Bergson’s concept of “mechanical inelasticity” echoes in the scene of the narrator’s visit with Mr. Norton to the Golden Day. The vet belittles the narrator to Mr. Norton:

‘You see,’ he said turning to Mr. Norton, ‘he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It’s worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn’t digest it. Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie! Already he’s learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!’ (94)

The vet’s remarks are a pointed critique of Mr. Norton, who claims the narrator (and students like him) are his destiny. Because the narrator is respectful and obedient in an attempt to stay in Mr. Norton’s favor, the vet feels the narrator embodies Norton’s ideal, rather than his own personhood. Norton’s implied model of black masculinity, according to the vet, is contingent upon the submission of black men; therefore, black masculinity must be understood within the context of white masculinity. “To you,” the vet claims, “he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man” (95). These comments are preceded by laughter, suggesting the vet has had a Bergsonian revelation regarding the narrator’s status as a thing. Similarly, the humor exists between the reader and the narrative world as one repeatedly sees the narrator allow himself to be used as a tool in his misdirected attempts at self-definition. The inability of the narrator to find an identity outside of the manipulation of what the vet terms “forces” shows how Ellison revises the tradition of the Bildungsroman, the coming-of-age narrative where, in the end, the protagonist assumes his or place within society, mature and properly socialized. Yet in Invisible Man, the place for the narrator, and perhaps black men in general, is one ultimately characterized by subordination and disenfranchisement.
The narrator’s eventful day with Mr. Norton enrages Dr. Bledsoe, the head of the college. Bledsoe is an intimidating presence who, through hard work and calculated sycophancy, has “made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men” (101). Seemingly aligned with the narrator’s grandfather, Dr. Bledsoe chastises the narrator, stating, “We take these folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don’t you know that? I thought you had some sense” (102). Bledsoe’s public image is one of the humble servant and ceaseless flatterer; yet, it paradoxically yields him a great deal of respect and power. His contrived performance of black masculinity, therefore, is heavily racialized and regionalized, evocative of the antebellum image of the ideal Southern black man as modest, attentive, and submissive—an image pejoratively known as the “Uncle Tom.” Unique to this performance, however, is Bledsoe’s insistence on subversive control through ingenious maneuvering, presenting the public image of the servant while wielding power indirectly. This model, which seemingly empowers the traditionally subjugated black male subject, still conceives of black masculinity as inferior to the implicitly preferable white masculinity.

Bledsoe abuses his position as a means to maintain his authority while preventing others from assuming comparable stature. He assures the narrator he will be punished for his actions, despite assuring Mr. Norton no such action would be taken. When the narrator threatens to reveal Bledsoe’s treachery, Bledsoe’s eyes begin to tear, but then he is “laughing with agony” (141). This response is Hobbesian, as the laughter shows Bledsoe positing himself as superior to the narrator, both in terms of administrative power, age, and public admiration. Throughout the scene, Bledsoe refers to the narrator as “son,” situating himself as the father, but also the provider of wisdom. When he talks to the narrator, he talks down to him; this paternal (and paternalistic) approach positions the narrator as a boy—an Other to a man—and continues the denial of the narrator’s acceptance as a man. Although Bledsoe avows that “nothing is worse for a black man than to be humiliated by white folk” (144), he persists in his humiliation, through words and through laughter, of the narrator, reaffirming his dominance in the interaction and in society. This social success contributes to a growing megalomania; laughing, Bledsoe provokes the narrator with “Your arms are too short to box with me, son. And I haven’t had to really clip a young Negro in years” (144). In this moment, Bledsoe signifies on a line from James Weldon Johnson’s 1927 poem, “The Prodigal Son,” replacing “God” with “me.” Bledsoe is not just a head of a college; in his mind, he is God, controlling those around Him. This level of arrogance
and delusion proves too much for the narrator, who soon after muses, “How long will I stand here and let him laugh at me, I thought, holding on to the back of the chair, how long?” (145). The narrator perceives the laughter as incendiary, and its provocation makes him both more frustrated and more aggressive. It symbolically emasculates him, robbing him of any semblance of power and respectability. Ironically, it also reveals Bledsoe’s vulnerability and his own insecurity about his impressive, albeit tenuous, position in (white) society. Laughter helps Bledsoe to demean the narrator, demonstrating Bledsoe’s awareness of his own susceptibility to being unmasked and ousted from his role on campus and in the community. By laughing, he simultaneously discharges the threat of the narrator while masking his own anxiety over the realistic chance that he could lose his power.

The experience of being chastised through Bledsoe’s demeaning laughter shifts the narrator’s perspective regarding his role and responsibility to the college and its reputation. Although initially aggravated by his meeting with Dr. Bledsoe, the narrator oddly begins to sympathize with his point; he tells himself, “the school and what it stands for have to be protected” (147). When he goes to concede to Bledsoe, the narrator is again the target of Bledsoe’s patronizing pronouncements: “Two things our people must do is accept responsibility for their acts and avoid becoming bitter” (148). Bledsoe’s statement reaffirms the grandfather’s commands to acquiesce to white hegemonic power, yet manipulate the privilege of being seen as a trusted servant to one’s advantage. Black men, in the grandfather and Bledsoe’s world, are never powerful unless they assume that power through covert machinations. Power is only garnered through appeasing those white men who possess the power or satisfying the interests of white men-at-large, who are afforded privilege through this racist and sexist power arrangement.

This “revelation” does not seem to last for long, however. The narrator leaves the college, and on the bus, he runs into the vet once more. “Play the game,” he prophetically warns, “but don’t believe in it—that much you owe yourself” (154). Ironically the vet offers the “fatherly advice” that the narrator must “Be your own father, young man” and “leave the Mr. Nortons alone” (156). These conflicting messages—Dr. Bledsoe’s and the vet’s—situate the narrator between being shrewdly “playing the game” and withdrawing from the “game” altogether, if not literally, then at least emotionally. Commitment to and belief in the game is damning, the vet suggests, while Dr. Bledsoe attests to its necessity. The vet’s perspective proves more accurate it would seem when the younger Mr. Emerson reveals Dr. Bledsoe’s treachery in the letters of
introduction he wrote for the narrator. The letters, advising the recipients to “help [the narrator] continue in the direction of that promise” (191), replicate the haunting contents of the briefcase in the dream. The narrator as a young black man remains the pawn of larger forces, be they white or black. It becomes clear that in the South, at least, there is no chance for an independent black masculine identity outside of control of larger white power structure which, aware of its own vulnerability politically and socially, depends on black men’s subjugation to remind themselves of their own dominance. Consequently, men in power—both wealthy white men and black men afforded exceptional privilege—continually emasculate, infantilize, and feminize the narrator. Dunwitty, Pierre’s boss in Bamboozled, repeats this dehumanizing tactic, as we will see in chapter 4.

The narrator is similarly manipulated by the Brotherhood, culminating in the death of Tod Clifton, which liberates the narrator from their grasp by making him aware of his oppressed position within the Brotherhood. Disenchanted, he embarks on a quest to change history by not “falling out” of it, but is confronted by growing social disorder in Harlem.

The riot scene that concludes the novel combines elements of the carnivalesque, the absurd, and the surreal to render the ongoing struggles faced by the black community in the years following World War II. It was based, however, on a riot in Harlem in August 1943. The New York Times reported that Robert Brandy, a soldier on leave, was shot by an officer after Brandy had intervened in an arrest because the officer had struck the woman being detained. The riot resulted from false claims the soldier had been killed. Although initial reports make it clear that Brandy was black, evidence of racial unrest noticeably were left out newspaper accounts of the incident. Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, in a radio announcement, skirts the issue all together:

A very unfortunate incident took place in Harlem this evening. An arrest was made in a hotel lobby, a hotel incidentally that has given us a great deal of trouble, I mean given the police a great deal of trouble. There seems to have been interference with the arrest and a soldier attacked the officer, the arresting officer. (qtd. in “Harlem Disorders” 1)

The statement deracializes the encounter while implicitly siding with the officer. The police are unified with the “us,” presumably the white population. No mention is made of the white officer’s assault of the black woman he was arresting or the soldier’s attempt to intervene. The next day, the Times carried an anonymous editorial entitled “Harlem’s Tragedy,” including the following statement to reinforce LaGuardia’s claims that it was “not a race riot”:
No friend of the Negro will defend the Harlem rioters. The overwhelming majority of Harlem’s law-abiding people, who are as good and useful citizens as can be found anywhere, do not defend them. [...] We are all neighbors in these five boroughs and much dependent on each other. The wise citizen knows this and the good citizen acts accordingly. (“Harlem’s Tragedy” 18)

Several aspects of this editorial are alarming to the attentive reader: the denial of race’s influence, the universal call for being “good” citizens, its placement in the paper in comparison to the initial story. Either way, its tone seeks to ignore (or perhaps silence) the power and presence of rioting as a means of resistance. Although a college student later dismissed Ellison as an “Uncle Tom” for refusing to apologize for the treatment of Ras the Destroyer in the text (“Indivisible” 363), we can see here how Ellison uses the riot scene to quite consciously comment upon and revise the historical account of these events in an early act of what Linda Hutcheon would later call “historiographic metafiction.”

Like the world of the carnival, the world the narrator encounters in Harlem appears to be upside-down, as revelers take to the streets amidst laughter and screaming. Young boys in blonde wigs jet past, followed by men dragging a milk truck, atop of which sits a woman. Perhaps reminiscent of Rabelais, she is large and mirthful, laughing and drinking deeply. “I laughed with the others, thinking: A holy holiday for Clifton” (544), the narrator remarks. Clifton, both in his exploitation by the Brotherhood and his reaction to this abuse, becomes a case-study in black masculinity for the narrator. Tod’s manipulation of the Sambo marionette serves as a metaphor for his relationship to the Brotherhood as the doll functions at the whims of a more powerful, yet unseen “force.” Anne Anlin Cheng echoes this idea, stating Tod “acts out what the Brotherhood has made him” (qtd. in Lamm 830). Kimberly Lamm extends this point, adding that with the doll, Tod “acts out what the Brotherhood has made of” the narrator, thereby suggesting the narrator feels guilty for his role in Clifton’s demise (830). Yet again, Ellison demonstrates the inability (and perhaps impossibility) of black masculinity to articulate itself outside of a white power structure.

The image of the Sambo with dark skin, red lips, and a wide grin appears throughout the text. In its first incarnation, as a bank in Mary Rambo’s apartment, Sambo signifies the historic subjugation and dehumanization of African Americans as well as the emasculation of African American men in popular culture:
It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around, as by the knocking. (319)

The presence of the bank raises fundamental questions for the narrator about his own identity. Kimberly Lamm stresses that “Sambo figures have become a repressed but crucially sustaining part of the black male ego in twentieth-century American culture” (830). That the bank is “early Americana” is especially telling, for it emphasizes the essential role African Americans have played within the American imaginary since its very conception. In her landmark 1931 study *American Humor*, Constance Rourke identifies three character-types—the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the Negro minstrel—as the fundamental figures of the American folk tradition. In fact, Rourke, who credits the influence of Bergson’s *Laughter* on her book, goes on to revise the French philosopher. Not only does she connect humor with emotion, thereby rejecting his connection of it solely to intelligence, but she also corrects his racially insensitive remarks on the negro: “Blackface minstrelsy has long been considered a travesty in which the Negro was only a comic medium. To the primitive comic sense, to be black is to be funny” (82).

By placing the Negro minstrel alongside the Yankee and the backwoodsman, Rourke positioned the integral role of African Americans (albeit a demeaning representation) in American culture and highlighted their centrality in the American identity. Ellison picks up this idea—the fundamental presence of African Americans in the formation of an “American identity”—and one can find traces of it in various essays he wrote after *Invisible Man*, including “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (1958), “The World and the Jug” (1963-4), and his interview with James Alan McPherson, “Indivisible Man” (1970).

The anger the narrator feels at the allegedly comical figure is compounded by Mary’s possession of the object. Is she, the narrator seems to suggest, implicit in this ongoing degradation of her own people? At the very least, why does she keep this reminder of the gross misrepresentation of African American males in her home? The narrator’s consequential destruction of the bank reveals not only his disgust with the depiction, but his attempt to break from this white-constructed model of how he is to be perceived by society. Afraid of telling
Mary and unable to dispose of it, he carries it around with him, a physical reminder symbolic of
the psychic burden the repetition of these images inflicts upon him and black men across the
country at this time (and arguably even today). Later, the narrator is horrified when he realizes
the puppeteer giving a public performance with a Sambo doll is, in fact, Tod Clifton, the missing
black leader from the Brotherhood whom the narrator had so admired:

I knew I should get back to the district but I was held by the inanimate, boneless
bouncing of the grinning doll and struggled between the desire to join in the laughter and
to leap upon it with both feet, when it suddenly collapsed. […] I saw a short pot-bellied
man look down, then up at me with amazement and explode with laughter, pointing from
me to the doll, rocking. People backed away from me. (432-3)
The damning image of Sambo hypnotizes the narrator; he finds himself adrift between joining
the laughter of the group—thereby legitimizing the humiliating treatment of his people—or
acting against it, again destroying the symbol of racial inequality and the dehumanization of
African Americans (particularly men, in this instance). Ellison illustrates the corrupting power of
laughter in the Bergsonian sense. It draws one in to the group as it works to correct the offender,
even against the interests of some of the group. But the laughter is also Hobbesian, working to
marginalize Sambo, and by proxy, African Americans. The conflation of the Sambo caricature
and the narrator (in this instance, a representative of African Americans) is indicated by the pot-
bellied man’s pointing, and his laughter is truly Bergsonian. Bergson wrote, “We laugh every
time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (58, Bergson’s emphasis), and here, the
narrator, in the eyes of the pot-bellied man, is a thing (i.e., the doll). Laughter here is not merely
corrective; it literally dehumanizes, and to the extent that it comes from a white man to a black
man, one could suggest itemasculates in the process. Tod’s command of the Sambo doll signals
his surrender, realizing not only the degree to which he has been manipulated (by the
Brotherhood and white society at large) but also his own impotence, as a man and an agent of
history. His name, Tod, from the German word for “dead,” seems to foresee his demise,
suggesting he was doomed to fail. Tod, consequently, is a foil for the narrator, suggesting the
need for him to consciously work against the self-destructive trajectory that history has placed
him in by virtue of his race. History, the narrator remarks, “records the patterns of men’s lives”
(439), but Tod was “running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a stand” (441).
Ellison makes it clear that identity for the narrator is not only constructed in terms of race and
history, but also gender; in order to be a hero, one must assert his authority. He must bring the oppressed, the silent, the downtrodden into history. Soon after, he sees a white nun in her traditional black outfit; she symbolizes the simplified notion of identity he has at the time—black versus white. He laughs, comparing her crucifix to the metaphorical cross he himself bears. The nuns do not look at each other or him, and this individualist gesture amuses the narrator, reaffirmed in his convictions about collectivism. And yet, even as he again redefines himself, he remains the tool of greater powers within society. As Robert G. O’Meally argues, the narrator “sees the truth of his predicament only when he sees that, ‘highly visible’ as he is, he is unseen” (267). So despite his claims to having achieved self-awareness, he remains blind to himself and his situation.

The laughter of the riot unites the narrator with the people of Harlem against the usual social hierarchies and, in the narrator’s mind, in honor of Tod Clifton—a reversal of the communal laughter in the first chapter. Christopher Shinn reads the scene as reflective of “Harlem’s social discontent and Ellison’s literary commitment to representing existing conditions of poverty and exploitation” (246). While subverting power structures and social order the scene paradoxically brings people out of their homes, unifying them in a resistance to a collective oppression they face at the hands of white hegemonic power. The narrator realizes the events are racialized, but also realizes its implications for the Brotherhood. Understanding the event in the context of Clifton’s death at the hands of an officer, the narrator perceives the riot to be a facilitating maneuver for the Brotherhood to further legitimize its agenda among the black population by blaming law enforcement, thereby secretly encouraging racial inequality and unrest that will potentially destroy Harlem. He refuses to be a part of it, and viewing the chaos around him—boys in blonde wigs, the woman on the cart, the men with machine guns protecting the bank—he chooses to withdraw from the moment against his plans to bring these people inside the “groove of history” (443).

The inversion of reality becomes hard for the narrator to process and cope with as he navigates this seeming underworld. One can be tempted to laugh in disbelief, but the scene is almost too real, or even “hyperrealistic,” as is often used to describe the work of Nathanael West, who tragically explored the chaos of riots at the conclusion of The Day of the Locust. “And I recalled the boys in blonde wigs,” the narrator recalls, “expecting the relief of laughter, but suddenly was more devastated by the humor than by the horror. But are [the dummies] unreal, I
though; *are* they?” (556). In this moment, the narrator’s ability to discern the real from the surreal collapses, and humor becomes impotent. No longer is laughter—as a celebratory device, a means of release, or an act of community building or exclusion—sufficient. The only option is escape, and the narrator does so, only to encounter the ringmaster of this circus: Ras.

Wearing an Abyssinian costume, Ras the Exhorter has become Ras the Destroyer, a “figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem” (556). In conflating an allusion to Ethiopian history with a multitude of weaponry, the resulting juxtaposition baffles the already bewildered narrator, who consequently “recognize[s] the absurdity of the whole night” (559). For Kant, laughing at the absurd comes from a feeling of safety that the absurd is neither harmful nor threatening. Noticeably, this moment is void of laughter, despite the comic implications; as the narrator puts it, the scene is “too much, too outrageously absurd” (559). This moment is revelatory for the narrator in that what brought him here, from the Battle Royale in the South to the streets of Harlem, was nothing less than “complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate” (559). The inability of the narrator’s antagonists—Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Emerson, Brother Jack—to acknowledge the interconnectedness rather than the separatedness of racial identity had propelled him forward, absent of a sense of place, but ever closer to the quixotic sense of self. This running climax with the confrontation with Ras, the most blatantly separatist character of all, resulting in the narrator’s violent act of resistance—he throws a spear at Ras’s face—and eventual descent into the manhole. Ironically, in the darkness where no light exists, he is safe, because it is here that he is not “black” but rather colorless—and invisible.

Despite Ellison’s skepticism in a 1955 interview that his novel would endure, *Invisible Man* remains a stunning historical document, chronicling the experience of one black man in postwar America prior to *Brown v. the Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycotts, the Little Rock Nine, to name but a few significant moments in the African-American struggle for civil rights. Therefore the 1952 text becomes an alarming testimonial to the second-class treatment blacks received within a nation, in spite of efforts to be recognized as equals, that often remembers the 1950s nostalgically as wholesome and idyllic. Masculinity, by way of the interactions of laughter and issues of identity, becomes a provocative entry point for discussing this exchange because, as a man, the narrator can position himself against the white man in a manner that raises necessary questions about the purpose and legitimacy of racial power. The continuing denial of the narrator’s humanity, particularly his masculinity, testifies to white
anxiety over shifting power dynamics in a radically changing America, heavily influenced by postwar prosperity, geographical migrations of the population (especially blacks into northern urban centers), and the burgeoning campaigns for social justice (the Civil Rights Movement being the most obvious at this moment in time). By ending the riot scene with a dream about the narrator’s castration at the hands of his white antagonists throughout the text, Ellison implicitly connects the literal castration of black men at lynchings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with protests (including riots) to demonstrate white fear about the possibility of black power. The black penis, like the rioting in the streets of Harlem, becomes a signifier in the white consciousness of the black man’s potential threat to white men’s authority, both as men and as leaders, at the hands of black men. The narrator is not passive in this emasculating moment, unwilling to be the cog in the wheel or the tool in the machine any longer: “No laugh, you scientists! Let’s hear you laugh!” (570). His response to his castration shows a deliberate re-appropriation of the type of laughter that had been used against him earlier at the banquet and in the hospital, and an embodied resistance to the “forces” that work in part to dominate and manipulate his body. It also defies white men’s control of history, just as he laughs at Norton, who does not recognize him in the subway, despite Norton’s claims that the narrator was his destiny. In these moments, laughter empowers him to resist the master with his own tools. It is not simply a laughter of relief (what several scholars of Ellison have called the novel’s “blues laughter”) or a laughter of celebration; rather, it symbolizes a bold act of provocation, antagonizing his antagonists and reclaiming a perpetually elusive (perhaps unattainable) manhood that has been repeatedly denied to the narrator, illustrating Robert G. O’Meally’s point that “his laughter is earned by his encounters with bull-necked experience” (267).

Unlike the cynicism of the prologue, the epilogue resonates with a democratic optimism that rebukes and revises his grandfather’s valediction and attests, without irony but surely with good humor, “one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray” (577). Echoing Rourke, Ellison centralizes the black experience within the American experience, rather than viewing them as distinct, unrelated entities. So in the narrator’s final words—“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581)—the “you” is not racialized, gendered, or nationalized, but rather human. In this manner he counters repeated acts of emasculation, both literal and symbolic, to assert himself as not only an
individual, but a man in a nation undergoing fundamental shifts in its understanding of race, gender, and power.

The physical act of laughing can assert the subject’s position within a given space through a process of disruption and the consequential reorientation of others’ attention. Ellison learned that lesson for himself at the Forrest Theatre in 1936. Furthermore, his deployment of laughter in *Invisible Man* shows his engagement with a range of philosophical and critical works, both domestic and foreign, by Henri Bergson, Constance Rourke, and Charles Baudelaire, among others. In fact, Ellison revises Bergson’s understanding of laughter to show how laughter can not only be of the group, but against the group as well. In a novel that wrestles with metaphorical invisibility, laughter repudiates being ignored, overlooked, and silenced. It becomes a signifier of an ongoing process of creating and refashioning one’s identity in relation to others. With this in mind, laughter, for Ellison, is not only a corporeal disruption, therefore, showing a lack of control over one’s body, but a social disruption as well, unsettling the expected routine of interpersonal conduct as well as hierarchies that privilege certain individuals within the group over the others. The narrator violates decorum in a way that puts those around him at unease, as when he imagines confronting Bledsoe—“’Bledsoe, you’re a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels!’”—and nearly chokes on his yam while emitting a “wild laugh” (265). Laughter challenges the expectations of his varied antagonists—Dr. Bledsoe, the Brotherhood, Ras the Exhorter, to name but a few—that the narrator remain unseen and unheard. It rebukes such strictures while asserting one’s presence (be it consciously or unintentionally), and consequently delegitimizes the constructed hierarchies which privilege these men while both dehumanizing and emasculating the nameless narrator. To this end Ellison extends Bergson’s belief that humor is a social corrective to demonstrate how humor can allow the subject to resist oppression through deliberate transgression—a transgression embodied in the disorderly self.

Laughter can be a means to purge oneself of the anxieties inherent to subjugation, even if this release is temporary. It also initiates a social dynamic that ultimately allows the narrator to realize his exploitation and forge a new sense of self seemingly away from social institutions and political ideologies (with the exception, perhaps, of an Emersonian notion of self-reliance and democratic individualism). He descends into what Claudia Tate calls “the inanimate womb of the underground” (171), where she believes he will be unable to escape. I do not agree; laughter, I would argue, insists upon the laughers’ visibility and his body. He may not have “found”
himself, but I agree with Valerie Smith that in constructing his story, he “creates for himself a persona that develops, indeed exists, in contradistinction to the images that others projected onto him” (43). Therefore, the narrator the reader encounters at the outset and in the epilogue may perceive himself to be “invisible” in the “eyes” of the white hegemonic power and even other blacks, but the book consistently reaffirms that he is by no means silent. Through language and laughter, he begins to construct and insist on his presence. The democratic hope Ellison attests to, reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman before him, may be fleeting; as we will see in chapter 4, laughter as a hopeful means of handling absurdity yields to an angry laughter, steeped in powerlessness, desperation, and exhaustion.
CHAPTER THREE
“Hunk of Movieland Manhood”:
_Lolita_ and 1950s American Masculinity

Few novels have garnered the level of adulation and detestation Lolita has. Shortly after
its 1958 publication, Lionel Trilling, one of the country’s pre-eminent literary critics, boldly
claimed, “In recent fiction no lover has thought of his beloved with so much tenderness, no
woman has been so charmingly evoked, in such grace and delicacy, as Lolita” (369). Equally
surprising was Elizabeth Janeway’s humanist evaluation in The New York Times that “Humbert
is all of us” (“Tragedy”). The novel’s critical reputation has only increased; it stands as one of
only two postwar novels in the top ten of the Modern Library’s list of the best novels of the
twentieth century, and it has appeared on Harold Bloom’s outline of the Western canon, _Le
Monde_’s “100 Books of the Century,” and _Time_’s “100 Best English-Language Novels from
1923 to 2005.” Its linguistic sophistication, masterful use of a modernist aesthetic, and narrative
audacity render it a singular achievement, a novel so skillful and self-assured in form, it manages
to simultaneously confound, disturb, and delight readers. The praise, as one can imagine, was not
unanimous; Frank S. Meyer, writing for National Review, raised a skeptical eyebrow at Lolita:
Without exception, in all the reviews I have read — and they are many — nowhere has
even the suspicion crept in that Lolita might be something totally different from the
temptingly perverted surface it presents to the degenerate taste of the age. Not a whiff of
a hint that it could be what it must be, if it is judged by the standards of good and beauty
which once were undisputed in the West — and if it is, as the power of its writing shows
it to be, more than a mere exercise in salaciousness. (“Lance”)
Indeed the critical reader cannot help but wonder how a novel that chronicles the intentional,
malicious molestation of that most precious Western creation—the child—could rank among the
top works of contemporary literature. Recently Stephen Blackwell summarized this dilemma:
How does he do it? As is well known, he adopts a two-fold strategy: first, he offers
stories from childhood that have allegedly affected his sexual development; second, he
attempts through his story to suggest Lolita’s own culpability and her moral failings, and
to hint that she is not quite civilized, depraved, even. (122)
Many interpretations, particularly by feminist critics, focus more on what the novel does, rather than how it does it; I contend that these two issues are ultimately inseparable. What I wish to offer here is a new understanding of Humbert’s expert manipulation of the reader, informed by three aspects of the text that often go neglected in critical discussions the text: the historical context of the novel, Humbert as a gendered subject, and humor as a fundamental aspect of his narrative. By drawing together historical information with gender studies and theories of laughter, I propose that Humbert’s “seduction” of the reader is contingent upon positioning himself as an American “alpha male” figure, despite his seemingly obvious exclusion from that role as a middle-aged European intellectual. Though this strategy falters at moments, revealing a vulnerable and insecure alternative, one can argue that his implied male reader is encouraged to view him as a model male, therefore said reader may align with the masculine Humbert against the shrewish women and queered men Humbert constructs in an effort to further glorify his own self-representation. In the process, Nabokov scathingly satirizes the American male as an extension of the conformity and consumerism of postwar American culture by simultaneously positioning Humbert and his reader as the creators and recipients of derision.

Critically, one must separate Humbert Humbert into the “confessor” (the Humbert that writes the book) and Humbert Humbert the “actor” (the Humbert that is created in the book the “confessor” is writing). Understanding the “actor” as the deliberate construction of the ultimately unknowable “confessor” allows me to show not only how Humbert Humbert seduces Dolores Haze, but also the reader—an individual who, for the most part, is implied to be male (or, perhaps, male-desiring). Through historical contextualization, gender theory, and humor analysis, I will draw due attention to the “others” Humbert creates so as to show how the émigré narrator appropriates an image of postwar American hegemonic masculinity to construct both a self and an audience that is implicitly American(ized), heterosexual, and male. By portraying himself as the man men want to be, he becomes worthy of the consideration, empathy, and mercy of a male readership that implicitly knows it does not adequately satisfy the definition of masculinity it has internalized and consequently attempt to perform satisfactorily and perpetuate. Humor allows Nabokov to align Humbert with these male readers, by constructing “Others” men

16Because of the extensive criticism already, I will focus not on Humbert’s creation of “Lolita” and depiction of Dolores, but on the secondary characters. For excellent analyses of the construction of Lolita, consult Kaufmann, Brand, Herbold, among others.
would wish to not align themselves with: women, boys, and queer men. Despite these attempts, I will also show fractures in this shrewd manipulation that vocalize the inability of men, regardless of their intellectual or physical faculties, to fully embody ideal manhood.

In *Invisible Man*, laughter becomes a weapon for and against the narrator; by the end, it also signals a mixture of hope and reserved optimism. A close analysis of *Lolita* finds laughter taking quite a different role, as Humbert deploys humor to draw the reader to him, against others. This laughter defies a Bergsonian approach; Humbert’s intentions resist recuperating or reforming the Other. Rather, humor functions to seduce the implied male reader to sympathize with Humbert against the seemingly moral Others who become his victims. Martin Amis claims, “Human beings laugh, if you notice, to express relief, exasperation, stoicism, hysteria, embarrassment, disgust, and cruelty. *Lolita* is perhaps the funniest novel in the language, because it allows laughter its full complexity and range” (119). This laughter functions externally in *Lolita*, as the real-world reader responds to the text, rather than within the text itself, as in *Invisible Man*. As a result, Humbert’s comic construction of Others and use of black humor underscore not the relationship between characters as much as the relationship between Humbert and his jury (i.e., the presumably male reader). The discussion of *Lolita’s* often sinister humor highlights how men use humor between men, how it reinforces an essential male identity against women and non-normative males, and how it poorly attempts to mask challenges to and concerns of an allegedly stable hegemonic masculinity. Often Nabokov demonstrates the immorality of laughter, which offers a stark contrast to the politically progressive, ethical uses of laughter we will see in the chapters to follow. When the male reader laughs, Humbert smiles, for he is in control not only of the reader, but the resulting “verdict.” This chapter, therefore, contends that Nabokov undermines accounts of laughter as inherently curative, celebratory, or affirmative by stressing the unethical ends towards which laughter can be deputized.

Feminist interpretations of *Lolita* by Linda Kauffman, Sarah Herbold, and Colleen Kennedy, among others, offer some of the most trenchant criticism on Lolita in recent memory. In their focus on how gender, sexual abuse, and patriarchy operate in the novel, they have not only exposed the misogyny and suppression of female agency in the text, but the sexist biases underlying earlier interpretations by prominent critics, like Lionel Trilling. Linda Kauffman’s critique was the earliest and most influential. In her essay, she attempts to reclaim Dolores Haze:

The answer to the question, ‘Is there woman in the text?’ is no. But there was a female,
one whose body was the source of crimes and puns, framed unsettlingly between the horror of incest and aesthetic jouissance, between material reality and postrepresentation, between pathos and parody. Like Lolita’s stillborn child, that body was not a woman’s—it was a girl’s. (150)

Kauffman’s reading underscores the exploitation and rape at the heart of the novel, the narrator’s ongoing attempts to conceal aspects of his indiscretions while blaming his innocent victim, and the extent to which critics suppress or even erase the crime and Dolores Haze so as to praise the novel’s formal and artistic accomplishments. Nabokov himself later implied the novel was written to afford the reader “what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss” (“On a Book” 315); feminist critics have been especially resistant to such explanations, highlighting what the novel does in spite of its author’s supposed intentions. Yet Kauffman has not been without her critics, as Eric Naiman recently observes she commits the representational fallacy that she herself warns against at the outset of her essay (153).

As a critic influenced by feminist literary theory and criticism, I admire the urgency and sociopolitical relevance of Kaufmann’s message, though I wish to underscore what I see as two fundamental flaws in her approach. In trying to salvage Dolores, she elides the necessary delineation of “Lolita” and “Dolores”; a pointed feminist analysis must delineate between the “real” embodied Dolores and the “constructed” ideal Lolita. Only Humbert calls Dolores “Lolita”—a mistake Stanley Kubrick makes in his 1961 film adaptation—and in naming his confession Lolita, Humbert pays tribute not to the now-deceased Dolores Haze, but to the idealized creation he psychopathically created in his own mind. Lolita is the Galatea to Humbert’s Pygmalion; she is the model he mentally creates and forces upon the body of young Dolores Haze, hence his frustration with the dissonance between what he wants of Dolores and how Dolores acts. Admittedly, Humbert volleys between both names throughout his confessions, encouraging readers to conflate the two, but our understanding of the sexual politics of the text, as well as the need to prevent aligning oneself with Humbert, requires the reader to see Dolores as the body onto which “Lolita” is inscribed. Naiman falls into this interpretative trap as well, but his metaphor regarding Dolores is apt: “a blank page, a screen on which Humbert projects his fantasies and desires” (149). Lolita does not need to be recovered because she is all we really have, but Dolores does. Lolita, like Lolita itself, is a fiction, leading critics like Malcolm Bradbury to avoid issues of gender altogether and reduce Humbert and Dolores to an allegorical
relationship; for Bradbury, “Lolita” is the “pursuit of the elusive symbol that is art itself” (194). Any feminist interpretation of Lolita, I argue, must begin with an acknowledgement of Dolores, a victim who is forever silent and ultimately unattainable. Yet, as feminist critics, we must not confuse Dolores with Lolita so as to avoid the seduction of the jury (and the reader) that parallels Humbert’s seduction of Dolores.

My second emendation to Kauffman and to other feminist critics of Lolita is the elevation of the novel to an allegory, with Humbert as an agent of patriarchy and Lolita standing in for all women. Kauffman reduces the text to the father-daughter relationship: “the inscription of the father’s body in the text obliterates the daughter’s” (131). Colleen Kennedy’s reading separates the disinterested “art” from the titillating “pornography”: “Lolita [the girl] becomes at once representative of art (an ‘island of entranced time’) and what threatens art (the vulgar)” (50). In a fascinating reading of the text, Sarah Herbold insists the text depends on female readers for legitimacy; Nabokov requires the female reader “to choose between her identity as a woman and her pleasure as a reader, Lolita activates and legitimates female readers in a way few other texts do” (75). What these readings neglect is that Humbert is only one man, and my argument, therefore, asserts we must appreciate Humbert not as a representative of what patriarchy does to women, but as a subject who performs gender in a manner that is simultaneously intentional and unintentional. Furthermore, what all of these readings lack is an attention to historical contextualization, which consequently results in two further pitfalls. First, it fallaciously treats patriarchy and gender as stable, transhistorical concepts. Though patriarchy dates back for thousands of years, it is always relative to the culture, space, and time in which it is articulated and performed. The secondary concern is that it adheres to Nabokov’s instructions that “good readers” should privilege “imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense” over “socio-economic or historical angle” (“Good” 3). My insistence on approaching Humbert as a fictive product of the years following World War II in the United States suggests a novel explanation for the success of Humbert’s seduction of the implied male reader: he consciously manipulates a hegemonic ideal of masculinity at the beginning of a period when the ability to be “manly” allegedly began to foster increasing anxiety in many American men.17 Humbert invokes humor as a mode to forge this hypermasculine image; as a result, Nabokov demonstrates the

17 For a discussion of Cold War politics and the “crisis” is masculinity, consult Cuordileone.
fragility of American masculinity while he himself encourages us to laugh at it. The novel works on two levels: it can draw one faction of readers to align with Humbert’s humor, while another faction may join Nabokov in deriding Humbert’s foolishness (along with the foolishness of his sympathizers). Either way, humor, be it a “low” humor of the body or a “high” humor of wit and wordplay, remains crucial to Nabokov’s aesthetic in Lolita. In fact, Eric Naiman has noted that Lolita “is littered with what might be called schoolboy humor” (18). This gendering and “aging” (as boyish, rather than manly) of the humor in the text leads me to do what follows: propose a way of understanding Humbert (and his humor) as an attempt to align and ally himself with a male readership that for various reasons—moral indignation, national identity, age, level of education—may find him otherwise reprehensible. In the process, such an audience may sympathize, even identify with the wily Humbert.

Shrewd and cunning, Humbert’s self-portrayal shifts throughout the novel from bumbling loser to the alpha male—a shift, I would argue, that potentially makes him more empathetic to men who are subtly aware of their own masculine inadequacies. This fluid representation is more realistic, after all, then a rigid rendering. Linda Kauffman remarked, “Since he presents himself as a schlemiel, the comic urge to identify with him is an almost irresistible temptation” (141). Humbert perpetuates this image when he remarks, “All of which goes to show dreadfully stupid poor Humbert always was in matter of sex” (25). However, one should be skeptical of such claims, especially considering his formidable intelligence and the repeated instances of deliberate manipulation of others that he recounts, including his doctors:

I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams, pure classics in style (which make them, the dream-extortionists, dream and wake up shrieking); teasing them with fake “primal scenes”; and never allowing them the slightest glimpse of one’s real sexual predicament. (34)

It would seem naïve to believe that this moment is not a meta-commentary on the act of reading itself. As readers, we aim to interpret, to understand, and to explain. Should we not then believe that here Humbert admits he is toying with us, as if the text itself was not evidence enough? Though Humbert seemingly encourages us to laugh with him at the foolish doctors, it would appear the joke is also on us, who serve as amateur psychiatrists in our own attempts to
understand what Humbert (and Nabokov) are doing with *Lolita*.

The schlemiel is but one incarnation of Humbert. If one wishes to draw once more from Yiddish parlance, Humbert may also be viewed as a schlimazel, a person with bad luck. His allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee” prods readers to view him as the victim of the envy of “the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs” (9). The first part of the novel suggests destiny is bringing Humbert and Dolores together: the death of mon oncle d’Amérique and resulting inheritance (27), the fire that destroyed the McCoos’ home (35), referring to Frederick Beale as “the agent of fate” (103). He also boldly contradicts himself, as necessary. “I am lanky, big-boned, wooly-chested Humbert Humbert,” he laments, “with thick black eyebrows and a queer accent, and a cesspool of rotting monsters behind my slow boyish smile” (44). Here Humbert renders himself pathetic, but understandably so, since he has yet to “seduce” Dolores. It defies an early self-description that is completely opposed to this one, in which Humbert arrogantly asserts,

> Let me repeat myself with quiet force: I was, and still am, despite mes malheurs, an exceptionally handsome male; slow-moving, tall, with soft dark hair and a gloomy but all the more seductive case of demeanor. Exceptional virility often reflects in the subject’s displayable features a sullen and congested something that pertains to what he has to conceal. And this was my case. Well did I know, alas, that I could obtain at the snap of my fingers any adult female I chose (25)

These contradictory representations, merely twenty pages apart, demonstrate not only Humbert’s unreliability and constant manipulation, but the doubtfulness of his schlemiel status beyond a shameless attempt at earning the reader’s compassion. The latter quotation from Humbert displays his unique appearance, both brooding and entrancing, in a manner that seems to glamorize him to a male readership while simultaneously establishing himself as the superior male.

Vladimir Nabokov’s notes reveal he discarded “I am a remarkably handsome male” as a beginning to Lolita (“Lolita, notes”)18; unsurprisingly, such an introduction potentially could have alienated a readership, either through its arrogance or its unnecessarily intimidating bragadocio in the face of a presumably heterosexual male readership. Most accurately, Humbert

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18 Material cited as “Lolita, notes” comes from my archival work in the Nabokov papers housed at the Library of Congress. To my knowledge, the information I present has not appeared in previous *Lolita* criticism.
is a schlemiel only when it is convenient; the role we can most accurately assign him, considering his mental manipulation, is Svengali. Humbert only exists in language—a language which, aside from John Ray’s minor editorial changes, he alone controls.

Completed in 1953 and published in the United States by Putnam in 1958, Vladimir Nabokov wrote *Lolita* during a transitional period in American masculinity. World War II had fundamentally shifted gender dynamics in American society, as many women had replaced men in the work force during the war. Even Rosie the Riveter, the iconic figure calling on women to work in support of the war effort, blurs gender boundaries: her penetrating stare and flexed biceps contrast her long, full eyelashes, groomed eyebrows, and cosmetics adorning her lips and cheeks. No doubt the postwar return to traditional gender roles, at least as represented in the emerging mass media and consumer culture, hoped to assuage the gender transgression unintentionally fostered by the necessities of war. This tension between traditional roles and revised articulations of gender continued as the United States became the first post-industrial nation in the 1960s, when many men went from performing manual labor to working in offices alongside women.

Despite fantastic representations of the 1950s America in popular culture, the decade was one “agitated by conflict and uncertainty, but above all, by a sense of rapid, puzzling change” (Gilbert 1). It is this America in which Humbert arrives, and it serves as the object of his derisive satire throughout *Lolita*. For example, early reviewers like Elizabeth Janeway noted the novel’s commentary on youth culture; after all, the “teenager” emerges in the mid-twentieth century not so much as a biological state of being as a commercial demographic. Nabokov, Janeway contends, “is slyly exploiting the American emphasis on the attraction of youth and the importance devoted to the ‘teen-ager’ in order to promote an unconscious identification with Humbert’s agonies” (“Tragedy”). Janeway’s comments may not be too off base, as Nabokov’s note cards in preparing Lolita reveal he was, in fact, perusing magazines like *Seventeen*, *American Girl*, and *Movie Teen*, all targeting this newly exploited source of revenue. From these magazines, the middle-aged Russian writer learned a slew of words unique to teenagers and the American vernacular: the September 1952 issue of *Seventeen* taught him “fallen off the roof” and “how Grandma was visiting” were euphemisms for menstruation, while *Movie Teen* offered him a profile of movie idol, Tab Hunter (“Lolita, notes”). Nabokov’s research also led him to fiction about living with young girls, like Janet Adams’s story “Little Misfit,” from the June 1953 issue
of McCall’s; the line “All this noise about boys just gags me” later appears scribbled in Dolores’s notebook (187). Though intellectually and socially at odds with this society, Humbert ultimately must convince it of his innocence, and the embrace of its excesses and vulgarities, in part aligned with his personal obsession with nymphets, remains central to this effort. To offer greater insight into the masculinity Humbert must appropriate, I shall briefly discuss three contemporary events to clearly demonstrate increasing concerns over definitions of gender, particularly masculinity during this period: the popular interest in clinical research on sexuality, especially Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 tome Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, the landslide victory of General Dwight D. Eisenhower over Adlai Stevenson in the Presidential election of 1952, and the surgical gender reassignment Christine Jorgensen underwent in 1953. Critics’ complicitly have ignored historicizing Lolita, perhaps at the behest of Nabokov himself in the aforementioned essay, harbored a neglect of the most crucial element of Humbert’s self-representation: his subtle invocation of hegemonic masculinity. To gain his reader’s sympathy, Humbert employs an image of masculinity that seems traditional and robust in the face of potential threats to American masculinity at the time: femininity, immaturity, and homosexuality.

Along with the magazines mentioned above, Nabokov’s reading prior to writing Lolita included expert discussions of parenting and adolescence, like Alice B. Barr Grayson’s Do You Know Your Daughter? and N. M. Iovetz-Tereschenko’s Friendship-Love in Adolescence. His research, however, did not stop with teenagers, and he showed an interest in research on sexuality, including paraphilia. In addition to reading pioneering physician Havelock Ellis’s Studies in the Psychology of Sex, he also read Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach’s Patterns of Sexual Behavior, a 1951 book of clinical investigations, from which Nabokov gleaned such provocative phrases as “piston-like thrust,” “my engorged beast,” “clitoral stimulation,” and “rear entry” (“Lolita, notes”). Though Nabokov’s note cards do not reveal if the author read the notorious “Kinsey Report,” he certainly was reading the research that coincided with it and further satiated the public’s desire for information about this aspect of their private lives.

Perhaps no man in postwar America posed a greater threat to traditional masculinity while simultaneously capturing the public’s attention than Alfred Kinsey, a “sexologist” who established a research institute at Indiana University in Bloomington. In 1948 he published Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, the controversial “report” derived from over five thousand interviews and ten years of clinical investigation. Despite the book’s sizable girth (over 800
pages) and price ($6.50, at a time when the average hardback book cost half that amount), it quickly rose to the top of bestseller lists, selling two hundred thousand copies by July (Wickware 86). While Americans were shocked by both the findings and the ensuing public discourse, one reporter noted that Europeans were “frankly amazed by the sensation created by the Report” (88). This tension between American values, steeped in the nation’s Puritanical roots, and a seeming European libertinism reflects the need for Humbert to recreate himself so as to excuse his sexual transgressions. His casual approach to being cuckolded by Valeria starkly contrasts his later moral condemnation of Gaston Godin, the lecherous pedophile who teaches at Beardsley in America. Humbert’s awareness of his audience appears not only in what he tells, but how he tells it. It seems only fitting that such discussion would surface by way of scientific discourse, as Kinsey’s research took America behind its own closed doors, revising public misconceptions about how men behaved sexually. For example, the research revealed men started having sexual intercourse earlier than previously believed and continued to copulate late into their lives. Even more surprising: not all men’s sexual activity was procreative—or, to the surprise of many Americans, even heterosexual (Wickware 90). Was the image of the robust, virile, heterosexual all-American male in danger? Kinsey seemingly suggests it was a myth to begin with.

*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* understandably polarized critics, leading anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer to remark that Kinsey had commodified sexual intercourse with his “dull and turgid book” (qtd. in Gilbert 91). Even today, Kinsey’s findings remain controversial and subject to debate, in part due to ongoing ideological warfare regarding marriage, sexual orientation, and proper sexual conduct.

Of interest to the contemporary reader of Lolita is how the “Kinsey Report” avoids conclusions while implicitly calling for a legal revision of the definitions and punishments for sex-related crimes. This perceived invocation serves as the book’s most widely publicized “conclusion” and with good reason: the definition was simply outdated (Wickware 92). The law’s understanding of sexual behavior originated in English common law, which prohibited all non-procreative sexual activity. The Kinsey Report, however, revealed how outdated this approach was when one reviewed the facts of sexual activity by men of the time. Humbert’s sexual behavior, though not legal or condonable, echoes the realization that non-normative sexual behavior was fairly common among his real-life contemporaries.

To say Alfred Kinsey influenced how Americans understood sexuality, even today, is an
understatement. His work permeated the American consciousness, echoed even in popular culture, such as Cole Porter’s song “Too Damn Hot” from Kiss Me, Kate, where the singer uses Kinsey to explain his own sexual proclivities. Kinsey started a social and scientific revolution in how sexual behavior and sexuality was discussed, and the introduction of the Kinsey scale challenged the limiting heterosexual/homosexual binary with a continuum that viewed sexuality as far more complex and diversified. “If I had any ulterior motive in making this study,” Kinsey told Life in 1948, “it was the hope that it might make people more tolerant” (qtd. in Wickware 98). An alternative interpretation, though, might assert that the publication of Sexual Behavior in the Adult Male first, five years prior to Sexual Behavior in the Adult Female, implicitly privileges male sexuality over female sexuality. Humbert reflects this bias in his representation of himself, as his needs supersede the best interests of Dolores, especially when she unknowingly participates in his masturbatory fantasies while wrestling for an apple. To understand Humbert is to understand a man who views the world as a man’s world, void of female subjectivity, agency, and (willful) sexuality. Nabokov, in his insistence on the novel’s “aesthetic bliss” (“On a Book” 315), corroborates such a message, or, at the very least, argues the novel is not a space for finding evidence to the contrary. While the novel does parody American masculinity, one finds little evidence that Nabokov himself promotes a proto-feminist agenda in doing so.

As previously mentioned, society, of course, did not universally embrace this challenge to traditional models of male sexuality and masculinity. James Gilbert notes that the changes of the 1950s—the rise of suburbia, mass culture, and conformity—were seen by some social commentators as “debasing,” but “feminizing,” and this perception led to “a renewal of traditional masculine vigor and individualism” (4). Before continuing, it is important to define the dominant image of masculinity at this time. The most detailed (and perhaps most often cited) articulation comes from sociologist Erving Goffman:

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports… Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. (128) Admittedly Goffman published this explanation in 1963, eight years after the novel was published by Olympia Press in Paris and eleven years after the narrative action concludes. Yet its
applicability is a testament to the powerful stranglehold this image of masculinity has had over American men’s understanding of themselves as gendered subjects.

No man better represented strong, conservative (politically and socially) masculinity in the early 1950s than Dwight D. Eisenhower, and his victory in the 1952 Presidential election is a case study of an attempt to re-embrace traditional masculinity in a period where such concepts were beginning to experience radical redefinition.

The major party candidates for 1952 were Adlai Stevenson and Dwight D. Eisenhower—Democrat and Republican, respectively. Stevenson was the Governor of Illinois and a champion for liberal causes who had attended Princeton before receiving a law degree from Northwestern. Witty and eloquent, Stevenson brought a passion and sophistication to the race. A Unitarian Universalist and intellectual, his baldness and intelligence led to Stevenson being saddled with the unflattering sobriquet “egghead.” A characteristically American strain of anti-intellectualism perceived his scholarly training as effeminate andemasculating. Emphasizing his folksy simplicity and considerable war record, the campaign of Dwight D. Eisenhower, on the other hand, presented a public persona that seemed the inverse of Stevenson. Though president of Columbia University at the time of his nomination, his status as a five-star general deterred any claims to being called an “egghead” intellectual. Eisenhower had been educated at West Point, served as the Supreme Commander of Allied forces in World War II and, for a time after, led the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He was the physical muscle opposing the intellectual frailty Stevenson represented to the American public. This gendering of political rhetoric surfaces again in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections, especially the latter race between the “good old boy” George W. Bush and the more sensitive John Kerry. This dynamic will be examined later in my discussion of Talladega Nights to uncover how masculinity functions on the national level.

The election of Eisenhower was quite an anomaly in that he had relatively no political experience, having never served in elected office. Rather, the Republicans “drafted” him to contest Robert Taft, an isolationist Senator from Ohio. The early 1950s was a period of mass hysteria regarding Communism, reflected in the predatory behavior of Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where the attack on “Red” was often aligned with the attack on “lavenders”—that is, gay men who were also seen as a national
security threat. The Republican Party wanted a candidate who would be proactive on the international scene, especially considering the dominant position the United States found itself in after World War II. This truly was, as Henry Luce famously editorialized, “the American century.”

Eisenhower’s victory not only brought an end to nearly twenty years of Democratic control of the Presidency; it also signaled a reactionary response to rising tension in American culture in terms of the mass culture, civil rights, and the growing loss of individualism many perceived. Consequently, the defeat of Stevenson was not only a rejection of the Democrats; it was a rejection of intellectualism, which had dangerously been linked to effeminacy by Stevenson’s detractors (Kimmel, Manhood 156). This anti-intellectual strain in American culture resonates in Humbert’s narrative: his formidable learnedness is strategically overshadowed by a hypermasculine counter-performance. Nabokov’s critique of this resistance in American culture connects to his larger satire on the shallowness that seems to plague the United States, with its ice-cream sundaes, motels, and teen movie magazines.

However, this aggressive 1950s American masculinity, hell-bent on curbing progressive movements and Communism, was not without its domestic challengers. The case of Christine Jorgensen fascinated the American public in April 1953, with Time calling her “Manhattan’s No. 1 glamour girl” (“Case” 82). Born George Jorgensen, Christine Jorgensen was the first person to have gender reassignment surgery, colloquially known as a “sex change operation.” She claimed that her “affections [were] more like a man than a woman,” and her surgery consequently removed “the evidences of masculinity” (“Case” 82). Of interest here is how sex and gender are conflated; the removal of Jorgensen’s sexual organs suggests, to her doctors and the public at large, the removal of her gender as well. This surgery was not met with unanimous approval, obviously, as some psychiatrists warned that her castration would provide only a “temporary illusion of womanhood” and therefore would result in regret and dissatisfaction in time (“Case” 83).

In his 1958 essay “The Crisis of American Masculinity,” Arthur M. Schlesinger portrays Jorgensen’s case as emblematic of an “age of sexual ambiguity” (238). “The present male confusion and desperation, it is contended,” Schlesinger writes, “are the inevitable consequence

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19 For a discussion of the “Lavender Scare” of the 1950s, consult Robert J. Corber, K. A. Cuordileone, John D’Emilio, and David K. Johnson.
of the threatened feminization of American society” (240). The controversy surrounding Christine Jorgensen also raises fundamental questions about the relationship between sex, gender, and identity. If a man, born with a penis and testes, felt like a woman, does that therefore mean that the behavior attributed to men was not natural and essential to their being? Simone de Beauvoir had already suggested the distinction in Le Deuxième Sexe in 1949: “‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’ The Second Sex was published in the United States in 1953 by Alfred A. Knopf, and the translation’s accuracy and integrity is still called into question, despite numerous re-printings. Yet de Beauvoir’s influence was not truly felt until the rise of second wave feminism in the early 1960s. It should come as no surprise that Jorgensen would become a cause célèbre, and the fascination with her reveals not only a growing anxiety about gender roles, but a frustration in articulating such concerns and their impact on everyday life.

These events, selected to demonstrate both support for and anxiety towards traditional masculinity, reveals a shift in political control. Since power cannot be created, only redistributed, those in power—namely, white heterosexual men—fear threats to that power by threats to how they are understood and threats to who they are. It is the moment of crisis that Vladimir Nabokov finds himself in when he begins to write Lolita. Nabokov himself was not an American by birth, but lived in this social milieu and his protagonist’s audiences, both direct (the jury) and indirect (the reading public), would have been predominantly male, as critics have sufficiently argued—at least, that is how Humbert primarily addresses them.20 As mentioned earlier, a disconnect surfaces in some Lolita criticism between Humbert Humbert the writer and Humbert Humbert the self-creation. Douglas Fowler’s reading of the text is problematic because he skirts the problem of the unreliable narrator by taking Humbert at face value. “In moral terms, then,” Fowler writes, “Humbert is not wholly responsible for his own entry into his relationship with Lolita: fate kills Charlotte, and Lolita seduces him” (149). Linda Kaufmann has rightly noted that “the most sexist critical statements come from critics who take the novel as a representation of real life” (133); here, Fowler is guilty of such neglect in his conflation of the writer and the creation. However, Kaufmann herself is not immune from critical missteps. She observes that Humbert “exaggerates the size of his penis, but to Lolita he must seem enormous, given the disparity in their physical proportions” (144). Kaufmann’s use of the word “exaggerates”

20For a discussion of Humbert’s wavering between addressing the gentlemen and gentlewomen of the jury, consult Wakamiya.
presumes there is a real, knowable Humbert and that he is lying. Although “a foot of engorged brawn” seems hyperbolic and comical (283), Humbert’s penis exists only so much as a creation within his narrative. Kaufmann’s analysis here is conjecture; while she acknowledges he is a “notoriously unreliable narrator” (135), she holds a fictional author accountable for his claims rather than exploring why he would engage in such braggadocio. Therefore, to counter this critical neglect, I begin my analysis of Humbert the self-creation by examining how he constructs oppositional others so as to construct himself: women, boys, and other men.

Humbert clearly delineates between nymphets, young girls, and women early in his narrative. The true nature of nymphets is “demonic” (16), not human; in this way, he separates them from other young girls, who presumably have “human” natures (16). Women antagonize Humbert in that they are not nymphets; he remarks how co-eds are “the coffin[s] of coarse female flesh within which my nymphets are buried alive” (175). He is even confrontational toward the women who will decide his fate. As Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya observes, “He repents and repels, expresses regret, then enrages—only to accuse the ‘frigid gentlewomen’ of prudishness—and finally proclaims his innocence” (143). He shows no respect for any women; rather, they become “palliative agents” he uses when nymphets are sexually inaccessible (18). His manipulation of women reaches a head with Charlotte Haze, Dolores’s mother, for whom Humbert reserves his most damning words. He seems pained to describe her, not because he is still mourning, but because it is a nuisance. She was “quite simple but not unattractive features of a type that may be defined as a weak solution of Marlene Dietrich,” he remarks (37).

Humbert also categorizes Charlotte as a woman “completely devoid of humor” (37). As F. W. Dupee noted, she is “the immoral moralist, the loveless romantic, the laughless comic—whatever it is that spoils the party and dampens the honeymoon all across America” (qtd. in Wood 187). This categorization is noteworthy because humor becomes key to Humbert’s “seduction” of his male readers. The critic should investigate how humor functions, especially mean-spirited jokes, because Sigmund Freud compellingly argued that such humor becomes a safety valve for dealing with restrained or even repressed desires (114). Furthermore, humor scholars have gendered dark humor masculine because of its aggressiveness and irreverence. Emily Toth notes that women use humor to “attack—or subvert—the deliberate choices people make,” implying men are more likely to mock physical appearance and disabilities (qtd. in Barreca 13). Humbert’s tendentious humor intensifies along with his desire for Dolores:
I long for some terrific disaster. Earthquake. Spectacular explosion. Her mother is messily but instantly and permanently eliminated, along with everybody else for miles around.

Lolita whimpers in my arms. A free man, I enjoy her among the ruins. (53)

Humbert begins to visualize his wife, “that dull and sorry thing” (72), as not only an obstacle, but one that must be overcome violently. His aggressive fantasies and jocularity towards death reaches a fever pitch when Charlotte, overwhelmed by the content of Humbert’s diary, runs out into the street and is struck down by car. Informed of what has happened, the skeptical (or perhaps indifferent) Humbert calls up the stairs, “There’s this man saying you’ve been killed, Charlotte” (97). The death of the nagging wife, met with a tongue-in-check one-liner, presumes a male reader, for it echoes the popular humor of James Thurber, who often used dark humor in his stories of domineering wives and henpecked husbands. These stories (like Nabokov’s) often found their homes in the pages of The New Yorker, the bastion of American middlebrow culture, so this scenario, with its dryness and morbidity, also reflects Humbert’s urbane wit.

Humbert’s sense of humor is equally sharp in relaying to the reader his concern with his perpetual rivals for Dolores’s attention—boys—even though he finds she has scribbled “All this noise about boys gags me” in one of her notebooks (187). Like his treatment of women, Humbert’s fascination (and disgust) with boys is corporeal and to be more specific, often grotesque. He worries how “all the boys’ eyes” are looking at “my Lolita” (53), and this fear of course reflects his own fear, for much of his control of Dolores, especially at this point in the text, is voyeuristic. She does not yet realize his affections for her, nor has he acted on them, so his indictment of the boys is an indictment of himself projected onto them. He knows the desire of which men are capable, and the boys become a proxy for men and for him. Later, he imagines the boys drooling over Dolores’s wool jersey (108) and soon after he has “odious visions of stinking high school boys” (147). These grotesque bodies reveal the boy’s immaturity and artlessness, but also the legitimacy of the threat they pose. They are living bodies—moving, sweating, drooling, staring—and as living bodies, bodies in the act of becoming, they are also inherently violable and sexualized. And much like Ricky Bobby’s exposed body in Talladega Nights, their “grotesqueness” makes them suspicious and, consequently, un-masculine.

Humbert’s anxiety continues when he imagines the eight-year-old brother of Dolores’s friend Mary transformed into “two gangling, golden-haired high school uglies, all muscles and gonorrhea” (160). What becomes provocative in this brief excerpt is the tension between his
disgust for the adolescent male body and his queer attraction to it. He blends words of condemnation (“gangling,” “uglies,” “gonorrhea”) with words that suggest beauty and desirability (“golden-haired,” “all muscles”). In deriding and dismissing boys throughout the narrative, Humbert not only assuages his anxiety over losing Dolores to them, but also reaffirms his own status as a man. However, as this scene shows, queer desire is latently present within Humbert’s narration. While I would not go so far as to claim Humbert is gay, I would contend that such moments in the novel indicate that the requisite heterosexuality of American men, which Humbert tries desperately to enact, is hardly stable, especially in a post-Kinsey society. It should come as no surprise then that one of his most comic and derisive portraits is of a homosexual. Nabokov mocks these futile attempts as playfully as he dismisses the mythic American male. This criticism, however, is more derisive than liberatory.

Humbert’s attitude towards homosexuality is contemptuous and antagonistic; early in the text, he relays the great pleasure he received in learning that the psychiatrists hypothesized he was “potentially homosexual” (34). Humbert constructs Gaston Godin, the Beardsley College teacher who secures Humbert a teaching position, as a foil to himself. Even his name insinuates he is reprehensible: Gaston Godin is phonically comparable to “ghastly” and “goading.” Humbert facetiously refers to him as “a genius!” (177) and soon after dismisses him as “the old fraud” (181). Humbert’s depiction of Godin, however, suggests that the latter’s queerness is his most despicable trait; in fact, Nabokov’s antagonists are often impotent or homosexual (Fowler 166). Godin decorates his house with the portraits of Andre Gide, Piotr Tchaikovsky, Norman Douglass, Vaslav Nijinsky, Marcel Proust (181-2)—all of whom were famous gay artists. He knows all the local boys and “would feed them fancy chocolates, with real liqueurs inside” (181). What is remarkable is Humbert’s decision to italicize “real” so as to indicate how corrupt Godin is, and to draw the reader into judging Godin as immoral. Humbert denounces him for essentially the same crime as himself—coercing (and presumably raping) a minor—yet does so with no sense of irony or self-awareness, especially since he told the reader earlier of his desire to “gorge the limp nymphet with sleeping pills” (80). The purpose of Godin, therefore, is for Humbert to distinguish between debased pedophilia and the timeless, ageless love he allegedly feels. Godin is a criminal and like the boys, grotesque: “a flabby, dough-faced, melancholy bachelor” (181). Humbert, however, is stuck in a “tangle of thorns,” the victim of “the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs” (9). One could read that to suggest Humbert felt
fate had damned him, but later in the novel, it becomes clear he means society when he refers to the gentlemen of the jury as “winged” (125). Therefore, Godin preys on society’s most innocent constituents—children—while Humbert is victimized by society itself deliberately. By positioning himself against the queer character, Humbert aligns himself with heterosexuals, which stereotypically, in a heteronormative society like 1950s America, would include both the male members of the jury and the male readership. To be an American man is to be a straight man, and sociologist R. W. Connell has noted that heterosexuality is not only demanded of women, as Adrienne Rich suggested, but of men as well (104). One could argue that Nabokov is problematically perpetuating the false link between homosexuality and pedophilia, as he does with Charles Kinbote in Pale Fire, but that presumption is challenged by the inclusion of another pedophiliac who furthers Humbert’s mission of redemption by separating his own love from perverse desire: Clare Quilty.

The initial mention of Quilty is when the imprisoned Humbert reads a brief biography of him in Who’s Who in the Limelight. The article offers hints toward Quilty’s latter role in the narrative: he wrote plays such as Fatherly Love and Little Nymph; he wrote children’s plays; his hobbies included “fast cars, photography, pets” (31). Soon after, Humbert muses that his Lolita may have grown to be an actress, starring in perhaps The Murdered Playwright. The reader learns here that Humbert is in prison for the murder of Quilty—“Guilty of killing Quilty,” he rhymes (32)—and sets up Quilty as the antagonist par excellence.

The next mention of Quilty is so subtle that it is easily missed: on the wall of Dolores’s room. In his recount, Humbert compares himself to popular conceptions of masculinity while further emphasizing the tension for Dolores’s affections. Dolores has cut out a magazine ad and posted it to her wall; the model is “a dark-haired young husband with a kind of drained look in his Irish eyes” (69). The ad refers to him as a “conquering hero,” while his wife, Humbert notes, is absent. It is not a coincidence that this dynamic—the dominant, present male and the submissive, absent female—parallels Humbert’s relationship with Dolores; as Linda Kaufmann rightly remarks, “The answer to the question, ‘Is there a woman in the text?’ is no” (150). Dolores has drawn an arrow to the face of the husband—whom Humbert now calls “the haggard lover” (69)—and written “H.H.” Whether Lolita actually did this is suspect; what this suggests is twofold: Humbert wants the reader to view him as handsome by Madison Avenue standards and that Dolores desired him or at the very least, found him to be similar to a male model.
Another advertisement occupies space on Dolores’s wall: a “distinguished playwright [who] was solemnly smoking a Drome” (69). In the climatic scene, Quilty tells Humbert he is “dying for a smoke,” to which Humbert poorly puns, “You’re dying anyway” (296). What is also of interest is Nabokov’s use of cigarette smoking to characterize Quilty; the only other characters who are women, specifically Charlotte and much later, Dolores. This detail reflects the notion that cigarette smoking was effeminate and therefore unbecoming for men. Considering the pictures’ proximity to her bed and the cultural tendency of young girls to decorate their walls with favorite celebrities, both of these men’s photos—one a perceived Humbert doppleganger, the other ad featuring Quilty—on Dolores’s bedroom wall places them in direct competition for her affection.

This duel over Dolores builds to the confrontation between Humbert and Quilty in the latter’s mansion. Shortly after entering, Humbert realizes Quilty is “in a fog and completely at my so-called mercy. I could enjoy myself” (295). At no point in the novel is Humbert more intentionally sadistic and distastefully hilarious. Attentive readers may notice that the relish he demonstrates for carrying out his revenge against Quilty is reminiscent of another work by Edgar Allan Poe: “The Cask of Amontillado.” In that text, the wronged Montresor dupes Fortunato into following him into the catacombs, only to entomb him behind a wall of brick and mortar. What alarms the reader is not only the narrator’s unrestrained cruelty, but the fact that he escapes any legal consequence for his crime: “Against the new masonry I re-erected the old rampart of bones. For the half of a century no mortal has disturbed them. In pace requiescat!” (214). Like Humbert, Montresor recounts his malicious behavior with macabre irony. This humor serves to not only celebrate the men’s behavior, but to relieve for their readers some of the dramatic tension created by their violent behavior. In some cases, it may even make them more appealing to a readership who vicariously enjoys sharing in their grim revelry. This mode not only lightens the discomfort Humbert creates (but not completely), but also fuels the audience’s skeptical acceptance of both the narrator and the narrative.

Although both Humbert and Quilty have engaged in sexual relationships with Dolores, Humbert chastises his rival by saying “She was my child, Quilty,” further complicating the paternal responsibility he has already exploited to his lecherous advantage. He appropriates the role of father to position himself as morally superior to someone who is no less culpable of child molestation and rape. He then shifts in his narration to co-opt another masculine role: the
cowboy. “Elderly readers,” Humbert announces, “will surely recall at this point the obligatory scene in the Westerns of their childhood. Our tussle, however, lacked the ox-stunning fisticuffs, the flying furniture” (299). This moment would challenge those who might claim one cannot read Humbert as an American male, for here Humbert deliberately aligns the scenario with Westerns, the most American of film and literary genres because of its emphasis on the frontier, violence, and self-(re)creation. Although Humbert addresses the elder members of his readership, the Western was by no means a genre out of date at this point. It was very much alive at the time the novel is set and many of the most popular radio programs, television shows, and films among audiences were Westerns: Red River (Howard Hawks, 1948), High Noon (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), and Gunsmoke (1955-1975), for example. To place oneself in a parodic pantomime of the all-American genre aligns one with “American-ness,” as well as goodness, since the Western often depended on the good/evil binary between the sheriff and outlaw. Quilty is the outlaw, the scoundrel, the scourge that must be eliminated for the benefit of society. Humbert, on the other hand, plays the moral sheriff, maintaining order and righting wrongs by ridding the town of the malevolent presence. If genres do, in fact, serve to negotiate social tensions, the Western reduces everything the black and white. By appropriating it, Humbert depicts himself as the clear “good” in this narrative, while Quilty, himself guilty of similar crimes, represents “evil” since he did it for the wrong reasons. Humbert rationalizes that his crimes against Dolores warrant forgiveness since he had good intentions, while Quilty’s purposes were carnal and debased.

The Western is uniquely an American genre because it took place in the most American of settings: the frontier. Richard Slotkin famously noted in his examination of the frontier myth how violence on the frontier figures into national identity: “the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience” (5). Indeed, in killing Quilty—that is, in killing his double—Humbert seeks a regenerative redemption for his crime against Dolores, lost to him now forever. Forgiveness is all he can seek—or so he wants the reader to think; one can never know. Douglas Fowler posits that Quilty offers Nabokov the chance to give Humbert “complete moral purgation” (153); completeness is always arguable, but certainly here one can see a Humbert whose vengeance is layered in its implications.

Briefly before he is shot, Quilty attempts to create a camaraderie between himself and Humbert—“We are men of the world, in everything—sex, free verse, marksmanship” (301)—yet Quilty undermines this overture with his damning (albeit hypocritical) reprimand: “my dear Mr.
Humbert, you were not an ideal stepfather” (301). The end of Quilty’s impassioned valedictory speech is met with bullets, sending the playwright into reactive motions “like [an] old, gray, mad Nijinsky” (302). Again, Humbert uses queerness as a means to distance himself from another male character; the irony is the queerness underlying this interaction.

The fight over the gun is imbued with homoeroticism:

We rolled all over the floor, in each other’s arms, like two huge helpless children. He was naked and goatish under his robe, and I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us. (299)

One could read this scene as an intentional blurring of fighting and lovemaking; certainly there is a narrative affinity in the language Humbert employs. The final line paradoxically suggests a togetherness yet separation, yet hints at an indistinguishable level of interpersonal intimacy, heightened by Nabokov’s use of Quilty as a double (and foil) for Humbert throughout the text. Humbert then examines his pistol—an obvious phallic symbol—to see if “our sweat might have spoiled something” (299). I contend, therefore, that the murder of Quilty is in part “homosexual panic.” Defined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, this “panic” arises from “‘latent homosexuals’ whose ‘insecurity about their own masculinity’ is so anomalous as to permit a plea based on diminution of normal moral responsibility” (20). Sedgwick’s frustration over the “homosexual panic” defense is that it is premised on the homosexuality/heterosexuality binary she worked to deconstruct. Despite the introduction of the Kinsey scale, resistance continues, especially in the early 1950s with its attempts to reinvigorate a traditional idea of masculinity that was ultimately unattainable and mythic, causing far more distress than it remedied. Quilty’s death is not only the death of Humbert’s nemesis for his beloved Dolores, but also a violent confrontation with his own repressed queer desire. As a foil, Quilty brings to light in Humbert aspects of his character and identity that even Humbert is unaware of; it is at these moments that the line between the (re)presented Humbert and the “real” Humbert fractures temporarily. Although the “real” Humbert only comes to the reader in brief glimpses, the (re)presented Humbert ultimately is the narrator’s finest creation.

So, if Humbert constructs his opposition as ugly, immature, or immoral, then what qualities characterize Humbert himself? Humbert’s “fancy prose style” displays his maturity (9), and themes of virility and attractiveness recur in his narrative. His narrative style reflects a self-awareness of his braggadocio: “Of course, such announcements made in the first person may
sound ridiculous” (104). He notably uses “my manhood” as a euphemism for his penis (42), equating masculinity with potency by locating it in the sexual organs. Understandably, a penis in part determines biological sex, but Humbert’s choice phrasing connotes gendering as well, demonstrating his obsession with an idealized, fantastic articulation of American masculinity. He combines virility and attractiveness when he tries to “sufficiently stres[s] the peculiar ‘sending’ effect that the writer’s good looks—pseudo-Celtic, attractively simian, boyishly manly—had on women of every age and environment” (104). By strategically blurring the binaries of human/beast and man/boy here, he presents himself as exceptional. Yet this tension between transcending and satiating one’s animal nature echoes throughout the text: he tries to calm his libido with “Down, poor beast, down” (141) and after Dolores’s flight, two strawberry blonde girls pique “the ancient beast” in him (268). One doubts if Humbert ever adequately mitigates this frustration, try as he might (claim)—or if anyone can. This masculinity—fluid, inaccessible, impractical—both distresses and empowers Humbert, though ultimately it is a target for Nabokov’s scorn. Perhaps this displeasure is best seen in Nabokov’s use of the word “manly.” It appears four times in the text: three times to refer to Humbert (53, 72, 104), once to refer to a rather forceful toilet (130). You can always count on a consummate craftsman for a fancy potty joke. As the narrative progresses, Nabokov’s derision intensifies; his critique of Humbert’s masculinity seems more in line with 1950s-era denunciations of “weaker,” non-normative masculinities than a call for greater sensitivity towards masculinity that we will see in my discussion of antiwar black comedies and post-9/11 film comedies. Nabokov’s depiction of Humbert ridicules the “crisis-ridden” masculinities that poses a potential threat to Cold War political stability, continuing Nabokov’s tendency to portray “unmanly” men as the comic butts of his fiction.21

In a recent documentary, Judith Butler discussed the role of Hollywood in the assimilation of her family to American society in the middle of the twentieth century:

I think I grew up with a generation of American Jews who understood that assimilation meant conforming to certain gender norms that were presented in the American movies. So my grandmother slowly, but surely, became Helen Hayes. And my mother, slowly but surely, became kind of Joan Crawford. And my grandfather, I think, maybe, he was Clark

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21Timofey Pnin of Pnin (1957) and Charles Kinbote of Pale Fire (1962) are two examples of post-Lolita characters Nabokov mocks in his comic fictions.
Gable or Omar Sharif or something like this. So I grew up with these people who were Jews, they belonged to a Jewish community, but they were also Americans, and they were both leading their community lives but very much wanting entrance into American society. (qtd. in Zadjermann)

Like Butler’s family, Humbert is an immigrant seeking assimilation and acceptance into American society through gender models articulated through popular culture and social policing. When Humbert calls himself a “great big hunk of movieland manhood” (39), he reveals his desire to satisfy sufficiently Hollywood standards of masculinity, and said standards are arguably the dominant standards in American culture, of which Hollywood is a cornerstone. The 1950s stands out as a ripe period for such representations; men’s men like John Wayne and Robert Mitchum competed for popularity with emotional, brooding younger talents, such as Marlon Brando and James Dean. Elizabeth Power has observed that Humbert’s seduction of Lolita is often rendered in cinematic terms (Stockton 101). I conclude, therefore, that Humbert’s constructed self is not only an obvious attempt by Nabokov’s narrator to gain sympathy, but relies on a deliberately parodic subscription to the hegemonic masculinity of his times and adopted nation in order to do so, which cinema both captures and reflects for the implied male viewer. Humbert’s seduction of the male reader is not only through his domination of the reader by way of a polished, occasionally overwrought prose that suggests intellectual superiority to him, but through a construction of self that implies a gendered superiority. His calculated (and hilarious) appropriation of a very hyperbolic, very American masculinity dissuades readers who may be turned off by Humbert’s crime, queerness, intellectualism, or gender anxieties from rejecting him outright as a pedophile, “lavender,” or coward. It simultaneously speaks to their own insecurities, insecurities inherent to every gendered being—a commentary perhaps on the vacuity of the American reading public. Nabokov’s satire of America, consequently, extends beyond its motels and highways and consumerism to encompass a critique of perhaps America’s greatest fabrication: the all-American man.
CHAPTER FOUR
For the Boys: Masculinity, Black Comedy, and the Vietnam War

A development, or rather re-emergence, prevalent in contemporary American literature was black humor fiction, in which war, sexuality, death, and other traditionally serious topics received irreverent treatment as authors attempted to depict the irrationality of the postwar years. A generation of American writers working in this mode—John Barth, Donald Barthelme, J.P. Donleavy, Thomas Pynchon, among others—emerged in the early 1960s; they were predominantly white, middle class males, and sometimes Jewish and/or former soldiers. Conrad Knickerbocker, in a 1964 article in The New York Times Book Review, referred to them as “neo-Swiftian,” launching “the glittering harpoons of Dr. Johnson’s age” (3). They were bitter moralists who rallied for sanity in an absurd age characterized by nuclear war and systematic genocide; novelist James Purdy captured the sentiment of his fellow “black humorists” well when he said, “I am in the position of liking the roots, somehow, of America and loathing everything it stands for today. We live in the stupidest cultural era of American history. It is so stupid it inspires me” (qtd. in Knickerbocker 3). Though Time’s piece on the black humorists contends these writers were more prone to jeers than jeremiads, the latter was exactly their mode, highlighting and lambasting the shortcomings and hypocrisies of the increasingly conformist, puritanical, restrictive character of American society in the 1960s. This stifling society threatened not only the integrity and freedom of the individual, but his or her very sanity. This mode, however, was not a contemporary phenomenon.

Critics, anthologists, and writers of black humor fiction have debated its origins and influences, although most point to satirists within the Western tradition, from Aristophanes to Mark Twain. Andre Breton assembled the first black humor collection, Anthologie de l’humour noire, by 1936, but it was not published until 1945. Largely a promotion of Surrealist writers like himself, the Anthologie was dominated by French writers, though Breton identified Jonathan Swift (1667-1745) as the “true initiator” (3). Time pointed to Juvenal (end of the first century to early in the second), Francois Rabelais (1494-1553), and Swift as inspirations in its 1965 report (“Black”), while Bruce Jay Friedman singled out French writer Louis-Ferdinand Celine (1894-1961), though he acknowledges there is “a nervousness, a tempo, a near-hysterical new beat in
the air, a punishing isolation and loneliness of a strange, frenzied new kind” one could also find in the work of Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) and Isaac Babel (1894-1940) (x). Douglas M. Davis, hesitant to name a source, finds Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Franz Kafka (1883-1924) and Nathanael West (1903-1940) to “often [be] on the lips and pens of the writers” in his 1967 anthology, *The World of Black Humor* (29). The short-sightedness of these lists, though, is that while the authors may share a stylistic similarity with these writers, they do not necessarily share the same values.

With their implicit celebration of individualism and condemnation of society’s corrupting influence, the black humorists of the 1960s were aligned, in part, with the British Romantics, especially William Blake (1757-1827), whose *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, privileged a childlike imagination over the stilted artificial demeanor characteristic of maturity. Blake particularly resonates in the work of Kurt Vonnegut; Eliot Rosewater quotes Blake in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater* (1965) and he identifies the mystical poet as his favorite in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Yet William Blake’s vision remains underestimated in its effect on contemporary American narrative, particularly the black humor of novelists, comedians, and filmmakers in the decades following World War II. In this chapter, I employ Blake’s innocence-experience binary to discuss how Kurt Vonnegut, Hal Ashby, and Robert Altman invoke the image of Romantic childhood through “man-child” figures as an anti-war plea for the welfare of young men fighting in the Vietnam. Their comedic texts resist the propagandistic narrative that war makes boys into men, preferring instead to employ a Romantic image of childhood so as to deputize readers to sympathize with and protect young men being drafted into war in general, but especially the Vietnam War.

Although not initially considered a Romantic poet, William Blake’s concerns about the individual, society, childhood, and nature led to his late addition to the literary period. His celebrated collection, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, addresses the eighteenth century philosophical concerns over how to properly educate children, whose interlocutors included John

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22 One example of such contemporary relevance is the 2007 Vintage edition of William Blake’s *Poems*, selected by musician Patti Smith. In her introduction, Smith notes, “when I was young I thought Blake was American. Many might claim him now” (xiii).

23 Influential Blake scholar G. E. Bentley, Jr. remarks, “Never has an important literary reputation been posthumously established so instantaneously and effectively. […] Blake had been unknown, and [Alexander] Gilchrist’s *Life* made him sensationally well known. From 1863 on Blake at last took his place in literary and artistic history as one of the great figures of the Romantic Movement” (qtd. in Bentley xxiii).
Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, by positing the titular binary of innocence and experience as a way to analyze the relationship between the child and socialization (Hilton 198). Northrop Frye, in his landmark 1949 study of Blake, views innocence as prelapsarian and those who live in the “unfallen world” are perceived by those in the “fallen world” as “somewhat naïve and childlike” (43). Frye asserts, “Children live in a protected world which has something, in epitome, of the intelligibility of the state of innocence, and they have an imaginative recklessness which derives from that” (43). D. G. Gillham advises, however, that “Blake’s innocents are not always children and his children are not always innocent” (10). Gillham’s revision of Frye rejects the paralleling of innocence and experience with childhood and adulthood, respectively.

Using Gillham’s interpretation, I argue that the black comedies I have selected—Slaughterhouse-Five, M*A*S*H, Harold and Maude—embrace a Blakeian binary of innocence and experience in which the former is applied to young soldiers who need to be preserved in the “imaginative” state of innocence and, consequently, protected from the inevitability of experience. Since soldiers were at least 18, they were not considered children in the eyes of the law. This concern is particularly timely for this period—1969 to 1971—as it marked not only the peak of the Vietnam War, but the increased bombings on Vietnam through Richard M. Nixon’s efforts of “Vietnamization” and growing domestic unrest over the American involvement following such events as the Tet Offensive (1968) and Seymour Hersh’s revelation of the My Lai Massacre (1969). Debates over age and the renegotiation of what would constitute adulthood culminated in the adoption of the 26th Amendment on July 1, 1971, which stated the voting age could not be higher than 18, amid concerns, in part, from protests by antiwar activists.24 Black comedy underscored the deadly consequences of drafting young men to serve in the Vietnam War; black humor juxtaposed the looming possibility of death, be it on the war front or the homefront, with the mismanagement and poor judgment of social institutions like the military. Deploying humor allowed the male characters within the text to alleviate their anxiety while revising the fatal cultural myth that war makes men out of boys. By analyzing how masculinity and humor work together in these texts, the social imperative to protect these boys’ innocence and end the war becomes strikingly apparent. Like Blake, these black humorists—Kurt

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24 For a history of this battle, consult Cutlise.
Vonnegut, Robert Altman, and Hal Ashby—craft comedic texts that highlight the absurdity of modern society without preaching a defeatist approach. Instead, they rally behind a dire need to protect the most vulnerable members of society and its future: the young [boys].

From the early days of the war, the discussion of the relationship between the United States and Vietnam had been in terms inflected by masculinized articulations of power. In 1957, Senator John F. Kennedy portrayed Americans as the “godparents” of “little Vietnam” (qtd. in Brewer 184), emphasizing a paternal (and paternalistic) dimension to the United States’s relationship with Asia, particularly in containing the influence of the Soviet Union and “Red China.” The Johnson and Nixon administrations clearly viewed a failure to prevent the spread of Communism to Vietnam as a sign of American impotence, and both presidents feared being at the helm during the first American defeat. The war, both in President Johnson’s private conversations and in the popular imagination, was often rendered in strictly gendered terms that viewed opposition as unmanly or effeminate. Terms like “hawks” (pro-war) and “doves” (anti-war pacifists), originally coined during the War of 1812, experienced a revival and situated a masculine aggressiveness against a feminine pacifism.

David Halberstam’s *The Best and the Brightest*, the bestselling account of Johnson’s Cabinet, attests to Johnson’s macho rhetoric and the gendered elements of the discourse over the political situation in Vietnam. After one victory, President Johnson proclaimed, “I didn’t just screw Ho Chi Minh, I cut his pecker off” (qtd. in Halberstam 414). Johnson insisted on a level of loyalty he metaphorically referred to as having one’s “pecker in my pocket” (434). Within his administration, Johnson was domineering and hypermasculine; David Halberstam discusses how Johnson perpetuated a level of “humiliation and virtual emasculation” against his Vice President Hubert Humphrey that few public officials would have received or tolerated (533). In one instance, when Humphrey delivered an impassioned speech that implied he may be the leader of the Administration on education, Johnson chastised his Vice President, alerting reporters, “Boys, I’ve just reminded Hubert that I’ve got his balls in my pocket” (qtd. in Halberstam 533). Clearly, to the President, an upset in the war in Vietnam and the domestic debate over Vietnam would be a blow to the national ego as well as Johnson’s personal manhood. Johnson needed to succeed in Vietnam where his more handsome, more charming, and more popular predecessor, John F. Kennedy, had failed in Cuba. But Johnson did not get his chance: after a less-than-expected performance in the New Hampshire primary, he declined to pursue the Democratic Presidential
nomination in 1968.

Johnson’s decision shocked America, especially combat soldiers, many of whom felt abandoned by their commander. 1968 proved to be a notoriously tumultuous year for the United States, as well as the deadliest year in Vietnam for American combat soldiers.\(^{25}\) At home, the Tet Offensive, followed by the famous Eddie Adams photograph of a Viet Cong prisoner’s execution in the streets of Saigon, riveted Americans and inspired greater opposition to the war in Vietnam.\(^{26}\) Two of America’s most celebrated leaders and vocal opponents of the war, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, were assassinated within two months of one another. Violent public demonstrations featuring clashes between protestors and the police force marred the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, leading to the arrest of the Chicago Seven on charges of conspiracy and inciting a riot, among other charges. The protests led to a separation between many antiwar organizations and the counterculture, yet their attempts to encourage an American withdrawal reached new levels of public visibility and increased polarization between the pro-war and antiwar factions.

Another “assault” launched by the counterculture was the blurring of gender boundaries. “Hippies,” the iconic creation of the 1960s counterculture, grew out their hair, challenging standards of masculinity and popular notions about how men should publicly present themselves. Antiwar protests famously placed flowers in the barrel of guns held by their National Guardsmen peers in a peacemaking gesture that showed opposition to the war, not to the servicemen themselves. Throughout the 1960s, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” remained a popular song, recorded by the Kingston Trio; Peter, Paul, and Mary; and Joan Baez. Its chorus replaced the titular flowers with “young men,” “young women,” “soldiers” and “graveyards,” respectively, calling for a defense of the young in the face of the ongoing violence in Vietnam. Many antiwar protestors, counterculture or otherwise, had connections to civil rights and women’s liberation movements, seeking to destabilize a white, male-dominated power structure that they believed marginalized and disenfranchised them. This challenge to the status quo was rightfully seen as a threat to the ability of the system to maintain its authority. President Richard

\(^{25}\) The Combat Area Casualties Current File, available on the National Archives webpage as of March 31, 2012, notes that 16, 592 deaths recorded in 1968, the deadliest year in the war. It is noted, however, that this is “for informational purposes only, [and] not official statistics” (National Archives).

\(^{26}\) Polls revealed that “six out of ten Americans by 1969 thought the war in Vietnam was a mistake. The Harris poll showed that while 81 percent of Americans though the antiwar demonstrators raised legitimate questions, 51 percent disapproved of their methods of protest” (Brewer 212).
M. Nixon viewed these young men and women as “enemies,” potentially supported by foreign Communist powers, though such affiliation could never be verified (Brewer 213). The Vietnam War and the opposition to it were both affronts to American power, a power understood in terms of masculine aggression, and a defeat on either front would be a symbolic emasculation. It should comes as no surprise, then, as Susan Jeffords has argued, filmmakers in the late 1970s and 1980s used the Vietnam War as a narrative context to “remasculinize” American culture after the discouraging fall of Saigon in 1975 (xi). For Jeffords, the hyper-masculine personae seen in films about the Vietnam War, including First Blood (1982) and Full Metal Jacket (1987), demonstrate that “renewed sense of American masculinity […] has not increased a flexibility of gender roles so much as it has simply redefined them in a manner that is equally excluding and, more significantly, equally damaging to women and those who are the subjects of masculine domination” (169). The image of manhood offered in the progressive black comedies I have selected is far more sensitive, suggesting a need to sympathize with and understand these young men, rather than reinvigorate them with a violent, stoic, even hubristic model of masculinity.

As dissent toward the Vietnam War began to peak in 1969, Slaughterhouse-Five appeared; as Jerome Klinkowitz observes, “An antiwar novel would not have done so well much earlier—not until the Tet Offensive of 1968 showed Americans how badly the war in Vietnam was going” (62). A postmodernist tour-de-force, the novel chronicled the misadventures of Billy Pilgrim, a reluctant time traveler ricocheted between his experiences in World War II, his captivity on the planet Tralfamadore, and his postwar ennui in the fictional city of Ilium. It initially received mixed critical reviews: Robert Scholes and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt separately gave the novel positive reviews in The New York Times, while Alfred Kazin chided the novel’s “impishly sentimental humor” (qtd. in Shields 255). It is this humor, however, that performs the noble effort of unsettling the reader in favor of young boys overseas—boys much like Vonnegut (and the fictional Billy Pilgrim) some twenty-five years later.

A testament to Vonnegut’s effectiveness was his success among teenagers and college students, who catapulted him into the national spotlight from the damning obscurity afforded to those miscategorized as genre writers (in Vonnegut’s case, science fiction). A photo caption accompanying a Newsweek article just prior to Slaughterhouse-Five’s publication deemed Vonnegut “A Campus Orwell” (qtd. in Shields 247). Indeed literary critic Leslie Fiedler, who had risen to prominence with his landmark study Love and Death in the American Novel
(1961), came to Vonnegut’s work at the insistence of his young son (5). The acclaim heaped on the novel as an antiwar statement, as a playful experiment in form, and as a jeremiad against human indifference led critic William Rodney Allen to observe, in 1996, “Perhaps not since Uncle Tom’s Cabin had a work of fiction so deeply affected the public’s perception of an ongoing American war” (ix). Allen boldly contends that Slaughterhouse-Five “helped get the United States out of Vietnam” (ix). This claim is undoubtedly exaggerated (after all, the war persisted until 1975), but attests to the novel’s powerful denunciation of American militarism, not only for its ideological implications, but for the trauma it exposes America’s boys to in the name of vague values like freedom, honor, and valor. Vonnegut was writing about World War II, not Vietnam, but like Altman, Vonnegut’s target remains clear despite the change in the geographical and historical context. By employing black humor, Vonnegut was able to underscore these issues and disturb his audience into paying attention—even into a new consciousness.

Billy Pilgrim is a middle-class optometrist in Illium, a fitting occupation for someone “to give Earthlings corrected vision” (78), as Todd F. Davis notes. Coincidentally, Vonnegut “distorts” a vision of Vietnam by using World War II as his context. The novel does, however, re-envision American perceptions of World War II, the global conflict that ushered in what Henry Luce famously called “the American century” and established the United States as the dominant world superpower. Although several literary works, such as Norman Mailer’s The Naked and the Dead (1948) and Joseph Heller’s Catch-22 (1961), challenged popular notions about the glory and gallantry of war, popular cinema continued to perpetuate those mythologizing narratives through films like Sands of Iwo Jima (1949), From Here to Eternity (1953), and To Hell and Back (1955). These films performed the crucial cultural work of establishing the “proper” popular historical accounts (and perceptions) of the war, avoiding critical examination in favor of self-righteous celebration, laying the framework for public and popular discussions of World War II and the United States’s “noble” role in it. Vonnegut complicates these inhibiting legends by engaging them and revising them, not so much to defame the American participation as to show the dehumanizing (rather than masculinizing) effects of war on those who fought. To this end, Vonnegut lobbies on behalf of the boys who now follow in his footsteps, invoking his own experience to demystify the false values and unfair pressures that compel them to service.
Vonnegut establishes the boy/man binary early in the novel during his confrontation with Mary O’Hare, one of the novel’s two dedicatees. Mary is the wife of Vonnegut’s war buddy, Bernard, whom he has gone to visit in the hopes of triggering his memory of Dresden. This scene may, in part, explain why Vonnegut embraces a novelistic framework as opposed to the more “legitimate” memoir or history: he is reconstructing his past, creating a narrative, much in the same way history and popular culture work to create explanatory narratives about the past. Vonnegut’s friend Loree Rackstraw recalls that when the writer visited his war buddies, “Nobody had the same story or could remember details” (30). This difficulty led Vonnegut to consider having the pages become increasingly darker, until the Dresden scenes, at which point the novel’s pages would entirely darkened (30). While Vonnegut was wrestling with how to depict the climactic event, Mary O’Hare brings attention to the level of character; arguably, she is the moral core of the novel, compelling Vonnegut to remember how young and innocent he and Bernard were during the war:

You were just babies in the war—like ones upstairs! […] You’ll pretend you were men instead of babies, and you’ll be played in the movies by Frank Sinatra and John Wayne or some of those other glamorous, war-loving, dirty old men. And war will look just wonderful, so we’ll have a lot more of them. And they’ll be fought by babies like the babies upstairs. (18).

Mary is not only one of the few women in the novel, but also the voice of reason. A nurse, Mary serves as Vonnegut’s assistant in the dissection of the Dresden bombing that will become the book itself, Susan E. Farrell has suggested (100). Mary disrupts Vonnegut’s intentions as a self-proclaimed “trafficker in climaxes, and thrills and characterization and wonderful dialogue and suspense and confrontation” (6), to capitalize off the book he imagines either “would be a masterpiece or at least make me a lot of money, since the subject was so big” (2-3).

Vonnegut genders sensitivity and compassion; the benevolent Mary guides Vonnegut into being a more reflective and considerate craftsman. He realizes, with Mary’s stern condemnation, that the novel he was about to write would contribute to the same cultural mythology that perpetuates wars and young boys’ desire to participate in them. He admits to himself, “We had been foolish virgins in the war, right at the end of childhood” (18), highlighting their ignorance and innocence. Sent off to fight for their country, these young men’s “virginity” accentuates how inexperienced, uncorrupted, and boyish they are, an irony Vonnegut sees as heartbreaking yet
revealing about their lack of preparation as men, both mentally and emotionally. He consequently subtitles the novel “The Children’s Crusade,” invoking a Romantic notion of the child as innocent in order to emotionally appeal to the readership for sympathy for the soldiers. Although the manifest context is World War II, the implications for the current conflict in Vietnam are obvious, particularly in the novel’s concluding chapter, where the writer reflects on the recent assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, both of whom were advocating an American withdrawal from Vietnam by 1967.

The Children’s Crusade—the thirteenth century campaign that manipulated youth to fight on behalf of Christianity, only to be either shipwrecked and enslaved—is a fitting metaphor for both World War II and Vietnam War as thousands of young men were compelled to fight for a cause that ultimately left them alienated and adrift. Vonnegut quotes from Charles Mackay’s 1841 history of the event: “They were no doubt idle and deserted children who generally swarm in great cities, nurtured on vice and daring, and ready for anything” (20). Mackay alludes to both the bravery and naivity of the children, and this account will resonate later in the novel with the hubristic machismo of Roland Weary, staid courage of Edgar Derby, and bemused indifference of Billy Pilgrim. Mackay draws a line between “history” and “literature” (especially romance): the former reveals that the Crusaders, specifically the adults, were “ignorant and savage men,” while the latter “portrays […] their virtue and magnanimity, the imperishable honor they acquired for themselves, and the great services they rendered to Christianity” (20). History records, Mackay affirms, while literature embellishes; as Mary suggests, these embellishments have dangerous social implications for those who read and live by these romances’ virtues. Vonnegut returns to this claim later in the text, when Roland Weary proclaims himself one of the “Three Musketeers,” an allusion to Alexandre Dumas’s historical novel celebrating honor and valor. By adopting this moniker, Weary and friends embrace and superimpose the ideals of these fictions onto their current situation, and in Vonnegut’s eyes, dangerously delude themselves. Vonnegut, word for word, repeats Mackay’s analysis of how romance handles Crusaders as the narrator tells of Roland Weary speaking “unintelligibly of the sacrifices he had made on Billy’s behalf” (64). This re-appropriation simultaneously aligns Crusaders with soldiers in both World War II and the Vietnam War, suggesting that all three were sent off on quixotic ideological quests and are unfortunately ill-fated. But Vonnegut does not condemn Weary for his invocation of the Three Musketeers; rather, it shows the extremes soldiers went to in their efforts to
appropriate fictions of noble masculinity that would both explain their predicament and provide guidance for how to navigate themselves through and out of it. Although Weary is one of the more unlikeable “listless playthings” in the text, he is sympathetic; his status as a self-appointed Musketeer is a coping mechanism. After all, he is only eighteen years old when he is shipped halfway around the world to battle for his country, his values, and his life.

In the self-reflexive first chapter, the narrative representation of Kurt Vonnegut discusses the difficulty he had writing the book, which was over twenty years in the making, because of the solemnity and extremity of the Dresden firebombing as well as the unreliability of memory. He tells his editor, Seymour Lawrence, “It is so short and jumbled and jangled, Sam, because there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre” (24). Indeed, the novel’s terse sentences, fragmentations, and experiments in temporality have been hailed as hallmarks of its artistic accomplishment. His style—marked by concision and “plain English”—evokes Ernest Hemingway’s efforts to write “one true sentence” (12), paring away an excess of adjectives, sentiment, and verbosity in favor of an attempt to achieve an accurate representation of reality—in Vonnegut’s case, a horrific reality that defies explanation. One may in fact wonder why a novel that is so seemingly simple (at least, at the sentence-level) and an admitted “failure” could have taken so long. Of course, the latter claim by Vonnegut—that the novel fails and has to fail—is false modesty. Reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt called Vonnegut on that in his 1969 review of the novel when he said “He’s wrong and he knows it” (35); indeed Lehmann-Haupt was right, and in his 1981 “autobiographical collage” Palm Sunday, Vonnegut himself graded Slaughterhouse-Five an “A-plus” (284). Rather, the difficulty Vonnegut faced, in part, was depicting the narrative of the Dresden firebombing in a way that could reach a wide audience without “explaining away” or shamelessly exploiting it for financial gains and literary recognition. Furthermore, wary of his faulty memory, Vonnegut draws attention to his concern that he will distort or romanticize the events. By bringing these issues to the forefront, he anticipates derisive criticism and admits the inherent difficulties in rendering the story honestly and without ulterior motives.

The writer’s struggle with ineffability and the inherent limitations of language are not the sole reason for Vonnegut’s accessible, straightforward prose style. Like his next book, Breakfast of Champions, there is a didactic quality to Slaughterhouse-Five, similar almost to a primer. Vonnegut is aware that as a survivor, he bears the burden of memory: a responsibility to the
perished to tell of what happened, to “set the record straight.” Looking back upon Dresden may render Vonnegut a pillar of salt, but Vonnegut is fully aware his soul is at stake, for reflecting on the loss of life, even when one has survived, is an incredibly human and humane act—a necessary reflection. To this end, *Slaughterhouse-Five* teaches the reader of what happened at Dresden, but also the need to resist this form of atrocity as well as simple unkindness. “God damn it, you’ve got to be kind” (129), Eliot Rosewater proclaims in *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*; Vonnegut carries on this message in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. But he is only able to do so after years of reflection and struggle with the story; a young man, innocent and ignorant, could not have rendered the tale or offered the kind of perspective Vonnegut offers in the novel. The young Vonnegut would have capitalized off of the narrative, aware of the novel’s powerful drama, but the older Vonnegut sees the tragedy of the event and the trauma it induced, and uses the occasion to warn the future. In a 1969 interview, Vonnegut mused that powerful *men* do not read large books, so he writes short ones so he can reach that audience (Bryan BR2). If *Slaughterhouse-Five* is too simple or too accessible, it is because the target audience may be youth themselves. But if Vonnegut can appeal to a readership before they grow up and assume the reins over the government and the military and the world at large, he knows he can “poison their minds with humanity” (qtd. in Bryan B2). The antiwar message of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which Vonnegut laments is as purposeful as being “anti-glacier” (4), functions on two levels: appeal on behalf of the young men who are fighting, in this case in Vietnam, but also to the young men who fight and ignite the wars of tomorrow. The book’s very intentions seem to work on two levels, therefore, consciously addressing the present and the future simultaneously.

Vonnegut’s examination of the Dresden firebombing is not the novel’s only critique of the American military’s actions in World War II. Another subtle, yet key critique in the novel is the case of Private Eddie D. Slovik, the first soldier to be executed for desertion since the American Civil War. Slovik’s death, by firing squad in 1945, had been ordered by Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces Dwight D. Eisenhower himself as a warning to potential deserters about the consequences. The case was uncovered in a William Bradford Huie’s 1954 book, *The Execution of Private Slovik*, which Billy reads in the novel.27 To execute Slovik, from Vonnegut’s perspective, is more a matter of protocol than justice; as he writes, its purpose was

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27 Coincidentally, Frank Sinatra had planned to direct and produce a film adaptation version in the early 1960s (Taraborelli 229). A made-for-television movie, starring Martin Sheen, aired in 1974; Sinatra was not associated with the project.
“to maintain that discipline upon which alone an army can succeed” (57). Slovik’s personhood is stripped of him in the name of the cause. But in mentioning Slovik passively, Vonnegut highlights his case—a case President Eisenhower tried to suppress when Huie’s book was published—and humanizes the war. Slovik’s crime was not subverting American military action by revealing strategies or sabotaging their efforts; it was not wanting to serve, not wanting to fight, not wanting to die. Vonnegut is humbled by the sadness of the situation—the sadness of a young man wanting to live his life on his own terms. But Slovik, like Billy Pilgrim, is a “listless plaything” (164), a pawn of a government’s plans and an inevitable war. Vonnegut’s opposition is not against war—that, he realizes, is futile—but against the treatment of men it incurs and the consequences for the young generations who are sent off, unknowing and scared, to wage the battles manipulated by their elders.

The contributions of women on the battlefield and the homefront aside, war in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a masculine effort, characterized by misguided machismo and bloodthirstiness. Perhaps channeling the hypermasculine rhetoric of Johnson I mentioned earlier, Vonnegut mocks the “post-coital satisfaction” some war enthusiasts receive from what is colloquially known as “mopping up” (66). He associates this pleasure with the “orgasm of victory,” again rendering success in battle in terms of sexual intercourse to uncover the gendered understanding of war that aligns military and sexual conquests. Meanwhile, the dog being used by the procedure is alien to war, having “no idea what game was being played” (66). Named “Princess,” the dog represents the innocence of the boys who find themselves pawns in a game they cannot comprehend—a game that defies such comprehension. In Vonnegut, innocence is feminized, but in a way that privileges the feminine as compassionate, rational, and preferable over the absurd cruelty perpetuated by masculinity.

An example of this wartime cruelty is when German soldiers find Roland Weary and Billy Pilgrim in a creek bed, where Roland is about to kick Billy in the spine. The Germans are confounded by the animosity of one American soldier toward another as well as Billy’s reaction to the predicament: laughter. Explanation escapes them not because they do not understand the context, but because there is no explanation to be had. This moment encapsulates war—World War II and the Vietnam War—for Vonnegut: violent, ill-advised, and absurd. Leslie Fiedler wrote that the strength of the black humorists lies in their recognition that “[t]he only response to the world that’s left is laughter” (qtd. in “Black” 94). Billy’s laughter is a sign of comic relief in
the face of such absurdity and the only response that seems rational. In moments such as these, it is clear that war fails in its efforts to make boys into men, instead showing the base animal instincts in humans—for survival, for violence, for anger.

The Germans themselves are not immune from such mistreatment, as they cruelly deny the men of tolerable living conditions. While transporting the men, they are given very little clean water and food, and they are forced into close living quarters. In spite of this abuse, the men actually become more humane. They cooperate and help one another to ease the difficulty and demoralization of the experience. The Germans provide Billy with a coat that amounts to not much more than a “fur-collar vest” (115). Seeing him in this insufficient garb proves to be “one of the most screamingly funny things they had seen in all of World War II” (115). The warfare becomes psychological here, as the Englishmen later point out to Billy when he is assigned to their bunker: “My God—what have they done to you, lad? This isn’t a man. It’s a broken kite” (124). The coat is an obvious insult, meant to feminize and therefore, in the theater of war, make Billy visually “unfit” for combat. Emasculation serves as a means of defeating the enemy. “It was a deliberate attempt to humiliate you,” one Englishman advises Billy. “You mustn’t let Jerry do things like that” (124). Described as “clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong” (119), the Englishmen are perhaps the manliest of the soldiers. To Vonnegut, they embody the cultural mythology behind war because, after seeing them, war “look[ed] stylish and reasonable, and fun” (120). Yet they also subvert the desirable masculinity they initially perform, complicating understandings of what it means to be a “man” in times of war. They sing Gilbert and Sullivan and perform plays for the delight of all the men. This revelry should not be construed as a sign of their weakness, though: in fact, an English soldier portraying the Blue Fairy Godmother breaks Paul Lazzaro’s arm as punishment for an attempted theft. Ultimately, the Englishmen show a different vision of masculinity on the front—one premised on both strength and sensitivity. Their humanity shines through their charity and fraternity in comparison to the Germans, who though equally broken and battered, continue to wage the war.

Worthy of note, however, in discussing the Germans is the absence of the term “Nazi” in the novel. It makes only one appearance by my count: when Howard W. Campbell, Jr. appears, the narrator mentions he was “an American who had become a Nazi” (206). This detail has been overlooked, but should be unpacked to discover how the novel handles gender and war. Early in the novel, Vonnegut’s father laments that he never wrote a story with a villain in it; Vonnegut

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responds, “I told him that was one of the things I learned in college after the war” (10). So although there are antagonists in Slaughterhouse-Five—Roland Weary, Paul Lazzaro, Howard W. Campbell, Jr., the Germans—there are no villains. For Campbell to become a Nazi indicates that Nazism is not an innate state of being, but rather an ideology in which one willingly participates. Vonnegut is fully aware of the connotation behind the word “Nazi,” especially in American culture, and avoids invoking it because he wants to revise a historical narrative that equates the Allies with “pure good” and the Nazis with “pure evil.” While he certainly does not condone the acts of the Nazis, he also refuses to see them as an exceptional case of non-humans or beasts. They were, in fact, individuals who subscribed to the propagandistic ideology championed by Hitler, sacrificing their free choice in favor of a mob mentality. War does not make boys into men; more likely than not, it denies boys and men of their compassion, reason, and personhood. Campbell’s “becoming,” ironically, underscores his willful choice to surrender his ability to act willfully by surrendering to a Nazi narrative that explained the world’s woes and how to cure them. By no means were Nazis alone, though, as many Americans supported a counternarrative that served to validate all American military actions in the name of the just and right; it is this counternarrative that condones the Dresden firebombing, despite the city’s military insignificance as an “open city.” By discussing Dresden as an atrocious military action against an “open city” populated solely by innocent civilians, Vonnegut’s ultimate message here, then, is a humanistic plea in favor of individual thought and resisting attempts to deny any person’s volition.29 Young men, as the unknowing pawns of these military efforts, function as the beneficiary of this antiwar satire, assuming the humor can properly mobilize the readership.

One person who clearly demonstrates agency and humanity is Edgar Derby, a high school teacher who uses his political connections to enlist in the Army. Edgar represents a masculine ideal: he is older (and presumably wiser), he has one of the best bodies (105), and he is patriotic. He becomes a surrogate father figure to Billy, who as “a funny-looking youth—tall and weak, and shaped like a bottle of Coca-Cola” (30), was far from the hegemonic ideal. Derby’s greatest lesson to Billy comes as he stands up to Campbell and the Nazi propaganda. “Derby spoke movingly of the American form of government,” the narrator recounts, “with freedom and justice

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28 Vonnegut here is most likely referring to his training in anthropology at the University of Chicago.

29 For a recent discussion of ethics in Slaughterhouse-Five, consult Tally, pp. 70-84.
and opportunities and fair play for all. He said there wasn’t a man there who wouldn’t gladly die for those ideals” (209). Derby transcends his confinement as a “listless plaything” to become a character, in Vonnegut’s mind. But his impassioned speech—a rebuttal that asserts his masculinity, righteousness, and purpose—is interrupted by the moans of the air-raid sirens. Later, Derby is shot by a firing squad for stealing a teapot, a fact which Vonnegut reveals from the outset of the novel. This grimly humorous death invokes laughter as a form of desperation; it also calls into question any valorization of Derby. Is he honorable, or was he foolish to think he could triumph in these circumstances? A compromised meaning seems best here: Derby’s willingness to stand up against propaganda was a celebration of one man over a political machine, but his death is a sign that life is indifferent to causes, beliefs, and actions—honorable though they may be. His death does not diminish his courageous confrontation; at the same time, it fails to cause any noticeable change. In war, even grown men are rendered children, underscoring their inability to control their own destinies, despite an articulation of masculinity that views one’s ability to do just that as a hallmark of American manhood.

Even after the war, Billy is unable to enact an acceptable example of American masculinity. His very name suggests his childlike state: “Billy” as the diminutive of “William,” while “Pilgrim” alludes to his disconnectedness from the world that leads him to travel between time and place. Believing himself to be an abductee, Billy frustrates his family, who perceives what today may be diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder as insanity. His daughter infantilizes him, sternly advising him, “If you’re going to act like a child, maybe we’ll just have to treat you like a child” (167). One may be tempted to view this as a continuation of the emasculation he faced in the war, but then, is Billy Pilgrim ever a “man” according to social standards? Roland Weary, the Germans, and his daughter Barbara infantilize (and therefore emasculate) Billy, rendering him unable to effectively resist through actions or words. In the foreword to his 2000 collection Bagombo Snuff Box, Kurt Vonnegut lists eight rules for writing a short story (which I believe can be adapted to the novel), including, “Be a Sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them—in order that the reader may see what they are made of” (10). This claim certainly applies to Billy Pilgrim, who endures ongoing humiliation with indifference, even laughter. But this stoicism does not reveal his admirable character as much as his bemused resignation from engaging in the world around him. Billy Pilgrim has been mistakenly understood as an Everyman and even a proxy for
Vonnegut himself, but Robert Merrill and Peter A. Scholl correct this misreading:

One may sympathize with his attempt to make sense of things, but the fact remains that some men have greater resources than others. Indeed, some men are like Kurt Vonnegut. By intruding in his own tale, Vonnegut contrasts his personal position with that of his protagonist. (146)

Vonnegut may be sympathetic to Billy, but he does not rally behind Billy’s approach to the world. Parsing this separation is important to understanding Vonnegut’s play with the Blakeian binary of innocence and experience. The “experience” of war does not make one mature; it does not allow one to “leave” a state of innocence. Rather, it traumatizes, brutalizes, and kills innocents. As a result, the readers must work to protect innocents like Billy Pilgrim and the thousands of boys like him from the danger of war. War might not be avoidable, but should it be the most innocent who fight it?

Billy Pilgrim knows when he will die. And he does not worry about it, because as he understands it, he will only be dead in that moment. The Tralfamadorians become his demagogues of sorts; he yields to their philosophy and pledges allegiance to the notion that free will is an Earthling illusion. “Well, here we are, Mr. Pilgrim,” they attest, “trapped in the amber of the moment. There is no why” (97). Consequently Billy allows himself to be tossed about, because there is no alternative in his mind. He admires Adam and Eve, because they were “naked […] so innocent, so vulnerable, so eager to behave decently” (68); in them, he sees the desire to be good and yet their failure to do so, a failure that, from a Tralfamadorian perspective, was fated and therefore inevitable. Billy aligns himself with this inability to act; by treating Billy as a comic butt, Vonnegut encourages the reader to resist such a passive response to the world. One must act and act responsibly; do not allow social pressures to restrict, stunt, and emasculate you, he seems to say. As we laugh at Billy, we must confront our own activity/passivity, challenging the narrator’s damning evaluation of humans like Billy Pilgrim as “listless playthings.”

In an age marked by blind patriotism and fierce activism, it is hard to believe Vonnegut, a former solider and witness to Dresden, would advocate the former. Rather, as the first and last chapters of the novel reveal, he seems to favor actions over words, fundamentally aware that words are inadequate. Vonnegut is aware of the limitations of language; he does not dare to represent the firebombing itself. But the novel’s true testament is to the power of both words and actions. Vonnegut’s words do the cultural work of revising popular understandings of American
involvement in World War II and, by proxy, in the Vietnam War. While Vonnegut frustrates many readers because he won’t, as J. Michael Crichton observed, “choose sides, ascribing blame and penalty, identifying good guys and bad” (110), Vonnegut does succeed in showing that good and evil are not opposite states of being, but rather points on a continuum of human action, constantly in flux from moment-to-moment and decision-to-decision. Because of this shifting nature, it becomes important to constantly regulate one’s behavior.

Vonnegut speaks as a member of the older generation and a father figure; this wisdom, legitimated by his war experiences, is tempered by his self-effacing humor. By crafting a metafictional narrative, he draws deliberate attention to the artifice of his creation as well as his intentions. In this way Vonnegut refuses to invoke the authority extended to him as the author by revealing what goes on behind the curtain. This refusal is integral to his success as a countercultural writer; he talks to his readers, not down to his readers, and this respect for them in turn wins him their respect.

The film M*A*S*H is perhaps the most transparent, damning, and commercially popular critique of the Vietnam War, grossing over $81.6 million ("M.A.S.H. (1970) - Box Office Mojo."). Directed by the relatively unknown director Robert Altman, the film established his reputation, initiating an impressive period of creativity throughout the 1970s that included McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971), Images (1973), and Nashville (1975). M*A*S*H demonstrated both his naturalistic style, emphasizing the animalistic qualities of humankind, as well as his iconoclastic directing style that encouraged ad-libbing and major departures from the script. The film won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in addition to, ironically enough, Best Adapted Screenplay Academy Award for Ring Lardner, Jr. Like Vonnegut, Altman shows how men at war become children, but in his version, this shift is willful and strategic. “Experienced” surgeons behave “innocently” as boys as means of coping with the death and carnage they bear witness to in the mobile army surgical hospital (M*A*S*H). These comic antics foster an unsettling juxtaposition between the immaturity of the men outside of the hospital setting with the solemnity of the operating room to show that without the intentional lunacy of the former, the latter would certainly drive these men to legitimate insanity. Since the men know they are being insane, they maintain their sanity, while they perceive their peers who insist on protocol and sanity as the truly dangerous members of the unit. Humor becomes a way to resist this danger and, in one instance, liberate the “insane,” particularly Waldowski and Houlihan.
With this kind of political subtext, initial reviews of the film were unsurprisingly mixed. It was produced by Fox simultaneously with patriotic pro-war films like *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *Patton,* which romanticized the Allied effort in World War II in a manner that tacitly supported American efforts in southeast Asia. *M*A*S*H* was based on a comic novel by Richard Hooker (real name: Dr. H. Richard Hornberger), which was set during the Korean War, but it did not critique it or war in general. Altman, however, revised this perceived deficiency in Hooker’s novel and Lardner’s resulting script; in a featurette for the *M*A*S*H* DVD, he admits, “I did everything I could do that would confuse the audience and make the audience feel that this was in Vietnam, so we took all the references to Korea out.” Altman’s efforts were apparently successful, as Roger Greenspun’s review was struck not by the film’s antiwar message, but its assault on organized religion: “To my knowledge, Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* is the first major American movie openly to ridicule belief in God—not phony belief; real belief.” Greenspun found nothing “profoundly radical” about the movie’s critique, and ultimately felt it “simply runs out of steam.” This obtuseness, along with Altman’s ability to keep the film under budget, reveals how an implicitly antiwar film made its way out of Fox Studios at the height of the Vietnam War. Roger Ebert was less confounded; he gave the film “four stars,” confessing that the laughter revealed “the unadmitted sadist in all of us.” This derisive laughter suggests not only a hostility toward the buffoonish authority figures who become the comic butts in *M*A*S*H*, but also the war itself.

Despite the film’s popular success—the highest grossing film of Altman’s career—it has received limited critical attention compared to the television show, which is noticeably less dark. Feminist critics interested in the gender dynamics of the text, however, have analyzed the film. Joan Mellen excoriated *M*A*S*H* in her study of American masculinity on film, yet what she damnsthe film’s focus on men—is what I believe is its strength. She misreads the film’s revisionist take on the war film to be an unconscious embrace of that aesthetic, then faults the film for depicting the men as stoic. A simple appreciation of the film’s humor, however, reveals these men are both emotional and sensitive, as they use humor as a way to show camaraderie, affection, and a desire to protect. “In *Mash* [sic] women are present to be humiliated,” Mellen laments, “further evidence that these buddy films were made in conscious hostility to the women’s movement” (313). Writing in 1977, a popular time for scathing feminist critiques of allegedly misogynistic texts, Mellen’s larger political agenda mars her ability to appreciate the
film on its own terms; of course, in this situation and at this time, political correctness will be absent, especially within the genre of black comedy, which eschews any notion of propriety. While “Hot Lips” Houlihan (Sally Kellerman) is certainly embarrassed by her colleagues, it is less because of her gender than her strict adherence to authoritarian Army protocol; she receives the same treatment from Hawkeye and Trapper John as Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall) does, with the intention of driving her mad, too. Ironically, amidst the madness of war itself, being mad is a way out, and the men realize the irony of their antics. While one cannot deny the other women in the film are pursued relentlessly, it should not be ignored that the exchange is consensual and that sex, like humor, becomes a coping strategy for these servicemen and servicewomen near the front. Helene Keyssar’s take on the gender politics is more balanced, as she attempts to analyze the film without dismissing it. She argues that the hijinks of the members of the MASH unit result from their confinement, lending credibly to Houlihan’s charges that the base is an insane asylum (62). Keyssar shares Mellen’s concern over the depiction of women, but focuses on the film’s belief in the “resurrecive power of the fraternity of men” instead of condemning the film as Mellen does (82). Women are “other,” Keyssar concludes, but they are not the “anti-community” they are usually portrayed as. My argument builds off of Keyssar to examine the fraternity of men, but also the paternity that arises in the film. Trapper John, Hawkeye, and Duke are obviously intelligent, able, and dedicated men, but when they’re not working (which in the military, means the other twelve hours a day), they often behave in ways that may be dismissed as juvenile or inappropriate. I believe this is the major flaw of Mellen’s reading; she views men not as gendered beings, but as beacons of patriarchy. When we view the male protagonists of M*A*S*H as men in war, it becomes clear that this shift from experience to innocence, from manly professionals to boyish imps, serves to help them safely deal with the expectations of them at the front as well as model for others the need to purge themselves of the anxiety and frustrations fostered by military protocol, the demands of their mission, and the rigid expectations of masculinity that celebrates warriors. They are concerned with upholding morale, both their own and others, and, in this way, the film rallies behind the American military personnel while decrying the war. In celebrating the revelry and irreverence of youthful innocence, they also testify to society’s need to preserve that state in the young, including those being dispatched to the front, and question those codes of “masculine” adult behavior that celebrate aggression and violence.
Despite its pointed critique of the Vietnam War, the beginning sets the film elsewhere: “And then there was Korea.” The film ostensibly is set during the Korean War, but the fashions and grooming of many of the characters betray any effort at verisimilitude, allowing the viewer to easily assume the film is satirizing the Vietnam War. A quote follows from General Douglas MacArthur’s, the initial commander of United Nations forces in Korea, farewell address to Congress on April 19, 1951: “I have just left your fighting sons in Korea. They have done their best there, and I can report to you without reservation that they are splendid in every way.” What is interesting is that this is not exactly what MacArthur said; “They have done their best there” revises his remarks that “They have met all tests there.” Altman’s presumably intentional emendation corrects the relative success in Korean War to emphasize the attempts to cope and succeed in the war, despite the difficulties the men were undoubtedly facing, especially as General MacArthur’s dismissal came after contentious debates with President Truman and his administration on how to proceed in Korea. Furthermore, this tweaking demonstrates Altman’s efforts to not only reconceptualize our notions of war, but also the war film; like Vonnegut, his innovation takes place on the level of both how we discuss war as well as our understanding of what the war itself constituted.

Though M*A*S*H understandably depends on a rather large ensemble cast, much of the film focuses on the antics of three surgeons: Hawkeye Pierce (Donald Sutherland), Duke Forrest (Tom Skerritt), and Trapper John McIntyre (Elliot Gould). The film begins with Hawkeye aimlessly stumbling onto screen, evidence of his status as one of “the listless playthings of enormous forces” (208), as Vonnegut called his “characters.” But Hawkeye soon resists this label, and with Duke Forrest in tow, he steals an Army jeep from an African American officer he finds rude and deems a “racist.” The men appear in a canteen and immediately begin flirting with the women, referring to them as “lunch.” The commander, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Blake (Roger Bowen), is taken aback by the arrival of Hawkeye and Duke, refusing to believe they are the much-needed replacements: “Don’t be silly. We’re expecting some really sharp surgeons.” The men soon prove their sharpness, not only in terms of medical acumen, but wit. When Blake informs them they have been accused of stealing a Jeep, they respond they did not do it and that it’s right behind him. Blake concurs, demonstrating how dim and easily manipulated he is. If

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30 Blake’s name is probably not an allusion to William Blake. Lieutenant Blake is a character in Hooker’s novel, which itself is not antiwar (nor is Lardner’s script). Nevertheless, the coincidence is fitting.

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they must be in a war zone, Hawkeye and Duke imply, they will be running things on their own
terms. Their arrogant swagger and distrust of untrustworthy authority figures reveals their
masculine assumption of control in the unit, albeit subtle and subversive, and ultimately makes
them the most easily identified-with characters in the film. Their anti-authoritarianism is not only
disrespectful, but also self-righteous; Altman leads the audience to believe these measures are
appropriate, even in this highly hierarchal military structure, by positioning the male leads as the
comical antiheroes.

The military is hardly the sole target of their irreverence, as the film rails against religion
as both a coping mechanism, but also an agent of self-delusion used by soldiers to make sense of
their situation and lead them through it. Two characters in particular represent religiosity in the
unit: Father John Mulcahy (Rene Auberjonois), also known as “Dago Red,” the soft-spoken
Catholic priest and chaplain, and Major Frank Burns, an uptight, caustic surgeon Hawkeye and
Duke are forced to live with. In Burns’s first scene on film, he is teaching the Korean errand boy,
Ho-Jon, to read from a Bible. The paternal Hawkeye and Duke scoff at this lesson and insist
some illustrated reading material will be more helpful, slipping Ho-Jon a “gentleman’s
magazine.” Like Vonnegut, Altman advocates the ethics of human sexuality over combat
violence, attesting to its curative powers and emphasis on intimate human interaction. Hawkeye
and Duke’s conflicts with Burns escalate from there: Burns disapproves of Hawkeye and Duke’s
drinking, while the latter take issue with his praying. They pathologize his faithfulness, with
Hawkeye asking Duke if he’s ever seen “this syndrome.” Duke responds “not with anyone
beyond the age of eight years old.” This exchange between the friends makes it clear that
although they may act like boys, Duke and Hawkeye are, in fact, mature men who occasionally
behave in an immature way. They view religiosity as a sign of infantilism in Burns, deeming any
allegiance to a higher authority—be it God or Uncle Sam—as paternalistic and restrictive. They
egg Frank on, with Hawkeye asking Burns if he was “on this religious kick at home, or did you
ack up over here?” Duke follows with, “Uh, Frank, how long does this how go on?” The
insanity and ceremony of being a Christian is unfitting for a soldier and a man, in their eyes; they
use these thinly veiled insults to both liberate Frank from his manipulation by religion and his
impotence to demonstrate his will power as a man. Religion fails to provide order and answers in
an absurd well; humor, at least, provides temporary escape from the oppressive lunacy of it all.

The men’s conflict with Burns comes to a head when he tells a young soldier, Boone
(Bud Cort), to grab him a cardiac needle to save a dying soldier. The soldier dies in the meantime, yet Burns calls Boone an “idiot” and blames him for the soldier’s death. Boone cries, and Burns’s reckless blaming enrages Trapper John, who punches Burns while Colonel Blake and the newly arrived Major Houlihan observe. To Trapper John, Burns is not only a stickler and general pain-in-the-ass, but a threat to the morale of the unit, especially the young subordinates. His fellow surgeons come to his defense. Duke informs Blake that “Frank Burns is a menace! Every time a patient croaks on him, he says it’s God’s will or somebody else’s fault.” Hawkeye corroborates Duke’s concern: “Yeah, this time he blamed it on some kid who was stupid enough to believe him.” Burns’s inability to save the man led to his psychological attack on the young soldier; Trapper John, Hawkeye, and Duke—all of whom have children back home—decry this cowardly act and demonstrate a desire to protect the young soldier (and young men like him). They are aware that this war is corrupting and upsetting, and consequently, they hope to protect the vulnerable boys who—by no act of their own—find themselves there.31 This protective role they assume, almost paternal in nature, demonstrates a need to look after the young who have been drafted into service from the damming maturation that comes with experience. In another scene, Hawkeye tries unsuccessfully to save Ho-Jon from military service by giving him pills that will skew the results of his physical. These men participate in the war, with skill and acumen, but they do so in a way that does not compromise their individual integrities. While they seemingly accept that the war is an evil they are powerless against, their efforts to maintain “innocence” facilitate their larger efforts to make the war bearable for as long as they all must be there. In a space that demands seriousness and focus, they revel; their play allows them to temporarily disavow their “status” as mature men and escape into a world of pranks and puerility. This strategic merriment provides emotional relief from the high-stress atmosphere of the operating theater, where they seriously battle to save the lives of young men.

The incident instigates an unspoken plan to rid the unit of Frank Burns. Hawkeye insists Frank Burns is an “idiot” who has “flipped his wife” and is “out of his head.” Ironically, to Hawkeye, the man who most adheres to military policy—Frank Burns—is the one who is most insane. Mental illness is judged not by an inability to function, but an almost inhumane

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31 Another scene that illustrates this sense that humorous anarchy and laughter form a resistance against powerlessness comes when Major Houlihan, annoyed by Hawkeye, rhetorically states, “I wonder how such a degenerated person ever reached a position of authority in the Army Medical Corps!” Father Mulcahy, without looking up, drollly responds, “He was drafted.”
willingness to operate within and support a dehumanizing power structure that limits personal agency and will power. Houlihan, who has fostered a semi-romantic admiration for Burns, defends his competence, to which a disgusted Hawkeye replies, “I mean, you’re what we call a regular army clown.” Women are either sexual objects who play along with his games or they are authoritarian antagonists; at this moment, the attractive Houlihan has damned herself to the latter in Hawkeye’s eyes. Conveniently, she will be the key to Burns’s downfall, allowing Hawkeye, Duke, and Trapper John to ascend to total control of the unit, although they govern benevolently.

Burns and Houlihan’s growing affection for one another climaxes in their midnight rendez-vous. The comical encounter is broadcast via the loudspeaker for the whole camp to hear, and Houlihan’s exclamation “My lips are burning! Kiss my hot lips!” leads to a new moniker. Embarrassed by the encounter, Houlihan and Burns bashfully attend the next day’s meal. While Houlihan avoids interaction with the three main surgeons, Hawkeye takes the opportunity to push Burns over the edge, asking about Houlihan’s body, her prowess, and the well-being of Burns’s family back home. The religious Burns is morally no better than Hawkeye, the audience learns; an adulterous affair serves much the same purpose as Hawkeye’s antics: escape from the demands of the unit and relief from the pressures of being medical personnel. Hawkeye coyly poses the question, “Is she better than self-abuse?” Burns, believing his and Houlihan’s honor besmirched, jumps over the table to attack Hawkeye, who accuses Burns of being a sex maniac. Burns is consequently removed from the camp in a strait-jacket under the arrest of military police, validating Hawkeye’s version of insane sanity over Burns’s. As he is carried off by military police, the always irreverent Duke asks Blake, “Uh Colonel, fair is fair. If I nail Hot Lips and punch Hawkeye, can I go home?” This joke draws attention to the men’s desire to physically leave and the means by which they handle that nagging anxiety. Perhaps Burns—removed from his position in shame—wins out in the end, after all. Though he seemed most comfortable with his position and responsibility in the unit, Burns leaves because of the anti-authoritarian antics of the others, who desperately want the “punishment” he receives. Humor allows Duke, Trapper John, and Hawkeye to relieve stress, but not to leave it behind. It is a momentary leave of absence, one which returns when they re-enter the operating room.

Humor also helps the men handle other problems in the camp, most notably Waldowski’s supposed discovery of his latent homosexuality and consequent decision to commit suicide.
Hawkeye first learns of this problem from Father Mulcahy, who learns it from Captain “Painless” Waldowski (John Schuck) in confession, but cannot tell anyone the specifics by virtue of Catholic ethics. “There are some things that absolution just—” Mulcahy mumbles, revealing his inability—either in actions or in words—to truly help the men with their predicament and furthering the film’s dismissal of religion as a viable solution to the men’s fears and frustrations, especially Waldowski’s anxiety regarding his supposed non-normative sexuality. The men, amused by the ridiculousness of Waldowski’s claims (he is, after all, engaged to three women back home and notoriously well-endowed), decide to rescue Waldowski from his own devices. They stage a parodic Last Supper, arranged around the table in white surgical attire while Waldowski, as the reluctant martyr, stands in for Christ. An attendant sings the movie’s theme song, “Suicide is Painless”; appropriately, Waldowski’s nickname is “the Painless Pole.” Though the song is strongly cynical and bleak in tone, the spirited way it is sung as well as the parodic context give the song an ironic inflection. The men mock Waldowski’s “revelation” and the morbid means he chooses to deal with it; I perceive the moment as more sarcastic and playful than homophobic. After all, a fraternity of men, regardless of sexuality, is what allows them to persevere in light of their nerve-racking situation. The night concludes with the men paying their final respects, even the boyish Boone (who tells Waldowski he wasted his education), before Hawkeye coerces Lieutenant Dish to sleep with Waldowski as a “service” to humanity. We have already seen that the men perceive sex as a curative, so Waldowski is found to be lively and motivated the next day to continue his work. While some may view this act as suggesting homosexuality can be cured, a more feasible explanation would be Waldowski’s “revelation” was more a matter of neurosis than self-awareness. The men’s efforts, facilitated by the benevolent, sacrificing nurse, reinstill Waldowski’s “manhood”—his confidence and ability to perform—so that he may finish out the duty he has been charged with.

With Burns gone and Waldarski restored of his (heterosexual) masculine power, the only real challenge the men face is “Hot Lips” Houlihan. While sunning one day, the men discuss her vulgarly, reducing her authority by objectifying her sexually. They hatch a scheme to figure out her true hair color. What reveals the men’s insidious power on the camp is the collaboration of others, including Houlihan’s own nurses. When she goes to shower, everyone assembles outside and when the signal is given, the tent flaps reveal a nude Houlihan. By uniting the group against her through derisive laughter, this moment strips her of her authoritative vestments to reveal her
naked—symbolically and literally. Although the bet is the ostensible reason, this moment disenfranchises any moral superiority Houlihan has over the men, who feel threatened by her desexualized feminine presence as well as her adherence to formal power structures. She storms into Colonel Blake’s tent and hysterically cries, “This isn’t a hospital, it’s an insane asylum! And it’s your fault because you don’t do anything to discourage them!” The threat of Houlihan’s charges is defused when the camera reveals Colonel Blake is in bed with a nurse. He, too, is implicitly in cahoots with the boyish antics that go on around him. She threatens to resign, but Colonel Blake calls her bluff. Exasperated, Houlihan relents to the fraternity she has been assigned to; the next time we see her on-screen, she is shamefully scurrying away from Duke’s tent, suggesting she has given in to his sexual advances.

Altman largely made his career out of revisionist takes on Hollywood genre films, from the Western (McCabe and Mrs. Miller) to the musical comedy (Nashville). M*A*S*H is no exception, lampooning the war film, even alluding to several as featured entertainment for the soldiers, including Halls of Montezuma (1950) and The Glory Brigade (1953). In an act of political and generic defiance, Altman supplants the climactic battle scene with a football game between Blake’s and General Hammond’s units. This scene, complete with cheating and illicit drug use, continues the film’s metaphor of war as an absurd game. The men actively hustle the General’s unit, engaging a ringer, Dr. Oliver “Spearchucker” Jones (Fred Williamson), a former professional football player, to assist them. Hot Lips, donning pigtails and a cheerleading uniform, jubilantly yells from the sidelines, indicating that she has either completely snapped or joined the lunatics. Her inane cheers, from celebrating a penalty flag to confusing a timekeeper’s shot for an attack, reveal her simultaneous free-spiritedness and confusion; Colonel Blake refers to her as both “a blithering idiot” and an “incredible nincompoop.” Either way, she has cast off undying allegiance to rules in favor of team solidarity and gleeful resignation to the situation she finds herself in. If you can’t beat ’em, Altman instructs, join ’em. The pranks, in Bergsonian fashion, that had directed so much scorn and laughter against her, now bring Hot Lips into the fold. She, too, sees the value of play and of laughter in an otherwise serious, terrifying space.

Shortly after the football game, Hawkeye and Duke receive their orders to return home. Hawkeye, displaying a happiness that is part relief and part disbelief, interrupts Duke in surgery. Duke briefly imagines a hero’s return, enthusiastically met at the plane by his loving wife and children. Duke tries to weasel out of his current circumstances, but the surgical team requires he
stay and finish, since the patient’s skull is open. Hawkeye’s nostalgic departure reflects in part an awareness of his victory: his antics have got him through the mental and emotional turmoil of being near the front, and he can return home now safely. Somewhat reluctantly, the men pack up and head out, bringing an end to the film as the loudspeaker announces that tonight’s film will be \textit{M*A*S*H}, in which the unit “puts our boys back together again.” This phrase has a double meaning, of course, referring to the medical assistance as well as the solidarity, both social and emotional, the men provide each other in the time of war.

For the film \textit{M*A*S*H}, manhood and boyhood—the former characterized by order and responsibility over violence and recklessness, the latter by anarchy and revelry over rigidity and solemnity—are states one can easily shift between. In the world of Altman, women are not nurturing teachers as much as accomplices in the chaos (Lieutenant “Dish” Schneider, played by Jo Ann Pflug) or stifling representatives of the social order (Margaret “Hot Lips” Houlihan), who must be subverted and exposed for their hypocrisies. War does not turn boys into men, but it does require men, at times, to not act like boys. In the surgery scenes, solemn in tone with blood-soaked clothing and bone-saws at work, the men display concentration, skill, and efficiency. The occasional humor is restrained and more a matter of comic relief then irreverence to the task before them. It becomes clear, then, that the lawlessness these men thrive on—chasing nurses with umbrellas, antagonizing Burns and Houlihan, playing golf on the helicopter launching pads—are means of handling the stress and volatility of the war conditions, not a disrespect towards their duty. In a world characterized by absurdity, the only rational response is laughter. Their boyish behaviors, governed by relentless pursuit of women and a never-ending series of pranks, serve to keep morale high, fend off fear of their own mortality, and most importantly, preserve their sanity. Embracing boyhood, at times, defies society’s requirements that men behave in ways that compromise their right to make their own decisions but also the strict order of the military that favors controlling the collective through uniformity and protocol. Acting childish asserts agency in the face of oppressive opposition that requires allegiance, and thereby highlights the artificiality and illegitimacy of the army’s power structure and its preferred articulation of “combat masculinity” as obedient, conformist, and unemotional. “We’ll follow,” these men seem to say, “but on our own terms.” Their alternative vision of manhood that blurs the binary of innocence and experience functions pragmatically as a viable means for navigating an increasingly irrational existence. The strict guidelines of masculinity that require stoicism and
maturity are untenable; only insanity can arise from such allegiance. As a result, one must maintain his individuality by forsaking the solidarity of the unity, favoring instead a relative loyalty to the goals of the mission. This strategy, surely a difficult one to cultivate and institute, is no child’s play. Consequently, the innocent boys must be protected from the situation that necessitates it.

_Harold and Maude_, the story of a May-December relationship between twenty-year-old Harold Chasen (Bud Cort) and seventy-nine-year-old Marjorie “Maude” Chardin (Ruth Gordon), opened in 1971 to lackluster reviews. The first review, in _Variety_, flippantly remarked, “_Harold and Maude_ is as funny as a burning orphanage” (qtd. in Dawson 131). Roger Ebert of the _Chicago Sun-Times_ reduced the film to a “movie of attitudes,” while Vincent Canby of the _New York Times_ remarked that “Mr. Cort’s baby face and teen-age build look grotesque alongside Miss Gordon’s tiny, weaved frame.” Judith Crist of _New York_ magazine was one of the few laudatory critiques in the popular press: “IT IS A JOY! An engaging excursion into the joy of living. Wonderfully perceptive” (qtd. in Gehring 97). Despite _Harold and Maude_’s relatively tepid reception, it has become one of the most acclaimed cult films in American cinema. The film now stands as an early triumph for Hal Ashby, whose later award-winning films established him as one of the premier directors of New Hollywood: _The Last Detail_ (1973), _Shampoo_ (1975), _Coming Home_ (1978), and _Being There_ (1979). _Harold and Maude_ was based on the MFA thesis of Colin Higgins, a thirty-year-old former volunteer Army reporter with _The Stars and Stripes_ (the military’s newspaper) who studied screenwriting at the University of California, Los Angeles. The film combines an awareness of disenchanted youth and war propaganda, and the way the latter works to cajole the former. The “soldier” here is not yet enlisted, though the military pursues him through the character of his Uncle Victor. Instead, _Harold and Maude_ uses a concentration camp survivor as a witness to the horrors of war and, therefore, one best suited to testify to the young and protect them from suffering a similar fate. The film shows a young man who embraces a morbid perspective on life confronting a woman who defies death; the ultimate goal here is to illustrate the need to reject the socializing influence of institutions and exercise free will. Like Vonnegut, Ashby emphasizes the need for individuals to use their volition to counter the strictures of society, from the rhetoric of war to the rhetoric of acceptable masculinity. Harold’s use of humor challenges death, while Maude uses humor to celebrate life. Her _joie de vivre_, exalted by her humor, “saves” Harold from allowing society to
treat him as indivisible from the masses.

Harold is a nineteen-year-old boy living in California, under the watchful eye of his mother (Vivian Pickles), who habitually terrifies by staging elaborate fake suicides. When he meets the seventy-nine-year-old Maude, though, Harold is forced to reconsider his approach as well as how he will handle the pressures placed upon by his family, various social institutions, and society-at-large. Critical attention toward Harold and Maude has been fairly limited. Wes Gehring places the film firmly in the genre of dark comedy, but offers an intriguing reading of the film as a play on the screwball comedies of the 1930s (100-105). Christopher Beach continues this understanding of the film as a dark comedy, though he does not cite Gehring’s reading itself. The most perceptive aspect of Beach’s take is his reading of the film as a play on The Graduate, inverting the sexually curious Benjamin Braddock with a “neurotic and desexualized figure” who represents the “antithesis of mainstream Hollywood masculinity” (56). Beach argues the film’s satire is most acute in its attack on the military (54). I will fuse and extend upon these readings to argue that the film laments the death of young men in the Vietnam War, pleading for a social need to protect their innocence and their lives. With its themes of alienation and socialization, Harold and Maude echoes Slaughterhouse-Five’s and M*A*S*H’s counterculture sensibility that advocates individual dissent over collective conformity. By examining the neo-Romantic struggle of the individual versus society, one can see how Harold and Maude sympathizes with the draft-age male during the Vietnam War and advocates a conscientious objection over willful participation in the ongoing conflict.

As the film opens, Harold is preparing his most recent “suicide attempt”: he will hang himself. As he drops and swings, the absence of music gives the scene a somber tone. When his mother enters and is noticeably unperturbed, one may be jarred by the gross casualness she displays, yet it becomes clear that this simulated self-sacrifice is commonplace in the Chasen household, shifting the tone from tragic to darkly comic. As the film progresses, Harold encounters a range of social institutions—family, military, psychoanalysis, organized religion—embodied in representative flat characters, and he must navigate between conforming to their normalizing efforts or remaining fiercely individualistic, emphasizing the disconnect between their worlds and his own.

The difference between these worlds is articulated in the way the characters use language. Women tend to echo the concerns of the domestic life, while men provide Harold with
perspectives on his public life. Harold’s mother speaks a highly formalized English, inflected by a drawn-out pronunciation and nagging habit of pretentiously incorporating French into her everyday speech. Similarly, the analyst employs the discourse of his profession, to the bemusement of Harold, who humors his questions with a certain detached irony. When asked what he does for fun, Harold grimly replies, “I go to funerals.” Harold feels a connection with death, symbolically, in that he himself feels detached from his environment; in fact, his ritualistic suicides—hanging, self-immolation, slitting his wrists—read as much as a cry for attention as a unsettling fascination with death and destruction. Dressing primarily in black and driving a hearse, Harold’s performance of masculinity demonstrates stoicism and morbidity, reflecting his quietist engagement with his own mortality. Concerned with his disturbing behavior, his mother decides to normalize Harold—first by meeting with his uncle, then through a computerized dating service. To this end, she hopes to initiate him into the upper middle class existence, including proper codes of masculinity (i.e., as a husband to one of the potential dates), she revels in indulgently, with elaborate dinner parties and ostentatious fashions; symbolically, such acceptance for Harold would inevitability mark the death of his individuality as well as his resistance to social pressures to grow up and operate within the folds of society.

Harold’s uncle is appropriately named Victor (Charles Tyner). A career-long military man, he served as General MacArthur’s right-hand man, a not-so-subtle irony considering he himself has no right arm. A portrait of Nixon overlooks his desk, a reminder that although Vietnam is not explicitly mentioned, the film is very much situated in the current political moment. In the course of their discussion, Victor admiringly talks of Nathan Hale, encouraging Harold to follow in his footsteps. Here, Higgins engages in the same form of historiographical critique as Vonnegut, questioning the creation and functions of history. The primary claim to fame of Hale, a schoolteacher from Connecticut convicted of espionage by British soldiers during the American Revolution, was his pre-execution valediction: “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country.” In short, Hale’s legacy is that of a failed spy; however, American history depicts the twenty-one-year old man as a masculine exemplar of allegiance and sacrifice for one’s country. Harold and Maude lambasts the manipulation of historical figure and history to control the behavior of citizens, especially young men like Harold. Like Rumfoord, the historian in Slaughterhouse-Five, Uncle Victor deploys history to serve a greater purpose; Vonnegut and Ashby draw attention to these machinations, highlighting history’s narrativity and
political intentions. Although Harold does not share his uncle’s enthusiasm, the film subtly warns of the dangers of this blind allegiance to the politically-manipulated version of history that often goes unquestioned in American society out of fears one will be accused of disloyalty and anti-Americanism. Ashby’s film challenges not only the machismo of American military rhetoric, but military men’s obsession with violence and death. Harold initially shares this sullen fascination; Maude refutes such reckless celebrations of death while defying the specter of death in her own life. Humor allows this most serious of topics to become grounds for jest, simultaneously empowering Harold and challenging the gravity death occupies in his mindset.

Unable to sway him into the military life, Harold’s mother enrolls in his an electronic dating service, a condemnation of the normalization inherent in the mechanization of dating, relationships, and love. These women are not so much round characters as embodiments of various social institutions. The first date, Candy, is a sorority girl (Judy Engles), majoring in political science and home economics. She represents the university, which may inform students about political science (“you know, what’s going on,” she calls it) or a biased version of it, but ultimately prepares women for traditional roles inside the private sphere. The second date, Edith (Shari Summers), works for the business world, a secretary for a company that distributes chicken feed. It becomes clear in Mrs. Chasen’s blasé interview that the girl is a mere cog, although she attempts to find some form of negotiated pride in her ultimately menial labor. The final date, Sunshine (Ellen Geer), is an “artist,” but it becomes clear her practice of the craft is pretentious and overwrought. Seemingly the arts would offer a way out, a source of self-expression, but in Sunshine’s hands, it becomes stale and cliché, offering her a staid model of the artist figure rather than a space for self-invention and creation. Harold’s lack of interest in these women, romantic or otherwise, reflects his rejection of these inhibiting institutions. These women operate as mere puppets for society; they do not share Harold’s spirit of rebellion or individuality. To this end, Ashby refutes Vonnegut’s contention that the young are “listless playthings”; rather, in Ashby, the innocents are ignorant to critical engagement or resistance, choosing instead to acquiesce to social stricture, including expectations of women as future homemakers. It is only when he meets Maude that it becomes clear Harold can both develop as a person without compromising the integrity of his iconoclasm.

Maude is an elderly woman, prone to eccentricity and transgression. Her life is governed by principles of carpe diem, anti-authoritarianism, and aestheticism evidenced by her teasing of
cops, stealing of vehicles (be it a priest’s car or cop’s motorcycle), and insistence that Harold learn to play a musical instrument. In her initial appearance on screen, Maude leaves the funeral dressed in a white coat and carrying a yellow umbrella, in stark contrast to the darkly dressed funeral goers, with the exception of a young girl who leads the procession and is similarly attired. This parallel accessorizing aligns Maude and the child is their sense of wonder and vivacity. Neither will be perturbed by the event they are partaking in, nor shall they treat death with the requisite gravitas and solemnity. To this end, Maude possesses an innocence despite her old age, as opposed to the experienced feigned by Harold in his brooding and cynical outlook. It is Maude, therefore, who must save Harold from the adult world of the Vietnam War, from the preoccupation with death, and from himself.

Maude initially “saves” Harold by educating him. She takes him to her home, where she revivifies the indifferent Harold by engaging his five senses: instructing him to drink ginger tea, smell her odorometer, caress her wooden sculpture (which, unsurprisingly, is rather yonic), play the banjo, and listen to “The Waltz of the Blue Danube.” The final piece alludes to her youth in Austria before the war. She talks of battling the domineering opposition, and the thrill it provided her comforts her to this day. Although she wages smaller battles now, she maintains her fighting spirit, rebelling against authority. She tells Harold of one particular act of rebellion: “At one time, I used to break into pet shops to liberate the canaries but I decided that was an idea way before its time. Zoos are full, prisons are overflowing. Oh, my, how the world still dearly loves a cage.” It is clear in this anecdote that the “cage” is metaphorical; one could align it, in fact, with the oft-quoted sentiment by Rousseau that “Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains” (45). For Maude, the “cages” are social institutions and expectations that govern, restrict, and inform human behavior. “Vice? Virtue? It’s best not to be too moral. You cheat yourself out of too much life. Aim above morality,” she lovingly preaches to her young protégé. Any restriction on individual expression is constrictive, denying the individual of his or her livelihood; Maude advocates an unrelenting optimism and unconditional love that rebukes masculine values by privileging emotion over reason, impulse over cautious consideration, the self over society.

Maude’s greatest rival is perhaps Uncle Victor, who embodies the American exceptionalism and pro-war rhetoric of the time. Vietnam is never explicitly mentioned during the film; this omission, however, does not discredit a reading of the film as a commentary on Vietnam. Although antiwar sentiment had become widespread by the early 1970s, especially
since the trial of Second Lieutenant William Calley for war crimes, vocal opposition to the war could be damning, especially for a commercial product. Therefore, the critique of the war is subtle, yet clear in a scene where Maude and Harold sit reflecting in a field of daisies. Maude admires the life cycle at work around her, and then she asks Harold what kind of flower he would like to be. He responds that he would like to be one of the daisies that surround them, but Maude insists that each of the daisies is different, commenting on their different sizes, directions of growth, and number of petals. “You see, Harold, I feel that much of the world's sorrow comes from people who are this,” Maude says, admiring a single daisy, “yet, allow themselves to be treated as that.” By accepting treatment as just a part of the community, an individual may feel agonized because of this reductive treatment, which denies one’s free will and agency. The scene fades from a field of daisies to a military cemetery, where daisies are replaced by uniform white gravestones, natural beauty yielding to artificial place markers. The denial of individual humanity in favor of the collective has robbed the flowers—the youth of America—of their chance to shine, each on his or her own terms. The comparison of the young and youth—flowers, in particular—can be found in Robert Herrick’s advice to an implied male reader to “gather ye rosebuds” or William Wordsworth’s nostalgic description of the past as “glory in the flower” as well as Pete Seeger’s protest song, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” To this end, Maude reassures Harold of his inherent uniqueness, emphasizing his need to resist conformity and normalization at any cost.

Maude’s view is not held uniformly by all the women in Harold’s life. Exhausted with Harold’s morbid histrionics, his mother enrolls him in the military. A terrified Harold appeals to Maude, and together they hatch a scheme to help Harold skirt military service. While his Uncle Victor and he are strolling the grounds, old veterans, delusional and invalid, wander the grounds—one even comically tumbles, emphasizing that this is a comic, not tragic depiction. The lonely veterans contrast with Uncle Victor’s insistence that the army looks after its own, a cryptic warning of the future for those young boys, like Harold, who follow the siren song of American military propaganda.

Further along in their stroll, they come upon Maude, who dons a costume reminiscent of the suffragettes. She harangues the war, as in her early days before World War II, but Harold embraces his uncle’s violent rhetoric, exaggerating it to an extent that makes even Uncle Victor uncomfortable. By parodying a hypermasculine persona that advocates violence and domination,
Harold uses Uncle Victor’s warmongering against him. He chases the “unknown protestor” until she falls through a drain, prompting Uncle Victor to condemn Harold for his reckless passion. Seemingly insane, Harold avoids military service, preserving his lifestyle and securing his increasingly intimate relationship with Maude. Again, the innocence of the child (albeit a late adolescent) is preserved, in part by the moral fortitude of a caring woman, in the face of a corrupting, masculine social institution. Though an essentialist characterization, women’s sensitivity and nurturing disposition positions them as the ideal saviors for young boys.

After the flower scene and Harold’s escape from the military, there is one more scene that can be read as a veiled critique of the war. However, at this moment, as in Vonnegut, the message is targeted at war in general, but the Vietnam War seems a contemporary application. Gazing at the sunset, Maude tells Harold of Alfred Dreyfus, the nineteenth-century French officer who was famously charged for treason in what amounted more to anti-Semitism than a legitimate claim of wrongdoing:

Dreyfus once wrote from Devil's Island that he would see the most glorious birds. Many years later in Brittany, he realized they had only been seagulls. For me, they will always be glorious birds.

While imprisoned, the birds, soaring free, seemed glorious, but when he too was free, they were mere gulls. His perspective was molded by the particulars of his situation; a shift in the quality of life altered his perception of what is truly glorious. Maude disagrees, though, and it soon becomes clear why. Looking down, the camera stands in for Harold’s eyes, revealing that he has noticed markings on Maude’s left wrist that indicate she is a Holocaust survivor. This revelation demonstrates that Maude is not simply a senile bon vivant, but that her unimaginable experience in the Nazi concentration camps directly informs her carpe diem worldview. When she alludes to Dreyfus, she forges a symbolic kinship between two, both of whom were victims of ethnically-motivated hatred. But unlike Dreyfus, Maude’s mistreatment has altered her perception of the world forever; she appreciates her freedom and admires that freedom in everything around her. Harold, making this connection, begins to view his own freedom more appreciatively. Soon after, Harold and Maude attend a carnival, and while observing the fireworks, he offers Maude a ring. She gazes at it admiringly, then casts it into the water, assuring Harold she will always know where it is now. Of course, this excuse is a kind-hearted lie; in Maude’s worldview, the ring is a virtual shackle, tying her down. Thereafter they consummate their relationship, echoing
M*A*S*H’s suggestion that sex can serve as a curative as well as an act of resistance to restrictive social norms that require young men to marry young women for procreative purposes.

Harold becomes engaged to Maude, and the dramatic disparity between their ages flusters his mother, allowing Harold to officially sever her manipulative influence on his everyday life. To this end, Maude has liberated Harold. When he meets up with Maude later to celebrate her eightieth birthday, she is content and soon reveals to Harold that she has taken pills and will be dead shortly. Harold is furious, and he tries in vain to save her life. Of course, Maude cannot live. For one, if Harold and Maude get married, it is antithetical to Maude’s philosophy and her re-education of Harold because it will simultaneously tie her down and inaugurate him into the normalizing social institution of marriage. Maude takes her own life not because she does not value it, but because she cannot handle the possibility of losing control of it. Having lived under the oppressive forces of a concentration camp, where her life could be taken from her at any moment, Maude treasures her volition and independence. Her suicide is her assuming control of her life by ending, fearing that as she ages and memory fades, she will lose control of her mind and body to the inherent difficulties of aging. Maude’s suicide, therefore, is the ultimate validation of the free will that makes life worthwhile. It also liberates Harold from his mother, his uncle, his analyst, his priest, and finally, from Maude; as she advises, “Go and love some more.”

As the film draws to a conclusion, a distraught Harold drives recklessly down a rain-slicked highway. This manic scene is juxtaposed with the hospital’s vain attempts to save Maude, who, of course, dies. The car—the Jaguar his mother gives him, onto which he has welded the roof of a hearse—careens off a steep cliff before landing upside-down on the beach below. The camera pans up the hill to reveal that Harold was not, in fact, in the car. He walks away, putting on Maude’s banjo and playing the song he heard coming from her player piano—“If You Want Sing Out, Sing Out”—upon his first visit to her home. Dressed in lighter hues, he has destroyed the car which symbolizes the meddling influence of his mother as well as his fascination with death. Freed of maternal command, paternalistic institutions, and constrictive ideals of masculinity, Harold is clearly reborn: optimistic, vivacious, unbound.

In Harold and Maude, the male protagonist rejects manhood not as a chronological period in a man’s life, but as a stage of maturation complicated by social expectations regarding citizenship, familial responsibility, and gendered domination. Maude reminds Harold of his
boyishness, and in the process, she preserves his innocence by obstructing his seemingly inevitable path to institutionalized experience. If we read Harold as the archetypal male, saved by the compassionate morality of a female, *Harold and Maude* can be read as a rejection of the view that institutions like the military fail to initiate one into “experience.” Furthermore, the state of “experience” itself may be an undesirable one that rather than masculinizing the individual, emasculates him by disallowing any sense of agency or volition.

Like *Slaughterhouse-Five* and *M*A*S*H*, *Harold and Maude* presents a need to protect “boys,” be it in age or in level of maturity, from the realities and horrors not just of war and hegemonic masculinity, but of life—to ease them into their birthright as leaders of the world by imbuing them with compassion, rationality, and a sense of obligation to the community that does not override the integrity of their individuality. In the process, they revise a fatal myth that war makes boys into men—that is, assuming they survive. Appearing within a tight two year time frame between 1969 and 1971, all three of these texts show, is that not only are boys not masculinized by war, but that war emasculates men, revealing their ultimate impotence in the face of death. These texts, designed to appeal to youth, can be read as more than mere entertainment, but as humanistic endeavors to save this population (especially men) from the disingenuous rhetoric of the American war machine as well as the dehumanizing effects war has on the individual subjected to its terrific reality. Humor alleviates this message, if only for a brief time, but it concurrently reveals that war is no laughing matter, though laughter may be the only sane response to it. Black humor especially operates as a useful mode, since its style of procuring laughs is so unsettling and irreverent. This rupture of expectation attacks the fundamental irrationality of social organization, and, ideally, calls upon the reader/viewer to become free-thinking, resistant, and proactive. The religious charlatan Bokonon advises in *Cat’s Cradle*, “Maturity […] is a bitter disappointment for which no remedy exists, unless laughter can be said to remedy anything” (198). *Slaughterhouse-Five* takes the potential for struggle a step further. It, along with *M*A*S*H* and *Harold and Maude*, can engage in everyday acts of rebellion in defiance of larger social demands and expectations, especially those placed on gender and sexuality.
CHAPTER FIVE

Drapetomania Redux: Black Male Satirists at Millennium’s End

The worst thing to call somebody is crazy. It's dismissive. I don't understand this person so they're crazy. That's bullshit. These people are not crazy. They are strong people. Maybe the environment is a little sick.
— Dave Chappelle, on *Inside the Actor’s Studio* (qtd. in Hazlick)

On March 12, 1851, Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright read his chairman’s report to the yearly meeting of the Medical Association of Louisiana. Widely considered an expert on health issues specific to slaves, the noted New Orleans physician had been asked to head a committee investigating the “diseases and physical peculiarities of the Negro race” (691). One of several “ailments” Cartwright identified and articulated in his report was *drapetomania*, an attempt to explain why otherwise contented slaves would attempt to abandon their seemingly comfortable lives on the plantation. Avoiding the obvious answers, such as the emotional toll of the separation and consequential destruction of the black family or the ongoing demoralization and dehumanization slaves faced as subordinates to their supposedly superior white masters, Cartwright posits that runaway slaves were afflicted by a madness that precipitated their efforts to run away. As a “disease of the mind,” drapetomania, a term which combines Greek words for “a runaway slave” and “mad or crazy” (707), could easily be cured to prevent slaves from attempting to abandon their bondage. Latently, this narrative both exonerated slave masters for perpetuating the conditions that would encourage slaves to desert their traumatic livelihoods and offered a facile narrative to explain the ongoing problem by bringing about a reasonable treatment for such an irrational disorder. As preventative measures designed to prevent escape (or, even worst, insurrection), Dr. Cartwright advised slave owners to keep slaves fed and clothed well, disallow fraternization and excursions at night, provide enough fuel for fires, and preserve family units as a means to ensure the contentment and continued obedience of the slaves (709). He added,

When all this is done, if any one or more of them, at any time, are inclined to raise their heads to a level with their master or overseer, humanity and their own good require that
they should be punished until they fall into that submissive state which it was intended for them to occupy in all after time, when their progenitor received the name of Canaan, or ‘submissive knee-bender.’ They have only to be kept in that state, and treated like children, with care, kindness, attention and humanity, to prevent and cure them from running away. (709)

The denial of slaves’ humanity functions as the obvious fundamental strategy for legitimizing and perpetuating the lucrative system of slavery. Cartwright implicitly shows that the maintenance of slavery, therefore, was premised on the slaves’ understanding of themselves as not only inferior, but also infantile. Denying their selfhood, in part, required a paternalistic relationship in which grown men and women were viewed and treated like children, revealing a slave owner’s sadistic rejection of their maturity and, therefore, denying the slaves’ entitlement to respect and to agency. As Manning Marable has asserted, white men viewed black men as a potential challenge to their power physically, politically, and sexually (71). For male slaves, therefore, a denial of their manhood—as fathers, as husbands, as human beings—was essential to white domination because it was black men’s manhood that made them most threatening to white men, both those who did and did not own slaves. This fear persists in the 20th and 21st centuries, leading James Baldwin to write at midcentury: “It is still true, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays, in one’s own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others” (qtd. in Collins 88). Focusing on drapetomania uncovers the insidious effort of the dominant culture to perpetuate slavery and control the perceived volatility of African Americans, especially men, through the deliberate manipulation of the learned discourses (in this case, medical) that form that society’s knowledge base. Cartwright psychopathologizes African Americans so as to assuage concerns of fearful white slave-owners and citizens in slave-holding regions as well as offer an easily comprehended, albeit absurd, explanation for understanding motivations of the subjugated Other. In this way, various discourses conspire to perpetuate and facilitate the subjugation of the marginalized subjects, thereby reinforcing the domination and stranglehold white, land-owning men had on power within that society.

A hegemonic power structure that is white and masculine deliberately employs the stigma of mental illness as a means of controlling the subject, defusing his or her potential revolutionary or subversive influence and dictating the manner in which threatening persons are understood,
portrayed, and discussed within society. This nineteenth century solution remains active today, although its transition to a corporate context, particularly the mass media, reflects shifts in the dominant industries of the American marketplace, the work opportunities for African Americans, and the cultural capital of blackness. The success of African Americans in entertainment, athletics, and other forms of cultural production has consequently led to varying forms of exploitation and commodification that allow primarily white interests to capitalize on the labor of this oppressed community. While this process certainly affects black women, I focus on black men in this chapter because of the implicit threat of visible black men to a power structure that privileges white men, thereby encouraging the latter group to develop strategies to counteract resistance, prevent subversion, and maintain political control.

I contend that works by black male satirists like Spike Lee and Percival Everett engage this stultifying exploitation, articulating the ongoing machinations of a white-controlled corporate power structure to harness, manipulate, and defuse the power of black art by men. In Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure* and Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* use madness as a trope to symbolize the black male protagonists’ inability to deal with both the domineering manipulation of their creative endeavors and the loss of personal control in their everyday lives. The worlds these men operate in are essentially absurd, tainted by the irrationality of racism and the fundamental vulnerability of hegemonic masculinity, revealing its inability to maintain its ideological dominance over this marginalized population. The madness of Theoloniuss “Monk” Ellison of *Erasure* and Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) of *Bamboozled* signifies on both meanings of the word “madness”: the anger these protagonists feel toward the corporate entities that limit and mollify their creative and political potential as well as the insanity they experience because of this persistent disenfranchisement and the frustration it fosters. In both texts, it fosters an inability to personally and professionally function in the public sphere. Both Pierre and Monk go mad as a response to the blurring of the logical and the irrational, the explainable and the absurd, the real and the surreal. Their madness, in turn, represents not only their complete helplessness to freely operate within the culture industry and mainstream society, but also a denial of the power that, within white definitions of masculinity, is endowed to every man by virtue of his sex in a patriarchal society. A text employing satire creates a space for the seemingly playful exploration of these restrictions, but it becomes clear that what starts as a jest has serious implications, shifting laughter from a means deriding those limiting forces to the
expression of desperation and frustration in a corporate power structure that increasingly reveals itself to be complete resistant towards any dissension. In the process, *Bamboozled* and *Erasure* underscore the powerlessness black male artists realize as they attempt to counter a racist hegemony by exposing the lack of control they have over their own art.

In both texts, slavery operates as a metaphor for the exploitative relationship between a white-dominated corporate media and black talent. It would be naïve to say that the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the conclusion of the American Civil War two years later brought about an end to slavery, both physically and mentally, in the United States. The legal (and largely ceremonial) end of chattel slavery promoted different avenues of racial subjugation, including the passage of Jim Crow laws and the exploitative practice of sharecropping, continuing the dehumanization of African Americans and limiting of their potential for personal and economic autonomy. Arguments have even been posited—most notably William C. Rhoden’s provocative 2006 bestseller, *Forty Million Dollar Slaves*—that slavery persists today, in augmented form, through various corporate endeavors like athletics. I extend this critique to the entertainment industry, arguing that we can apply drapetomania as a critical concept for understanding the role of the black male artist at the end of the twentieth century, a century which saw radical transformations in the presentation of entertainment, from the vaudeville stage to the rise of digital media. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how humor and laughter becomes markers of a growing frustration with, as well as temporary relief from, the increasing pressure faced by these black men in an age of purported equality.

In 2000 Percival Everett’s novel *Erasure* and Spike Lee’s film *Bamboozled* examined the quixotic quest of a black male artist to declare his aesthetic independence from the domineering corporatized industries—publishing and television, respectively—that manipulate and censor their artistic visions. To accomplish this goal, both protagonists parodically embrace grotesque caricatures of African Americans that have their roots in nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy and folk culture. Through a deliberate evocation of these black male tropes from American popular culture, including Uncle Tom, the coon, and Stagger Lee, Everett and Lee portray characters who attempt to raze their respective industries from within through subversive acts of parody and deliberate defiance. To their chagrin, Theolonius “Monk” Ellison of *Erasure* and Pierre Delacroix of *Bamboozled* ultimately fail in these David-versus-Goliath quests, allowing their respective creators to offer damning indictments of the near impossibility of “pure” black
creative expression in a corporate culture industry that is largely dominated by white men. The trope of madness in these texts reveals how black artists, particularly those who are male and middle class, find themselves driven to insanity by industries that use such tactics as drapetomania to stifle and defuse the potential political power of the messages the artists intended to propagate through their creative work. In turn, since both Everett and Lee employ satire for this purpose, they reveal the difficulty of using satire to address an audience that often misread such a mode. Lee opens *Bamboozled* with Pierre defining satire because, as Lee angrily notes in an interview,

I gave a definition of satire because motherfuckers are stupid. When I say that, I’m talking about certain critics, not all of them. But I just wanted to state right away that this film is a satire so they could flick that switch and know. Even then, some of them still got it wrong. (qtd. in Aftab 260)

Despite Lee’s claim that his comments are directed to “certain critics,” one senses that the viewing (and *paying*) public often has the same difficulty with satire. Madness—the inability to operate within the constructed “norm”—reflects both the protagonists and their creators’ aggravation at both the limitations placed on them by the corporations that govern their media and the restricted interpretative capabilities and clichéd demands of their audiences. Everett and Lee comment not only on the state of black creative expression at the dawn of a new millennium, but I argue, contribute a tone of skepticism to ongoing debates regarding race, class, and the alleged “crisis” of black manhood.

Critical discussions of *Erasure* and *Bamboozled* have predominantly focused on the issues of race at the center of each work. With films like *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee has emerged not only as one of the top contemporary independent filmmakers, but one of the most controversial and provocative commentators on race relations in recent history. In contrast, Percival Everett has tried to eschew the confines a writer can face in being placed in the category “African American literature.” Like Ralph Ellison, one of his acknowledged antecedents, Everett actively resists being deemed an “African American writer” and, consequently, has branched out into unfamiliar territory for that considerably limited designation, including the Western genre and experimental fiction, to broaden the possibility of contemporary African American fiction. Sherman Alexie has noted, “everybody, including other African-American writers and scholars, is ignoring him. And I think Everett is being ignored precisely because he is so threatening”
Ironically *Erasure*, the novel of his that most engages issues of race to that point in time (2000), has garnered the most critical attention for Everett, thereby demonstrating yet another example of the limitations critics sometimes put on authors. (Everett has since returned to such issues with *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* in 2009.) Admittedly, as a white male critic, I am part of this problem, but I want to expand beyond issues of race because it is quite clear to me that reading *Erasure* as an “African American novel” implicitly places emphasis on race, limiting the novel’s perspective and avoiding the novel’s commentaries on gender, sexuality, and class, among other things. Philip Brian Harper has contended that “all debates over and claims to ‘authentic’ African American identity are largely animated by a profound anxiety about the status specifically of African American masculinity” (ix); with this in mind, I intend to engage how issues of black identity are examined not only through issues of race, but gender, sexuality, and class as well. Of course, this claim does not discredit the role of race in the novel; rather, I want to suggest that the novel (and *Bamboozled* as well) is best read when one understands the ongoing intersections of the aforementioned identity issues. In the process, I wish to include language—how it is used by subjects and against subjects—as a fundamental component of intersectional analysis, with humor as a mode for examining these interdependent factors’ influence on the identities of the respective protagonists. Before I begin my analysis, though, a discussion of the status of the American black man in American society is necessary for properly situating my readings of both texts.

The turn toward social constructionism within the social sciences as well as the poststructuralist emphasis on performativity have called into question the nature of race as a viable category of identity. Biologically speaking, race does not exist; the danger here, of course, is a dismissal of the cultural and social consequences of race, especially for racial minorities. In 1986 Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s *Racial Formations in the United States* was influential in the constructionist shift, challenging myths of race as an essence or illusion: “The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle” (68, emphasis theirs). Cultural critic Paul Gilroy’s 2000 book *Against Race* furthered this understandably touchy inquiry by arguing race has “no ethically defensible place” in society or politics (6), since the “rational absurdity of ‘race’ was elevated into an essential concept and endowed with a unique power to both determine history and explain its selective unfolding” (14). This ascension, consequently, has led
to “dangerous and destructive patterns” (14), the abolition of which ideally will lead, in Gilroy’s opinion, to a “radically nonracial humanism” (15). These postulations, of course, were not uniformly embraced, prompting Molefi Kete Asante, the initial proponent of Afrocentricity in American academia, to angrily decry, “It took us 150 years to defeat the notion of the colored American in the United States, and I will not stand idly by and see such a misguided notion accepted as fact at this late date in our struggle to liberate our minds” (847). For Asante, Africans and African Americans cannot be separated; Gilroy’s project implies such a difference. Walter Benn Michaels, in 2006’s *The Trouble with Diversity*, pragmatically continues Gilroy’s investigation by arguing that race, diversity and multiculturalism have obscured class struggle in contemporary American society. Michaels contends,

But we shouldn’t think that just because we keep on treating people as if they belonged to races, they somehow do, or that our treating people as if they belonged to races is its own justification. Treating race as a social fact amounts to nothing more than acknowledging that we were mistaken to think of it as a biological fact and then insisting that we ought to keep making the mistake. Maybe instead we ought to stop making the mistake. (39)

These arguments have gone beyond viewing race as a social construct to viewing it as a persisting impediment to true social progress, loosely defined as equality among citizens. *Erasure* and *Bamboozled* appear in the midst of this postmodern debate, and, I contend, we can read both texts as intellectual engagements with the personal and political realities of race for African Americans in an era that questions its continuing validity. Somewhat prophetically, these texts have become even timelier since the 2008 election of Barack Obama, as the popular media perpetuates a dangerous, reactionary discourse about a post-racial America. Although texts can only offer the experience of select people, they provide a space for a thought experiment into the implications of these broader, often idealistic theoretical questions regarding the possibility of a raceless culture.

The early 1990s also saw the beginning of a debate in the mass media over the supposed “crisis” alternately in or of black manhood. Richard Major and Janet Mancini Billson’s 1992 book *Cool Pose*, for example, was subtitled “The Dilemmas of Black Manhood.” Manning Marable proclaimed, “Every socioeconomic and political indicator illustrates that the Black male in America is facing an unprecedented crisis” (77). Bob Herbert, an op-ed columnist for *The New
York Times, led a panel discussion on black manhood, subsequently published in The New York Times Magazine in December 1994 under the title, “Who Will Help the Black Man?” The beating of Rodney King, the rise of gangsta rap, the trial of O. J. Simpson, and the Million Man March were just a few of the events that brought extensive media attention, both positive and negative, to African American men and sparked debates over the state of black manhood, including, among some commentators, the need to repair (even reclaim) it. This desired restoration of black manhood, no doubt, was in part a reflection of a larger trend, triggered by Robert Bly’s 1990 book Iron John and the (predominantly white) mythopoetic men’s movement, which called for a need to rediscover that essential manhood. These efforts emerge as inherently problematic because of their vague, essentialist claims that there is some “true” manhood that needs to be found, embraced, and reinstated. Indeed, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was one of the first to vocalize his skepticism, distrust the “rhetoric of crisis” being employed by commentators regarding black men (xvi). Gates writes,

The manifold ambiguities of black masculinity and its social valence have led, inevitably, to an outpouring of books with titles like The Conspiracy to Destroy Black Men. Talk of conspiracy is a nearly irresistible labor-saving device in the face of recalcitrant complexity. One of the reassuring things about talk of conspiracy is that it posits a bright line between victims and victimizers. Of course, it is all too simple. (xxi)

The question becomes, of course, what are the implications of restoring the purportedly “lost” power, especially for the black women and children, who had been oppressed—before and during the “crisis”—by the privileges extended to black men through patriarchy? Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Bilson have noted that white and black manhood share similar definitions: breadwinner, provider, protector, procreator (1). With this in mind, bell hooks suggests that if black manhood has been symbolically “castrated” by a racist hegemonic power structure, is it then a white patriarchy’s definition of manhood that black men are seeking to recuperate? This point of departure is representative of the academic shift across the social sciences and humanities towards a discussion of progressive black masculinities, whose proponents include sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, historian Manning Marable, and cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal.

Following the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, surges in assets among the wealthiest Americans led to the increased visibility of a black middle class. Of course,
this emergence was not without its consequences, as this shift was evidence of an increasing disparity between the nation’s richest and poorest citizens, black and white. This economic inequality, according to Walter Benn Michaels, was masked by progressive reforms in gender and racial relations, such as affirmative action and multiculturalism initiatives (7). Therefore, one could argue the black middle class is politically closer to the white middle class than to the black working class. This growing tension is evident in Bill Cosby’s notorious 2004 address during an event to celebrate the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision. Cosby claimed “the lower economic people are not holding up their end in this deal,” faulting them for “not parenting” and spending money on expensive sneakers instead of *Hooked on Phonics* (qtd. in Leiby). Cosby’s assault then launched into an area that I wish to explore in this essay: language. He lamented, They're standing on the corner and they can't speak English. […] I can't even talk the way these people talk: 'Why you ain't,' 'Where you is' […] And I blamed the kid until I heard the mother talk. And then I heard the father talk. […] Everybody knows it's important to speak English except these knuckleheads. […] You can't be a doctor with that kind of crap coming out of your mouth! (qtd. in Leiby)

The emphasis Cosby places on language privileges what linguist Geneva Smitherman has called “Received Standard English”—that is, the dialect of English that White America requires “as the price of admissions into its economic and social mainstream” (12). Smitherman’s insights into language reveal how acceptance into white society necessitates a racial performativity staked in lingual competency as a sign of (white) bourgeois propriety. Both *Erasure* and *Bamboozled* focus on black middle class protagonists, and an examination of the characters’ uses of language—be it Black Vernacular English or Received Standard English—reveals the cross-racial, cross-class performances required by a white-dominated society (and, therefore, media) for success in the public sphere. Yet this posing sparks resentment in those blacks who cannot or do not follow suit against those blacks who acquiesce and the white society that requires it.

Furthermore, because white American society is patriarchal, their critiques of these social demands are often rendered in terms that are gendered. White men’s power depends on a subjugation of marginalized groups; black men represent an implicit opposition and threat to a hierarchy organized around white male power.

The roots of the movie *Bamboozled* (2000) can be found in another Spike Lee project: *Malcolm X* (1992). *Bamboozled* alludes to this fact by including a brief clip from the earlier film
in which Malcolm, played by Denzel Washington, tells a crowd, “You been took. You been hoodwinked. Bamboozled.” Referring specifically to a character dressed as Abraham Lincoln in blackface, Gregory Laski asserts that *Bamboozled*

exposes the lie of racial progress in America, rewriting the traditional narrative of black liberation in which the epoch of slavery gives way to that of freedom, and testifying that to be black in the ‘new millennium’ is still to be subject to physical and psychological abuse, to have one’s ‘ass kicked’ and psyche wounded by the ‘master,’ who, in the case of the film, assumes the guise of the white media establishment that coerces African American actors to perform in blackface in order to earn a living in the entertainment industry. (1094)

Laski’s claim overreaches, as Lee’s critique is quite clearly pointed at the entertainment industry in particular. While Lee’s satire of popular culture may be indicative of larger social trends, to dismiss all signs of racial progress outright is hasty and without necessary nuance. To read the film exclusively in terms of race misses the film’s overall message regarding the corrupting influence of the media, which presents information reductively and grossly simplifies representations of blacks in its half-hearted efforts to entertain and educate. By paying lip service to the black community, it attempts to avoid charges of underrepresentation. Even more importantly, Lee does not condemn only Pierre’s “whiteface” performance, but also Dunwitty (Michael Rappaport)’s “blackface” posturing; these cross-racial self-presentations mutually indict whites and blacks in maligned representations of blacks in mass media, including advertising, television, and film. Indeed, in its critique of media operations, the film bears more similarity to *A Face in the Crowd* (Kazan, 1957) and *Network* (Lumet, 1976) than earlier Spike Lee fare, and the famed director alludes to the latter film at a key moment in *Bamboozled* as Manray (Savion Glover), signifying on the classic Howard Beale (Peter Finch) line from *Network*, states, “I’m sick and tired of being a nigger, and I’m not going to take it anymore!”

Media is the target, but race—and I argue, gender, class, and sexuality—become the lens through which we can understand Lee’s trenchant satire.

The danger of satire, as Jonathan Swift famously warned, is that the audience will not realize it is being mocked—that is, society fails to recognize its own reflection in the satirical text. Furthermore, critics may misread the text as advocating that which it is lambasting, so Spike Lee opens *Bamboozled* with Pierre Delacroix (Damon Wayans) directly addressing the camera,
defining “satire” and “irony.” This deliberate attempt to intervene on how the audience interprets the film is an intriguing strategy, especially considering satire’s general lack of popularity among commercial film audiences (King 94). Delacroix’s voice is noticeably high, nasal, and somewhat jarring; Branford Marsalis remarks that Wayans had difficulty with a “white voice,” which “comes off stilted in the performance, almost to the point of caricature” (qtd. in Aftab 264). Indeed this fault illustrates Delacroix’s self-compromise as well as his self-deception by underscoring the disingenuousness of the vocal performance and his consequential inability to achieve complete acceptance as a black artist in white corporate America. Wayans’s failure to “speak white” convincingly, though, may also be advantageous in portraying Pierre: the voice’s artificiality unsettles viewers in a Brechtian sense, so what some may perceive as bad acting actually highlights the fraudulence of Pierre’s self-(re)presentation and the efforts to which Pierre will go to uphold this lie. In his rather successful attempt to achieve status in a white-dominated society, particularly a television station where he is under the supervision of a white boss, Pierre employs Received Standard English and even changes his name from Peerless Dothan to the more “French-sounding” (and therefore, presumably more sophisticated, by white standards) Pierre Delacroix. Pierre is a persona more than a person, a mask that defies the “keep it real” mantra associated with African Americans and the problem of racial authenticity that has received wide dissemination in contemporary popular culture, through such venues as Chappelle’s Show’s “When Keepin’ It Real Goes Wrong” sketches. In a postmodern sense, there is no “real” self and certainly no authentically “black” performance, but the dissonance between how Pierre speaks and how his father’s speech highlights the sacrifices the former has made for success, prompting his father (Paul Mooney) to angrily ask, “Nigger, where the fuck did you get that accent?” His father, a chitlin’ circuit comedian who goes by the stage name Junebug, uses the pejorative word “nigger” to not only reaffirm Pierre’s blackness, but to police him back into an acceptable black masculine performance. His rhetorical question is aggressive, demanding behavioral adjustment rather than an answer. The father, in the Freudian understanding of subject formation, models masculinity for the son; in this moment, the father’s corrective query indicates his disapproval towards Pierre’s racial artificiality and, consequently, his performance of (black) masculinity. Although his father works from night-to-night and has a noticeable drinking problem, the sting of his racial commentary in his comedy act suggests an honesty and authenticity to his life. But since he does not alter the tenor of his anti-racist message, he never
achieves wide acclaim or financial success. However, Pierre leaves this visit with his father feeling confident that he will not stoop to such levels; he would rather maintain the current conflicted level of success he has than “keep it real” in the way his father has. Therefore, we cannot understand Pierre’s struggles with his identity outside of a context of gender as well as race. As Pierre confronts his father, the bearer of masculinity for the son, Spike Lee emphasizes the interconnectedness of race and gender. For Pierre’s father, one must maintain a masculine standard traditionally denied to him by his race. Here, the humor yields to the emotional sincerity of this pained interactions; Pierre’s departure is, in effect, a rejection of his father and his father’s belief in a racial and gender authenticity.

The formality of Pierre’s speech is in sharp contrast to his boss at the Continental Network System, Dunwitty, a white man who appropriates what he believes is an authentic black identity, evidenced by his use of Black Vernacular English, his copious use of the word “nigger,” and his office décor, including pictures of black athletes (a playful inversion of Sal’s wall of Italian Americans in Do the Right Thing) and African art. He is a comical figure, and the disparity between his comfortable white bourgeois lifestyle and the caricaturish performance of blackness he claims he has earned create a humorous discord. From his first screen appearance, Dunwitty is emasculating Pierre metaphorically: he berates him when he is late to a meeting, sarcastically referring to him as “Monsieur Delacroix.” Here Lee poses a brilliant ironic inversion: for Pierre, his French pseudonym makes him classier, sophisticated, and acceptable, but Dunwitty uses “Monsieur” to portray Pierre as fancy, uppity, and (implicitly) not masculine or, at least, not as masculine as he is. (This conflation of “Frenchness” and insufficient manhood resurfaces in Adam McKay’s Talladega Nights, as we will see in Chapter 5.) The two are left alone after the meeting, and Dunwitty apologizes to Pierre, further reinforcing that his earlier treatment of Pierre was more a matter of establishing superiority over his subordinate so as to reinforce his alpha male status in the business meeting. In the ensuing conversation, it becomes clear that Dunwitty compensates for his fragile masculinity by appropriating what he views to be an authentic (and therefore self-legitimating) black masculinity, despite the fact that it is grounded in reductive stereotypes gleaned from popular culture, like the very show he will later produce. He confides to Pierre,

You know, I grew up around black people my whole life. I mean, if truth be told, I probably know niggers better than you. And don’t go getting offended by my use of
the ‘n-word.’ I have a black wife and two biracial kids, so I feel I have a right. I don’t give a goddam what that prick Spike Lee says. Tarantino was right. ‘Nigger’ is just a word.

_Bamboozled_ offers two commentaries on language in this comment. First, Lee uses his film to rebuke director Quentin Tarantino’s real claim about the democratic nature of the word “nigger.” In this way, one can read _Bamboozled_ as a response to Tarantino and what Lee sees as Tarantino’s illogic. Lee insists “nigger” has the ability to transcend it historical usage to have realistic implications for African Americans today. Dunwitty racializes language, entitling himself to use racial epithets because of his familiarity and identification with the group at which the term is directed. His marriage to a black woman and fathering of two biracial children, in his mind, testifies to his own “blackness.” In the spirit of the social constructionist approach to race, Dunwitty views blackness as experiential, not biological. For him, language is essential to his sense of self, and part of that identity means an entitlement to use words that are reserved for certain members of the population who also identify as black, racially or culturally. His tirade reaches a fever pitch when he tells Pierre, “Brother man, I’m blacker than you. I’m keepin’ it real. I’m ‘bout it, ‘bout it. I got the roll. You just frontin’, tryin’ to be white.” The irony, of course, is that if we follow Omi and Winant’s arguments about the social construction of race, then both men are engaged in cross-racial performances, equally “frontin’.” To claim blackness for Dunwitty, though, is to verify his status as a “real” person, specifically a “real” man. Therefore, to hypocritically deny Pierre of his blackness—albeit it a socially constructed, largely stereotypical blackness—is more an act of emasculation than deracialization. Blackness, for Dunwitty, is relevant only to the degree it legitimizes his sense of his own manliness. The blackness, however, is constituted in language and in behavior, not in the most obvious place one would find it: skin pigmentation. Therefore, Dunwitty’s masculinity is ironically rooted in an ultimately inauthentic construction of race that privileges the performative over the biological.

With Dunwitty’s naïve subscription to a fraudulent rendering of blackness in mind, Pierre sets out to create a “coon show”—a show so offensive, so incredible, so unsettling it will incite the ire of his bosses, leading to the termination of his contract and his dismissal. Riffing on Mel Brooks’s _The Producers_ (1968), _Bamboozled_ speculates, “What if blackface minstrelsy returned?” Dunwitty demands Pierre create a stereotypically black show, leading Pierre to revive the one of the oldest, most degrading entertainments in American cultural history, yet one
fundamental to the development of American popular culture. In reinvigorating the blackface show, Lee collapses temporal boundaries, implying that the racism of the past persists today, albeit in altered form. Although Pierre’s assistant Sloan (Jada Pinkett-Smith) tries to pitch it as potentially revolutionary, Pierre presents the show as a satire, eventually acquiescing to all of Dunwitty’s ridiculous demands, including setting the narrative action on a plantation. “Every week, these two Alabama porch monkeys—they’re gonna make us laugh, they’re gonna make us cry,” Dunwitty claims, “they’re gonna make us feel good to be Americans.” Dunwitty’s remarks are unabashedly racist, yet revealing about the American character that, in part, perpetuates them.

In 1931 Constance Rourke placed the Negro minstrel character at the center of American folklore, alongside the Yankee and the backwoodsman; the culture of African Americans, she convincingly asserted, was integral to the development of a uniquely American culture (Lhamon xxx). This image—degrading, simplistic, and grossly exaggerated—was utilized by white America to not only reminded themselves of their own personal and political freedom, but (ironically) of their supposed superiority as civilized people. Furthermore, as critics like Eric Lott and W. T. Lhamon have argued, blackface minstrelsy allowed immigrant performers to stake a claim in “whiteness” by establishing blacks as their Others through derisive performances (Nowatski 115). The relevance of blackface minstrelsy today, therefore, is its acute awareness of the malleability and performative aspects of race (Nowatski 116). Despite his claims otherwise, the new minstrel show Pierre proposes does not revive blackface minstrelsy, Spike Lee seems to suggest, as much as it highlights the way blackface minstrelsy was disseminated into film and television. To illustrate this long history, he includes a montage that includes Pigmeat Markham on Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In and Jimmie Walker on Good Times, broadly drawn characters with racially-inflected catch phrases that mock Black Vernacular English and exploit wide-mouthed grins reminiscent of coon imagery. Lee rightly asserts that this past, demoralizing as it may have been, has hardly passed.

Furthermore, in Pierre’s manipulation of Manray (Savion Glover) and Womack (Tommy Davidson), homeless street performers he recruits to star in his “coon show,” shows the wide range of class experiences African Americans have, further undermining monolithic visions of blackness. Neither Pierre nor Sloan reveals to Manray or Womack the “experiment” the former is conducting to test the network; to this end, the middle class African Americans exploit the
poverty-stricken African American characters, with little regard for how their game will affect the men in the long-run. Lee shows the audience that economic differences within races can lead to different values and motivations, thereby demonstrating how intersectionality operates in the formation of one’s identity. Yet Manray, who only wants to “hooft” (performers’ slang for dancing), is shown as more “authentic” and therefore more sympathetic because his art takes precedent over his financial and professional success. This position situates Manray as a foil to Pierre, whose constructed façade and antagonistic behavior toward the network cast him as maniacal, even unlikeable. In a society that celebrates individualism, Pierre has compromised his integrity to achieve respectability. In a society that embraces a Romantic conceptualization of the artist, he has done the worst thing an artist can do: he has sold out to appease the tastes of the masses and the demands of social institutions (i.e., corporate America). Initially he meant to resist, but eventually he yields to the parody of himself he has created. As Kurt Vonnegut notes in the epigraph of *Mother Night*, “We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.” Like Dunwitty, Pierre achieves status by pretending to be the man he wishes to be seen as and loses any sense of himself in the process. But Dunwitty’s phenotypical race protects him from the destruction Pierre will face as a marginalized subject.

Another distinctive aspect of Dunwitty’s public persona is the macho metaphors that imbue the language he employs in business meetings. This rhetoric becomes synonymous not only with his success as a businessman, but as a man. Desperate for a profitable series on his network, he tells Pierre, “I want advertisers sucking my dick to buy on this show.” A hit show would empower him in the same way that fellatio empowers the recipient over the provider since the recipient’s pleasure is privileged in the act. As a man subscribing to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity, Dunwitty wants power in all aspects of his life, professionally and sexually. In the male mind, the lack of mutual pleasure and submissive position (physically and symbolically) required by fellatio signifies the dominance the sexual act suggests. After Pierre pitches *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*, Dunwitty’s excitement reveals a conflation of both professional and sexual powers: “I really, really like this. You know how I know? I’m getting’ a boner. The Swanson Johnson is getting hard.” Financial success mirrors physical prowess: it empowers him, bestially proving his dominance, while suggesting to the audience the artificiality as well as superficiality of his masculinity power.

Masculinity is often stereotypically rooted in the adventurous spirit, the willingness to
take risks. Dunwitty decides to tell his bosses immediately, proclaiming, “If CNS doesn’t have the balls to pull the trigger, somebody else will!” The metaphor of “having the balls” echoes the fallacious essentialist belief that men are naturally assertive and unfazed by potential danger or failure, as if such hubris is naturally rooted in their testicles, a body part that fundamentally separates them from the allegedly passive reticence embodied by women. For Dunwitty, masculinity is, unbeknownst to him, misplaced upon the body, the professional world, and sexual performance. It comes as no wonder he embraces a misguided version of black masculinity that he constructs for himself from gross stereotypes perpetuated, in part, by the very medium he works within as an executive; after all, the black male body has often been an entity onto which many white men have projected their fears about their own sense of an inadequate masculinity.

Scholars of masculinity have emphasized the need to focus on men’s relationships with women as a means of understanding masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 837). Sloan offers an engaging foil to her boss and his struggles with both his race and gender. While critics like bell hooks have faulted Spike Lee for his depiction of women as patriarchal and limited (‘whose’ 9), Sloan is a seemingly more progressive character: educated, self-supporting, strong. She also, for better or worst, is cast as the narrative’s voice of reason; as Pierre pushes the limits in his attempt to be transgressive and satirical, it is Sloan who has to remind him of the potential ramifications of his mischievous efforts. Rather than being a fully developed character, she is his conscience, most obviously in the scene when she gives Pierre a “Jolly Nigger Bank.” This fitting symbol conflates Sambo imagery and money, a fitting allusion to Invisible Man, in which the unnamed protagonist smashes exactly this kind a bank in an effort to stop the maddening sound coming from the pipes and symbolically destroy the insidious presence of these grotesque caricatures (Ellison 320). The narrator of Invisible Man, though, is also unable to rid himself of the legacy of this demeaning iconography. But while the narrator partially embraces a stereotypical understand of blackness as he joyously consumes the yams on the street, Pierre resists breaking his whiteface performance, which indirectly causes Sloan to murder him.

In Sloan’s eyes, Pierre has “sold out,” compromising his integrity as both an artist and an African American man, in his attempt to appease the white-controlled corporate interests

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32David Ikard argues, “The cultural affirmation of self-sacrifice compels black women to ignore suffering under patriarchy to support black men and preserve cultural solidarity, thereby rendering black women accomplices in their own subjugation” (5). Lee’s situation of Sloan between white corporatization (embodied by the black Pierre) and black nationalism (her brother, Julius/Big Blak Afrika), two entities that perpetuate the aforementioned subjugation of women. Sloan confronts the misogyny of both groups, culminating in her final “act” of resistance.
embodied by Dunwitty. As Pinkett-Smith and Lee have noted in interviews about the film, the blame does not solely lie on the white characters who encourage these images, but also on the African American producers, writers, and actors who participate in this denigration of their race (Aftab 266, 270). While some may argue race is strictly a social category one elects to identify with (as we will soon see with Monk), Lee’s work refutes this potentially perilous discussion to show that a refusal to treat racial issues seriously and respectfully in fact reinforces the same racially motivated hatred and ignorance that perpetuates that ideology in the first place. To this end, Sloan serves as a reminder that the artistic gesture Pierre is making poses serious consequences, not only for African Americans in the entertainment industry, but the perception of the same people by the viewing audience. This danger becomes tangible when audience members—white, black, Hispanic—attend tapings of *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show* in blackface, with one older white woman proclaiming, “Yesiree Bob, you’re darn tootin' I'm a nigger!” The weighty connotation of the word “nigger” has been seemingly destroyed, but the behavior it legitimates thrives; to wear blackface in a spirit of jest uncritically denies the psychologically scarring impact such entertainment has had on past generations of African Americans—a damage that continues to this day. In addition, it ignores the historical uses of such entertainment to reinforce popular support for an ideology that denies African Americans their rights, their agency, and their humanity.

Like Dr. Frankenstein, Pierre loses control of his creation. When his efforts fail to enrage as he had hoped and instead enjoy widespread popularity, his project takes on a life of its own and Pierre is rendered impotent to regain stability in his personal and professional lives. It also fuels his nervous breakdown. This struggle becomes clear as he sits in his office and, without instigation, the Jolly Nigger Bank begins to throw coins into its mouth. This delusion indicates Pierre, like Tod Clifton in *Invisible Man*, is no longer the puppeteer, but the puppet, and he has carried on the same legacy that he aimed to subvert—an iconography represented in the bank itself. His subsequent madness reveals his powerlessness in the face of both the network and the audience; he has lost the source of his masculinizing power—his art—and is metaphorically castrated. The horror he expected is replaced with a damning laughter that reminds him of his failure, siphoning any power he may possess as creator and head writer.

Not everyone is laughing, though. Pierre’s show has also enraged the ire of a politically radical hip hop group, the Mau Maus, who are led by Sloan’s brother, the self-named Big Blak
Afrika (Mos Def). When they kill Manray, both as a sign of envy for his success and retribution for the demoralizing character he portrays, the Mau Mau’s incur the vengeance of police officers, who brutally shoot all of them, save the one white member, who they refuse to kill despite his protestations otherwise. Sloan, emotionally distraught by the success of the show and the concurrent deaths of her brother and her prospective lover Manray, appears in Pierre’s office with a gun. She shoots him, punishment not only for not listening to her (as she claims), but for his betrayal of his identity and his craft. This act—the murder of Pierre by Sloan—is the ultimate emasculation; having lost his creative and executive power, he is murdered by Sloan, his former lover, assistant, and (in a symbolic sense—the *not-male*) a woman. His demise reveals that the final joke is on him; the corporate machine and racial history of representation he had hoped to subvert has the last laugh. The destruction of his artistic ability and his ability to speak as an artist is represented in his literal death—at the hands, no less, of another African American, which illustrates the insidious ability of these cultural and corporate forces to turn members of a community against themselves. In doing so, the corporate power structure maintains its control while clearing a potential threat to its authority.

Percival Everett has resisted what he sees as attempts to limit him as a “black writer”; when his friend, colleague, and co-author James R. Kincaid asked him to define “race” in an interview, he sarcastically replied, “It’s when two or more people, dogs, horses or cars try to get to a distant point as fast as they can” (“An Interview” 378). Yet the name of *Erasure*’s protagonist—Thelonious “Monk” Ellison—places the narrative firmly within the tradition of African American expressive culture by merging the names of jazz musician Thelonious Monk and writer Ralph Ellison to examine questions about the purpose of the category “African American literature” and the opportunities and limitations facing its supposed practitioners. Fittingly, both namesakes were dynamic creative forces who had a profound effect on the American arts while maintaining limited public roles in the political sphere, although recent revisionist studies of both men—Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Theolonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original* and Timothy L. Parrish’s *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*, for example—have corrected critical and popular misconceptions that both men were apolitical or disinterested in contemporary race relations. At the outset of the novel, Monk debunks race, commenting on its nature as a social construction: “the society in which I live tells me I am black; that is my race” (1). Like Pierre, Monk has dealt with being insufficiently “black.” From
his college days onward, Monk wrestles with claims by others that he is not being “black enough” (2), thereby drawing attention to the physical, social, and behavioral aspects of race: one has to look black, others must identify one as such, and blackness must be performed not self-consciously, but naturally. It comes as no surprise then that Monk repudiates race while acknowledging the very real effects race has in the lives of individuals of color:

I don’t believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose and slave ancestors. But that’s just the way it is. (2)

Everett is clearly entering into the discussion of race as a social construction alongside the likes of Omi and Winant, and Gilroy. For Monk, the fictionality of race is apparent, and it has a function for some in understanding themselves and others, but personally he refuses to structure his self-conception upon such faulty premises and superficial categories that, by their collective nature, challenge his integrity as an individual artist and man.

The defeatism of Monk’s understanding of race—that it is inevitable some people will subscribe to it and perpetuate hate and violence in its name—reveals a certain degree of middle class comfort on his part, a comfort he often seems to be oblivious about in discussing his life. As a professor of English at a major American university (not unlike Everett), Monk is undoubtedly disconnected from the realities many working class and lower class blacks, where racism is more direct and explicit. This remark is not to suggest that the black middle class is immune from racial prejudice—far from it—but since fiction rarely focuses on this group, as Everett has said in interviews (Stewart 299), the author is consciously working to complicate any essential conception of the African American experience. In turn, an understanding of society firmly grounded in black and white race relations is not as integral to him as it is in other texts he alludes to, like Invisible Man; in spite of his intentions, his understanding of race as constructed does not hinder the effect of white and black race relations in his everyday life. More to this point, in the waiting room of his sister’s clinic in an impoverished neighborhood, Monk talks with a young mother who enjoyed reading Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Jean Toomer’s Cane. Fittingly, Monk agrees that these are excellent novels, and Everett illustrates that literary appreciation is not the province of the educated elite. Furthermore, the subtle commentary here is that both Hurston and Toomer challenged notions of what African American literature could and should be, or even if it was necessary at all. Hurston faced
criticism from writers like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, who lambasted her use of Black Vernacular English and catering to white tastes rather than addressing a black readership. Toomer consciously shunned issues of black and white identity, refusing to be marketed as a Negro writer by his publisher (Byrd and Gates). Paradoxically, in avoiding what “African American” should be, Everett expands what it can be.

While Monk’s financial problems, instigated by his sister’s murder and his mother’s mental instability, propel the writer to pen My Pafology (later renamed Fuck to instigate publishers), he rarely considers the economic comfort he experiences as a member of the educated bourgeoisie. This omission, however, is not a crippling flaw in the text; rather, I would suggest, it is a deliberate attempt to revise the reductive characterization of African Americans in literature by African American writers, the most obvious satirical targets being Richard Wright and Sapphire, who, from Everett’s perspective, pathologize blackness. Engaging with these authors, and specifically their influential novels—Native Son and Push, respectively—Everett not only critiques the limited terrain of African American literature as a category for critical and marketing purposes, but he also satirically examines issues rooted in black manhood, both its social articulation and its literary representation. Like Pierre, Monk creates a deplorable representation of blackness pushed to the extreme in accordance with what he thinks his white corporate bosses really want. In attempting to satisfy through parody, though, a slippage occurs over who controls the text: the creator or the viewer. In both Bamboozled and Erasure, the tension between authorial and audience control is literally mediated by the corporate media, whose ambivalence leads to an offensive appropriation by predominantly white viewers. In Bamboozled, those white viewers find the stereotypes to be objects to laugh at, while the readers of My Pafology in Erasure find it to be a harrowing depiction of the black victimization they had always assumed existed. This reaffirmation reinforces their white liberal guilt as well as their racist presumptions about black populations that permit simultaneous feelings of pity and moral superiority.

Unsurprisingly, Monk stands alone in this chaos. Although the humanistic understanding of language is to allow communication and foster community, Monk finds himself alienated by language, both in his use of it as a social being and a writer. His use of language structures his social identity and, according to him, signifies to others his insufficient blackness and/or manhood. For example, in his youth, his use of “Egads” as an exclamation encouraged others to
perceive him as “not black enough” (2), reflecting the behavioral, especially expressive, expectations inherent to cultural conceptions of blackness in addition to the obvious physical marker of such a racial designation. The specter of whiteness—of being seen as white and not black—haunts Monk, though Pierre seems to embrace it. Such reactions may be rooted in their experiences with their fathers growing up; Pierre’s father is ashamed of his son’s pandering, while Monk’s father prepares his son for a life of white bourgeois propriety. His father’s continuous claims early in life that Monk was special have served more to isolate him from others than inspire him, and he feels emotionally and socially disconnected, even with his loved ones. “Anyone who speaks to members of his family,” Monk writes, “knows that sharing a language does not mean you share the rules governing the use of that language. No matter what is said, something else is meant” (32). He regretfully admits to his sister, “Sometimes I feel like I’m so removed from everything, like I don’t even know how to talk to people” (26). In part, this frustration transfers into his writing, leaving Monk to wonder if his life is as worthy as the lives of medical service led by his father and his sister. His father, however, seemed to understand Monk, and the two discuss literary works like Finnegans Wake to the bewilderment of the other family members. This disconnect uses level of education to discuss class status: Monk’s father is a doctor, his mother has an undergraduate degree, and he is fairly precocious, a trait which is encouraged by his father. Language reveals each person’s level of education as well as what areas of knowledge they excel in and the associated discourses with those disciplines. Even though his sister Lisa and his brother Bill are doctors, neither can comprehend Monk’s fiction, inflected as it is with a poststructuralist understanding of language. In an extended meditation on language, Monk observes, “It’s incredible that a sentence is ever understood. Mere sounds strung together by some agent attempting to mean something, but the meaning need not and does not confine itself to that intention” (44). Although he concedes the inherent flaws in language, he sees, nevertheless, the power of language in his everyday life; like race and gender, it is a social creation, rooted in the essential needs to structure identity and community on unifying concepts of commonness and difference. Yet, for Monk, it reveals his insufficient blackness and masculinity; his formidable education sets him at odds with others, including members of his family.

The constructedness of race, gender, and language become clear in a rather humorous encounter in a coffee shop that requires Monk to employ certain social performances as a means
of resistance. Two Frenchmen are speaking and their mere presence and “fern” language agitates what Monk calls “a couple of stringy, gimme-capped inbred bohunks” (45). Monk’s rendering of these men reveals the connections between class and language; his polished English contrasts their articulation of English, composed of colloquialisms like “gimme” for “give me” and crude epithets like “faggots.” Their physical appearance, in conjunction with their language, indicates to Monk both their lower socioeconomic status and their lack of education. These men, on the other hand, interpret the Frenchmen’s use of their native tongue to mean they are “funny”—their word for gay because it suggests deviation from a normal—then clarify with “queers.” The name-calling allows the “bohunks” to articulate the inferiority they perceive in the Frenchmen, so as to celebrate themselves and deride the men. When the Frenchmen, somewhat confused by the idiomatic usage, figure out what the “bohunks” are asking, they identify as “queer.” The bohunks, motivated by some internalized social desire to police “deviant” men and their own sense of superiority as heterosexuals and Americans, challenge the Frenchmen to a fight, perhaps as much to reinforce their own vulnerable masculinities as to correct the Frenchmen’s admitted divergence from the bohunks’ ideal.

Monk, who has been listening in, nonchalantly informs the bohunks that the fight would not be fair, since it would be three men (including himself) against two. No doubt this camaraderie between the Frenchmen and Monk that the latter foster is connected with Monk’s relationship to his brother, who has recently separated from his wife and come out as gay. In uniting with the Frenchmen, he implicitly accepts his brother, whose sexuality has left Monk ambivalent at best. Monk remains stoic, chewing his food and “trying to remembering all the posturing I had learned as an undersized teenager” (46), while the bohunks identify him immediately as another deviant from the hegemonic ideal they subscribe to—a black man; “I think we got the nigger riled” (46), one of the bohunks jokes, using laughter to simultaneously deride Monk and establish solidarity with his fellow bohunk. Not only does Monk acknowledge the artificiality of masculinity but also the need to unite with, even protect, others who are victimized by it. This solidarity with the gay Frenchmen against the white, heterosexual bohunks symbolizes a collective resistance to the tyranny of hegemonic masculinity, both its unrealistic expectations and the bullying it perpetuates by those who are unable to satisfy its standards. (As presumably poor men, though, the “bohunks” do not satisfy a hegemonic masculinity that is usually middle class, although they subscribe to it nevertheless.)
When the bohunks ask Monk if he’s gay, he refuses a direct answer and, consequently, a subject position that could either defuse or fuel the threat. Language, or rather his refusal to identify through it, in turn empowers him. Monk’s support of the gay Frenchmen proves unnecessary, though, since both men stand up to reveal themselves to be large, tall, and healthy. Their stature alarms their antagonizers, who soon run off, and the Frenchmen invite Monk to join them. His resulting laughter relieves his well-hidden anxiety, but also acknowledges the absurdity of his willingness to engage in a fight, especially for two men without need. Language becomes a means to both inscribe identity, which is as fictitious as the means by which it is rendered, just as laughter serves to acknowledge, reinforce, and later dismiss those constructs. To this end, humor allows Monk to temper the impact language has on his life, both in its possibilities for resistance and its limitations in how others understand who he is or what he has to say. Humor attempts to alleviate this tension while underscoring language’s unavoidable role in day-to-day-life.

Yet language is Monk’s racket. He has made his career as the writer of experimental fiction that is highly informed by the French theory that dominated the academy in the 1970s and 1980s; his latest novel, for example, plays upon Roland Barthes’s S/Z. In her essay “Postmodern Blackness,” bell hooks faults postmodernism, including poststructuralist theory, for perpetuating the interests and concerns of white men, which in turn indirectly undermines the efforts of blacks to politically unify by deriding them as essentialist (“Postmodern” 133). Monk’s embrace of Barthes indicates his allegiance to the very school of thought that would help dispel race as a viable political category for social organization and personal identification. This artistic pursuit has garnered him a professorship and the ire of his peers in the Nouveau Roman Society, but neither financial gains nor a popular readership. Even his sister, a doctor, finds his work to be inaccessible, lamenting, “I just wish you’d write something I could read” (7). The price of his art is its limited commercial appeal, allowing Everett to raise questions about the purpose of art: the exploration of the limits and possibilities of his craft or a connection to his audience, either as a teacher or an interrogator of what humanists may deem “the human experience.” These concerns intersect with Everett’s major target in the novel: the publishing industry.

In an interview with James R. Kincaid, Percival Everett asserts, “Writers aren’t the problem. Publishers are the problem” (“An Interview,” 380). Not only do they make reductive demands of the artist, they also limit that artist’s ability to find a readership. This criticism is best
demonstrated when Monk goes into a large chain bookstore, only to find his experimental fiction stocked under “African American Literature,” despite the absence of blacks or even racial themes in his work. This commercial and critical pigeonholing has followed him throughout his career, even when he published a novel entitled The Persians (2). To add insult to injury, the most successful novel in the country at the moment is We’s Lives in Da Ghetto, an exploitative portrait of a young black woman’s life in the inner city clearly meant to skewer Sapphire’s 1996 novel Push. Written in a crude version of black vernacular English and continuing what, in Monk’s eyes, is the pathologization of blackness, the novel represents an attempt by the author, Juanita Mae Jenkins, to pander to the market by rehashing an oft-repeated, reductive image of poor black womanhood as victimized and uneducated, yet possessing the strength and will power to conquer these injustices. For Monk, the objection is not necessarily commercial, but political and artistic as well: How can Jenkins make claims to speak for a people—any people? In his opinion, seeing her book on sale is the equivalent of finding Mammy jars. This conflation of the rags-to-riches tale and degrading black stereotypes fuels the desire of white audiences for highly emotional, spiritually uplifting narratives that show the subjugation of blacks and their ability to independently assuage their condition. These texts are fundamentally conservative, since the onus, therefore, lies on the victim, exonerating the victimizer. Ultimately, We’s Lives in Da Ghetto and texts like it reassure white readership of their benevolent superiority and displaces the responsibility for blacks onto themselves, in the spirit of Bill Cosby’s earlier comments, to “hold up their end of the bargain” in the struggle for equality and personal success. In the process, whites are absolved of the guilt they might feel over white privilege and their complicity in the ongoing racial inequality blacks face in today’s sociopolitical climate.

In addition to the film rights selling for three million dollars, the popularity of Jenkins’ novel leads to its selection by Kenya Dunston (a not-so-subtle parody of Oprah Winfrey) for her Book Club reading list (52). Jenkins receives adulations on the show, most excessively from Dunston herself, despite the obvious artificial sincerity Jenkins is projecting to the delight of the viewing audience. Everett further complicates this writer’s authority by revealing she is an Oberlin-educated woman who based the narrative not on her own experiences, but on a few days she spent in Harlem visiting family years earlier (53). Yet she claims the novel is about “our people” and fills a necessary gap for “our stories” within literature (53), while obscuring the class and regional distinctions that complicate any understanding of the African American
experience. Although Monk refrains from explicit condemnation of a “collective identity,” it becomes clear that he disapproves of it, especially one that is created so as to be exploited by artists, the publishing industry, and the commercial market. These narratives contribute to ongoing racism by viewing race monolithically, as if the experiences of this character speak for the experiences of all African Americans. In the process, a naïve white audience perceives African Americans not as a diverse community in its own right, but as one-dimensional and oppressed. Everett’s creation of Monk as a black, middle class, experimental writer is a conscious attempt to question these trends within the publishing industry by offering an underrepresented image of black male identity—the black intellectual. In the process, Everett follows Ellison’s lead, challenging notions of “blackness,” socially and culturally, against which white readers understand themselves.

Although the Kenya Dunston passage is but a brief scene in the text, it is an important one for the reader to consider in examining issues of gender and art. Everett takes on Oprah Winfrey, arguably the most influential woman and African American in the United States at the time, not to mention one of the most influential people in the publishing industry. In an interview with Anthony Stewart, Everett has mentioned his opposition to reading recommendations like those offered by Winfrey: “That anybody can claim to vet art and then feed it to the public seems to me pretentious, portentous, and probably pernicious and vile. And I won’t participate in it” (302). By the time of Erasure’s publication in 2000, a majority of the writers Oprah had recommended were women and the only black men had been Ernest J. Gaines and Bill Cosby (the latter for three children’s books, no less). A year later, Jonathan Franzen famously objected to Winfrey’s selection of his novel, The Corrections, telling an interviewer, “She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one dimensional ones that I cringe” (qtd. in Jones). At the very least, Franzen seems to be concerned about being placed in the company of the previously recommended authors as well as the potential appeal of his work to Winfrey’s audience, who, admittedly, is largely female. His remarks unsurprisingly led to a backlash and charges of elitism as well as sexism. Was Franzen worried about a woman, especially a television talk host, serving as a literary tastemaker? While Franzen recanted in the face of potential financial fallout (the Oprah recommendation, after all, guarantees a bestseller) and criticisms from editor Robert Gottlieb, critic Harold Bloom, and writer Andre Dubus III among others (Kirkpatrick), Everett makes it clear in the aforementioned quote that he does oppose
Winfrey’s referrals, especially with her considerable influence in mind. Although Jenkins does not represent male and female interactions in her novel, one cannot help but feel that Monk’s critique of her may be an antagonism along the lines of gender. Are these stories, consumed primarily by a female audience, the proper subject for “African American literature,” or do they foster a white paternalism toward black culture? Despite his efforts to expand the category of “African American literature” he is placed in nevertheless, there is also a critique where “African American literature” perhaps should not go or, at the very least, a dismissal of disingenuous stories manufactured to appease reductive images of blackness.

Monk’s own inability to satisfy the market’s demands of an African American writer mirrors his perceived insufficiency as a black male. Although this “flaw” does not impede his everyday life, it does serve as a source of occasional frustration, especially in his art and his interactions with other blacks. The underlying irony here, of course, is that Monk feels pressure to adhere to an artificial construction of reality, one which he is aware is artificial, yet fosters considerable anxiety nevertheless. Forced to move to Washington, D. C., to care for his ailing mother, Monk experiences further distress when pro-life activists murder his sister, leaving Monk with her debts. This instant financial liability is further instigated by the success of Jenkins and the waning appreciation of his skill set in the working world, best evidenced by American University’s offering of a meager sum to teach its American literature survey course. Aware of this damning contradiction, the celebration of the popular and devaluation of the intellectual compels Monk to embrace the publishing industry’s expectations and craft a “problem novel.” So while Pierre in Bamboozled employs gross stereotypes to offend the audience and force his bosses to fire him, Monk does so to both “cash in” and comment on the reductive expectations of black representations in contemporary publishing. In both instances, the men’s efforts to create the most offensive, most stereotypical, most degrading images of black manhood unintentionally result in the exact portrayal white audience are comfortable with and long for. To this end, an uncritical (and racist) white audience discharges the satirical edge of these scathing racial commentaries on contemporary American society.

Entitled My Pafology, the novel implicitly condemns the “rhetoric of crisis” (as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls it) around blackness. In addition to his viciously funny parody of Sapphire’s Push, Everett also lambasts Richard Wright’s Native Son, practically plagiarizing the murder of Mary Dalton in the 1940 classic (here, Mary becomes Penelope Dalton). These
subjects of parody reveal the same legacy of vile depictions Pierre must confront—depictions which show no signs of aging or irrelevance. Mocking both Native Son and Push, nearly 60 years apart in publication, demonstrates the continued pervasiveness of these images within literature as well as African American writers’ willingness to comply with such representational subjugation in the name of fame and/or financial success. (During their interview, Dunston shamelessly harps on how much money Jenkins has made from her novel.) Monk adopts the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, a play on Stagger Lee, a folk figure from the blues tradition whose cold-blooded murder of his friend elevated him to legendary proportions. Stagger Lee has been heavily mythologized in black popular culture, most notably a 1959 song sung by Lloyd Price, and served as a stereotypical model for black manhood as stoic, violent, and threatening within popular culture. Stagger Lee is a legendary example of what Mark Anthony Neal has discussed as the “Strong Black Man” myth:

The ‘Strong Black Man’ is the flagship product of nearly 400 years of lived experiences by black men in North America, black men who in the process of resisting enslavement, economic exploitation, random and calculated violence, and a host of other afflictions that usually befall those with a foot on their neck, created a functional myth on which the black nation could be built. [...] But as [Norm R. Allen, Jr.] suggests, despite seemingly positive attributes, the figure of the “Strong Black Man” can be faulted for championing a stunted, conservative, one-dimensional, and stridently heterosexual vision of black masculinity that has little to do with the vibrant, virile, visceral masculinities that are lived in the real world. (21, 24)

In invoking this character, Monk feeds into the white fear and fascination with black masculinity, delivering a narrative that combines sex and violence, yet concludes with the requisite punishment of the offender, assuring a presumably white readership that the danger has been neutralized.

Monk parades the standard stereotypes in his indictment against the portrayal of African Americans in fiction. The name of the protagonist, Van Go Jenkins, obviously alludes to Juanita Mae Jenkins, and Van Go’s English, an intentionally shoddy attempt to capture Black Vernacular English, echoes We’s Lives In Da Ghetto:

My dick be twice as big as his. I jump up and knee the fucka in his balls. He slump over and I wanna make him suck me off in front of everybody, but I just hit him again,
wif my fist, across his pasty white face. (67)

Van Go’s language is concerned with maintaining a hypermasculine façade that also highlights the performativity of blackness. Monk, like Mantan in *Bamboozled*, engages in a blackface performance that satiates racist expectations of blacks. While both figures find these renderings problematic and upsetting, there remains a hope they can subvert them from within—a political desire that seems ultimately unattainable. Furthermore, ironically, this attempted performance of an exaggerated black masculinity is betrayed by blatant homoeroticism. Monk also comments on the emphasis discourses of masculinity, regardless of color, place on the penis as a sign of virility, power, and, therefore, manhood. The focus becomes so emphatic, it fuels a queer fascination among anxious men regarding their bodies and those of other men. Van Go’s superiority over his white opposition is based not only in his skin color or his claim to an authentic manhood, but the size of his penis. To force his opponent to perform oral sex would establish his masculine dominance, while deeming the other guy a homosexual and, therefore, delegitimizing any claims to a hegemonic masculinity staked not only in physicality but heterosexuality. The humor of this vignette lies in the domination of the other, forcing him to perform a sexual act that, in Van Go’s eyes, is reserved for women or gay men, both of whom he views as inferior to himself as *not-men*.

It is worth noting the role laughter plays within this narrative as a tool for insulting or reinforcing solidarity. While Van Go remains fairly indifferent to his environment, fantasizing about killing his mother and sexually assaulting a former girlfriend, he becomes incensed when he is the target of others’ laughter. The fight discussed above was instigated when another man laughed at him, prompting him to stare and ask, “What you laughin at, cracka?” (66). Laughter is also a means of not only deriding others, but also of asserting the superiority and masculine power he derives from a patriarchal power structure that bestows such privileges on men. Though the narrator of *Invisible Man* is able to reverse the laughter in the end to have it serve as a means of resistance, Van Go is powerless to reappropriate this destructive social act. When Cleona accuses him of raping her, he laughs, dismissing his mistreatment of her as deserved and highlighting her ultimate failure to gain retribution against him. His laughter, meant to demoralize, signals his own hubris regarding how he should conduct himself in society, particularly one that has traditionally disenfranchised poor, urban black men like himself.
Eliciting laughter is one strategy for restoring the authority he believes he is entitled to as not only a male but a grown man, which becomes clear when Van Go appears on Snookie Cane’s talk show (here, Monk is parodying Ricki Lake). The antagonistic comments of the audience members and Van Go’s responses reveal how he perceives himself as well as his willingness to defend these definitions against doubt or derision:

Snookie Cane put the microphone in front of a fat woman with corn rows on her head. ‘His problem is he don’t respect himself,’ the fat woman say. ‘So, how he gone respect anybody else.’

‘I respect myself,’ I say.

‘You ain’t showin it, boy,’” the fat woman say.

‘Who you callin boy?’ I say. ‘Sit yo’ big butt down.’

A tall, skinny dude stand up and say, ‘I think Mr. Jenkins here gots a problem wif his self-confidence, you know wif his manhood.’

‘I’ll show you mine if you keep yo’s to yo’self,’ I say.

The audience laugh and that feel kinda good. (115)

By calling Van Go “boy,” the first audience member aligns him with a term that has been used to infantilize black men, particularly in the South, and in a more general sense with a non-man. The identity of men is constituted in opposition to those individuals who are “not men” either through social or biological definitions: women, boys, and often in a heterosexist white society, queers and people of color. His assertion of his manhood, in part, relies on surpassing boyhood (itself a social construct, as we saw in the last chapter) and both denying that level of human development and emotional immaturity while concurrently defying the behaviors and attitudes associated with it. Everett here underscores the white male society’s strategic infantilization of black men, which Van Go is working against; though he himself is violent and impulsive, Everett suggests this reaction, in part, may be connected to a society that historically disenfranchises (read: emasculates) him. The second comment again reinforces the symbolic investment of masculine power in the phallus, the metaphorical castration of which many critics of black masculinity credit with the insecurity behind many black men’s performances of masculinity. His challenge to the audience member for both to reveal their respective penises, albeit more of a threat than a sincere challenge, provokes amusement and laughter in the audience, establishes Van Go as the dominant male (being the challenger and not the
challenged), and, in a Bergsonian sense, deflates the audience member’s charges regarding the lack of intrinsic markers of masculinity. What becomes clear, of course, is the artificiality of his masculinity and vulnerability of his manhood, for Everett reveals how Van Go’s notions of being a man are entirely extrinsic, manifested either on his body or in his ability to provoke laughter, particularly against a rival male. Percival Everett echoes an Ellisonian understanding of laughter, its ability to both dehumanize and alienate but also to alleviate and even elevate. For Everett, humor becomes a tool through which the dispossessed Van Go creates a delusional sense of masculine power to contest the economic and racial hardships he faces in his everyday life, hardships that weaken his attempts to legitimately claim a valid masculinity. This ideal, however, is ultimately illusory, since such notions are constantly created and renegotiated by the hegemony that works to suppress opposition and those on the margins.

Although My Pafology can certainly be read as a comment on African American representation at large, it makes its most trenchant commentary about the depiction of black men. What the novel suggests is that black men are essentially trapped, subscribing to a damaging hegemonic masculinity that by virtue of their race they can never fully attain—in fact, even white men, though somewhat closer to the ideal, cannot satisfy the vague, fluid articulation of masculinity that privileges them. Even more ironic is how black men are both excluded from hegemonic masculinity yet, as a marginalized group, the bearers of a supposedly more authentic masculinity that is raided and appropriated by many white men seeking to, as Dunwitty declares, “keep it real.” Cultural representations, both in print and on screen, simultaneously render black masculinity in terms of crisis while blindly celebrating and venerating that particular articulation of how a man should conduct himself. To this end, many black men are caught in a veritable catch-22 of gender, simultaneously included and excluded from masculine privilege. The humor these men generate and the feeble laughter that follows it reveals an attempt to wrestle with this idea which becomes increasingly apparent; however, yet again, any laughter in this context seems feeble, even futile.

Monk intended the novel as a parody (or so he tells his publisher), but it soon takes on a life of its own, as Random House offers him large advance and a status-seeking Hollywood producer decides to option it. Like his counterpart in Bamboozled, he is both horrified and unsurprised when the novel succeeds where his previous works have faltered, at least commercially. The coup de grace, however, is when My Pafology—now renamed Fuck to both
extend the novel’s offensiveness and, for Everett’s purposes, further ensures the reader’s association of it with Sapphire’s *Push*—becomes a serious contender for the pretentiously-named The Book Award. Monk is a member of the award committee and tries unsuccessfully to prevent the novel he wrote under a pseudonym from winning; however, the committee overpowers his vote. Like Pierre’s struggle to rein in his monstrous creation, Monk’s novel begins to overpower its creator, emphasizing his lack of control over his artistic and personal lives. This growing impotency in his everyday life blurs the lines between reality and nightmare for Monk, who in a scene that recreates a climatic moment from the conclusion of *Invisible Man*, imagines his own (symbolic) castration:

So, I had managed to take myself, the writer, reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries yet walls everywhere. […] Somehow I had whacked off my own

- *willy*
- *stick*
- *dick*
- *doink*
- *rod*
- *pecker*
- *poker*
- *member*
- *prick*
- *putz*
- *schmuck*
- *tallywhacker*
- *johnson*
- *thing*
- *little friend*

and now had to pay the price. I had to rescue myself, find myself and that meant, it was ever so clear for a very brief moment, losing myself. (258)

Again how Monk uses language functions significantly in his self-conception. The various words he employs to describe his penis reveal the extensive colloquial permutations on the phallus,
both euphemistic and ridiculous; the psychological obsession with the physical manifestations of
black male sexuality; and as his inability to grasp the object in itself by way of employing the
original term. His dependence on slang—slang which emphasizes both the penis’s “active”
qualities (pecker, poker) as well as the avoidance of seriousness (tallywhacker, little friend)—
indicates the phallus’s (and masculinity’s) cultural mystique.

By the novel’s end, Monk has lost the one thing the hegemonic male should always have:
control. The tastes of the public, crafted by a publishing industry that seeks out and markets the
same clichéd stories, seize *Fuck* and make it a runaway hit. This metaphor extends to art in
general, where in many ways, the text—be it a poem, a painting, or a film—becomes the
property of the interpreting audience once the artist has completed and released it. To this end,
the artist is an ideal model for an exploration of masculinity, as the man creates, only to have
control wrested away by various competing forces who claim their own forms of ownership over
his creation. Monk is driven to a form of madness that while not debilitating does blur his reality
much like the carnivalesque riot scene at the end of *Invisible Man* or the concluding scene in
Pierre’s office in *Bamboozled*. As Monk tries to correct what is happening to “his” novel, he
loses more and more control as the market seizes onto the profitable novel.

Once the committee has decided on *Fuck* to win the Book Award, Monk attends the
awards ceremony, prepared to be exposed. The question is, What about him is being exposed—
that he is the writer masquerading as Stagg R. Leigh, or that he literally is Stagg R. Leigh? After
the award’s announcement, Monk approaches the stage, but surreallyistically, the faces of the
audience appear to be those of “my life, of my past, of my world” (264). From this crowd
emerges a child with a mirror, and the reflected image is not that of Monk, but of Stagg R. Leigh.
Monk and Stagg, therefore, are more similar to the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde than
Dr. Frankenstein and the Creature. In this moment, Brian Yost suggests, “No trace of Monk
remains, public or private” (1330), but this statement is not wholly accurate. Rather Monk and
Stagg have dissolved into each other; physically, it may appear to be Stagg, but mentally, the
reader is led to believe Monk is still narrating. What this fantastic conflation of identities
suggests is that Monk, like the narrator at the conclusion of *Invisible Man*, is now seeing himself
as the world sees him: as a black man. The gross caricature of African American men as
represented in the mass media, from popular literature to cinema, has tainted his ability to
delineate between his sense of self and the projected expectations of this overwhelming
influence. By employing the pathologized urban black male as a narrative voice and subject, he has yielded to the commercial aesthetic of the corporate authority, thereby implicating himself in the perpetuation of these dehumanizing images that continue to enslave many African Americans mentally and emotionally. The parallels between Monk’s and Pierre’s experiences suggests a larger cultural oppression both Spike Lee and Percival Everett sense impedes them; by using artist figures as protagonists, both men offer a reflexive portrait of black male artistry at the turn of the century.

The dissolution rather than division of personae becomes evident when Monk accepts the Book Award on Stagg’s behalf. On stage he stares into the camera and mutters, “Egads, I’m on television” (265)—“Egads” being the word that earlier in the text signifies he’s “not black enough,” while “I’m on television” is reminiscent of Van Go’s final words in Fuck. Everett suggests that though Monk, for all intents and purposes, rejects the iconography perpetuated by writers like Jenkins, he too is equally as culpable and, in fact, those same damaging images have marred his own self-perception. Though he may repudiate and revile Stagg R. Leigh and Van Go Jenkins, it is those very images that, being perpetuated by the media and corporate America, thwart his attempts to operate outside of race. Just as Flannery O’Connor described Hazel Motes as a “Christian malgré lui,” Theolonious Monk Ellison learns that he is “stereotyped African American malgré lui.” Everett therefore enters into the discussions of race to show that though some may decry the influence and effectiveness of race as a means of social categorization, it remains an insidious cultural mythology nevertheless. Masculinity aligns white men and black men, as similar in gender, but different in race; this opposition increases the antagonism between both groups. Try as one may to define oneself outside of its parameters, one will always be understood within a context that is implicitly racialized. However, this situation is also gendered because Monk inability to define himself shows his exclusion from the most American and seemingly democratic of all national myths: the self-made man. Both texts function as failed experiments, demonstrating not only the limits of black male artists to seek agency in a white-dominated commercialist corporate culture, but also the ambiguity inherent to satire. The power they are denied as men and as artists is paralleled in a way that seems exclusionary to black female artists, but ultimately suggests such suppression may be connected to white male psychological insecurity that aims to control black men’s thoughts and bodies as potential threats to the status quo. While satire may ultimately be ineffectual, the laughter it inspires, unsettling as
it may be, potentially can inspire art’s goal of raising awareness and elevating consciousness.

In 1999 Ashraf Rushdy identified a subgenre of African American literature—the “neo-slave narrative”—to describe works of fiction, starting with Margaret Walker’s 1966 novel *Jubilee*, that “assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3). Writers working in this form since the 1960s, Rushdy contended, were reviving a genre which “African Americans subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject” (7). I would expand on this notion to suggest that one can see neo-slavery practices in contemporary American institutions, like athletics and popular entertainment, where white-dominated corporations exploit the talents, both physical and creative, of African Americans. The earlier mentioned concept of drapetomania, in a contemporary context, reveals how these corporations handle dissension from their talent by defusing their subversive messages and objections through the employment of a psychopathological discourse. Recently drapetomania was perhaps best seen in the media coverage of the struggles between Dave Chappelle, star of the wildly successful *Chappelle’s Show*, and Comedy Central as well as the resulting pop psychological diagnoses of Chappelle’s resistance and consequential departure.

By the second season of his sketch comedy show on Comedy Central, Dave Chappelle had established himself as one of the most popular and, therefore, commercially viable properties on cable television. His show satirized a variety of issues and individuals in American culture, from race relations (“The Black White Supremacist”), gender relations (“The Love Contract”), images of black masculinity (“The Player-hater’s Ball”), and notorious personalities in the media, from R. Kelly to Michael Jackson. Despite its sharp social commentary, this objective was inconsistent, with sketches that sometimes depended more on slapstick, homophobic or sexist jokes, or scatological humor than targeted satire. Furthermore, it became unclear at the time if *Chappelle’s Show* was exploiting, perpetuating, or subverting racial stereotypes about African Americans and whites. In 2004 Matt Feeney captured this ambiguity well in an article for *Slate*, writing

A challenge, though, when watching *Chappelle’s Show*, is to resist the temptation to grant it—because Chappelle is black, and because he deals with harsh racial caricatures, and because you’re laughing your ass off, and because you want to believe you’re a progressive person—a political significance it doesn’t have. *New York Press* film critic
Armond White, for example, credits *Chappelle’s Show* with ‘subverting racism, sexism, and clichés you might call blackism.’ But Chappelle doesn’t ‘subvert’ these things—he exploits them. (‘Black Comedy’)

Feeney is perhaps too “black and white” about the matter, but certainly there is a degree of ambivalence within the show regarding its treatment of race. At the very least, the danger of racial satire is that the employment of broad stereotypes will unintentionally reinforce the racist ideology that bred those stereotypes initially. In January 2005 Chappelle indirectly voiced concern about this possibility when he discussed the “buyer’s remorse” he experiences as a comedian when the audience laughs, but he later regrets what he had to do to earn it (“That’s”). Bambi Haggins sees this creative crisis as symptomatic of “the already Byzantine task faced by the African-American comic: to be funny, accessible, and topical while retaining his or her authentic voice” (4, her emphasis).

This concern—who call the “satirist’s dilemma”—seems to have pushed Chappelle over the edge in March 2005, shortly after he signed a two-year contract valued at nearly $50 million. As Chappelle later explained on *Oprah*, he became uncomfortable with the nature of laughter a white crew member exhibited while filming a particularly racially-charged sketch. Along with growing pressure from Comedy Central executives, Chappelle decided the most responsible decision he could make, as an artist, was to leave the show. His quick departure and unknown whereabouts, however, fueled speculation about drug use and mental illness. Surely, the media implied, a man with the best-selling television DVDs of all time, a wildly successful television show, and a multi-million dollar contract would have no reason to be unhappy. In Chappelle’s absence, the media, as a subsidiary of corporate America, proposed explanations for his seemingly unexplainable departure, including mental illness. This modern-day drapetomania serves to control Chappelle (and artists like him) by controlling the narrative around the story and dispelling his dissent as mental instability. In a capitalist society, it would seem surely would have to be crazy to walk away from that much money. The corporatized media exploits this explanation to suppress Chappelle’s media critique and maintain power in the exploitative exchange. If it can no longer use him, it will dispose of him.

When Dave Chappelle re-emerged from self-imposed exile, he appeared in a high-profile interview on *Oprah*. The first question Oprah Winfrey posed to Chappelle was, “Everyone wants to know: Why did you walk away from 50 million dollars?” Implicit in this line of questioning,
coming no less from the wealthiest African American in the nation’s history, is how could someone who is so financially successful be so unhappy, both professionally and personally? To this end Winfrey is complicit in the corporate machinations that worked to control the public perception of Chappelle’s hostility toward his employer. Chappelle quickly clarifies that he did not walk away from the financial compensation, but the circumstances surrounding his employment. Citing Mariah Carey and Martin Lawrence as examples, he discusses how black performers are portrayed as “crazy” right after they make a major transition in their careers, marked by financial and popular success. “Would you say you lost your mind, sort of?” Oprah suggests, to which Chappelle denies, asserting, “I wasn’t crazy, but it’s incredibly stressful. I feel like, in a lot of instances, I was deliberately being put through stress because, you know, when you’re a guy who generates money, people have a vested interest in controlling you.” This observation, I argue, demonstrates how strategic methods of control like drapetomania remain relevant today; as a concept, drapetomania today serves as a useful critical tool for understanding the ongoing subjugation of African American entertainers. In this instance, slavery shifts from the fields of plantations to the studios of Hollywood, where creative endeavors replace manual efforts as the labor the white-dominated industry exploits in the name of profits. This process of exploitation and subtle manipulation also demoralizes and dehumanizes, reducing black artists into commodities and appealing to the white fascination with a seemingly more “real” black identity, often characterized in terms of language, both verbal and non-verbal.

As Monk and Pierre face madness instigated at the hands of the corporate entities, Everett and Lee show the futility many black artists, male and female, encounter in their attempts to operate within a commercial market. Caught between a desire to succeed, both in terms of money and popularity, and a desire to create an individual expression, artists compromise (often under great pressure) so as to ensure their success. The history of African American male entertainers is rife with those who some have condemned for ceding to industry preferences like Bill Cosby, those who remained out of the mainstream in the less financially lucrative club circuit like Dick Gregory and Bamboozled actor Paul Mooney, and those who were (nearly) destroyed by the excesses of fame like Richard Pryor. In their examination of the commercial art industry, including television and popular literature, Everett and Lee pose similar questions: What is the role of the black male artist? What is blackness? Can one resist the stranglehold of overbearing executives and corporations who try to stifle or suppress one’s artistic integrity? The
creators of the texts examined here suggest madness: the destruction of the ego in the face of media juggernaut that manipulates and misconstrues as it seems fit. In *Erasure* this satire is Horatian; we laugh at Monk’s final exclamation, suggesting his ultimate destruction. Laughter serves to mock the industry and its consumption of Monk as an artist, albeit somewhat grimly. Furthermore, it implicitly indict a predominantly white leadership that craves such stories of racial victimization and exploitation as a means of legitimating their own liberal white guilt. In doing so, Everett seems to acknowledge the limitations of such a commentary in a mass-produced novel like the one he is crafting. *Bamboozled*, however, has a far more Juvenalian approach: the audience is left unsettled, implicated in the racial politics as they stare at an audience in blackface. Laughter here is not a means of celebration or derision; it is a vain attempt at relief from the indictment Lee confers on his viewer. Suddenly madness is not so damning; perhaps laughter is the only sane response, as ineffictual as it may be, because it symbolically rebukes the silent resignation Ellison warns against.
CHAPTER SIX

“If You Ain’t First, You’re Last!”:

_Talladega Nights, George W. Bush, and Post-9/11 Masculinity_

Since his 1995 debut as a regular cast member on _Saturday Night Live_, Will Ferrell has emerged as one of the most popular comedic actors today. His impersonation of President George W. Bush as easily confused yet unwaveringly confident established the model for several arrogant, yet endearing characters Ferrell further developed in films like _Anchorman_ (McKay, 2004) and _Blades of Glory_ (Gordon, Speck 2007). Yet as Will Ferrell memorably sang at the Academy Awards ceremony in 2008, “A comedian at the Oscars, / the saddest man of all. / Your movies may make millions, / but your name they’ll never call.” Scholars of humor often lament the inattention given to their subject, but what remains clear is that humor and the genre characterized by it—comedy—offer rich insight into the culture because of the social quality of laughter. When we laugh, we identify with the group the humor is created for, and this humor often appeals to shared values and prejudices. This chapter examines the social and political function comedy serves, especially in response to constructions of masculinity and political rhetoric, by offering a close analysis of post-9/11 hegemonic masculinity and Will Ferrell’s film, _Talladega Nights_ (McKay, 2007). The comic persona Ferrell has crafted—the hubristic, yet vulnerable leading man—represents not only an extension of the egotistical male comic lead developed by actors like Jack Benny and Jackie Gleason, but also a variation reflective of the contemporary sociopolitical milieu. Through an analysis of _Talladega Nights_, I contend Ferrell’s comic image of manhood parodies the shift in hegemonic masculinity symbolically triggered, at least in part, by President George W. Bush following 9/11 in order to show the limits and shortcomings of this dominant yet problematic rendering of American masculinity. In the process of amusing the audience, Ferrell is able to satirize the president and provide an implied male audience relief from the heightened, albeit unattainable, expectations of them as men in post-9/11 America.

The conceptual framework of “hegemony masculinity” emerged most notably from the work of sociologist R. W. Connell, who defines “hegemony” as a “historically mobile relation” arising from “some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power”
(Masculinities 77). The “hegemony” is fluid and representative of the dominant group’s ideological interests. Consequently, Connell proposes one model of masculinity—“hegemonic masculinity”—triumphs and is “culturally exalted” as the preferred version of masculinity perpetuated by social institutions (77), “telling” all men in a community the most desirable way to behave, think, and conduct themselves as men. Men who are able to at least partially satisfy this definition are empowered through the hegemony, while those who falter are disenfranchised and, as a result, may feel inadequate, ostracized, and impotent. Although Connell and Messerschmidt discouraged a “fixed, transhistorical model” (838), certain qualities of hegemonic masculinity have remained relatively unperturbed in the United States since World War II.

Few men can potentially influence this dynamic gender model as much as the President, since hegemonic masculinity is, as Michael Kimmel defines it, “a man in power, a man with power, a man of power” (“Masculinity” 30). Although Connell acknowledges that someone with great institutional power may not conform to this image of masculinity, I argue that George W. Bush does become such an exemplar for American men in this instance, as, in many ways, the casual, sensitive, charming Clinton did before him. As I will show, his public persona helped shift the national definition of masculinity away from the intellectual and compassionate Clinton model towards a more traditional vision of manhood, what Susan Faludi calls a “John Wayne masculinity” (4).

Although the attacks of September 11 are the most obvious marker of the shift in American masculinity, the beginning of this transition can be traced to the 2000 presidential election. The respective campaigns of Al Gore and George W. Bush attempted to present two wholly different images of masculinity for Americans to choose between; indeed, one could say voters were choosing a leader of the American government as well as of American manhood. Ultimately, the two men were not that dissimilar; both were Ivy League-educated Southerners whose fathers had been prominent politicians. What mattered, as Michael Kimmel asserts, is how they presented themselves as men to the American public:

No matter how Gore tried to “butch” it up and present the male toughness of an alpha male, as he was advised by feminist writer Naomi Wolf, he seemed officious, elite, and effete. It was as if Gore presented an image of the man who had never been a boy; Bush, by contrast, appeared as the boy who had never grown up, a good-time frat boy Peter Pan. And white men, who voted overwhelmingly for Bush, made clear whom they would
rather have hanging out in the White House. (Manhood 276)
The election of George W. Bush was a rejection of the sensitivity, intellectualism, and moral ambiguity of Clintonian masculinity. Even former Vice President Gore distanced himself from Clinton, a sign that change was not only expected, but necessary. Clinton was the charming Rhodes Scholar from Hope, Arkansas, a man who played the saxophone, cried publicly, and—according to some conservative detractors—was too heavily influenced by his careerist wife. George W. Bush was the antidote to this liberal compassion and perceived effeminacy. Molly Ivins, the liberal commentator and fellow Texan who had known Bush since high school and closely observed his political career, sums up Bush’s persona as follows:

He is neither mean nor stupid. What we have here is a man shaped by three intertwining strands of Texas culture, combined with huge blinkers of class. The three Texas themes are religiosity, anti-intellectualism, and machismo. They all play well politically with certain constituencies. (“The Uncompassionate”)

Although Ivins criticizes this image, it nevertheless aligns well with what Richard Goldstein calls the “neo-macho man” that emerged after 9/11.

In response to this unexpected atrocity of 9/11, the national morale was traumatized as the exceptionalist narratives of invincibility and infallibility were razed not by a major world superpower, but a small number of extremists. In the press coverage that followed, a heroic image emerged—not of military or political leaders, but especially of everyday men: firemen, police officers, paramedics. These rescue workers had entered burning buildings to selflessly save others, and a masculinized image was perpetuated that forsaked the contribution of female emergency personnel, flight attendants, victims. In a culture that usually celebrates entertainers and athletes, a new hero arose from the rubble, blending courage, altruism, and patriotism.

This moment of crisis instigated a return to older, seemingly more “authentic” models of gender, and a renewed “manly man” materialized in popular discourse. An October 28, 2001 article by Patricia Leigh Brown in The New York Times heralded the “return of manly men.” David Granger, editor-in-chief of Esquire, remarked,

Before Sept. 11, ruggedness was an affectation you put on like an outfit. Now there’s a selfless being attributed to rugged men. After a decade of prosperity that made us soft, metaphorically and physically, there’s a longing for manliness. People want to regain what we had in World War II. They want to believe in big, strapping American boys.
(qtd. in Brown)

This rhetoric of crisis in national and gender identities was by no means new; in 1958, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. published his essay, “The Crisis of American Masculinity”—in the pages of Esquire, no less. Yet the uncertainty, confusion, and need for explanation created by the attacks led many to search out explanations, albeit artificial and ineffectual, in staid cultural narratives, like that of rugged masculinity. The media perpetuated this need for answers, as did conservative cultural commentators like Camille Paglia: “I can’t help noticing how robustly, dreamily masculine the faces of the firefighters are. These are working-class men, stoical, patriotic. They’re not on Prozac or questioning their gender” (qtd. in Brown). The answers seemed to lie in the essence of manhood, and women were pushed, consequently, to the wayside. Susan Faludi notes that these images—both visual and descriptive—were largely centered on men; the men who stormed the cockpit of United 93, led by Todd Beamer’s assertive cry of “Let’s roll!”, were privileged over the flight attendants who had boiled water to throw at the hijackers (56-60).

Michael Kimmel refers to American culture being “firemanized,” as country music demonstrated a “celebration of police firefighters, and soldiers and its near-hysterical promotion of war against all comers” (Manhood 277). An exemplar of this process was country singer Toby Keith, whose song “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue,” offered to “put a boot in your ass, it’s the American way.” This effort reaffirmed Americans, primarily men, in the face of a humiliating assault, but also legitimized American military action upon those nations deemed culpable, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The rhetoric behind Operation Iraqi Freedom and the War in Afghanistan was marked, yet again, by a masculinized aggression. Donald Rumsfeld’s piercing stare, sneer, and fist-pounding became evocative of this behavior, resulting in the septuagenarian Secretary of Defense’s sex symbol status.33 Secretary of State Colin Powell referred to the French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine’s disapproving concern with President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address as “getting the vapours” (qtd. in Taylor), feminizing his French counterpart for his (and his country’s) reticence to assist in the war in Iraq. Francophobic sentiment carried over into the 2004 election, when Don Evans, the Secretary of Commerce, said Democratic hopeful John Kerry was “of a different political stripe and looks French” (qtd. in Cohen). Stuart Roy, a

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33 For example, in the December 2, 2002 issue of People magazine, where Rumsfeld was named one of the sexiest men in the world.
spokesman for Republican House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, explained Republicans opposed “Mr. Kerry’s lack of support for the war on terror and the way he seems to be in agreement with the arguments of the French” (qtd. in Cohen). These charges were exacerbated by French support for Kerry, who, according to political scientist Nicole Bacharan, “blocked out the America of religious faith and straight talk that likes Bush” (qtd. in Cohen). Republican detractors manipulated these accusations in the media to imply Kerry was unfit, un-American, and unmanly.

Through a stratagem Frank Rich lambasted as “castration warfare” (“How Kerry”), the Bush campaign worked tirelessly to question John Kerry’s masculinity in the public’s eyes, not only in his connections to France, but his war record. While Bush had served in the Texas Air National Guard, John Kerry had been awarded for his combat service in Vietnam, but later publicly denounced the war. Bush’s dubious war record led his campaign to portray Kerry as a “flip-flopper,” suggesting he could not stay strong and steady—qualities necessary for any man and President. These allegations were further fueled by the notorious opposition of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT), who opposed Kerry’s candidacy on the basis of what they perceived as his misrepresentation of American efforts in Vietnam and his own service. “In a time of fear,” Frank Rich opined, “the only battle that matters is the broad-stroked cultural mano a mano over who’s most macho.” He angrily concluded, “In that race, it’s not necessarily the best man but the best actor who will win” (“How Kerry”). In aftermath of September 11th, Susan Faludi noted the government and media’s efforts to revive a masculinity popularized by John Wayne, and who better to lead the country than a rancher from Texas?

The fundamental problem with this revived model of masculinity is its relative unattainability. What man can be that steadfast, that self-righteous, that aggressive? Furthermore, it supported a dangerous irrationality. Ignorance and error did not detract Bush supporters, and as Richard Goldstein mused, “no one ever lost macho points for being stupid” (“Neo-Macho”). In the face of failure, President Bush would not relent; this stubbornness proved comically clear on May 1, 2003, when he landed a LockheedS-3 Viking aboard the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and emerged wearing a flight suit. Later, he delivered a televised speech aboard the aircraft carrier with a banner behind him proclaiming “Mission Accomplished” behind him. The war was, in fact, only just beginning, and the search for “weapons of mass destruction” embarrassingly proved fruitless, with no WMDs found. But as Bill Clinton remarked, “When people feel
uncertain, they’d rather have somebody who’s strong and wrong than somebody who’s weak and right” (qtd. in Goldstein).

Bush’s macho approach and pervasive influence on American masculinity resonated not only in his political rhetoric, but also in popular culture. A popular film that engages the influence of “Bushian masculinity” is *Talladega Nights*, the 2006 Will Ferrell vehicle about Ricky Bobby, a NASCAR driver with “a need for speed.” Ricky Bobby—with his piercing blank stare, Southern drawl, and charming arrogance—is a variation of the celebrated Bush impersonation Ferrell honed on the late-night variety show, *Saturday Night Live*. While the film received generally positive reviews from major critics, none of them remarked on the film’s satirical take on the president; only Jim Emerson noticed a similarity between Ferrell’s portrayals of Ricky Bobby and President Bush. Stephanie Zacharek comes closest when she writes,

Even though Ricky Bobby comports himself with a manly swagger, his eyes look perpetually perplexed. This is the kind of hubris you could find only in a naïf, a creature who’s certain of his place in the world simply because he has no idea just how big the world is.

One can imagine a liberal commentator like Frank Rich or Richard Goldstein substituting “Ricky Bobby” in this observation with “President Bush.” Several did comment, however, on the representation of men in the film. A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* felt

Mr. Ferrell’s willingness to strip down to his skivvies is one of his trademarks. It is also a rare movie-star display of solidarity with those American men who, whether out of laziness or principle, disdain sunlight, proper nutrition, body-hair maintenance and abdominal exercise. Part of Mr. Ferrell’s appeal is surely that he is one of them. O.K., one of us.

Although how appealing Will Ferrell is to all American men is indeterminable, what Scott perceives is a kinship Ferrell is able to build between himself and the so-called “average Joe,” in opposition to the hyper-masculine, impervious image Bush performs. This relationship is crucial to the critique I contend Ferrell engages, and the comic mode allows him to embrace and subvert the model of masculinity Bush proffered. Bush answers an implicit national request for traditional values and then manipulated to further an aggressive policy of foreign retaliation in the name of national security; *Talladega Nights* eschews such a call and certainly its exploitative re-purposing. Ricky Bobby first typifies then grapples with hegemonic masculinity, molded by
both political policies and right-wing values redefined by American culture via the Bush administration’s policies. With its examination of contemporary attitudes like self-righteousness, homophobia, and Francophobia, Talladega Nights proves itself to be more than just another light-hearted comedy from one of America’s foremost comic actors, but rather a Horatian satire about gender politics and blind patriotism in the United States after 9/11. By positioning a Bush-like male as the comic butt, Ferrell’s portrayal of Ricky Bobby demonstrates that this masculine vision is destructive—more divisive than unifying—and must be emended.

Talladega Nights parodies a string of stylish, rags-to-riches biopics of the early 2000s, including Ray (Hackford, 2004), Walk the Line (Mangold, 2005), and Cinderella Man (Howard, 2005). It follows Ricky Bobby (Will Ferrell), a God-fearing NASCAR driver who lives by the motto, given to him years earlier by his estranged father, that “If you ain’t first, you’re last!” His vacuous trophy wife, Carlie (Leslie Bibb), is more drawn to his machismo and success than to any sense of an authentic self he may possess. His two foul-mouthed children, Walker (Houston Tumlin) and Texas Ranger (Grayson Russell), win their parents’ respect by aping their father’s egotism. The children’s names link the characters’ vague Southerness with Texas, Bush’s home state where he served as governor prior to the presidential election of 2000, and hint toward the film’s deeper satirical purpose. Cal Naughton, Jr. (John C. Reilly) is his best friend, a clueless companion who often takes second place, in races and in life, to Ricky Bobby. Naughton’s friendship with Ricky amounts to hero worship, indicating that Ricky Bobby perpetuates the masculine image other men can only hope to attain. Ricky Bobby is the man, and although he has some people who find his image more amusing than worth imitating, such as his crew chief Lucius Washington (Michael Clarke Duncan), he is able to maintain the general admiration of his co-workers, family, and friends. Conflict arises with the arrival of Jean Girard (Sacha Baron Cohen), a French race car driver hired to thwart Ricky Bobby’s winning streak. Girard serves as a foil to Ricky Bobby as the latter re-evaluates himself, both personally and professionally.

The filmmakers situate Talladega Nights in that most masculine of genres, the sports films, where men triumph and women are relegated to the role of either supporters or objects of desires, the spoils of victory. But there is also a historical significance to this setting: in the 2004 election, New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd quoted Kerry asking, “Who among us doesn’t like NASCAR?” Slate writer Mike Pesca corrected this misquote; Kerry’s actual words were, “There isn’t one of us here who doesn’t like NASCAR and who isn’t a fan” (“Fumble”). A
blatant attempt to cast off his reputation as a member of the liberal elite, the comment reflects Kerry’s attempt to claim an authentic, implicitly working-class masculinity he is otherwise lacking. The emphasis on speed, competition, and (horse)power allows NASCAR to reflect the tenets of American hegemonic masculinity, while its particular appeal among the working class suggests a cross-class performance on Kerry’s part as well. In *Talladega Nights*, NASCAR becomes representative of the interests, values, and beliefs of a particular working-class Southern population, Bush’s target demographic. Thomas Frank noted how Bush became a “working-class hero,” winning the votes and approval of those who consequently vote against their own economic interests (“Bush”). As a working-class Christian Southerner, Ricky Bobby embodies a key component of Bush’s support base as well as the self-image Bush tried to present to the public in both campaigns, despite Bush’s privileged upbringing. Although his personality is exaggerated for comedic purposes, Ricky Bobby avoids the image of masculinity embraced, recreated, and perpetuated by George W. Bush. By highlighting certain aspects of the masculine performance and hyperbolize them, the filmmakers show the dangers of such a masculinity can lead to.

Furthermore, NASCAR functions as an intriguing metaphor for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at least from a progressive perspective. The speed, shape, and performance of race cars align with the competitive nature of hegemonic masculinity. This celebration of power, the never-ending “game,” the blatant machismo—all of these factors can be read in NASCAR and the Iraq War as well. Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, John Ashcroft, and, of course, George W. Bush himself operated on a rhetoric of hyper-masculine assertiveness that often became aggressive as well as assured self-righteousness. On the eve of the invasion of Iraq, President Bush said, “The game is over,” implicitly prompting other nations to join his ranks; Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the French prime minister, retorted, “It is not a game and it is not over” (qtd. in “Rumsfeld”). In an interview with Jim Lehrer in September 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld justified the war:

We are free people. We don't want to live in fear. We don't want to be terrorized. We know there's no way to defend against it. The only way to deal with it is to go after the terrorists where they are. We're killing, capturing terrorists in Iraq which is a... Baghdad today which is a whale of a lot better than Boise.

The rhetoric of the war echoes the rhetoric of racing: besting the competition, establishing
dominance, winning the “game.” Is it not fitting that NASCAR drivers race in circles, yet are ultimately no farther than from where they started, lampooning Bush’s war efforts?

Self-righteousness and perceived infallibility are Ricky Bobby’s defining characteristics, and his insistence on being victorious and defining himself as a man by his ability to win, touting, “If you ain’t first, you’re last!” This statement echoes throughout the film and reveals the self-delusion that protects Ricky Bobby’s deep-laden insecurities over his aptitude and ability to wield control, rooted in his precarious relationship with his unreliable and often absent father. These mottos reduce conflict to black-and-white understandings and reflect an arrogance seen in Bush’s speeches to the American public. In a press conference held on October 25, 2006, President Bush too expressed a thirst for battle and undeniable ability to win:

I know the American people understand the stakes in Iraq. They want to win. They will support the war as long as they see the path to victory. Americans can have confidence that we will prevail because thousands of smart, dedicated military and civilian personnel are risking their lives and are working around the clock to ensure our success. (“Press”) Bush’s confidence lies in a perceived adeptness based on a presumed superiority in terms of intelligence and drive, not in any reporting of current status or realistic expectations. The United States’s triumph is primarily staked in their desire for victory: they want it more. Ricky Bobby’s personality is an embellished version of the conviction President Bush shows in his announcement: we will win because we want to win, and we were meant to win. Ricky Bobby and President Bush share this attitude towards confrontation, despite the absence of logic or viable strategy. Although some commentators had begun to call the war in Iraq a “quagmire,” Bush tries to uphold the mission’s integrity because hinting at even a slight lack of control is not masterful, not American, and certainly not masculine. Like the Vietnam War three decades earlier, the legitimacy of the masculine authority of the President and the masculinized image of the United States as a world power are severely threatened by a military loss abroad, especially in a developing country such as Iraq.

The possibility of defeat has been rendered in Oedipal terms as well, and the relationship of father and son offers interesting parallels between Ricky Bobby and George W. Bush. Ricky Bobby’s personal philosophy, focused on victory at all costs, comes from his father, Reese. His undying admiration and hero worship for Reese remains steady throughout the film, despite his father’s despicable behavior. In a prefatory scene from Ricky Bobby’s childhood, Reese
unexpectedly shows up at Career Day, much to the delight of his son. Introducing himself as an amateur race car driver and amateur tattoo artist, Reese advises the class, “It’s the fastest who gets paid, and it’s the fastest who gets laid.” The ridiculous sentiment resonates with Ricky, serving as a guiding principle for his adult life, where he becomes a professional driver in an attempt to follow (even eclipse) his father. This foolish emphasis on winning, speed, and sex come into perspective for Ricky Bobby when he is forced to re-evaluate his beliefs later in the film:

RICKY BOBBY: Wait, Dad. Don’t you remember you told me, ‘If you ain’t first, you’re last’?

REESE BOBBY: Huh? What are you talking about, son?

RICKY BOBBY: That day at school.

REESE BOBBY: Oh hell, son, I was high that day. That doesn’t make any sense at all, you can be second, third, fourth. Hell, you can even be fifth.

RICKY BOBBY: What? I’ve lived my whole life by that!

Just as Ricky Bobby’s life has been an attempt to both prove himself to his father and exceed his father’s accomplishments, some commentators have argued George W. Bush’s attitudes about the war in Iraq stem, in part, from his father’s problems and limited success with Saddam Hussein. In removing Saddam Hussein from power, Bush demonstrates symbolically that he is worthy of the Presidency and in accomplishing something his father, who served only one term, could not. In an October 3, 2006 op-ed piece in the Washington Post, Richard Cohen discusses these theories surrounding the filial inadequacy felt by the young George Bush:

He wanted to best his father but also to even the score for him. This was a twofold thing. George W. Bush wanted, in effect, to win the second term that George H. W. Bush had lost (to Bill Clinton), and he also wanted to finish the job his father had started with Saddam Hussein. If there is a better explanation for why Bush—not necessarily the neo-cons around him—so fervently wanted war, I cannot come up with it. (“Can”)

Reese Bobby, a bumbling, havoc-raising, deadbeat dad, is obviously not a caricature of George H. W. Bush, but he represents the same kind of domineering image of paternal masculinity Ricky Bobby must contend with in Talladega Nights as he struggles to define himself as a man.

In light of the war in Iraq, the Bush administration employed gay marriage as a red herring. The president said on several occasions he would support a bill that defines marriage as
a union between a man and a woman, including the following remarks from February 24, 2004: the Defense of Marriage requires a constitutional amendment. An amendment to the Constitution is never to be undertaken lightly. The amendment process has addressed many serious matters of national concern. And the preservation of marriage rises to this level of national importance. The union of a man and woman is the most enduring human institutions, honoring—honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith. Ages of experience have taught humanity that the commitment of a husband and wife to love and to serve one another promotes the welfare of children and the stability of society. (“President Calls”)

This statement is timely as it corresponds with crucial campaigning in the lead-up to the presidential election in November 2004 as well as the fact that the nation was approaching the first anniversary of the Iraqi invasion, when restless and dissatisfaction with the lack of progress led to a national divide in popular opinion (Moore). Political commentators, comedians, and cartoonists noticed the red herring Bush was forging. In a cartoon by Pat Oliphant, President Bush, donning an oversized cowboy hat, proclaims, “I am a wartime President! I am at war to defend our traditional values.” Yet when the line of questioning shifts to his dubious service record during the Vietnam War, Bush redirects the interrogation by yelling, “I am at war to defend us against homosexual marriage!” (qtd. in Lewis, Cracking 191). Paul Lewis, who offers a detailed study of the benefits and dangers of humor, including on chapter focusing on George W. Bush, insightfully analyzes Oliphant’s cartoon:

The effort to emphasize the evasiveness of the president’s campaign rhetoric, his use of key phrases about war, god, family, patriotism, and his determination not to discuss his own war record, indeed to deflect attention from it by talking about gay marriage, was undoubtedly apparent to like-minded viewers of the cartoon. (Cracking 190)

Bush, according to many liberal commentators, used gay marriage to divert attention from the continuing tribulations of the Iraqi occupation by reunifying his Christian conservative base. By suggesting gay marriage (and the LGBTQ community) were a potential threat to traditional values, Bush mobilized a key component of his support and deflected attention from his blunders in foreign policy.

Homophobic sentiment, further instigated by heated debates over same-sex marriage, have been underscored in contemporary American definitions of masculinity. If the most
powerful man in America does not support gay marriage, does that imply that men everywhere should follow suit? To limit marriage to heterosexual individuals highlights the inherent homophobia to the exclusion. Redefining marriage would give gay and lesbian citizens more political agency and condone the lifestyle of a historically disenfranchised group—one which largely does not support Republican leadership. As a symbolic challenge to a hegemonic order that is implicitly heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples are excluded from privileges that would grant them equal authority and power. R. W. Connell states hegemony relates to a person or group’s ability to claim and exert authority (77); those in power (though not always governmental) outline what is acceptable and what is not. Ricky Bobby’s irrational fear and disdain for the gay Jean Girard serves as an allegory for the Bush administration’s homophobic policies toward the LGBT community.

As a homosexual and a Frenchman, Girard poses a double threat to Ricky Bobby as the personification of hegemonic masculinity. As a non-American, non-heterosexual, and a non-“dude,” he represents “the Other” used by Republicans to demonize opponents and against which the hegemony constructs masculinity. Jean particularly defies the description of Bush offered earlier by Molly Ivins: he drinks macchiatos, listens to opera, and reads French existentialist literature. In short, he is a sophisticate and an intellectual—two categories Bush not only eschews, but employs to depict his opponents like Kerry as out-of-touch, inauthentic, and unfit to preside over the American people. Consequently, Girard unsettles Ricky Bobby to the delight of the audience:

RICKY BOBBY: Holding hands with a man makes me terribly uncomfortable.
JEAN GIRARD: It’s a sign of affection in many countries.
RICKY BOBBY: Well, not here.
JEAN GIRARD: It’s not sexual in any way. My erection has nothing to do with you.

Again the hegemonic emphasis on control—in this instance, corporeally—becomes the fodder for satire. To be emotional is not to be in control, so affection is taboo, particularly when homoeroticism is implied. Hegemonic masculinity requires one to be heterosexual, but also to repudiate any potentially queer behavior, which in this instance, is anything that suggests otherwise. When Ricky says “not here,” he emphasizes the cultural relativity of gender and sexuality performativities, despite a lack of awareness of his own complicity in these artificial structures as a hypermasculine, hypernationalist person. Likewise, Girard’s behavior deviates
from the heteronormativity Ricky Bobby finds comfort in; consequently, he attempts to police Girard back into a proper performance of American masculinity, although Girard obviously is French. This facet does not matter to Ricky Bobby, though, who feels his approach to gender to be natural, preferred, and inherently superior, using “nationalized” place as a way of further legitimating it.

The humor of this conversation can be duly understood under the superiority theory, in which laughter is directed at an Other perceived as inferior. The film constructs Ricky Bobby so the audience simultaneously likes him and feels superior to him, especially because of his ignorance and overwhelming discomfort spurred on by his hyper-masculine persona. The scene, however, also allows an inverse reading: the audience may look at Jean Girard as “less” of a man than Ricky Bobby because he is articulate, sensitive, and affectionate—typically feminized behaviors. By queering hegemonic masculinity, both in his expression of emotion as well as his behavior, some viewers can perceive Jean Girard as an illegitimate, undesirable vision of masculinity, one which the Bushian model remedies through confidence, stoicism, and aggression. Therefore, rather than reading Ricky Bobby as an essentially satirical creation, the audience sympathizes or even identifies with him, which leads to a fundamental problem of satire: the audience may identify with, rather than against, the target of derision.

This scene is also critically important because Jean Girard reveals his intentionally subversive nature. His lack of “acceptable” masculine traits is obvious, but his indifference towards this deficit is evidence of a confidence in its own right. His unspoken critique of hegemonic masculinity may alienate an audience that adheres to such faulty premises and values. In doing so, he hints at what Michael Kimmel calls “the great secret of American manhood: We are afraid of other men” (“Masculinity” 35). Kimmel argues that homophobia is not a fear of homosexuals, but rather straight men’s fear that gay men will expose them as inauthentic and unmanly (35). Girard’s emotional expressiveness offers an alternative interpretation of masculinity that symbolically challenges the legitimacy and feasibility of the version Ricky Bobby follows so steadfastly. Since Girard adheres to a masculinity constructed in another geographical, national, social, and even sexual context, he undermines the control Ricky Bobby feels entitled to as an adherent of hegemonic masculinity in United States after 9/11. The humor of the film, including the laughter at or with Jean Girard, exposes the uncertainty and dissatisfaction men feel regarding their performances as men.

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This initial challenge comes in a barroom confrontation, where Ricky Bobby meets Jean Girard. Jean Girard’s arrival is heralded by jazz music, which the bartender claims is included on the jukebox for profiling purposes. Ironically, despite admiration by the French, jazz music is a uniquely American creation, showing a history of mutual admiration between French and American cultures. One could read this even further: jazz music, as a fundamentally African American form of creative expression, subtly suggests an affinity between two groups excluded from a hegemonic power that is inherently white and “American.” Jean Girard antagonizes Ricky Bobby, jeering the limited American contributions to world culture: Cheerios, George Bush, and the Thigh Master. When prompted for what France invented, Girard coolly responds: democracy, existentialism, and the blow job. The final contribution especially almost succeeds in persuading the bar patrons that the French are admirable, including Cal Naughton, Jr. In an aggressive demonstration of dominance, Girard pins Ricky Bobby down, threatening to break his arms if he fails to announce his love of crepes. Although Ricky Bobby admits he enjoyed the “thin pancakes,” he refuses to acknowledge his love of “crepes” because of its French namesake. This seemingly inane point of contention nevertheless echoes the renaming of “French fries” as “freedom fries” following the French opposition to the invasion of Iraq, deriding the absurdity of the nationalist stubbornness perpetuated by conservative pundits. Ricky Bobby remains steadfast in his refusal, and when Girard breaks his arm, he chides Ricky that “Your injury is one of ignorance and pride.” Girard’s aggression forces Ricky Bobby to confront his limitations, rebuking his hubris and, literally, inflexibility. He also establishes himself as Ricky Bobby’s foe—as a race car driver, a member of the gay community, a Frenchman, and a man.

Francophobia has been a noticeable facet of American humor for years and has been particularly prevalent, however, since the end of World War II. The American success in both world wars, and the perceived rescue of France in both instances, led to a macho American self-image that depicted France as inadequate militarily. This failure was also rendered in terms of masculinity, and French men are often portrayed in American humor and comedy as effete, passive, and refined, in direct contrast to the rugged, crass, self-sufficient American man. One need only look at various representations of French males, from the bumbling Inspector Clouseau to the lecherous Pepe Le Pew. The French, much like the English, become representative of a sophistication and pretentiousness against which American comic heroes are often defined against. But Francophobia is not only present in American humor; it resonates in
political commentary, the broadcast media, and everyday life. As mentioned earlier, Francophobia was used to mischaracterize and subvert Kerry’s attempts to remasculinize himself and therefore demonstrate his ability to serve as the head of the American government. When French President Jacques Chirac denounced an invasion of Iraq as “the worst of all possible solutions” (“Rumsfeld”), France became the most objectionable of whipping boys in the American consciousness, especially among conservatives. Fred Barnes, executive editor of the conservative *The Weekly Standard*, justified the wave of anti-French sentiment in a pre-invasion editorial on February 12, 2003:

The simple fact is nobody likes an ingrate. It would be one thing if the French said they planned to sit out the war in Iraq. But it’s quite another when the French actively try to undermine President Bush and prevent regime change in Iraq, as they’re doing now. After all we’ve done from the French—saving their butts in World Wars I and II, taking over for them in Vietnam—this makes them ungrateful in the extreme—breathtakingly, unprecedentedly, and perhaps even unforgivably, ungrateful. (“How Many”)

Barnes’s polemic reveals that American feelings of Francophobia are not based in anger and frustration, but in betrayal. By dissenting from the push for war, they are distasteful and disloyal to the country that, in the recent past, has supported and saved them. Such detestation prompted the aforementioned renaming of French fries by restaurateur Neil Rowland as well as broadcaster Bill O’Reilly’s demand for a boycott on French products. In disagreeing with the aggressive American foreign policy, France stands defiant against the substantial authority the United States wields in the international political arena and, in doing so, challenges the United States’s right to possess (and be given) such influence.

Jean Girard’s intentional characterization as a Frenchman is fundamental to the film’s examination of Bush-era politics. He is less a developed character than personified fear stemming from a particular masculinized American identity, forged in part on anti-intellectualism and rugged individualism and typified by the persona George W. Bush has adopted since the 2000 Presidential campaign. Girard embodies all the pejorative stereotypes of the French that American humor propagates and the hegemonic ideal of masculinity shuns: gay, cerebral, stylish, elitist, eccentric, pedantic. “My husband Gregory and I want what any couple

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34 As of August 2, 2011, an announcement regarding boycotting France remains on O’Reilly’s website, and it can be accessed here: http://www.billoreilly.com/pg/jsp/general/boycottfrance.jsp.
wants,” Girard laments to a cautious Ricky Bobby, “To retire to Stockholm and develop a
currency for cats and dogs to use.” Girard’s oddness distances him from the American
characters, especially the purported “alpha male,” Ricky Bobby. Girard is the foil against which
Ricky Bobby demonstrates his manliness, revealing his successful execution of a presumably
essential masculinity that is ultimately socially constructed and historically fluctuating. The
audience, however, becomes aware that Ricky Bobby’s masculinity is absurd and ineffective; the
humor comes in his inability to realize this fact while continuing to follow through with it, what
Henri Bergson calls “mechanical inelasticity.” By calling into question Ricky Bobby’s very right
to be called manly, Girard becomes a threat to Ricky Bobby’s self-definition and the larger
construct of masculinity. In the Bergsonian sense, laughing at Ricky Bobby is an implicit
awareness of his shortcoming and a social corrective to discourage his exaggerated maschismo.
Though Girard is obviously non-American, his formidable professional capabilities and
confidence make him the more desirable image of masculinity and, in the sociohistorical context
in which the film was released, a productive alternative to Ricky Bobby and George W. Bush.

To protect himself from the fear that he will be exposed as unmanly, Ricky Bobby
utilizes humor in the form of demeaning insults to identify and confine Jean Girard to the role of
Other. For the film’s satirical purposes, these terms, used as defense mechanism, are absurd,
reflecting more upon Ricky Bobby’s vulnerability than Jean Girard’s inferiority. During a race, a
worried Ricky Bobby, anxious over his competitor’s skill, asks, “Where are you, Pepe Le
Bitch?”—a moniker that derides Girard as effeminate, submissive, and French. Pepe Le Pew,
although comically endearing, represents many of the damning stereotypes of the French,
including a preoccupation with love and general aloofness. In another scene, Girard offers a
vague threat: “Now it is time for the matador to dance with the blind shoemaker!” The
incongruity of Girard’s statement echoes the cerebral quality commonly ascribed to French
culture, due in part to the powerful influence of French intellectual culture in the twentieth
century. The work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, among others,
challenged and subverted various key American values, including Christianity, capitalism, and
individualism. Unsurprisingly, such thought was met with contempt by more traditional
American critics and scholars who stubbornly resisted their unsettling ramifications.

Ricky Bobby’s fall from the hegemonic ideal illustrates once more the artificiality and
illegitimacy of this model of masculinity. In 1976, Robert Brannon outlined characteristics of

hegemonic masculinity, informed, in part, by the women’s liberation movement. Reported in four succinct statements, one can see as the American articulation of hegemonic masculinity:

- No Sissy Stuff: The stigma of all stereotyped feminine characteristics and qualities, including openness and vulnerability.
- The Big Wheel: Success, status, and the need to be looked up to.
- The Sturdy Oak: A manly air of toughness, confidence, and self-reliance.
- Give ‘Em Hell!: The aura of aggression, violence, and daring. (12)

As Brannon describes it, being “manly” calls for an avoidance of emotion. When Ricky Bobby’s car flips in a race, he not only loses his chances of winning, but he also is symbolically emasculated. Emerging from the wreckage, he runs around frantically and shouts nonsensically, surrendering any claims to emotional and corporeal control as well as stoicism. Wearing only underwear, he reveals a body that is pudgy and out of “shape,” lacking toned musculature. It is open, imperfect, and undesirable; it is a physical manifestation of his emotional and mental inadequacy. He is no longer a manly “sturdy oak,” but rather erratic, disoriented, disturbed, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Hegemonic masculinity, in its effort to reify itself, requires American men to avoid any such behavior. Failure to do so is unmanly and, in a society that binarizes gender, therefore feminine.

To discuss the masculine and feminine, the film’s portrayal of women warrants attention, particularly the three female characters in Ricky Bobby’s inner circle: his wife, Carley (Leslie Bibb); his mother, Lucy (Jane Lynch); his personal assistant, Susan (Amy Adams). In a film focused on masculinity, these women are reduced to two categories typical of film comedy in male-dominated society: sex object (Carley) and moral support (Lucy, Susan). Carley’s character is nothing short of a trophy wife, seemingly appropriate for a champion. It becomes clear from her introduction—she reveals her breasts to win Ricky’s attention—that she is yet another prize Ricky Bobby has acquired in his career. She is content to serve Ricky as his wife and the mother of his children, and her self-esteem is rooted in her physical appearance. When Cal compliments Carley’s breasts during a family dinner, both Ricky and Carley are flattered, revealing her shallowness and Ricky Bobby’s objectification and possessiveness over of his wife. Ricky’s crash, unsurprisingly, halts his racing career and effectively ends his marriage, since Carley’s self-worth is aligned with the professional success of her husband and, therefore, his ability to embody a masculine ideal. The loss of his wife—to his best friend, Cal, no less—furthers
Ricky’s emasculation. Distraught and cuckolded, Ricky returns, literally and symbolically, to the comfort of his mother, whose strength and loving commitment allow her son to recuperate from his crushing failure.

Throughout the film, Ricky’s mother, Lucy, serves as a counterexample to the poor model of manhood offered by Reese, attempting to raise her son correctly in light of his father’s overwhelmingly negative influence. When Ricky returns to her, she supports him, but she also works to discipline his children. Initially obstinate, the children come to respect her unflinching assertiveness and tough love. After instituting “granny law,” Texas Ranger remarks, “You’re going to break us like wild horses, aren’t you?” In this fraternal world, women are either the downfall of men or their saviors; there is no room for them as equals. To redefine his masculinity, Ricky Bobby needs the tenderness and toughness only his mother can provide.

However, Reese also proves instrumental to Ricky’s recovery. Ricky is understandably hesitant, at first, but his mother’s guidance propels him forward. As he leaves, Texas Ranger cheers, “Do it, Dad. Get your balls back.” His son’s remarks insinuate an elision between the body and masculinity; to win again represents a reinstatement of his masculinity symbolized by his testes. The path to remasculinization requires Ricky to reclaim his professional glory the egoism that fueled his downfall. Learning to drive fast again will regain his “balls”—the physical symbol of his masculinity—and this lesson must be learned from the father, the instiller and instructor of masculinity. Yet his methods seem unorthodox and idiotic, including driving with a cougar and trying to outrun cops in a high speed chase. Ultimately Reese’s effectiveness is questionable, more comedic than corrective. What Ricky Bobby needs, the film suggests, is a woman—not a mother, but a lover.

Susan initially enters the film as Ricky’s bookish personal assistant. Bespectacled and mousy, she stands in stark contrast to Carley, who is noticeably disconcerted by Susan’s presence. When Carley abandons Ricky, Susan remains loyal, and the onus for rallying Ricky back into competitive mode falls upon her. Despite the efforts of his parents, Ricky is ultimately “saved” by Susan when she gives a rousing speech that seems to assert the same tenets of masculinity Ricky has finally been working against:

It's because it's what you love, Ricky. It is who you were born to be. And here you sit. Thinking. Well, Ricky Bobby is not a thinker. Ricky Bobby is a driver. He is a doer, and that's what you need to do. You don't need to think. You need to drive. You need speed.
You need to go out there, and you need to rev your engine. You need to fire it up. You need to grab ahold of that line between speed and chaos, and you need to wrestle it to the ground like a demon cobra. And then, when the fear rises up in your belly, you use it. And you know that fear is powerful, because it has been there for billions of years. And it is good. And you use it. And you ride it; you ride it like a skeleton horse through the gates of hell, and then you win, Ricky. You WIN! And you don't win for anybody else. You win for you, you know why? Because a man takes what he wants. He takes it all. And you're a man, aren't you? Aren't you?

Susan’s speech reveals the expectation that women will reaffirm masculinity, and she inspires him to be confident and assertive, but noticeably missing is the blind pride that made him initially stumble. Susan offers an alternative vision of masculinity closer to Girard than the earlier Ricky Bobby. Though this image of masculinity does not posit women as equals, it does offer a negotiated form of masculinity that dispels the earlier example Ricky demonstrated. Northrop Frye suggests that comedy’s intent is to “ridicule[s] a [protagonist’s] lack of self-knowledge” (452); here, Susan serves as the arbiter for what Frye sees as comedy’s ultimate design: the “social reconciliation” of the individual (452). She guides Ricky Bobby into a rejuvenating vision of masculinity where he is confident and active without being boorish. To this end, he becomes self-aware and reintegrated into a society he finds himself at odds with following his accident.

Ricky Bobby’s restructured masculinity—neither intimidated nor insecure—is revealed in his race against Jean Girard, who hopes Ricky Bobby will honorably defeat him. Although initially put off by Girard’s overt performance of his non-normative sexuality, Ricky Bobby’s re-education by the accident, his mother, and Susan have made him increasingly understanding of his French counterpart. It is worth noting that it is only when Ricky is not in power can he appreciate the restrictions of hegemonic masculinity as well as the alternative perspectives of those it also marginalizes. When he himself is disenfranchised, he becomes keenly aware of the way he has been inhibited as well as the ways other men have been excluded and ostracized by a limiting vision of manhood. The pure ridiculousness of the conclusion—a foot race set to the tune of Pat Benatar’s “We Belong” (again, emphasizing social reconciliation and reintegration)—undermines any overwhelming feeling of a didactic moralizing while showing the mutual understanding the men now have for each other. As Ricky wins, an American flag
waves in the background, signaling a new vision of American manhood: assertive, confident, yet compassionate and pragmatic. He consequently refuses to shake Jean Girard’s hand, preferring instead to kiss him, a purposeful (though mocking) sign of acceptance, but one that nevertheless reveals his self-assurance as well as his tolerance.

As I have previously discussed, the traditional conventions of the comedic genre rely on the audience to recognize and identity with the values and prejudices the film presents. This implicit recognition usually occurs through a character who serves as likable and sympathetic. Ricky Bobby becomes not only a case study of masculinity, but a representative of the problems inherent to his times. As time changes, so too does comedy. The reason I offer the extended study of Ricky Bobby, though, is not just because this film consciously engages with and revises Bushian masculinity, but because it illustrates a fundamental shift in the portrayal of leading men in American film and television comedy. The typical comedic male, dating back at least as far as Ralph Kramden on *The Honeymooners*, was a heterosexual “everyman”—working a 9-to-5 job only to come home to a wife, who loved her husband, but was often his moral conscience and a mother figure. Kramden was physically overweight and disheveled, prone to loud outbursts and self-satisfied smirks. His personality was characteristically confident, assertive, and self-righteous, rooted in his patriarchal belief that he was the breadwinner and “king of the castle.” An essential part of his character (and the comic structure of the narrative) was his inevitable failure, his realization of that failure, and his sheepish request for forgiveness from an understanding wife. These images showed a masculinity that was overwrought and exaggerated, but ultimately humbled in the face of a loving female partner. This pattern can be traced through the family-centered comedies, especially on television: Fred Flintstone on *The Flintstones*, Archie Bunker on *All in the Family*, Homer Simpson on *The Simpsons*, Peter Griffin on *Family Guy*. Although the historical or geographical context changed, these men—working class, overweight, bombastic—continued to promote a traditional image of heterosexual marriage.

Yet Bush’s presidency, including his Cabinet’s and his hypermasculine personae and rhetoric, have prompted an intriguing revision of this model. In popular culture, what we now see are men who, even in the face of undeniable failure and shortcomings, self-righteously insist upon their infallibility, even against reason or evidence to the contrary. Maintaining their patriarchal authority as fathers, husbands, and male citizens, these men view admission of defeat as nothing short of emasculation, and Ricky Bobby is only one example. Other exemplars in
contemporary popular culture include Stephen Colbert’s on-air persona on *The Colbert Report* and Stan Smith of the aptly named animated show, *American Dad*. In their steely-eyed confidence and absurd hubris, these men evoke a masculinity that is simultaneously traditional and innovative, reassuring and impractical. Their hyperbolism of their statements and foolhardiness of their actions, though, illustrate the inefficacy and destructiveness of their masculinity. The male audience who may initially identify with this articulation of manliness can see it falls short; the male audience already dissatisfied with such an oppressive model finds relief in seeing this dangerous understanding of manhood skewered, ridiculed, and dismissed. Comedy moves beyond understandings of it as a conservative genre that celebrates and maintains the traditional values of its target audience. Instead, it can rally for revision—literally, a new vision—for the perpetuation of that particular culture and, perhaps, beyond the initial demographic.

Perhaps the critical and commercial popularity of these characters reveals an unspoken need in the audience, especially men, to have traditional gender roles examined and reassessed. *Talladega Nights* grossed over $100 million dollars domestically, but, as Geoffrey King reports, audiences tend to dislike satire and studios therefore tend to avoid producing them (94). The roots of success, therefore, may be in the humor and the social purposes the prompted laughter performs. The relief theory of laughter as refined by Sigmund Freud states that laughter allows for the safe, necessary release of pent-up nervous energy. One may suggest then that the pressure men feel to enforce and subscribe to hegemonic masculinity is relieved by such texts that show the inadequacy and foolishness of such expectations. These characters—Ricky Bobby, “Stephen Colbert”, and Stan Smith—present a supposedly tried and true version of manhood to reveal how it is artificial and futile. In doing so, they assure viewers that men potentially can embrace qualities like sensitivity, empathy, level-headedness, and conscientiousness without compromising other “masculine” values like assertiveness, determination, and independence. Such entertainment also forges a counternarrative about how a self-righteous, patriotic, stubborn masculinity, marred by its uncritical nature and reckless exultation, fails to satisfy the ends it sets out to accomplish, namely empowering men *as* men. The laughter does not bring one into the fold; rather, it shatters such conformist demands. Comedy can serve as an ideological weapon by offering a fictive space where ideas are acted out: old models of masculinity can be tried and dismissed while new models can be called for and even suggested. Because it is behind the
comic mask, it is taken as jest, but the implications of these suggestions and the new possibilities they afford are never far from reach. The spirit of play characteristic of the comic liberates the individual from the stultifying requirements of compliance enacted by a competing worldview, if only temporarily. From this rupture of logic and regulation, however, a new order can emerge if one is willing to acknowledge that comedy is serious business.
CHAPTER SEVEN

EPILOGUE

_The Tears of a Clown_ calls attention to the role of humor and laughter in men’s performances of masculinity. In addition to lobbying for the vital social labor the comic plays for men, I had hoped to illustrate how humor and laughter in comedy allows us to see how men negotiate the fundamental tension between how they identify, how others identify them, and how successful they are in executing their notion of an ever-elusive “authentic” masculinity. While we laugh, these men sublimate their anger, pain, frustration, and anxiety into a socially viable mode that simultaneously permits expression while discouraging critical attention. Yet, I believe, if we resist this temptation (and cultural prejudice) to view the comic as “kidding around,” we find a fruitful space for investigation the ongoing (re)creation of identity.

Over the past few weeks, as I prepared the final manuscript of this dissertation, three public incidents occurred that underscore the need to critically examine the sources, implications, and consequences of men’s uses of the comic. Please allow me to briefly summarize those events:

- On February 16, Sandra Fluke, a law student at Georgetown University, testified before a Congressional committee about the financial burden her fellow female students faced due to birth control costs. On February 29, conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh rebuked Fluke’s testimony on his show, suggesting she was “slut” and a “prostitute.” As J. Bryan Lowder characterizes it, Limbaugh “laughed off the outrage at his previous remarks with an ejaculation of boy’s club crassness” (“Has Rush”). He audaciously defied his critics, stating, “So Miss Fluke and the rest of you feminazis, here's the deal: If we are going to pay for your contraceptives and thus pay for you to have sex, we want something. We want you to post the videos online so we can all watch” (qtd. in Lowder). The resulting backlash led several national companies to withdraw their sponsorship of Limbaugh’s radio show, while political figures from Barack Obama to Mitt Romney chided Limbaugh’s insensitivity. Under immense pressure, Limbaugh publicly apologized, “My choice of words was not the best, and in the _attempt to be humorous_, I created a national stir. I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices” (qtd. in Hart and Mirkinson, emphasis mine).
On March 20, actor Robert De Niro hosted a fundraiser in New York City attended by Michelle Obama. Before the First Lady spoke, De Niro observed, “Callista Gingrich. Karen Santorum. Ann Romney. Now do you really think our country is ready for a white First Lady? Too soon, right?” (qtd. in “Newt”). Republican candidate for the Presidential nomination Newt Gingrich called on President Obama to condemn the remarks (“Newt”). In an apology statement, De Niro wrote, “My remarks, although spoken with satirical jest, were not meant to offend or embarrass anyone -- especially the first lady” (qtd. in “Robert”, emphasis mine).

On March 27, a JetBlue pilot on a flight from New York City to Las Vegas had an outburst and had to be subdued by passengers, several of whom were “burly men” en route to the 2012 International Security Conference (“JetBlue”). The next day, radio host Carson Daly mused, “On this particular flight, most of the people were on their way to some sort of security conference in Las Vegas... so it was a bunch of dudes, and well-trained dudes. [...] If that were me... with my luck, it would be like, ‘This is the flight going to the [gay] pride parade in San Francisco’ [...] ‘Uh, we're headed down to Vegas for the floral convention’” (qtd. in “Carson”). Soon after, Daly tweeted an apology: “This morning on my radio show I attempted to make fun of myself & offended others by mistake. I sincerely apologize” (Daly, emphasis mine).

All three of these incidents demonstrate a man’s use of humor to disparage a person or group. In the process, we see the individual revealing an aspect of his identity and how he wishes to be perceived. When Limbaugh calls Fluke a “slut,” he is not only rejecting her perspective. He also calls into question her right to publicly voice such a perspective. Chastising her for her alleged sexual promiscuity, which was neither substantiated nor relevant, also suggests how Limbaugh believes women should conduct themselves publicly and privately. Though he tries to dismiss his comments as an “attempt to be humorous,” a Bergsonian reading of this moment reveals Limbaugh’s jibe may silence Fluke and “correct” her supposed indiscretions. When De Niro pokes fun at the wives of candidates for the Republican Presidential nomination Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney, his commentary may seem less racialized than politicized: he affirms his position as a Democrat. Implicit to this joke, however, is a reduction of the Obamas (and the mentioned women) to their racial identities. While De Niro seemingly lauds the election and resulting accomplishments of the first black President, he counter-intuitively simplifies
political dynamics to a racial dynamics. When Daly suggests he would so unfortunate as to be stuck on a flight with pride parade participants, he reclaims his privilege as a heterosexual. His joke is clichéd, implying gay men are not “real” men. It further implies that “real” means are proactive and strong. This joke reinforces a homophobic logic that shames gay men and perpetuates their exclusion from hegemonic masculinity. One of Daly’s critics was Alice Hoagland, the mother of Mark Bingham. As she pointed out, her gay son was among those who led the charge on the cockpit of United 93, effectively preventing a planned assault on Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. In a public rebuke of Daly, she poignantly stated,

No one among his pick-up team of fellow passengers was asking ‘Are you straight? Are you gay?’ No one doubted that a guy who weighed 220 and stood 6’4’’ tall — who could run over a charging opponent on the field, and ran with the bulls in Pamplona earlier that summer — would be an asset to a desperate group trying to overcome a threat onboard an airliner.

The world has its share of strong, heroic gay men. Gay men in sports uniforms and military uniforms have been winning America’s games and fighting America’s battles for a long time: quietly, humbly, and in the face of vicious bigotry. (qtd. in Kinser) Her son may not have been heterosexual, but he certainly wasn’t passive or weak, either.

Though these men all sought forgiveness on the basis of “kidding around,” the politics of personal identity underlying these “jokes” allows them to be potentially funny while simultaneously deriding, oppressing, and silencing the jokes’ targets. Jokes have power: the power to empower the joker and disenfranchise the target. Masculinity, in its inevitable fragility, embraces such means for claiming and reifying its status, while denying it of others. This political potential makes joking incredibly intense and threatening; criticism can intercede to examine this capability, both to explain the underlying dynamics and defuse the implicit danger of such social forces.

What remains abundantly clear is that humor and laughter, somewhat paradoxically, are no laughing matter.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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