"But You're Not at All like Bertha": Contemporary (Black) Trans* Studies and Richard Wright's "Man of All Work"

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> While transgender has served as a kind of umbrella term in recent years for cross-identifying subjects, I think the inclusivity of its appeal has made it quite unclear as to what the term might mean and for whom. . . . [W]e have hardly begun to recognize the forms of embodiment that fill out the category of transgenderism, and before we dismiss it as faddish [as some have done], we should know what kind of work it does, whom it describes, and whom it validates. Transgender proves to be an important term not to people who want to reside outside categories altogether but to people who want to place themselves in the way of particular forms of recognition. Transgender may indeed be considered a term of relationality; it describes not simply an identity but a relation between people, within a community, or within intimate bonds.
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> —J. Jack Halberstam (49)

> White man, hear me! A man is a man, a woman is a woman, a child is a child. To deny these facts is to open the doors on a chaos deeper and deadlier, and, within the space of a man's lifetime, more timeless, more eternal, than the medieval vision of Hell.
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> —James Baldwin (726)

A year before the Supreme Court's historic *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation ruling in 1954, Richard Wright, best-selling author of the 1940 novel *Native Son*, a searing indictment of black disenfranchisement in the urban North, composed a startling short story about the plight of a black male cross-dresser.[1] "Man of All Work" was originally published posthumously in 1961 in Wright's collection *Eight Men*. However, the present essay focuses primarily on the story's inclusion, nearly fifty years later, in the 1996 volume *Go the Way Your Blood Beats: An Anthology of Lesbian and Gay Fiction by African-American Writers*, edited by Shawn Stewart Ruff. Repositioned in this unlikely context—after all, Wright, a straight man, was not known to write in any affirming way about homosexuality—and approached with more recent theoretical

DOI: 10.1093/melus/mlab032

tools, Wright's narrative acquires a new relevance in an era marked by the proliferating deaths of cis, trans*, and non-binary black people at the hands of law enforcement officials (often black and brown men) and white vigilantes.[2] Some have called this an epidemic of fatal anti-transgender violence in the United States.[3] Compounding these tragedies is the recent public knowledge that many of our most beloved entertainers and pundits continue to hold, or previously held, anti-gay beliefs.[4] Taken together, both developments contribute to the ongoing tensions that complicate the already fraught relationship between black heterosexuals and the black LGBTQ+ community.

I adopt an improbable methodological approach to revisit this provocative work by a prominent author in the African American literary canon. In order to make visible what I argue is elusive narrative content in Wright's text, I mine the intersections among contemporary trans* studies, black feminist thought, and several trenchant insights derived from black studies. My argument engages this body of scholarship chiefly to demonstrate how Wright's farcical attempts to dramatize, and exploit, the dominant cultural feminization of black men yields complex theoretical insights about the impact of anti-black racism on the lived experiences of black people. In addition to exploring how repositioning Wright's story within Ruff's anthology of black, lesbian, and gay literature produces complex insights into the contemporary lived experience of racialization, this rereading also highlights what some in black studies refer to as the fungibility of the black body—in other words, its distinctive interchangeability. As Frantz Fanon reminds us, "Negro experience is not a whole, for there is not merely *one* Negro, there are *Negroes*" (136). With Fanon's critical insight as a backdrop, I work these multiple scholarly intersections to examine how Wright's cunning manipulation of anti-black assumptions about the black body in the mid-twentieth century United States stages the potential for a new solidarity among US-based African-descended peoples to emerge—one that might heal, if only provisionally, troubling intra-racial tensions that have long plagued the relationship between contemporary black heterosexuals and their LGBTQ+ counterparts.

"Man of All Work" tells the story of a young African American family man who is laid off from his job just after the arrival of his and his wife's second child. Fretting over how they are going to make the final two mortgage payments on their home without either of them working, the husband, Carl Owens, frantically skims the want ads in search of employment. Finding few jobs for black men but several for black female domestics, Carl hits on what he believes is a brilliant solution. While his wife is resting, Carl slips into one of her dresses. Pleased with the results, he awakens Lucy and tells her that he is going to find a job. When Lucy sees the way her husband is dressed, she demands that he immediately change or else she will scream. "[H]ave you gone crazy?" she asks him, then adds, "Carl,

people can l-look at you and s-see that you're a man." However, Carl has anticipated his wife's principal objection and has a ready answer for her:

> Ha, ha. No, Lucy. I just looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I've got on a dress and I look just like a million black women cooks. Who looks that close at us colored people anyhow? We all look alike to white people. Suppose you'd never seen me before? You'd take one look at me and take me for a woman because I'm wearing a dress. And the others'll do that too. (Wright 283–84)

However, his wife is not convinced of the poor eyesight of most whites. It is only when Lucy vows to leave him if the police jail him for "impersonating a woman" that Carl promises to abandon his plan (285). Later, when Lucy awakens from a nap, she discovers that her husband has disregarded her threats and left their home in the hopes of securing the position he saw advertised in the morning paper.

The remainder of Wright's story (originally composed as a radio play and written completely in dialogue) plays out on the level of farce, turning all the while on the notion of "skewed visibility." This is a concept Lewis Gordon has coined to highlight the manner in which the black body "dwells as a form of absence of human presence" in an anti-black world, such that a cisgender man of color might be (mis)taken by members of the so-called master race as a woman rather than the man he so desperately longs to be ("Black" 77–78). As the narrative unfolds, the reader is encouraged to consider whether the contemporary term *cisgender* is even an apt one to make sense of the bodily integrity of black-identified individuals who may have originally been assigned "female" or "male" at birth, for, in the words of Calvin Warren, "Placing blackness within gender, or finding the place of blackness along gender, is an impossible project" (269). Soon, Carl (now called Lucy after taking over his wife's name and identity) shows up at the home of Dave and Anne Fairchild, the white middle-class family who placed the ad, and (validating Ralph Ellison's astute observation regarding the "*inner* eyes" of whites) is quickly hired (Ellison 3).[5] For three-quarters of the narrative, Carl successfully passes as a cisgender black woman by expertly and convincingly performing a series of racially specific gendered duties: cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, and looking after the couple's curious six-year-old daughter Lily, who, shadowing Carl's every move, more than once threatens to "clock" him as a man.[6] At one point, noticing Carl's unusual strength, the young girl exclaims: "You're not at all like Bertha," a reference to the Fairchild's previous black maid (Wright 298). Later, Carl suffers through a series of personal indignities that severely tax his already overextended nerves and threaten his psychological well-being. For instance, he first has to stifle his deeply ingrained black male fear regarding the tabooed white female body when the wife suddenly calls on him to scrub her back during her morning bath, then, adding insult to injury, invites him to commiserate with her over their shared plight, "as one woman to another"

(294). A short while later, the protagonist must use every cunning at his disposal to fend off the husband's brutish sexual advances, even having to comically wrestle the man to the floor to avoid being raped. Near the story's conclusion, farce turns to tragicomedy when Anne Fairchild returns from work to find Carl/"Lucy" and her husband in a sexually compromising position. Fearing the black "woman" has been trying to steal her husband, she dramatically shoots Carl in the vicinity of his groin, and the symbolism of this wound's exacting placement can be seen as a near-castration. This tone-shifting plot development leads to the eventual unmasking of Carl's "true" identity as a cisgender black man. The story concludes when, as a condition for his agreeing not to report the shooting to the authorities, the Fairchilds agree to cover Carl's medical expenses and give him a two-hundred-dollar check, the exact amount he needs to not only pay the remaining mortgage on his family's home but also feed and clothe his wife and children until both are well enough to work again.

How to Mastermind the Fall of White Heteropatriarchy

As this plot summary makes evident, the story's neat symmetry, combined with the ribald humor and genuine pathos, exposes what Wright's fellow author and expatriate Chester Himes once described as the "absurdity of racism." According to Himes, "If one lives in a country where racism is held valid and practiced in all ways of life, eventually, no matter whether one is a racist or a victim, one comes to feel the absurdity of life. Racism generating from whites is first of all absurd. Racism creates absurdity among blacks as a defense mechanism. Absurdity to combat absurdity" (1). The concept of absurdity has serious implications when considered in light of the relational dimensions between blacks and whites in the United States, but this concept acquires even greater resonance when it intersects with the relational dimensions of gender and sexuality. In a culture organized by anti-black racism, black men and black women are positioned differently in regard to a whole range of human phenomena *in relation* to whites. Gender and sexual phenomena are no exception. According to Gordon, "Rules that apply to white bodies change when applied to black bodies in a world conditioned by antiblack racism" ("Black" 78). One such "rule," of course, is the assumed correspondence between our so-called "sex characteristics" (which includes everything from genitals and hormones to vocal pitch and facial hair) and our gendered sense of self, such that bodies with uteruses and sex characteristics that line up more or less neatly with the social group "female" are normatively understood to be "women," while bodies with penises and sex characteristics that line up relatively neatly with the social group "males" are normatively understood to be "men."[7] Elsewhere, Gordon reminds us, "From the standpoint of an antiblack world, black men are nonmen-nonwomen, and black

women are nonwomen-nonmen. This conclusion is based on our premiss of whites—white men and white women—being both human, being both Presence, and our premiss of blacks, both black men and women, being situated in the condition of the 'hole,' being both Absence" (*Bad* 124). For Gordon, the existential condition of being considered a "hole," or an absence of human presence, aligns with feminine lack in a Lacanian sense. What this means is that black men, regardless of the genitalia they were born with, are positioned closer in an anti-black world to individuals assigned "female" at birth—both blacks and whites—than to white individuals who were assigned "male" at birth. In terms of sexuality, this model might translate into something like the following: "[A] black man in the presence of whiteness stands as a hole to be filled; he stands to the white man in a homoerotic situation and to the white woman in a heterosexual erotic situation with a homoerotic twist; she becomes the white/male that fills his blackness/femininity" (127).

This is hardly a new insight about anti-black societies. Its absurd parameters were first sketched out well over a century ago by W. E. B. Du Bois, who famously noted that juxtaposing black and white bodies in the same spatiotemporal landscape makes possible extraordinary effects out of ordinary situations. In such settings, a single black man and a single white man standing side by side, but separated by an abstract—although no less real—"color line," may end up producing a skewed scenario in which the two will experience asymmetrical outcomes in life due to contrasting skin color. In this context, the white body indexes humanity, whereas the black body indexes something quite different. In Fanon's inimitable words, for whites, "The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. . . . The Negro is taken as a terrifying penis" (177). Reduced to the genital, or to the biological, as Fanon characterizes it, the black person, whether man or woman, is not fundamentally human in the way that whites are fundamentally human, or perceived to be; the black person is a threat to white sovereignty and therefore must be contained, if not destroyed—hence, the significance of my second epigraph. For James Baldwin, black men, black women, and black children are tragically absented from the normative, human categories of "man," "woman," and "child." After all, these categories have already been colonized by *white* men, *white* women, and *white* children.[8]

Wright's singular brilliance was to transfer such an insight to the segregated terrain of a pre-civil rights era North American city and to update it by fleshing out the absurdist gender and sexual dimensions submerged therein. These more complex narrative dimensions become obscured, I argue, when Du Bois's signature concept, the color line, is restricted to its more literal meaning. However, for Gordon, "The [Du Boisian] color line is also a metaphor that exceeds its own concrete formulation. It is the race line, as well as the gender line, the class line, the sexual orientation line, the religious line—in short, the line between 'normal' and

'abnormal' identities" (*Existencia* 63). By staging a black-white encounter in which the story's central black male figure cross-dresses (not principally to garner self-recognition from others as a woman but rather to claim recognition as a cisgender man in our society's normative terms—that is, as his family's breadwinner and provider), Wright allows his protagonist, by the end of the narrative, to recover a modicum of gender and (hetero)sexual integrity. However, as I further suggest, the author manages in addition to critique and invert the normative hierarchy of human value that had been affixed so firmly to so-called black and white bodies for generations.

Indeed, as the story unfolds, it is revealed that Anne and Dave Fairchild hardly exemplify white heteropatriarchal health or morality. In fact, Dave is both an alcoholic and a serial rapist while Anne, in addition to enabling her husband's infidelity by repeatedly excusing it, has also attempted to kill another human being—namely, Carl. Moreover, shortly after Carl arrives to the Fairchild household, dressed as his wife Lucy, the reader learns that Dave's drinking has been a recurrent problem. In fact, his excessive drinking has led him to sexually assault every black domestic worker his wife has ever hired, including Bertha. Dave engages in these predatory acts in full view of his daughter, Lily, who in her child's mind interprets these vicious assaults as a form of play: "Oh, Papa's wrestling Lucy like he wrestled Bertha" (Wright 301). However, Dave is also a racist. After Anne shoots Carl and her brother-in-law, a doctor, arrives to help, and Carl's more accurate gendered self is comically revealed, Dave hits on a rationale that he imagines will absolve him and Anne of attempted murder. When he learns, for instance, that the black man and his wife had earlier been alone in their bathroom, he exclaims: "That's our answer! I was protecting white womanhood from a nigger rapist impersonating a woman! A rapist who wears a dress is the worst sort! Any jury'll free me on that" (309). To emphasize Dave's immorality, Wright depicts him uttering the aforementioned racial slur a total of nine times. In the story's restaging of this encounter between black and white, a series of binary oppositions that, as I suggested earlier, are normatively considered stable and fixed—that is, superior white / inferior black, superior white family / inferior black family, superior white heterosexuality / inferior black heterosexuality, and so on—become inverted, and in the process, so, too, do their respective valuative expectations. Viewed through the clear-eyed lens of a rigorous critique of anti-black racism, to the reader, Carl, the black family man, eventually outranks Dave, the white family man; likewise, it is the black family that emerges as an exemplar of heteropatriarchal normalcy whereas the white family stands in for deviancy *par excellence*. With the tables thus turned, the Fairchilds become "blackened" by their association with criminality while the Owens become "whitened." Color here is detached from bad faith embodied racial designations, liberated even, and thus color's association with race becomes a free-floating phenomenon, similar to gender. As Alexander Weheliye reminds us, the affixing of

Blackness to the bodies of people culturally designated as black only serves to naturalize race as a property intrinsic to some raced groups while conveniently being sidestepped by others. Such practices must assiduously be problematized to disrupt the pernicious assigning of "human" and "nonhuman" categories of being to those groups who, on the one hand, might be advantaged by those operations and those who, on the other, might be most disadvantaged by them—in this case, whites and blacks, respectively (333).

The Unlikeliest of Comrades: Trans*-ness and Blackness

Some critics have suggested that Wright's preferred literary strategy for restoring black male gender and sexual integrity was to highlight the way this figure's banishment from these norms results in his no longer being properly a man.[9] For Marlon Ross, "Man of All Work"

> literalizes the connection between black male emasculation and race rape. . . . Wright is here embodying the idea that black urban men are emasculated partly because they are disallowed from taking the traditional husbandly role of family provider, while black women are seen to usurp that role due to their access to more reliable forms of domestic labor in the cities. ("Race" 323–24)

While there is much validity to Ross's claim, I approach the narrative through a different lens. In exploiting gender as a fungible property, something that is interchangeable rather than stable and fixed, I argue that Wright's text is able to manipulate the raw materiality of the fictional body to produce a dizzying narrative, one that both encompasses normative understandings of race, gender, and sexuality in terms of their ontic registers and simultaneously flips those understandings on their heads. As I suggest above, the author's creative choices make possible an unhinging of Blackness and whiteness from black and white people in the way that Weheliye suggests is vitally important. These choices also allow for a no less crucial unhinging of femininity and masculinity from cisgender women and men, respectively. Thus, Wright's narrative bends the cultural law of race and gender to make possible a different way of imaginatively inhabiting the black body. To quote Marquis Bey, channeling Hortense Spillers, "black and trans* bodies speak to and as metonymic flashes of the poetic forces of blackness and trans*-ness insofar as they are imagined as 'an *alternative* statement, as a *counter*statement to American culture/civilization, or Western cultural/civilization, more generally speaking'" (278).

As a founding theorist of black feminism, Spillers is important to my idiosyncratic rereading of Wright's story, as it is her groundbreaking 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," to which scholars such as Bey, and much of recent black trans* studies scholarship, is indebted. In this essay, Spillers famously argues that "the black American male embodies the

only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn *who* the female is within itself. . . . It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood." Notably, for Spillers, this black woman who lies within the black male is hardly understood as something to suppress or refuse, but rather as a "*representational* potential[ity]" (278). Bey provocatively suggests that "there is something decidedly non-normative, something even transgender, about Spillers's black heritage advancing the "power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (281). What Bey is referencing here, in a different register, is nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical understandings of homosexuality as inversion. In this outdated and biologically determined view of same-sex desire, sexual attraction was primarily understood in heterosexual terms—that is, cisgender men could only be attracted to other cisgender men if their psyches were female; likewise, cisgender women could only be attracted to other cisgender women if their psyches were male. Male and female homosexuals were thus diagnosed to be "psychical hermaphrodites" (Terry 44).

By referencing Spillers in this way, Bey is attempting to frame an alternative statement to such retrograde views and represents a reading of trans* identity that is similar to the reading that Halberstam offers but is also notably different because of the former's insistence on highlighting its racialized dimensions. Indeed, this rereading of trans* identity is one that exceeds the physical body in its ontological, identitarian sense. Similar to Weheliye, for Bey, both trans* and its companion signifier "black" "denote poetic, para-ontological forces that are only tangentially, and ultimately arbitrarily, related to bodies said to be black and transgender" (276). Bey argues that these two concepts are "fundamentally para-ontological," that is to say, they exist "beyond" the body, even while they do not necessarily "discredit the materiality of ontic subjects who are characterized by and through these identificatory markers"—in other words, "real" black cisgender men and women and "real" trans* subjects of any race or ethnicity (276–77). For my purposes, one of the advantages of Bey's intervention is that it avoids critical tendencies to hold human bodies hostage, especially black bodies, to institutionally and culturally determined narratives about race, gender, and sexuality that, in the end, seek to impose limiting outcomes about what is possible for those bodies. Because of the way the racial color line has been calibrated to disadvantage black men and women, cisgender or not, in relation to their white counterparts—namely, to fix and constrain the range of their potential life options—any effort to see those demarcations as culturally imposed rather than rooted in some essential "biological gendered truth," as Spade reminds us, leaves open the opportunity to navigate, or re-present, those constraints differently.

What this principally means for the present analysis is that although Dave Fairchild, a white man, attempts to force himself sexually on Carl, a black

man, one should not assume that either man is a homosexual in terms of identity (that is, Dave for being the one who initiates male–male sexual contact and Carl for being the object or victim of such contact). The story's unlikely inclusion in Ruff's anthology might in fact buttress such an assumption since it appears alongside other literary narratives that, on close reading, do not "play" with these embodied categories insomuch as they reify them as dissident forms of erotic self-knowing. However, as noted earlier, the juxtaposition of black and white bodies within the same spatiotemporal landscape skews normative assumptions about identities, especially sexual identities, that can be derived from altogether familiar scenarios. Although Wright coyly embeds conventional sexual content in his narrative, the interpretation of that embedded content is not what we have come to expect when the color line is acknowledged rather than evaded. Wright's narrative becomes a palimpsest of sorts. As in Gordon's absurdist formulation that I cite above, it is as if a recognizably "homosexual" scenario (two "men" in a sexual "clinch") is being laid carefully atop a heterosexual scenario (a "man" attempting to forcibly have sex with a "woman"). However, the added dimension of color, or race, placed on top of that scenario blurs or complicates the expected reading of what one is actually seeing; in short, it fundamentally resignifies that content. This is the case here since the two "men" do not share the same masculine social status. Because of white supremacy's insistence on the "ungendering of Blackness" (Snorton 57)—that is, its fungibility—the black man is positioned far closer to the status of the black woman than he is to the white man. In this instance, the context of the narrative exceeds the content. This context is what Gordon calls an anti-black world.[10] In such a world, the black is neither man nor woman. Blackness overrides black humanity to such an extent that gender becomes an interchangeable property. Thus, as Warren reminds us, the project of trying to align Blackness and gender results in an oxymoron. As Carl says to Lucy at the outset of the story, because "[w]e all look alike to white people" (Wright 284), the black man can be (mis)taken for a black woman; the black woman can be (mis)taken for a black man. However, that very (mis)taken-ness can be self-consciously exploited to ends that are different from those predetermined by the dominant racial order—in other words, one might alternately read it, to invoke the language of C. Riley Snorton, as "a contrivance for freedom" (57).

Snorton's *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017) has become a cornerstone of black trans* scholarship. In this volume, Snorton disarticulates trans*-ness from bodily subjectivity and pairs it with Blackness, a similar concept that likewise has been written onto the body in ways that seek to mark and fix bodies and minds to comport with hegemonic modes of being. Referring to his volume as one that seeks to "trace collateral genealogies of blackness and transness," Snorton engages in novel literary readings to demonstrate the utility and breadth of such insights. For example, in analyzing several early twentieth-century black male-centered narratives, such as James Weldon Johnson's *The*

Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912), Snorton leans into Spillers's pronouncement that it is "the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood" (278), to say "yes" to her who lies within him, to critique Fanon's gendered complaint in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that "the black is not a man" (8). Snorton discovers that, in these works, the black mother chiefly functions as a figure of abjection in the absence of black fathers, which in turn leaves these male protagonists without proper role models for establishing and sustaining a normative masculine identification. However, for Snorton, because of the careful policing of black women's reproduction during this period, their bodies played a vital role, for whites, in the maintenance of the color line and thus the production of "raced" identities. Hence, "the project of defining black manhood within a modernist idiom would necessitate an encounter with the figure of the black maternal as a character and as the ground of nonbeing that engenders black manhood" (108). In other words, there could be no escape from this figure; she could only be embraced.

It is Snorton's close readings of these unconventionally trans* figures in literary narratives that are most useful for my purposes here. In such narratives, Snorton seeks to "explai[n] how the condensation of transness into the category transgender is a racial narrative, [and] how blackness finds articulation within transness" (8). To make this "articulation" visible, Snorton holds no particular fidelity to contemporary understandings of trans*-ness nor to Blackness, especially those that require bodily ontology to be a privileged sight of interpretation. This allows him to read trans*-ness and Blackness semiotically—as phenomena that are produced on rather than in the body, often by external forces. The Du Boisian concept of double consciousness, for example, becomes a way for Snorton to read trans*-ness onto Blackness by locating a similar "double-ness" that also attaches to early narratives of homosexuality as inversion, in which one is doubly a man and a woman. For Snorton, Du Bois's signature concept of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" becomes useful not only for giving voice to racial "feelings" that elegantly capture the interior mood of what it "feels" like to be black in a society that routinely elevates one racial group over another but also for offering scholars working at the intersection of racial and gender discourses an especially flexible template for exploring how the two are "inextricably linked yet irreconcilable and irreducible projects." This discovery inspires Snorton to articulate what should, by this point in my argument, be a rather unsurprising insight: "To feel black in the diaspora, then, might be a trans experience" (8).

What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?

I suspect that his own experience of being trans*, in the expansive way that Snorton means above, may partly help us to understand Ruff's thought process in choosing to include "Man of All Work" in an anthology devoted to, as his subtitle states, "Lesbian and Gay Fiction." I want to suggest that, as a black gay man, Ruff, like the other writers I have referenced in this essay, is well-versed in racist narratives touting the fungibility of the black body and that he, too, is adept at mobilizing this knowledge for subversive ends. After all, Ruff's loyalties are even further divided between what some might view as conflicting identity groups: blacks on the one hand and gays on the other. As a consequence, he knows that he is just as susceptible to being marginalized and othered by straight blacks for being gay as he is to being marginalized and othered by white gays for being black. Yet, as this hybridized being, he apparently feels a powerful connection to both groups even as he often feels excluded by them. What impact, I wonder, might this dilemma have had on his selection process?

I suggested earlier that Ruff had organized his anthology around an anti-identitarian logic. I would like to fine-tune that claim somewhat. For while it is true that the volume mobilizes an anti-identitarian logic with respect to sexuality, it does not actually extend that same logic to race, specifically to Blackness—an insight that is echoed by a well-known statement Baldwin made in a 1984 interview that, for African Americans, "The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live" ("Go" 67). This awareness, coupled with the realization that Ruff's *Go the Way Your Blood Beats* takes its title from a comment Baldwin uttered in this same interview, strongly suggests that Blackness and gayness do not hold identical statuses in Ruff's mind. A closer look at the volume reveals that while every author whose work Ruff includes can be identified as black or African American, not every author can be identified as LGBTQ+. This is certainly true of Wright, but it is true of other writers, as well, including Toni Morrison (whose 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* Ruff excerpts for the anthology), Gloria Naylor, and John Edgar Wideman—not one of whom has ever identified with the LGBTQ+ community despite their work occasionally engaging with such themes. The point I am making here about the uneven status that Blackness and gayness occupy in Ruff's anthology dovetails with Bey's trenchant insight about Blackness more broadly: that "as a poetic force [it] bears a vexed and tense relationship with black people/bodies. . . . [It] is both linked to and disarticulated from black bodies" (281). Yet it is equally true that homosexuality has likewise functioned similarly to the way that Blackness has historically functioned in the dominant imagination—that is, echoing Bey, as both linked to and disarticulated from the body, specifically from "gay" bodies. Thus, for similar reasons, the inverse is also true: that is, the same complex relationship that so-called gay

people have to the phenomenon known as "homosexuality" simply cannot be said of the relationship so-called black people have to this same phenomenon. Yet, in compiling his anthology, Ruff's longing to be recognized as a member of both identity groups understandably continued to exhibit a strong pull on him.

A clue to Ruff's solution to resolving this crisis of belonging can perhaps be located in the introduction he wrote for the anthology. In the very first paragraph, Ruff references a story by Black Arts writer Amiri Baraka, "The Alternative" (1965), which he admits to agonizing over whether to include in the volume. Like Wright, Baraka was not known to be a gay man and was, at various points in his life, accused of being homophobic.[11] Despite his early close friendships with white gay men such as the poets Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg, the fact that Baraka did not self-identify as gay perhaps enabled him to make use of any number of dominant cultural beliefs about homosexuality as not only an aberrant sexual object choice—that is, an "identity"—but also as a "sign of chaos and crisis" (Reid-Pharr 104). For instance, when Baraka writes in a 1965 essay that "[m]ost American white men are trained to be fags" (216), Ross reminds us that such recourse to "sexualized invective"—that is, referring to someone as a "fag" or a "cocksucker"—has been a reliable linguistic resource in black nationalist rhetoric since the 1960s and did not necessarily translate into homophobia in the conventional sense ("Camping" 291). Quite simply, writers such as Baraka would often invoke well-known derogatory slurs for sexual marginality to renegotiate in their favor the unequal relation of black men to white men in ways that sought to reorder the hegemonic perceptions of the racial hierarchy. In this "reordered" cultural landscape, the terms that whites routinely used to conceptualize the bodily landscape, including gender and sexual identities and practices, would undergo a resignification so that words and concepts that whites had long used meant something altogether different when blacks used them.[12] For Darieck Scott, a reference to, or a portrayal of, a degraded and homosexualized white male figure in black nationalist writing of the era should be understood as politically calculated rather than reflective of anti-gay sentiment. Scott argues that whether such a figure can be positively identified as homosexual or is in fact heterosexual, such a portrayal "provides [these authors] with a white man who can be sexualized. If white men can be sexualized, they can become objects of (black) power: they can be praised or condemned in the very arena that black men are, according to racial myths, powerful and dangerous" (180). Although these writers may have recognized the existence of actual gay men and lesbians in their lives (as Baraka certainly did with O'Hara), their expressive writing was a different matter altogether.

Moreover, when homosexuality is represented with a black face, as in Baraka's short story, the depiction functions in a similar way as it does in narratives that target white males, but with one small difference—the racial emphasis also shifts. Just as the depiction of white homosexualized male figures symbolizes weakness and corruption within the dominant order, portrayals of black homosexualized

male figures, whatever these characters' actual sexual orientation, reflect their authors' larger concerns about the deteriorating health of the black community, specifically the health of its black men. Set on a college campus in the mid-1960s, "The Alternative" centers on a group of young black male students who spy on a fellow black classmate having sex with an older man who is visiting their dormitory. Staring at the deviant lovers through a keyhole, the students heckle and use homophobic taunts against the two men, one of whom is described as stereotypically effeminate, only for the group to find themselves, in Ruff's words, "aroused by what they are watching, [so that the young men] turn against one another, their masculinity suddenly at issue" (Introduction xxi). In his 1977 analysis of "The Alternative," John Wakefield suggests that homosexuality is not the central focus of Baraka's story; rather, homosexuality—as abstraction and less so as an identity—is primarily the symbolic vehicle through which the author examines how, in his view, class and racial concerns intersect with gender expectations and norms to debilitate black masculinity. For instance, when the young black men witness their classmate, Bobby Hutchens, with a male paramour, the scenario is meant to communicate the "realization that the black middle-class students see their own weakness and crime in this [same-sex sex] act." As Wakefield puts it, "Bobby Hutchens serves merely as the scapegoat of their private fears at being emasculated by their entry into the black middle-class world" (199).

The homosexual as scapegoat has a long history, not only within American literature more broadly but also in black American literature more specifically.[13] For writers such as Baraka, this figure marks the boundary line separating black marginality, and hence criminality and inferiority, from "white decadence" more broadly. Considered to be neither normatively black nor normatively white, the black "faggot" therefore serves as the "ideal policing vehicl[e] for constructing black male warrior identity" (Ross, "Race" 294). Rendered ineffectual by his proximity to homosexuality in this expanded sense, this figure embodies what a strong—that is, heterosexual—black man ought *not* to be. For Baraka, the black college student of this era found himself straddling competing ideological traditions: "Education meant for the intelligent black the opportunity of joining the growing ranks of the black middle-class[;] it also represented, in Baraka's view, a temporary alienation from traditional black values" (Wakefield 188). Symbolically speaking, much like the homosexual (whether literal or metaphorical), such men teetered dangerously close to the edge of crisis and chaos. Their "crime" results from their naïve immersion in white cultural norms that are inhospitable to African Americans. As university students, these men reflected a growing concern, among many black nationalists such as Baraka himself, that Blackness was being eroded by its too-close proximity to white hegemonic values and belief systems. In Wakefield's reading, "the white world denies black identity by not providing a cultural context within which the black could begin to exist" (196). This worry is conveyed in "The Alternative" through the narrator's

palpable anxiety as a result of his infatuation with white European high art and literature—an anxiety which can be glimpsed in this character's tendency to quote ostentatiously from the works of seventeenth-century English white male poets such as Richard Lovelace and Robert Herrick.

Largely because Ruff's chief interest is the story's depiction of homosexuality as an "identity" rather than an abstraction, he initially appears to be unconcerned with the broader symbolism that governs Baraka's fictional world-making. However, this indifference may be misleading. After all, the criteria Ruff eventually settles on for selecting the various narratives for his anthology all seem to turn on his seemingly instinctive recognition that what structures the relation between Blackness and gayness are the textual echoes of a similar degradation in the West's dominant imaginary of those it deems Other. Indeed, Ruff's desire to include works such as Baraka's story, Wright's "Man of All Work," and the short excerpt from Morrison's *Song of Solomon* has to do with the conceptual overlap of black precarity and LGBTQ+ precarity *tout court* that these works make spectacularly visible. In fact, Ruff calls attention to this overlap in his introduction when he notes how Morrison's protagonist, the relentlessly heterosexual Milkman, ventures south to Virginia, where he engages in antagonistic and perhaps homophobic banter with a small group of resentful black old-timers, only to, in Ruff's language, "experienc[e] every homosexual person's nightmare: being called out and attacked" (Introduction xxii). Interestingly, as with Baraka's "The Alternative," Milkman's attack occurs at the hands of other black men like himself, and not white men, which may appear on the surface to bracket the racial dimensions of the encounter. In his deft rereading of similar scenes of physical violence among black men in Baraka's early work, Scott suggests that such altercations often serve a larger function in black-authored works of this period, one that covertly gestures back to the original primal scene of interracial conflict between blacks and whites—in other words, to plantation slavery.[14] Because of the unstated anxiety that modern black identity is in fact produced in a perverse—Scott's preferred term is *sadomasochistic*—relation to whiteness, scenes as the one in Baraka's story (and in his other fiction and plays) "appear to reenact conquest and enslavement symbolically as a sexual violation, both as the compulsion to repeat a trauma . . . and as a therapeutic adaptation: the harm done by the foreign [that is, by whites] becomes the harm done by 'one's own'" (194–95).[15] Notably, such scenarios engender not merely horror and indignation on the part of some readers but also pleasure. In Scott's words, "there is a disturbing pleasure to be found in conforming to the habit of submission taught by the history," in this case, of anti-black racism (195). Echoing Scott, I suggest that it is precisely his recognition of the conjoined nature of racial and sexual abjection, broadly speaking, that in part undergirds Ruff's choices for his anthology: specifically, his pleasurable recognition of "the mutually defining relationship

between blackness and queerness" that he observes in some African American-authored fictions (Scott 16).

As I have already noted, anti-black racism yielded a crisis in the ability of cisgender black men and women to embody normative gender and sexual roles. Moreover, such a crisis was endemic to Blackness across gender and sexual categories—that is, it hardly mattered if one self-identified as heterosexual, homosexual, or transgender to suffer this crisis. Before he had encountered Baraka's story, Ruff believed his selection process to be a sound one. As he explains it:

> Early on I didn't intend to use this story. My agenda was set: I planned to historicize and contemporize lesbian and gay fiction, and provide a context in which to describe the tradition of African-American gay and lesbian literature while setting the precedent of *marrying* the two. Cutting a swath from the canon of African-American literature gives a certain gloss to our writing as being part of the African-American literary tradition. (Introduction xxi-xxii; emphasis added)

This is a telling passage, for it is here that Ruff attempts to lay out his principal dilemma: to whom should his anthology be beholden? On one hand, there lies the tradition of lesbian and gay literature, which Ruff implies but does not say outright was defined by the embodied experiences of white lesbians and gay men, while on the other hand lies the tradition of African American literature, which Ruff implies but again does not say outright was defined by the embodied experiences of straight black men and women. As a member of both identity groups, gays and blacks, Ruff singles out the doubled category of "African-American gay and lesbian literature," "our writing," as being stranded between traditions—of both but belonging to neither.

To work through this dilemma, Ruff speculates that he should "provid[e] a kind of genealogy of gay and lesbian literary fiction" (xxii). This is similar to the approach that Snorton takes up with his critical examination of the intersections of Blackness and trans*-ness. In Foucauldian terms, such a genealogical method would reject narratives of progress in favor of "presenting a series of troublesome associations and linkages." As such, its primary objective would be to use the past as, in the words of one scholar, "a critical engagement with the present." In short, a "genealogical analysis traces how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power, many of which are nowadays forgotten" (Garland 367, 372). For Ruff, this might entail weighing the costs and benefits of having to endure what on the surface may appear to be homophobia from black straight people versus the costs and benefits of having to endure likewise what may appear on the surface to be anti-black racism from white homosexuals and coming to an understanding of how the "troublesome" histories of these experiences, and the complex power relations between and within these two groups, have shaped, and continue to shape, the contemporary moment. Given the sense that many

African Americans have of sharing a collective fate in an anti-black world, and the priority Ruff himself seems to attach to Blackness over gayness, there is little mystery as to which approach represents the most attractive option to him.[16] This preference is somewhat telegraphed by Ruff's insinuation of a greater prestige to be had in envisioning his anthology as "part of the African-American literary tradition" (Introduction xii) rather than as part of the lesbian and gay literary tradition.

Before reaching a decision, Ruff revisits these other stories he is drawn to—several of them by black writers who are straight, some of whom may have been resistant to queer readings of their work.[17] Like Baraka's "The Alternative," these other stories speak to him; as someone who is both black and gay, he perhaps sees himself reflected in these narratives in ways, both positive and "troublesome," that he may not often see in narratives by white lesbian and gay authors. As Ruff explains it, "Each of these [black] writers, and many more that I researched but couldn't possibly have included lest this book be thousands of pages, have commented upon the lives of gays and lesbians—some with clarity and insight, some with unmitigated rage, and some, it seems, *accidentally*" (Introduction xxii; emphasis added). *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines "accident" as "[a]n unfortunate and unforeseen event involving damage or injury" ("accident, *n.*"). However, I would say that Ruff's use of this term cuts against the grain of this common understanding, especially since the seemingly fortuitous nature of these linkages and associations has its origins in the *purposeful* elevation of one group over another—whites over people of color and heterosexuals over all other gender and sexual categories. None of this was by chance. Quite the contrary, in fact. In his introduction, Ruff appears to oscillate between having his anthology recognized as part of the lesbian and gay literary tradition or the African American literary tradition before ultimately seeming to land on the latter as the more desirable option. I would argue that it is precisely this patina of prestige—or to use Ruff's word, "gloss"—despite its problematic aspects (potential homophobia) that ultimately convinces Ruff to include Baraka's story and thus to include other stories by black writers who are not explicitly LGBTQ+. This prestige is enabled by the fact that Ruff's decision-making appears to intuit that to be black is to already be perceived as queer—as in strange, unusual (as in not-white)—and thus the usual distinction between persons who, in an identitarian sense, are heterosexual and persons who are not is negligible when blacks are involved. This is essentially what Ruff means when he suggests these writers' works offer commentary on the lives of black gays and lesbians by "accident." The implication is that the "harm" or "injury" that is caused to African American lesbians and gays is redoubled by the fact that they are both African American and LGBTQ+; theirs is a shared "injury" twice over. In other words, to be gay, lesbian, or trans* *and* black is not to cancel out the one in favor of the other but rather to reinforce stigma. After all, to be black is already to be considered

a sexual deviant, at least to whites, even to white lesbians, gay men, and transgender men and women. Armed with this rationale, Ruff has an epiphany, writing: "Including [these authors] meant that literature, not the sexual orientation of its writers, had to define this collection, with bisexuality and homosexuality as literary themes my guiding principle" (Introduction xxiii).

If Ruff organizes his anthology with an emphasis on a collection of written works that share common themes, rather than on (sexual) identity per se, what we quickly discover is that any distinction, then, between black heterosexual experience and the experience of blacks who suffer what we might provisionally call the blues of gender and sexual marginality is in fact superfluous, or not worthy of note. This is the case since *all* blacks share this experience in one way or another. Ruff organizes his anthology, therefore, not around an abstracted understanding of sexual orientation but on a shared understanding of the lived experiences that are produced by anti-black racism. This anti-identitarian logic regarding sexuality—specifically sexual identity, but, as I have argued, not race—ultimately persuades Ruff to include the works of these non-LGBTQ+-identified writers in his anthology.

Conclusion

Forgiving the fact that Ruff's decision to include Wright's "Man of All Work" repeats a common error of collapsing a gendered orientation (trans*) with a sexual orientation (lesbigay), and thus rendering trans* experiences invisible, I suggest that if we attend closely to the logic Ruff employs to assemble his anthology overall, we might be able to discern positive aspects of the way that anti-black racism—via the racial color line—works assiduously to subjugate black people.[18] Surely the potential upside of such routinized intentionality is that it keeps us on the side of us, regardless of the differences that may try to fracture our bond. Quite simply, Ruff's anthology provides the necessary textual scaffolding for the formation of a strategic alliance among previously antagonistic relatives—in particular, for the purposes of this essay, black heterosexuals and their LGBTQ+ kinfolk. Because the white body has never been burdened with overdetermined meaning as has been true of the black body, I cannot imagine a white gay anthologist having to wrestle with the dilemmas that appeared to plague Ruff. This leads me, finally, to Roderick Ferguson's powerful insight: the "construction of African American sexuality as wild, unstable, and undomesticated locates African American sexuality within the irrational, and therefore outside the bounds of the citizenship machinery" (87). As I have suggested, such beliefs have the effect of locating all blacks within the same collective space of a shared experience of racial harm or injury, despite the cross-cutting differences of gender, sexuality, and class. Crucially, Ferguson notes that

> Although African American homosexuality, unlike its heterosexual counterpart, symbolized a rejection of heterosexuality, neither could claim heteronormativity. The racialized eroticization of black heterosexuals and homosexuals outside the rationalized (i.e., heteronormative) household *symbolically* aligned black straight and gay persons. (87; emphasis added)

For better or worse, then, black straight persons always already presumably have far more in common with black LGBTQ+ persons than any of us has ever had, or perhaps ever will have, with our white counterparts. While Ruff never says as much, I suspect that, in organizing his anthology the way he did, he was trying to tell us something vitally important (as perhaps was Baraka, however clumsily), and it may be this: at least within the pages of *Go the Way Your Blood Beats*, black straight men and women, along with black lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transwomen and transmen (all of us kinfolk), may become temporarily joined within the same conceptual space and as such may be able to forge a momentary reconciliation among ourselves. Certainly, we can do this—if only for the sake of ensuring our collective survival.

Notes

The author wishes to thank John Thurston, Angelo Robinson, and the readers of *MELUS* for their careful and supportive feedback as I wrote and revised this essay.

1. The story did not appear in print before it was included posthumously in the collection *Eight Men* (1961), so it is difficult to pinpoint the exact date it was composed. Nonetheless, Edward Margolies speculates that 1953 is a good guess for the story's composition. Both Margaret Walker and Hazel Rowley state that Richard Wright likely wrote the story while he was living in Paris, where Wright moved with his family in 1947. Given Walker's infamous charge that Wright was homosexual, it is striking that she does not focus more on the sexual intrigue of "Man of All Work." Rather, Walker's emphasis is strangely elsewhere, writing that the story "deals cynically with economic determinism and satirizes Communists or the lumpenproletariat as victims" (331).
2. My use of the asterisk follows the lead of recent scholarship that views other derivations as fixing the term *trans** within binary notions of gendered embodiment. Writes one scholar, "Proponents of adding the asterisk to trans argue that it signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions that better represents a broader community of individuals" (Tompkins 27). I am also drawing from black trans* studies work that views the asterisk in ways that, like Blackness, leaves the category open and destabilizing and that is essentially anti-identitarian (Bey 285, 286).
3. For more on transgender violence, see Petula Dvorak and Imara Jones.

4. For more on black celebrity personalities and anti-gay bias, see Elwood Watson.
5. Ralph Ellison notes that whites' "*inner eyes*" are "those eyes with which they [whites] look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). These first set of "eyes" function as a metaphor for the way some whites internalize assumptions about black people based on stereotypes and then project those assumptions onto actual black men and women they meet or with whom they interact.
6. In her memoir *My Husband Betty: Love, Sex, and Life with a Crossdresser* (2003), Helen Boyd writes that "Children and teenaged girls are especially good at clocking cross-dressers. Kids are still learning about gender and haven't learned yet that it's impolite to point and ask questions" (201).
7. This essay's use of trans* inclusive language is indebted to several sources, including Dean Spade's essay "About Purportedly Gendered Body Parts" (2011). Here, Spade notes that otherwise smart and well-informed allies at times traffic in language that is not only sexist and transphobic but also tends to rely on problematic notions of biological determinism. For Spade, any terminology that references physiological or morphological features as a guarantor of some essential knowledge about someone's body "reproduce[s] the oppressive logic that our bodies have some purported biological gendered truth in them, separate from our social gender role. Our bodies have varying parts, but it is socialization that assigns our body parts gendered meaning." For more on trans* inclusive language and the surrounding debates, see Ray Briggs and B. R. George.
8. This insight is derived from Richard Dyer: "White people are stereotyped in terms of gender, nation, class, sexuality, ability, and so on, but the overt point of such typification is gender, nation, etc. Whiteness generally colonises the stereotypical definition of all social categories other than those of race. To be normal, even to be normally deviant (queer, crippled), is to be white" (26–27).
9. For more critiques on Wright and gender, see Paul Gilroy and Trudier Harris.
10. According to Lewis Gordon, this is a world that "phenomenological sociologists refer to as an *ideal* type. An ideal type is a subjunctive reality. It is a world with a strict logic and strict rationality. It is a world that is governed by a specific ontology where the human being collapses under the weight of existence" ("Race" 129).
11. There is some speculation about whether Amiri Baraka was actually heterosexual. Several writers detail the close relationship Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) had in the late 1950s and 60s with the openly gay Beat poet Frank O'Hara (see Brad Gooch, Andrew Epstein, and Joe LeSueur). Ron Simmons views the semi-autobiographical novel *The System of Dante's Hell* (1965) as a thinly veiled account of Baraka's own early homosexual past, which the author later

disavowed. While other scholars acknowledge the possibility of Baraka's past same-sex desire, they prefer to view his depictions of homosexuality as largely symbolic (see Marlon B. Ross ["Camping"] and Darieck Scott). José Esteban Muñoz also addresses Baraka's allegedly queer past, only to reveal that following the 2003 brutal murder of his adult daughter and her female partner, Baraka and his wife became vocal activists for LGBTQ+ issues. This leads Muñoz to conclude: "Real violence has ironically brought Baraka back to a queer world that he had renounced so many years ago" (95).

12. This is precisely the point that James Baldwin makes quite colorfully in the essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" (1985), writing of his youth: "The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls" (819).
13. For more on the scapegoating of homosexuals, see Eric Brandt and Gregory M. Herek.
14. Similarly, Muñoz closely analyzes Baraka's 1964 play *The Toilet*, which also depicts same-gender violence in relation to a perceived homosexual threat among black men, just as in "The Alternative" (1965). Muñoz's reading mines the play for what he calls a "project of queer futurity," a project that Baraka himself could not acknowledge at the time and that ultimately may have "haunted" him later in his life (88).
15. For more on sadomasochistic race relations between blacks and whites, see Scott (178–87). It is important to note that sexual abuse also characterized the experiences of enslaved black men, a topic that has not been examined as closely as the abuse experienced by enslaved black women (see Thomas Foster and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman on the sexual abuse of enslaved men). In his analysis of Baraka's *The Toilet*, Muñoz gestures toward this historical past when he calls attention to "the sticky interface between the interracial and the queer" (93).
16. See Michael Dawson's concept of "linked fate." This belief that one's prospects as an individual are closely tied to that of the racial group perfectly captures this unique dimension of contemporary black identity (76–77).
17. This is certainly true of Toni Morrison, who famously voiced resistance to Barbara Smith's landmark lesbian reading of her 1973 novel *Sula* in the essay, "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" (1978). In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison states: "Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula.* Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*" (118). For more on this conflict between Smith and Morrison, see chapter 4 of Roderick Ferguson.

18. For Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo, "trans-identities are either collapsed into gay identities (gender and sexuality become one) or trans-identities are detached from gay identities (gay is subordinated to sexuality). In neither instance, it could be argued, are trans-identities granted visibility or voice on their own terms" (86–87). On this problem in queer theory, see Jay Prosser.

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