



*Marlon B. Ross*

SISSY INSURGENCIES

# Sissy

A Racial Anatomy of Unfit Manliness

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*PREAMBLE*  
Sissies Everywhere

Once we begin to look for them, we see sissies everywhere. Perhaps a liability of a study like this one—composed at a historical juncture when public talk about private gender and sexual propensities is so seemingly frank and yet so titillating and sensationalized—is that the subject, in this case the sissified male, can become unintentionally objectified again. This inquiry is intended to disrupt the encrusted stereotypes of the sissified male, even as it necessarily engages with some familiar tropes that have stigmatized the sissy across the decades. Even in the midst of what appears to be social upheaval—if not societal progress—in regard to the acceptance of gender-nonconforming individuals, the sissy remains stigmatized. The sissy remains the gremlin of the American national imaginary when it comes to the rites and rights of manliness—whether on the battlefield, in the sports arena, in the halls of political power, in the corporate bullpens of business competition, or in the bloodstained streets of revolutionary protest movements. Sissiness haunts every sphere of vaunted masculine empowerment as a cautionary figure of the failure to win, which is assumed to result from a failure of manly drive. American men are still quick to call another man a punk, a wuss, a pussy, a sissy if he loses, especially if he loses in good conscience from overscrupulousness in following the rules.

The actual and fictive black boys and men examined here—Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, W. E. B. Du Bois, William Pickens, James Weldon Johnson, Beauford Delaney, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Little Richard, Sylvester James, Emile Griffith, Wilt Chamberlain, Glenn Burke, Dennis Rodman, and many whose names are not quite as famous—have varied complex relations to sissiness, to homosexuality, and to racial leadership. This historical engagement with the racial tenors of nonconforming gender conduct and character—whether through sissy-flirtation or sissy-avoidance or some dialectic between them—finds that sissiness both undergirds and circumscribes endeavors to advance or liberate under conditions entirely uncongenial to the notion of black masculine empowerment. By showing how others have responded to the perception of black men's gender negotiations, we can begin to decipher a cultural and discursive anatomy of the sissy figure across different institutional venues and across different eras of U.S. history. I

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certainly do not want to fix the sissy into an unchanging gender type, but at the same time, I want to suggest a persistent gender ideology that views the sissy as a danger to proper masculine conduct and character, even if the particular nature of that danger varies with the changing conditions of racial and gender entitlement. The men studied here are exceptional only to the extent that many of them are well-known as leaders within their vocations. The gender tides that they were pressured to navigate have been experienced, if not so publicly, by every black man, to one extent or another. In this sense, we can see our own gender resolutions and insecurities mirrored in their stories. In their lives, perhaps, we can glimpse our own sissy insurgencies and thus better grapple with those insecurities that inhabit, condition, and characterize what it means to live as black boys and men in white male supremacist society.

Too many individuals to name have been inspiring presences for delivering this work, most of whom are cited in the text or notes, but three in particular I have to name here for giving me a kick when I most needed it: Sharon Holland, Robert Reid-Pharr, and Dagmawi Woubshet. A portion of chapter 4 was previously published in *African American Review* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 633–651; and a portion of chapter 5 appeared in the 2017 special issue of *FORECAST* (*Forum for European Contributions in African American Studies*) titled “Blackness and Sexualities,” edited by Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann. In addition to these journals, I want to thank those institutions where portions of this book first had a hearing, including Cornell University, especially Dagmawi Woubshet; Swarthmore College, especially Anthony Foy; the University of Oklahoma, especially James Zeigler; Brown University, especially Rolland Murray; and the University of Virginia. My research assistants—Dionté Harris, Giuliana Eggleston, and Sarah Winstein-Hibbs—were wonders of efficiency. I want to thank the editors and staff at Duke University Press for looking beyond the flaws of the manuscript to envisage and realize this book. I most want to thank K. Ian Grandison, to whom this book is dedicated, whose intellectual experimentation and commitment to fair play, in all its meanings, continue to surprise, challenge, and inspire me after more than twenty-five years.

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## *Can the Sissy Be Insurgent?*

The Negro child learns to annihilate himself, to grow limp, before Mister Charlie and Miss Ann. The middle-class Negro child is trained to be a sissy.

— CALVIN C. HERNTON, “Dynamite Growing out of Their Skulls”

No one dares call us sexual niggers, at least not to our faces. But the epithets can be devastating or entertaining. We are faggots and dykes, sissies and bulldaggers.

We are funny, sensitive, Miss Thing, friends of Dorothy, or men with “a little sugar in the blood,” and we call ourselves what we will.

— MELVIN DIXON, “I’ll Be Somewhere Listening for My Name”

At the culmination of my high school academic career, I was privately instructed by my principal how to perform a manly handshake. It was the day of the annual awards ceremony, in which academic medals would be bestowed on deserving students in a public ritual celebrated in the school’s gym. Each time as I trekked up to receive yet another award, my chest swelled with pride and anticipation. Little did I know that my crowning achievement as a high schooler would be dashed immediately after the ceremony by none less than the principal who had so many times shook my right hand in congratulation for a stunning career. Afterward, as the gym emptied and seniors whooped and hollered in recognition that school days were really coming to an end, the principal beckoned me over with his index finger. Expecting yet another pat on the back, instead I got a deflating

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lesson in manliness. “As you enter the big world,” he said in a tone low enough to ensure that only I could hear, “you need to know how to shake hands like a man. You cannot succeed with that limp handshake of yours.” He then coached me in the ritual of the manly handshake by having me repeat several times grabbing his hand firmly, aggressively even, practicing one swift unyielding hold, not too long, with an instant, decisive release.

In an environment where my proud black classmates were certain that my rightful place as valedictorian would never be recognized for one of our own kind and where my own father had taken me aside to advise, based on previous experience with my elder siblings, against expecting what I deserved from that school, I could not avoid the suspicion that his coaching had the tincture of racial animus. Whatever his motivation, my reaction was certain as my chest deflated in unmanly embarrassment, and I felt myself shrinking away from him with my proverbial tail between my legs. I felt as though I had been privately called out as that which I had so successfully evaded for my four high school years: a sissy-boy, not quite fit or equipped for, as he put it, the big world that awaited me.

### Sissy Good Conduct

Because I liked reading, writing, and doing creative things, they felt I should be around boys doing boy things. Even though I hung out with the guys in my neighborhood and was actively involved in sports, they still thought it wasn't normal that I sat in my room reading and fantasizing.

—TERRANCE DEAN, *Hiding in Hip Hop*

Despite having a body exhibiting some noticeable gender dissonance (at least as I perceived myself), I was popular with both teachers and classmates. I was, in fact, a specimen of another telltale sissy formation, what Andrew Tobias, writing under the pen name John Reid, aptly labels “the best little boy in the world,” a malady I learned about only years later when I encountered Tobias's novel of that title, which had been published two years before my high school graduation.<sup>1</sup> I was like the protagonist of Tobias's novel, too good to be a normal boy, never in any sort of trouble, got perfect grades, participated dutifully in extracurricular activities, and played football with the avidity that only a South Texas boy can know. Was it my eager participation in school athletics that had shielded me from my own incipient sissiness and made me popular despite my limp handshake? And this, despite the fact that I was also an avid reader, one who especially adored the poetry of lady authors like Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay and who devoured Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* novels as a middle schooler.

Perhaps I instinctively sensed, as Charles I. Nero has so wittily observed, that “reading can make you queer.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, I was sure to arm myself with physical prowess on the field to put my classmates off the scent of my adoration for books, poetry, and chummy chats with girls I worked with on yearbook, student council, honor society, and other goody-two-shoes organizations that consumed far too many of my waking hours. When not at some after-hours school event, I could be found invariably at home, still tugging at my mother’s skirt, so to speak, and generally being an attentive son to her, if not to my father, alas. My principal intensified any doubt that I had pretty effectively kept subliminal. Having hoped that my feeling of masculine inadequacy was only a matter of my psychological makeup or emotional temperament, both of which could be sublimated, I was alarmed by my principal’s schooling me in the manly handshake—by the prospect that it was instead written in or on my body as a physical condition that could not be fully masked, or even worse closeted within my psychology in a way that could not be accessed, much less changed.

As can be found in the testimony of so many other sissy-boys, I knew from my vaguest earliest memories that my person did not comport with the gender expectations on which everyone seemed to agree, and this long before the usual physical awkwardness of puberty, whose arrival only intensified my somatic dissonance. Although this self-narrative may in some ways coincide with those of transgender persons, there are also salient distinctions—most notably no sense of being misgendered in relation to my anatomical sex. I did “boy” things as a kid, and I loved being a boy, getting dirty, climbing trees, playing cowboys and Indians. I had, though, a nagging haunting of discordancy (whether physiological, physical, emotional, or psychic, I could not say), which could expose itself at any unexpected time. My inattentiveness and downright clumsiness around my father, a strict and distant disciplinarian, were as pronounced to him as to me. One day when I was around twelve, he stopped his manual-drive old pickup on a dirt road and told me to get behind the wheel and drive. I was flummoxed. When my younger brother, who seemed naturally expert in all things boyish, took my place behind the wheel, shifted the gears into motion, and maneuvered the old truck like a pro, my father chastised me, saying I needed to model myself on my little brother rather than constantly staring out the window daydreaming. As usual, I tamped down my rage at my dad’s unfairness and sought solace in a quiet defiant sullenness that even he could not penetrate. My father had hit home in calling out my propensity for daydreaming, my constant fabrication of a secret life wholly diverging from that circumscribed by my South Texas small-town existence. How could *he* know that daydreaming was a sure symptom of a sissy sensorium, whose undertow I thought, or prayed, was well beneath the surface of my external life? After the truck-driving fiasco, I nurtured furtive daydreams plotting

clever scenarios of linguistic assault on my father, an inner life that I knew he was incompetent to control.

One of the speculations I'd like to make here, advancing the work of Nero, is that reading, and especially as compulsive or sophisticated literacy, plays a large role in raising the consciousness of a sissy propensity, if not in the actual making of a sissy. Whereas Nero emphasizes the popular idea that a boy too enraptured by reading will turn queer sexually, I want to consider how reading becomes a safe harbor for the incipient sissy-boy—whether or not as a sign of incipient homosexuality. Reading, we might speculate, provides a harbor in which the sissy-boy can, on one hand, luxuriate silently in his predisposition for sensitive and fantastical daydreaming while, on the other hand, finding himself intimated in storied representations of boys like himself deemed overly sensitive and thus gender dissonant. In his groundbreaking essay “Sissies at the Picnic,” Roderick Ferguson makes a similar point about the relations among fantasy, escape, and sissiness, but his fantasy involves a gender and racial cross-identification with the Amazonian powers of the female superhero Wonder Woman:

It was Wonder Woman that made me want to be a reader. I was determined to discover the history of the Amazons. So I had Mama take me to the regional library, and together we got a library card. Soon thereafter I would walk to the library and check out this large hard-cover book about Greek mythology. . . . I didn't rest until I had consumed the whole book, learning of ancient mysteries and godlike failures. It was my fascination with books and the things they held inside that marked me as different from the other boys. Soon my brothers and the other boys in my neighborhood noticed that I was spending more time reading indoors than playing baseball and football outside. . . . My reputation as a sissy became a knot that could not be untied, and I was banished from the world of boys.<sup>3</sup>

In reading, the sissy-boy Rod can experience a heightened racial and gender fluidity not as easily allowed in everyday social interactions under the gender and racial strictures of Jim Crow. At the same time, in Ferguson's account, reading becomes at once a refuge to experiment with his nonconforming gender conduct and also a hindrance to normal boyishness. “As I developed skills as a reader, my abilities to catch an oncoming ball plummeted miserably,” he writes.<sup>4</sup> Although this fear of the “oncoming ball” is a characteristic anecdote signaling a sissy propensity, the causal relations among reading, boyish sports, and sissiness remain puzzling. Does the focus on reading dictate a sissy incompetence at sports as a circumstantial result, or was there already something about the physicality or temperament of the boy that lured him into reading as a refuge from sports?

In his study of the racial implications of literacy on perceptions of black masculinity, Vershawn Ashanti Young confesses a similar experience to Ferguson's in rural Georgia, a generation later and in the setting of Southside Chicago: "Literacy habits, like reading novels of a certain kind and speaking what might appear to be standard English, have always made me seem more queer, more white identified, and more middle class than I am. When I fail to meet the class, gender, and racial notions that others ascribe to me, I'm punished."<sup>5</sup> Young's anecdote is helpful insofar as it reminds us forcefully that gender conformity is necessarily experienced through racial identification—a major premise of this book. His self-observation also emphasizes that even though the perception of sissiness is strongly linked with same-gender sexuality in both dominant and marginalized cultures, boys who become straight-identified sexually are occasionally categorized as sissies by others, whether or not they themselves self-identify as such. Like the 1990s mini-trend of straight black sissy memoirists who are the subject of chapter 5, Young experiences disidentification between his heterosexuality and others' perception of his gender queerness. Unlike those memoirists who tend to tap into their childhood sissiness as a resource for racial leadership, Young expresses a profound alienation from blackness resulting from a sense of gender nonconformity. As Young intimates, class status or aspiration cannot be separated from perceptions of sissiness, nor can color, which intersects with assumptions about black men's proper degree of virility, or lack thereof. As Young acknowledges, however, literacy, including timbre and manner of speaking, is but one factor that contributes to the projection of black masculine deficiency. Because literacy and speech habits are clearly acquired skills, a deeper question arises as to what motivates some boys toward an intense desire for literacy while others seem to have an aversion to it, and what other factors shape the perception of a sissy sensorium, along with its self-alienating affect.

Like Young, I intuited from early on that certain kinds of physical bearing could mark one as a sissy, whether too much bodily grace in walking or dancing or too little bodily coordination in running or catching a ball. Similarly, emotional temperament seems to expose a boy to sissy suspicion either when he is too gesturally expressive or when he does not respond with appropriate excitement to boyish pursuits and achievements. How does one figure out that balancing act—how to avoid being too emotional about inappropriate objects or how appropriately to express coolly restrained emotion for deserving objects? Although childhood bookishness tends to be read as a marker of sissiness, it must be emphasized that not all boy readers are sissies and not all sissies are unusually bookish. Nonetheless, there are some relatively fixed coordinates that create a strong suspicion of sissiness. As we shall see in chapter 6, and as mentioned in Ferguson's essay, the

sissy in U.S. culture figures pretty definitively as the antithesis of sportsmanship; perhaps this hinges on the conventional correlation of the domesticated indoors with femininity versus the wild outdoors with masculinity. Boyhood readers become stigmatized as gender nonconforming, especially if they seem not to be able to negotiate the line separating the girlish indoors from the boyish outdoors, for which contact sports serves as an emblem. Perhaps what is at stake in the connection between reading and sissiness is the way in which reading helps to produce a too-good boy, one who is not prone to get into trouble both because his play is curtailed by the domestic space of the house and because his reading itself can proffer imaginary adventures without the real-life risk of outside dangers. Since courting danger helps to define conventional boyishness, reading inadvertently amplifies the sissy-boy's gender deviance.

One of my concerns here is the need to bring “conduct” back into the conversation where social constructs of gender orientation are concerned. Not all good boys are sissies, but many sissies tend to be too-good boys—unless they channel their sissified conduct into a decided swishing behavior, in which case they become flagrantly disruptive to the conventional gender order. Conduct focuses on the ways in which we as subjects form a sense of individual character through habitual behavior in relation to larger social, political, legal, and moral codes. Certainly, performance is an element of conduct, but I find that by emphasizing character and conduct, we get at different dimensions of the ways in which gender is overly assumed to be intrinsic to the self. Perhaps wrongly, conduct tends to be seen as the manifestation of a coherent self, rather than as a series of repeated performances half-consciously acted out for a judging public. When cultural theorists attempted to move beyond identity to account for the repertoire of repeated behaviors that serve to fashion one's relation to social groups, they promoted the concept of performativity, or at times performance, emphasizing the coerced adoption of social roles in the making of individual subjectivity.<sup>6</sup> Somewhere between identity and performance/performativity lies a much less analyzed arena that I label “conduct.” I emphasize conduct here because of its intimate connection with ethos, from which the word “ethics” is derived. Ethos is the classical Greek idea of the action that follows from possessing a particular personal nature or character. A person of upright character will conduct themselves accordingly in a correct manner, and such a person will thus possess the authority to persuade others to their side in civic matters. As the study of what constitutes morally appropriate action, ethics derives from ethos as the good life derives from character. While not wanting to jettison the importance of politics, ideology, and collectivity in the understanding of social identity and performance, I want to suggest that how we develop a sense of who we are socially is interwoven with competing and conflicting assessments of how conduct is directed by one's character. The idea

that something is “wrong” with a person who does not conform to gender expectations stems from moral—and often moralistic—assumptions, articulated by social injunctions at home, school, house of worship, and other civil institutions, as well as codified in laws, policies, and bureaucratic rules. Just as one’s gender identity cannot easily be segregated from one’s performance of a sexual orientation, so gender performativity is inextricably bound up with the character that is presumed to govern moral conduct.

Although I want to theorize gender conduct as flowing from assumptions about moral character, I do not want to suggest that conduct is a stable perception of self in relation to other. Indeed, as we shall see, the fungibility of conduct makes it both a fallible gauge of character and a powerful conduit for regulating gender behavior socially, politically, and ideologically. In other words, “conduct” is the unstable barometer through which appropriate gender behavior is judged by the self in interaction with others’ perceptions. There are different levels, dimensions, intensities, and tenors of conduct; thus I employ a variety of words to indicate this fungibility in terms of self-perception and others’ perception in a particular circumstance at a particular moment, and in terms of the sociohistorical fungibility at work in shaping how men’s gender conduct is judged collectively across time. These cognates of conduct—including behavior, habit, practice, comportment, deportment, posture, demeanor, manner, gesture, speech, and gait—suggest the difficulty of pinning down how a male’s temperament directs or is directed by his gender orientation. By temperament, I mean the repertoire of emotions, sensations, senses, and rationales that orient a person’s relation to himself and others as a gendered actant or objectified subject. Rather than merely a social manifestation of individual character, one’s temperament orients and moors a person toward and within a social structure.

The panoply of cognates I employ helps us to consider the fluctuating continuum of conduct. At one end we might place *behavior*, a more stable sense of predictive conduct that applies so broadly and deeply that we use it to describe the biological imperatives of nonhuman animals, as well as the sociological and biological drives of human individuals and communities. *Habit* is less predictive than behavior and usually implies conduct that is largely learned through repetition so iterative that it has become thoughtless or almost automatic, often in response to internal and external pressures. *Practice* is also learned conduct but at a higher level of consciousness and repeated effort—as though there is some challenge or resistance involved in sustaining the conduct as such. Whereas behavior and habit can appear, often falsely, to evacuate moral, political, and ideological considerations, practice brings these back into view—reminding us that part of what makes conduct fungible concerns a person’s negotiation of a community’s demands, whether highly implicit and assumed or coercive and openly contested.

Whereas all of these cognates operate as a manifestation of individual and collective bodies, the physical embodiment of conduct becomes all the more apparent at the other end of the scale. *Comportment*, for instance, indicates the extent or intensity of the body's conformity to internal and external pressures. Whereas *comportment* emphasizes a person's physiological manifestation of gendered character, as though the conduct flows almost unconsciously from temperament, *deportment* emphasizes a physical action more consciously practiced to achieve a particular end—and thus might be more directly related to a sense of bodily performance in relation to others. *Posture* refers to a person's physical bearing as evidence of gender orientation, while *demeanor* or *manner* refers to how the person faces the social body, literally and figuratively. These dimensions of conduct entail how the body's movement can relay, reliably or falsely, a person's gender conformity, or lack thereof. How one speaks has long been recognized as properly determining one's comfort within one's gender, with a deep and rough voice identified with manhood and a soft and high voice with proper femininity. How one speaks, of course, has long been recognized as exposing one's class, region, and race. As we shall see, one of the signal attributes assigned to the sissy is an improper way of voicing one's gender. This is usually described as a voice that is too proper, too soft, or too histrionic to issue from a male's mouth. *Gesture* captures the notion of how the limbs of the upper body move in a fashion that exposes gender fitness, while *gait* refers to the same dimension of the lower body—the extent to which one's walk conforms to the expectations of one's assigned gender. As Sara Ahmed has theorized, these directional orientations of the person's body are implicated in larger dynamics of cultural identity, such that the sociopolitical structure might be seen to provide guiding coordinates for individual, as well as collective, conduct.<sup>7</sup> Where the judgment of male gender fitness is concerned, all of these modes of conduct are fraught, self-conflicted, and contested—all the more because each holds racial implications.

This theory of conduct will be further elaborated in each chapter. In chapter 2, for instance, we'll consider Booker T. Washington's schoolmarmish “gospel of the toothbrush” as a mode of negotiating acceptable racial leadership by developing over time a reliable gender practice that signals a nonintimidating type of black manliness to white supremacists. The white men with whom Washington negotiates may take his conduct as *behavior*—that is, as conduct that is in biological accordance with the unmanly subservience natural to his race's temperament. Washington's opponents, to the contrary, immediately recognize his conduct as a *practice* that exposes the race to a variety of the ideological pitfalls as they seek to alert the black public to the sociopolitical dangers that might be overlooked by those enamored of Washington's apparent influence among white male rulers.

In turn-of-the-twentieth-century Alabama, Washington's too-good conduct emanates more than the effect of a "good boy"—that is, a "good Negro"; it also inflects his social practice with a tinge of sissiness—a demeanor not so much read onto the body itself as read into his mode of public racial engagement. Although I may be anachronistically stretching the usage of "sissy" here in extending it to Washington's self-humbling conduct in the early Jim Crow Deep South, I believe the suggestiveness of an African American cultural tradition of sissy leadership warrants the speculation. Washington's sissy conduct is not merely a persona put on for an audience of white rulers and black followers. Nonetheless, we should not discount his public dramatization of a sissy persona to diminish the masculine threat represented in acting as "boss of the race." The dilemma for Washington was how to appear to be a "good Negro," totally subservient to the white men with whom he negotiates the fate of the former slaves and to the white ladies under whom he works to achieve an accommodating character. More fundamentally than a practiced performance, however, Washington's gender negotiation develops *conditionally* as a habitual way of constructing a coherent temperament and agency in an everyday conduct necessarily deeply informed and shaped by the peculiar circumstances calling out his complex social, psychic, and emotional response to his slave and postslave upbringing—E. Patrick Johnson's "material way of knowing."<sup>8</sup> In other words, Washington's gender conduct is deeply conditioned by the sociopolitical context of slavery and early Jim Crow, as well as deeply conditioned by the subtle development of a character responsive to the material, institutional, and ideological constraints of that historical context. He becomes how he reliably behaves. And how he consistently behaves proffers a sense of his temperament, the capacities and limits of his unique character in the way he "faces" the world in terms of racial, gender, sexual, and other social structures and formations.

The formative example Washington provides also allows us to frame how available language, geographic scale, and degree of publicness impinge on the valuation of gender conduct—ranging from historically honed gender epithets to fuzzy catchphrases loaded with innuendo, from a highly visible public sphere to the cloistered intimacy of a small community, from a spectacular self-representation aimed at a mass audience to the everyday interactions occurring among a handful of colleagues and acquaintances. For a black man who would seek to head the race, gender conduct is not merely a question of how he comports himself in relation to blacks and whites but also a matter of how "the public," black and white, perceives and receives that comportment through a gender vocabulary both cognizant and inchoate. What Houston A. Baker Jr. says about the critical role of the black "masses" generally in the formation of black leadership is especially

apt in considering how gender conduct is arbitrated in and by the mass public in anointing such leadership. “But the black majority and its institutions,” Baker continues, “have always provided the only imaginable repository for the formation of a self-interested and politically engaged black public sphere in the United States. Furthermore, the resources of the black majority have enabled both the emergence of effective (self-, or better, community-interested) leadership and radical definitions of black publicness itself.”<sup>9</sup> Although Baker is focusing on the black public, the controversial nature of Washington’s conduct reminds us how the anointing of such leadership is always a transaction between the demands of the white public sphere and the black masses. To begin our history, Washington serves as a formative case of the conditional or circumstantial sissy, a conduct habitually attuned to others and embedded in the self in response to ideological expectations, historical necessities, and social obligations related to racial status. By political necessity, Washington must broadcast his gender conduct across the national public sphere as proof of worthiness to head the race, and he does so not only through his public speeches, most famously the 1895 Atlanta Exposition address, but also through his very popular books, most famously his 1901 autobiography, *Up from Slavery*.<sup>10</sup> The vernacular tone of his speeches and writings makes his subservient gender conduct a highly accessible spectacle intended to gratify whites while placating black followers. Unfortunately for him, however, the spectacular nature of his gender practice also makes him the sole target of adversaries, whose public attacks on his gender propriety are intended to shame him into a more muscular gender performance. On its grandest scale, gender conduct is shaped by what is legible and illegible on the big stage of popular and mass culture—a dynamic that intensifies as the twentieth century progresses, with the emergence of televisual and digital technologies where the racialized gender conduct of persons seems to be readily accessible for judgment by a cross-racial public, as we shall see especially in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

We know quite a lot about Washington’s *public* gender practice because his racial leadership depended wholly on its broad cross-racial visibility in the public sphere, but we know very little about Washington’s private gender conduct. This is not unusual for public figures before the advent of mass tell-all narratives (examined in chapters 5 and 6) and mass televisual technologies (examined in chapters 4 and 6). By contrast, there has been very little interest in the public gender conduct of Washington’s protégé, George Washington Carver, even though Carver’s conduct was characterized ostensibly by highly visible effeminate mannerisms and attire—a sissiness based in the observable physicality of his person. We therefore cap chapter 2 by using Carver as a complement and foil to Washington to consider how contemporaneously a different tenor of gender conduct operates at a local scale in a more privatized context. Carver serves as our formative

instance of the “physiological” sissy, one whose conduct seems to offend not on a mass scale but instead within a very parochial setting in which minute bodily details of manner, posture, address, comportment, deportment, gesture, and gait seem to emanate from his material condition as a differently gendered male. To indicate the importance of scale in determining how gender conduct is socially and ideologically fungible, I emphasize the distinction between the mass public nature of Washington’s conditional gender practice and the parochial context of Carver’s physiological sissiness. That is, we cannot understand the racial implications of sissy conduct without considering its context and scale. Washington’s adversaries never charged him with displaying any sign of a nonmasculine affect in his personal presentation. As far as we can tell, he performs heteronormative obligations through conventionally masculine bodily deportment. Ironically, Carver’s nonconventional, unmanly demeanor seems to escape public comment exactly because his public engagement was narrowly limited to a scientific, instrumentalist project that was easily consumed as nonpolitical. The very same gender demeanor that was invisible to the mass public, however, became a major cause of controversy within the confines of Tuskegee Institute, where Carver’s effeminacy became both a subject of concern for Washington and a target of his academic rivals.

Our engagement with Carver in chapter 2 is thus necessarily speculative and tentative—aimed mainly at nuancing a historically recoverable anatomy of unfit manly conduct at different scales and through a limited vocabulary, from the closely observable body in a tight locale to a broadly observed social practice on an international mass public stage. In considering the limits of the language we use to characterize and categorize gender fitness, this study suggests that the fungible nature of language itself—whether in the discursive domain of the scientific, vernacular, or mass—contributes to the historical and social fungibility of gender conduct. It is generally understood that language available to us today was not current at the turn into the twentieth century, limiting how a person and his public could label any particular apperception of conduct. However, less discussed, there was language available to previous generations in making such distinctions that we no longer use—or even recognize—today. For instance, whether today Carver would identify as a trans person or as nonbinary is difficult to know; at best, we can only speculate on the etymological, biographical, social, political, and racial significance of these material manifestations that seem not to align with the normative engenderment of his time. Washington’s and Carver’s observers, however, did trade in highly stigmatizing gender epithets that have perhaps lost some of their sting today. As we move deeper into the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, conduct and character will continue to serve as a touchstone for theorizing the sissy exactly because sissy discourse is anchored in the speculative

observation of behavior, temperament, posture, manner, and mannerism—all of which carry heavy loads of moral signification, aiding social stigma and abetting social enforcement sometimes through dismissal and mockery (as we shall see with Carver's Tuskegee colleagues), sometimes through innuendo and gossip (as we shall see with Richard Wright's literary reception examined below), and sometimes through psychic/emotional abuse and/or physical violence (as we shall see in the case of figures like James Weldon Johnson's ex-colored man in chapter 3, James Baldwin in chapter 4, Amiri Baraka in chapter 5, and the queer boxer Emile Griffith in chapter 6). Changes in language can serve as an index for how perception and cognition of gender fitness changes along with different sociopolitical movements to effect the democratization of society.

### Speculating Richard Wright as Sissy Test Case

As with Young, Ferguson, and Nero, my early reading habits fostered both a racial and a gender cross-identification. It was not until college that I began to find African American texts that seemed to capture facsimiles of my own sissy yearnings. On encountering the young Richard of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), I instinctively gravitated toward his notion that words could be powerful weapons. When little five-year-old Richard takes his father's figurative words literally, he hangs the kitten that his father has told him to get rid of, responding to his father's ill temper with his own verbal wit, which unfortunately results in the lynching of an innocent kitten. I'm not necessarily suggesting that Richard, the protagonist of Wright's autobiography, is a sissy. Wright is careful to construct the young protagonist in terms that lodge him securely in a naturalized boyishness, in spite of—or perhaps to compensate for—his propensity for reading. We can exploit Wright, though, as an exemplary test case of the challenge presented to anyone attempting to understand the sissy's character and conduct—his physiology, temperament, behavior, role, status, affect, self-identification, and discursive representation—across historical circumstances, geographic climes, and racial formations. Wright's case is helpful to the project of historicizing the notion of sissiness as too-good-boy conduct in terms of the moral and social dilemmas that Jim Crow imposes on masculine performance.

One approach would be to identify particular authors as sissies based on autobiographical, biographical, and fictional accounts. To say the least, this is a tricky matter, and one I'm prone to deploy cautiously by more frequently focusing on an author's textual self-representation and any representation of sissy characters, rather than reductively relying on the question of whether the author himself is a sissy "in real life." Even so, I find that autobiographical modes are an especially

rich resource for speculating about racialized formations of gender fitness. Here I am interested less in the formal and thematic (that is, the ostensibly *literary*) applications of the autobiographical subject than in the cultural transactions that necessarily operate between autobiography and social perceptions of self and other as these expose representations and discourses of male gender fitness. As Kenneth Mostern has theorized about the identity politics of autobiography, this genre is deeply institutionalized to represent social identities as though they are solely individualized subjects, but modes of “minority” autobiography tend to spotlight the binds and fissures at work between a represented self and its various publics. “Writing life stories really does engage one in the problematic of presenting an explicitly public identity,” Mostern observes, “even when such an identity fails to fully explain the life.”<sup>11</sup> Reading racialized self-presentations of these autobiographical subjects as always collectively and publicly constituted through gender conduct, I seek to highlight the situational gender dynamics being negotiated by representing a raced self as a publicly consumable figure. Thus, autobiographies by Washington, Johnson, Baldwin, Baraka, 1990s academic public intellectuals, and openly gay professional sportsmen are understood as inextricably interrelated with mass public perceptions of such subjects as sentiently, cognitively, and/or willfully gendered—sometimes analyzed as the representation of a public reception within texts, as is the case with Johnson’s autobiographies, and at other times analyzed as well in terms of how public discourses shape and are shaped by the intervention of the text, as with the response to Washington’s *Up from Slavery*, Baldwin’s various autobiographical essays and semiautobiographical fictions, or professional sportsmen’s gay disclosure memoirs. I examine the perception, projection, reception, or suspicion of sissiness as it is lodged by others (Washington and Carver in chapter 2, James Baldwin in chapter 4, Amiri Baraka in chapter 5, and openly gay pro athletes in chapter 6), and the response to these accusations, as a marker for the social, ideological, and political uses toward which sissy suspicion is put. In other cases, as with James Weldon Johnson and his character the ex-colored man (chapter 3), gender nonconformity seems the very matter of self-characterization, even if the term “sissy” itself is never used in Johnson’s memoir and novel. This requires a degree of speculation about the intentions, affects, and purposes of the representation of particular nonconforming gender characteristics and behaviors. In some cases, however, individuals either express their sissiness (whether implicitly or explicitly) or seem to overly protest it through distancing, denying, and avoiding tactics.

In all cases, the individual habit of sissy-avoidance, stemming from the hegemony of sissophobia, abets our understanding of how historical figures have negotiated charges of unfit manliness. Although sissophobia—the hyperbolic fear of being perceived as, or being too proximate to, a sissy—obviously is closely

linked with homophobia, distinguishing between the two helps us to explore the entangled interaction connecting male gender nonconformity with male homosexuality. It is far easier to identify sissiphobia than sissiness, a fact that simultaneously works to the benefit and the detriment of any male accused of being a sissy, for just as sissiness is easily denied because proof is at best speculative, so it is also easily charged due to the predilection to stigmatize the slightest perceived deviation from masculine norms. Because the facile label or insinuation of sissiness also prompts a suspicion of homosexuality, sissiphobia guards against nonnormative gender conduct by linking it so inextricably with sexual conduct that historically has been not only highly stigmatized but also widely illegal as aailable offense. Unlike homosexual acts and behaviors, there have been no U.S. federal laws or state statutes banning sissiness, so to attack a man as a sissy invites other extralegal modes of social punishment, ranging from ridicule and shaming to physical violence.

We can see how the sissy charge operates by briefly considering how Wright's first biographer, Margaret Walker, deploys it speculatively. Walker provides us a concise dictionary of terms used to designate or indicate suspicion of a sissy nature: "He gave the appearance of an almost effete, slightly effeminate personality. He had a pip squeak voice, small delicate hands and feet, smooth face with very light beard, and rather fastidious ways or mannerisms. He certainly did not exude a strong maleness or masculinity."<sup>12</sup> Although she never uses the word "sissy," a reader has no doubt about the charge, for Walker piles on suspect characteristics—a typical pattern when such a charge is being made—as if to compensate for the claim's speculative nature. Although Walker's firsthand observations should not be facilely affirmed, neither should they be facilely dismissed as gossip or armchair psychoanalyzing. As a onetime intimate friend and an author in her own right, Walker had powerful skills of observation that could be trained on Wright at close quarters, but she may also have had interested motives.<sup>13</sup> Because there is no proof of evidence, as can be the case with a "practicing" homosexual, judging a sissy disposition is necessarily a speculative, not to say gossip, enterprise. As both Phillip Brian Harper and Mark Anthony Neal point out in different ways, where others' sexuality is involved, there is always a degree of speculation.<sup>14</sup> Other theorists have pointed out how rumor and gossip have played a crucial role in enabling viable social networks, especially for sexually discreet gay men excluded from dominant gay white institutions and resources even after Stonewall.<sup>15</sup> Gossip about homosexuality, however, is a double force—working as a constructive vehicle for social connectivity among multiply marginalized groups like black queer men but also being exploited as a prohibitive social and state apparatus to discipline, shame, and ruin the lives of anyone suspected of queer sexual behavior. Given that the sissy shadows the homosexual not only as a specter that polices

the gender nonconformity supposedly intrinsic to sexual aberration but also as the assumed vestibule of homosexuality in the dominant social imaginary, the proscriptive role of gossip, innuendo, and rumor is all the more salient for disciplining sissy conduct. For one thing, as discussed below, sissiness is liminal and projective, projected onto others or onto the self as existing somewhere between an impossible masculine ideal and an ever-shifting threat of masculine failure. For another thing, “evidence” is necessarily in the eye of the perceiver *and* in the eye of the subject perceived as coded within a particular cultural context at a particular time using language that can be, at best, slippery, and at worst, obfuscating. One man’s sense of deficient manly conduct may be another’s expression of sensible vulnerability. For this study, rather than frowning on speculation as somehow cognitively and morally culpable, speculation is taken to be an important theoretical enterprise for comprehending the etymological, ideological, historical, social, material, and psychic dynamics of sissification. It is easy to dismiss Walker’s observations, as most scholars have done simply by ignoring Walker’s implications. Because Wright conducted himself in strict accordance with heterosexual protocols as far as we know, Walker’s charges are quickly dismissed. Unless there is a preponderance of evidence suggesting a homosexual liaison, hegemonic heteronormativity, or what Adrienne Rich theorizes as “compulsive heterosexuality,” demands the assumption of heterosexuality, especially in the cases of celebrated figures like Wright or Malcolm X.<sup>16</sup> If one is not judged a homosexual, then one is not presumed a sissy. This results in a paradox. While heterosexuality is the overwhelming presumption for everyone, the slightest perceived deviation from masculine conduct causes a rush to sissy accusation, and from such an accusation, the presumption of homosexuality follows precipitously. To speculate on a man’s sissiness itself usually serves a stigmatizing social or political purpose beyond the demand to enforce heteronormativity. Sissy-shaming is so common an activity based in both vulgar and subtle assumptions about proper gender conduct that until recently its accusatory stigma has not been systematically articulated, much less systemically challenged. That Walker’s speculation enacts a not-so-subtle attack on Wright goes without saying.

Even though Wright’s Richard of *Black Boy* could be seen as displaying some telltale signs of sissiness, including the boy’s propensity to escape into voracious reading, perhaps more compelling is the way the author insists on naturalizing Richard’s boyishness. Wright goes to great pains to ensure that Richard is not perceived as a too-good boy. He is, in fact, something of a rascal, a rebel-in-the-making who boasts and seethes against first a father and then a Jim Crow system that he refuses to allow to unnerve or unman him. In fact, Wright purposively creates a sissy foil, Shorty, to highlight the protagonist’s properly gendered courage. Wright exploits this foil to cast his young protagonist as possessing so mannish

a native temperament that he cannot help but comport himself in ways that defy emasculating Jim Crow humiliations.

In characterizing Shorty, Wright, like Walker, piles on characteristics that invite suspicion. He spotlights first physical, then phrenological, then psychological, then cultural attributes that we will see referenced repeatedly as markers of a sissy sensorium:

The most colorful of the Negro boys on the job was Shorty, the round, yellow, fat elevator operator. He had tiny, beady eyes that looked out between rolls of flesh with a hard but humorous stare. He had the complexion of a Chinese, a short forehead, and three chins. Psychologically he was the most amazing specimen of the southern Negro I had ever met. Hardheaded, sensible, a reader of magazines and books, he was proud of his race and indignant about its wrongs. But in the presence of whites he would play the role of a clown of the most debased and degraded type.<sup>17</sup>

Soft, miniaturized physical features first distinguish the “specimen,” and his yellowness further softens him. Then the passage turns to phrenology as the narrator assigns to Shorty a foreign look (“the complexion of a Chinese,” etc.), an *estrangement* within the familial and familiar that we shall see James Baldwin theorize as the perception of gender queerness. Richard then turns explicitly to Shorty’s psychological type (“the southern Negro”), as though the narrator himself is *not* also a “type” of southern Negro. That a budding writer should note another’s fascination with reading magazines and books may seem fitting, but mentioning this in the context of the boy’s racial passive aggressiveness (proud of his race but a clown in the presence of whites) seems to make the focus on the other’s literacy suspect. Wright then proceeds to dramatize Shorty’s tendency toward minstrel subservience. When Richard observes Shorty extending his butt so that a white male passenger on the elevator can kick it before plopping a quarter into Shorty’s open mouth, Richard is scandalized, feeling “no anger or hatred, only disgust and loathing.” When Richard asks Shorty why he would do such a thing, Shorty responds, “Listen, nigger, . . . my ass is tough and quarters is scarce.”<sup>18</sup> Wright is here placing Shorty in the position of a black boy so (self-)emasculated that he might be regarded as metaphorically raped by the white master.<sup>19</sup> Consenting, at least ostensibly, to have his anus penetrated by the white man’s shoe, Shorty shifts from being the object of Richard’s sissy suspicion to becoming a homosexual, at least figuratively. If Shorty will enact this consensual anal penetration *in public*, no telling what he would consent to *in private* for a few more quarters.

Through the white man’s kicking Shorty in the ass, Wright implies male anal penetration, and in Shorty’s opening his mouth to receive the white man’s quarter, Wright furthers the analogy by insinuating symbolic fellatio. Without explicitly

calling Shorty out first as a soft sissy and predictably capping with metaphorical implications of faggotry, Wright encourages the reader to speculate beyond mere suspicion. Shorty is not the true subject here. It is Richard's fit manliness that Wright is concerned to shore up. Proof of fit manliness against the castrating horrors of Jim Crow is manifested in Richard's response to Shorty's perversion—a scapegoating of the homo-sissy as a natural race traitor that we will see reprised in some black nationalist writing.<sup>20</sup> Richard's appropriate manly and thus moral reaction of "disgust and loathing" guides our moral response as readers. In the later Chicago section of *Black Boy*, Richard records a similar reaction to a Southside literary group, whereby he observes: "I was encountering for the first time the full-fledged Negro Puritan invert—the emotionally sick."<sup>21</sup> Also in this scenario, Richard links sexual inversion to the kind of racial alienation also discussed by Vershawn Young: "In speech and action they strove to act as un-Negro as possible," Wright observes about the faux-writers in the group.<sup>22</sup> Both Shorty and the Southside faux-literati sharply contrast with Richard's manly directness in the Jim Crow South and in Southside Chicago.

Even as a small child, Richard's native propensity dictates his bold aggression as he prioritizes survival in life-and-death situations. When his mother takes the boy to beg money from his philandering and absent father, Richard not only refuses to go live with his father but also refuses the paltry offer of a nickel—which his mother urges him *not* to take, though the father suggests that she is teaching "him to be a fool." "I wanted to take the nickel, but I did not want to take it from my father," Richard says.<sup>23</sup> Richard's boyish defiance, even in the face of a nickel that the family so desperately needs, indicates how prescient mannishness, when properly disciplined, need not be modeled on his father's failed husbanding and fathering but instead can become the basis of a virile, and thus radically liberating, character and conduct. "I had the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean," Richard remembers. By equating the father's offer with filth, we immediately understand that the boy is making an astute moral judgment not about the father's bodily hygiene but instead about his character and conduct. This passage foreshadows the Shorty incident in which the soft boy trades his mouth and ass for a quarter, whereas the little boy Richard, refusing the nickel, gets distanced from stigmatizing sissy traits like softness, strangeness, passive aggressiveness, minstrel subservience, and race betrayal. Both the father and Shorty figure conduct so abhorrent that it sickens Richard, but each male's conduct resides at opposed ends of a gender scale, with the father's behavior exposing a flaw fully *within* the character of the patriarchal masculine, whereas Shorty's threatens to cast him out of the purview of the masculine altogether. The father is all too much the man, if a morally unfit one. Shorty is hardly a man and is thus morally unfit. Exactly because Richard seems to exhibit qualities—like devotion to reading,

poetry, and imaginative flights—that could easily elicit speculation of sissiness, Wright must work harder to distance his autobiographical hero from such suspicion, ironically demanding the presence of other sissies as a foil and thus shielding against the specter of the protagonist's own sissiness. (Walker was probably not the first to charge Wright with sissiness, for a boy like Wright/Richard would be a convenient target for other boys' projections.) The little boy Richard's moral sense of uncleanness in the face of a philandering, incompetent father and husband corresponds to the young man Richard's moral sense of disgust—a natural physiological reaction from the gut—in the face of Shorty's and the Southside inverts' emasculated and emasculating conduct.

Given Wright's use of the sissy foil, and his tendency to feature sissies and fags across his oeuvre, it is not surprising that there has been a persistent, low-key scuffle over how to characterize the author's relation to gender nonconformity. Baldwin infamously attacked Wright in his first published essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel" (reprinted in *Notes of a Native Son*), by reducing his greatest hero, Bigger Thomas, to an Uncle Tom figure, and by placing Wright in an unseemly symbolic sexualized wrestling match with Harriet Beecher Stowe.<sup>24</sup> As Baldwin himself becomes the most articulate literary spokesman on behalf of civil rights, the young turks of Black Power begin to scapegoat him through his sissy reputation, contrasting the soft Baldwin with the hard-bodied Wright. In the most egregious case of over-the-top scapegoating, in an essay significantly titled "Notes on a Native Son" (italics added), Eldridge Cleaver accuses Baldwin of wanting to be inseminated by white men in order to have their mulatto babies—a passage voluminously commented on. This charge, though, is capped with Cleaver's defense of Wright as a foil to Baldwin. Vaguely and inaccurately citing Wright's Aggie West passage from *The Long Dream* (discussed in chapter 6) as a case of the "practice by Negro youths of going 'punk-hunting,'"<sup>25</sup> Cleaver claims this as "one of Wright's few comments on the subject of homosexuality."<sup>26</sup> Feeling the need to distance the homosexually obsessed Wright (according to Walker) from homosexuality to make him a harder foil to Baldwin, Cleaver proceeds to the knockout punch: "I think it can safely be said that the men in Wright's books, albeit shackled with a form of impotence, were strongly heterosexual."<sup>27</sup> Wright's male characters are, then, like Richard's father, all too manly (sexually), if plagued by the social impotence that sometimes occasions a fully masculine appetite and ambition, especially for African American men under Jim Crow. Unlike Cleaver's sissiphobic scapegoating attack on Baldwin, his defense of Wright is rarely commented on, but one cannot grasp the impact of the former without focusing on the gender logistics of the latter.

Cleaver is defensive about "safely" seeing Wright's "men" as "strongly heterosexual" exactly because they are problematically "shackled with a form of impotence."

Cleaver wants to ensure that these characters' "impotence" is not misconstrued as sissiness or faggotry. This is why Cleaver overprotests in making the case for Bigger Thomas's revolutionary virility: "And Bigger Thomas, Wright's greatest creation, was a man in violent, though inept, rebellion against the stifling, murderous, totalitarian white world. There was no trace in Bigger of a Martin Luther King-type self-effacing love for his oppressors. For example, Bigger would have been completely baffled, as most Negroes are today, at Baldwin's advice to his nephew . . . concerning white people: 'You must accept them *and accept them with love*. For these innocent people have no other hope.' [italics added.]"<sup>28</sup> Raising Bigger to the status of a real person, a practice common among these black nationalist writers, Cleaver allows Wright's "greatest creation" to stand in for the author himself as the properly masculine warrior, however "inept," against white male supremacy. Cleaver's homo-sissiphobic accusation represents a typical scapegoating tactic in the post-civil rights moment among some black nationalists, but this tactic garners its punch from an assertion of an alternative manly code of conduct in black history, here embodied in the fictional Bigger. Like Baraka's attempt to expunge his sissy self by scapegoating nonviolent civil rights leaders (chapter 5), Cleaver is here trying to eviscerate the palpable influence that the homo-sissy Baldwin has had on his own authorial persona, ironically as self-evident in the autobiographical style of *Soul on Ice* itself. Too penetrable, too vulnerable, too soft to engage the enemy at the frontline of the racial war, Baldwin and Shorty are figures for one of the earliest meanings of the term "sissy": unmanly cowardice. Undergirding Cleaver's charge against Baldwin, and Richard's against Shorty, is the disappointment for men whose manly character is ostensibly perverted by the overriding power of white male supremacy. In short, they are insinuated as men sissified by Jim Crow.

Wright's reference to Shorty as a "clown" in the face of whites enlists him in the iconography of the Jim Crow minstrel figure as an improperly gendered black man. From the 1830s to the 1950s, the most popular cultural figuration of black manhood is projected onto minstrel slackness, a sort of physiological softness in demeanor, gesture, and gait that in turn communicates sissy cowardice. Slackness is the visual cue exploited by blackface performers to indicate the essence of black maleness as a lack of masculine nerve. It is the image of the loose-jointed Jim Crow, whose body constitutionally lacks spine, lacks backbone, lacks phallic hardness. Thomas "Daddy" Rice's antebellum blackface performance of the Jim Crow character has often been noted for its mockery of black slave culture and black manhood. Following Michael Rogin, we should go further in considering the sexual implications of blackface minstrelsy.<sup>29</sup> It is not only analogous to gender cross-dressing, as Rogin observes; it is indeed also a mode of *sexual* cross-dressing whereby black manhood is racially mocked by turning the black man, if not into

1.1 A popular etching of Thomas “Daddy” Rice performing “Jump Jim Crow,” c. 1835. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.



a woman, then into an effeminate sissy. The one sketch we have of Daddy Rice’s performance (figure 1.1) visually communicates in volumes what need not have been verbally articulated for it to have its demeaning gender effect. Right hand on softly feminine oversized hips, left arm lifted with a fey hand gesture, hip juttied out in a posture closely identified with the female African primitive: the drawing captures the gender insult that the words of the song—the only other record of the performance recorded in the annals of history—need not say.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on the legacy of Jim Crow minstrelsy, popular stagings and filming of Negro manhood were often performed to accentuate effeminate physical embodiment: limp wrists, hips flexibly extended, with a skipping gait, or shoulders stooped, head bowed, eyes droopily cast down, feet dragging—the contrary to figurations of fit manliness: the muscled athlete, the alert revolutionary, the upright statesman, or the brave soldier at attention.

Wright’s portrait of Shorty draws on African American cultural disgust for the Jim Crow minstrel, which is linked to the Uncle Tom, as a discredited stereotype

of unfit black manliness. To desire black manliness—to insist on occupying that gendered, raced identity—is an impenetrable act of bravery so overwhelming in its implications that no white man can possibly imagine the ethical character it requires, much less the quotidian heroic conduct it demands under the Jim Crow regime. No wonder Tomming or playing the clown—playing the Uncle Tom for white men’s sadistic pleasure—can be so tempting a mode of economic survival for a soft boy like Shorty. In this case, too-good sissy obedience—which in black nationalist thought is imaged as a desire to be penetrated by the white man—transfigures into too-ready obeisance to white male authority, a habit, if not more endemically a behavior, that guarantees race betrayal. If masculine uprightness strongly implies a moral code that shapes male character predictably toward narrow modes of gender conduct, black men’s uprightness becomes intrinsically contested not only by the presumptions of white male supremacy but also by black men’s moral judgment of one another, whether privately or by airing dirty laundry. “Goodness” for a black man indexes a relative ethos shaped by the pressures of white supremacy, so much so that in African American vernacular “bad” becomes an epithet signaling a positive style of resistant black manliness, inferring in turn that any black man who is too good deserves to have his manhood called into question.<sup>31</sup> As we shall see, this iconography of the “good Negro” inflects negative reactions to such reforming figures as Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., and James Baldwin in particular moments of rising impatience with black male leaders who counsel such strategies as short-term accommodation in exchange for economic profit, long-suffering nonviolence, or taking the moral high ground as an act of transcendent conscience. As the case of Wright’s use of gender nonconformity exemplifies, rather than attempting simply to categorize the gender identity of such historical figures and characters, I am more interested here in how the sissy discourse is employed as a writerly strategy to stage or perform a figure’s relation to normative masculinity, often in the interest of other ideological and political enterprises. In other words, gender epithets like “sissy” and “faggot” are doing double duty, policing what constitutes proper manliness while also serving particular, often nondemocratic, political, economic, and ideological agendas that keep not only sexual but also gender and racial hierarchies intact, ultimately to the benefit of ruling white men.

Around the same time that I got acquainted with Wright’s Richard, I discovered another narrative, James Baldwin’s semiautobiographical novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, whose too-good protagonist, John Grimes, seemed to harbor a similarly fantastical inner life as a shield against a disciplinarian father. The structure of feeling at work in Baldwin’s John Grimes seemed so familiar to me that I shuddered as I read this story of a gentle boy’s coming into manhood on the eve of his fourteenth birthday, occasioned by his achieving salvation on the threshing floor

of his stepfather's storefront Pentecostal church. To recognize John as my fictive double was to come to terms with my own sissy sensorium, an uncanny epiphany that would forever tinge my criticism on Baldwin with a certain defensive gratitude. Recently, I and other queer theorists have insisted on John Grimes's homosexuality, and appropriately so. Nevertheless, this rush to read John as a homosexual has caused us to overlook how the narrative also functions as a sissy bildungsroman. To speculate on John's emotional and bodily practice, as well as that of Baldwin himself, as that of a sissy, is not intended to evacuate homosexuality as a constitutive component of their sissiness, as I will explain in chapter 4.

If Richard enacts his rivalry with his father through masculine violation, Baldwin's John enacts his rivalry more surreptitiously by outwardly seeming to join his father's church like a good boy. While I theorize this shielding behavior as *sissy passive aggression*—seeming to oversubmit to authority while indirectly undermining it—I do not intend to attach any of the usual negative moral and psychological connotations to this term. Indeed, as we shall see, such passive aggression can, as with Baldwin, enact ideological insurgency against the racial and sexual status quo. We might draw a larger point from this initial contrast between Wright's and Baldwin's deployment of a subtextual sissy discourse in fictions published in the decade after World War II.<sup>32</sup> Although there is no doubt a shared social discourse about the sissy, that discourse is deployed toward different ideological effects and writerly affects even by authors who would seem to share a common racial heritage writing in the same decade. To what extent geography also shapes one's relation to sissiness—Wright from the Deep South writing about the interwar Deep South as an expatriate in France, Baldwin from Harlem writing about interwar Harlem as an expatriate in Switzerland—is also an important factor.

### Sissy Liminality

My sense of being a sissy emerged long before any notion of sexual object choice could come into play. Or, more precisely, I early on harbored a sense of some sort of anomalous relation between gender expectations and my own failure to live up to those expectations long before I could even imagine a question of sexual attraction or gender object choice. Sissiness may very well be the vestibule of homosexuality, if not trans identity, for many, but I want strongly to caution against equating these. Unlike homosexuality, which has become increasingly an articulated identity anchored in language, laws, and institutions in a plethora of ways, sissiness remains shadowy, inchoate, disarticulated, noninstitutionalized, even as its speculative existence shores up seemingly more solid racial, gender, and sexual categories. If being too girlish seems a problem, then liking being with

boys too much could be just as unsettling. Not knowing “naturally” how much is too much is itself the conundrum. William Blake’s maxim “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough” is the converse of the sissy’s plight. A manly man like Blake dares to know, or at least conducts himself as knowing, how much is too much by enacting a daring violation across an invisible line. As Blake puts it, “Enough! or Too Much.”<sup>33</sup> A sissy-boy seems to come up to that line of Too Much and trembles with uncertainty. Was liking being around girls too much versus liking being around boys the source of my gender discomfiture? This puzzle was further muddled by the fact that different boys at different ages seemed to shift from liking being around boys to liking being around girls enough to like them. Different temporal trajectories certainly help to define the perception of gender nonconformity, as C. Riley Snorton has illustrated in his history of trans identity, observing that the “transitive” character of gender usually projected onto trans persons more aptly applies across all identity formations, including those of sexuality and race.<sup>34</sup> This concept of the transitive nature of sexual and racial identification will be especially helpful in analyzing not only Baldwin’s process of learning how to fashion himself as a sissy, mentored by the artist Beauford Delaney, but also James Weldon Johnson’s autobiographical and fictional narratives addressing the gender options available to men seeking to wield an air of cosmopolitan urbanity to arm themselves at the height of Jim Crow violence (chapter 3). In the vernacular, the transitive and circumstantial nature of gender is bluntly acknowledged in the rush to suggest, on encountering an improperly gendered person, that time will cure the malady, that perhaps the boy or girl will grow out of it, or that a change of venue (sending the child to fresh air in the countryside or to a military academy) will make the difference. This recognition that gender is conditionally fungible or transitive usually is articulated to reassert heteronormativity, but there is no reason that it cannot work to undermine heteronormative assumptions, as Snorton has shown. Whether a factor of temporality or circumstance, any hint of apparent gender indecisiveness creates alarm because it draws attention to the potential liminality of all gender character and conduct.

Liminality within gender—as much as, if not more than, a line between the genders—is what addled my attempts to be a natural boy, rather than just a good one. For, at the least, I understood that a good boy meant necessarily always risking being too good for proper boyishness. Discursively, however, this gender uncertainty, an anxiety within one’s own male body despite taking pleasure in possessing a male anatomy, is routinely articulated as a confusion that causes a boy to cross the line into girlishness. Perhaps it is a failure of language, or of the social imagination, that reads any small lack of masculine competence as necessarily catapulting a boy or man into the feminine—or more precisely an effeminate—sphere. This sissy dilemma seems analogous to the one-drop rule that governed Jim Crow

racial identity: the slightest hint of doubt about one's boyishness seems to catapult one into the realm of sissyness. This feverish binary within the masculine (tough/soft, butch/femme, aggressive/passive, straight/sissy) comes under deep suspicion in this study, as I hope to build on work like that of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Jack Halberstam, who seek to unsettle the line linking a binary gender system (masculine/feminine) to a binary sexuality (gay/straight). In her pivotal essay "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," Sedgwick observes that the increasing social acceptance of adult male homosexuality has not automatically benefited "effeminate boys":

Indeed, the gay movement has never been quick to attend to issues concerning effeminate boys. There is a discreditable reason for this in the marginal or stigmatized position to which even adult men who are effeminate have often been relegated in the movement. A more understandable reason than effeminophobia, however, is the conceptual need of the gay movement to interrupt a long tradition of viewing gender and sexuality as continuous and collapsible categories—a tradition assuming that anyone, male or female, who desires a man must by definition be feminine; and that anyone, male or female, who desires a woman must by the same token be masculine. That one woman, *as a woman*, might desire another; that one man, *as a man*, might desire another: the indispensable need to make these powerful, subversive assertions seemed, perhaps, to require a relative deemphasis of the links between gay adults and gender-nonconforming children. To begin to theorize gender and sexuality as distinct though intimately entangled axes of analysis has been, indeed, a great advance of recent lesbian and gay thought.<sup>35</sup>

Sedgwick's point is borne out by the fact that while homophobia has become a strongly stigmatized behavior in the United States and beyond, there is no commensurate term to capture society's stigma against "effeminate boys"—"effeminophobia" notwithstanding.<sup>36</sup> Sedgwick further points out that "there is a danger . . . that that advance may leave the effeminate boy once more in the position of the haunting abject—this time the haunting abject of gay thought itself."<sup>37</sup> Despite Sedgwick's urging of a queer theory that sees "gender and sexuality as distinct though intimately entangled," and her concern over effeminate boys' becoming the "haunting abject of gay thought itself," very little work has been conducted on the complex relation between the sissy-boy and homosexuality, and on the implications of this relation, in turn, to racial configurations.

One important work that follows up on Sedgwick's theory is Halberstam's *Female Masculinity*, which examines the performance of masculinities among women and analyzes the relation between dominant and subordinate masculinities.

Including some attention to how women of different racial identities perform masculinities, Halberstam also instructively observes that “male and female masculinities are constantly involved in an ever-shifting pattern of influences.”<sup>38</sup> He asks whether the question “might be not what female masculinities borrow from male masculinities, but rather what do men borrow from butches.”<sup>39</sup> In contesting the line between masculine and feminine by emphasizing the entangled relations among different modes of masculine performance, Halberstam helps us see how even within a sex socially constructed as *one* gender—whether male or female—there is no single manifestation of masculinity, whether performed by women, men, or trans persons. To understand sissy conduct and character as intrinsic to the range of masculinities, pluralizing the masculine, rather than merely as slippage into the feminine, is not intended to underestimate the ideological compulsion to normalize one domineering expression of the masculine as morally ideal and socially upright.

Halberstam’s idea that men could learn how to be masculine from butch women is counterintuitive in U.S. discourses of gender and sexuality, but it is a touchstone of my study for understanding how normatively masculine men learn their masculinity from the conduct of sissies as an inverse object lesson. Even though the sissy-boy is most definitely the “haunting abject of gay thought itself,” as Sedgwick asserts, he is at the same time a liminal subject whose speculative existence helps to authorize and legitimate a uniform notion of dominant masculinity. As we shall see, sissies serve as a constant reminder of the fragility of the line connecting maleness to conventional masculinity, and they pose a further challenge in that, far from being alien to the dominant masculine, sissies operate on a line defining both the *inner* limit of conventional masculinity and the masculine *alien* (or “abject,” to use Sedgwick’s term) within the social structure of maleness. Like Halberstam, I want to emphasize that there is a “multiplicity of masculinities” without ignoring the hegemonic impact of the dominant masculine, but I also want to go even further in illustrating the role that race plays in the formation of masculinities as multiple and yet hierarchized in relation to other social categories like race. The tendency of dominant culture to image black men as masculine and yet differently masculinized from middle-class white men helps us to see how the gender conduct of sissies cannot be grasped outside a racial frame. If black men are already one step removed from hegemonic masculinity, when scripted either as subserviently Uncle Tommish or as thuggishly hypermasculine, the black sissy is perceived as further marginalized. I want to suggest here, to the contrary, that just as white middle-class masculinity is unimaginable without its troubled and troubling relationship to black men, so white hegemonic masculinity has been haunted by and constructed on the unstable category of multiply marginalized black sissiness.

The liminality of sissiness exposes not so much a failure *of* masculinity as an inherent failure *in* the masculine as a paradigm that governs the conduct of men and boys. The fear of the sissy among men is the fear that masculinity is not natural *to* or *in* men, that men possess individual and collective vulnerabilities particular to their gender conduct. Not falling prey to sissiness means refusing to hear or feel certain vulnerabilities, and instead to pose as infallibly masculine even at those times when one's maleness feels most in jeopardy. In other words, not all vulnerabilities are unmasculine. The problem for all boys and men, however, concerns how to know which vulnerabilities are acceptable, which ones are not, and under which circumstances. On top of this, a male must instinctively know how to navigate the material gestures of in/vulnerability, usually signaled materially through the body's manner, and such gestural signals may change with time and circumstance. As we will see with the sports disclosure memoirs written at the turn of the twenty-first century (chapter 6), these first out pro athletes must negotiate not only persistent ideas about how a jock is to look and behave but also a changing iconography of how a gay man can look and behave in bodily presentation in the era of the Castro Street Clone as a self-possessed, conventionally gendered macho white man who happens to be "militantly" gay. The line between acceptable and unacceptable vulnerabilities is not historically or culturally stable. Whatever the time or place, those unacceptable vulnerabilities are projected onto the sissy as a contaminating vector of unfit masculinity. As we shall see, even as U.S. gender and sexual norms have changed in response to concerted activism, the sissy has remained a pretty reliable vehicle for marking and measuring upright masculinity in boys and men across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

### The Sissy Race Card

My teachers, classmates, and team members seemed to embrace me as though I were a normally gendered boy, and I speculate that it was perhaps my decent athleticism that shielded them from my sissiness or, rather, shielded me from their suspicions. There is another possibility, however. In hindsight it is highly likely that in the era of legally forced desegregation, my race veiled my sissiness from others, both black and white, in different ways. I was certainly not the only too-good black boy in my class. There was a gaggle of us, other black middle-class-aspiring middle school boys who performed well academically and athletically. Were any of them also hiding their sissy temperaments behind others' racial assumptions? The further past puberty we got, however, the thinner our numbers became. Sports, bands, partying, girls began to consume more of their time as we progressed through high school, whereas my time was spent increasingly proving something

to someone, or overcompensating for something I could not fully comprehend about myself. The further we got past puberty, the more pronounced a “flagrant” sissy’s gender anomalousness became, in that sissiness tended increasingly toward what others identified as effeminacy—limp hand gestures, swishing behinds, skipping gaits, girlish giggling, voices that trailed upward in pitch at the end of sentences. Puberty is supposed to deepen the gulf between boy and girl, based in an ideology of bodily consent.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, as homosexuality has become increasingly a legally protected category, the equation of sissiness with homosexuality has been able to offer a sort of shield for gender-anomalous conduct insofar as it provides a social rationale for sissy behavior.

Far too self-conscious of my physical comportment, I guarded mightily against effeminate mannerisms, although it was not always easy to see how I appeared to others, or to know exactly what counted as unboyish in a desegregating school system. In high school, one of my white male classmates, one of my football teammates, casually observed that I carried my books like a girl—hugging them up close to my chest rather than wielding them low at my side. It only took one offhand comment. Though “offhand,” so to speak, the comment itself highlights how closely surveilled a boy’s demeanor is—not only to a school principal but also to other boys and girls. Because appropriate gender conduct within the masculine is so fugitive, hard to pin down, its informal rules are especially draconian, subject to punishment on the slightest misprision. Carrying my books close to the chest seemed convenient and thus natural—perhaps even visceral—to me, especially given my penchant for toting around so many books at once before the popularity of the backpack. In fact, the boyish way of carrying books, swinging them in the hand at the side as though a weapon in waiting, seems in retrospect to indicate that no boy should carry so many books as to need to hug them at the chest. Once this habit of book-carrying was mentioned to me, however, I recognized how even such a slight gesture harbored the potential for gender shaming. I could easily, if self-consciously, change my book-carrying conduct, but I could not diminish the very self-consciousness that caused my sense of doubt about my masculine fitness. What had been an unconscious habit all of a sudden became a calculated performance that defined my chastened conduct, as I sought to remember the proper book-carrying form. For sure, race clouds the question of how boys and men are perceived socially in regard to masculine conformity, as Neal has so brilliantly articulated through his concept of illegibility. While racial-gender stereotyping projects onto black maleness some attributes as overly legible, it necessarily also projects other attributes as illegible. If black boys are supposed to be cool to the point of overly phallic hardness, what does it mean when a black boy carries his books like a girl, or not enough like a boy? Might this be an effect of inhabiting a different racial culture in a Jim Crow school?

I remember my first college roommate, a white boy from a neighboring town who met me during summer orientation, went through the trouble of finding out my home phone number, and insisted on arranging for us to be roommates. He seemed nice enough, if a tad bit too eager, and after rooming with him for a couple of months, I realized what the problem was. He thought he had found in me an approachable black boy who could make him more cool without his feeling intimidated by my black masculinity. Let's call this expectation the Booker T. syndrome: I was deemed enough of a nonintimidating Negro to serve as his bridge to blackness because I did not seem the rough hypermasculine nigger who haunts and titillates the fantasies of so many whites. One night, when I innocuously walked into the room, my new roommate expressed a sudden delighted admiration for how I walked, and begged me to teach him to "walk black." When I laughingly reported that unfortunately I had miserably failed at conquering that particular skill, he refused to accept the idea, saying that I naturally walked that way and that he could see me dipping and dapping like the college's black basketball players (almost all the black males at my college were basketball players) when I came into the room. Needless to say, I had to abandon him as a roommate. For a white young man who had chosen to room with me *because* of my black maleness, not even my too-good sissy conduct could clue him in, even though it could make me attractive to him as an experimental project to overcome his racial fears and live out his fantasies of cool cross-racial camaraderie.

Although there has been some good scholarship indicating how same-gender sexuality takes on diverse forms across different nationalities and cultures, there has been very little consideration of the implications of cultural difference for sissiness and sissophobia.<sup>41</sup> I have elsewhere discussed how historically in black literature and popular culture there has been a bifurcation of the sissy into swishing versus respectable figures.<sup>42</sup> In "Sissies at the Picnic" Ferguson observes a similar categorization at work in the black communities of his rural Georgia hometown during the 1970s: "The sissies that I knew ran the gamut of gender styles: some, like Edward, were limp-wristed and sashayed as they walked; others, like my literature instructor, were straight-laced and masculine; still others, like the pianists and choir directors, had a fondness for perms and relaxers."<sup>43</sup> Although Ferguson does tend to equate sissiness fully with homosexuality in his essay, he is one of the few cultural theorists who has helped to articulate the heterogeneous figurations of sissy conduct available within black communities. Clarifying the import of this observation for queer theory more generally, Ferguson explains how the social realities of black sissiness are easily obscured and overlooked within the narratives and theories developed to explain the emergence of modern homosexuality in the West: "There is a history jeopardized by prevalent understandings of queer identities and tired notions about black communities, images discarded by hegemonic

formations as trifling and unimportant. Since the hegemonic narrative of modern homosexuality is figured around cosmopolitanism, whiteness, and normative gender practices, that narrative can only approach a discrepant history like mine by suppressing it. I will tell this tale as a way to illuminate the heterogeneous makeup of the black communities that I knew in west-central Georgia, a configuration that confused the precincts of past and present, man and woman, heterosexual and queer.<sup>44</sup> Often reduced to a uniform stereotype in mass media, and pushed under the radar of queer theory, this array of black sissy conduct—from the swishing to the hyperproper—raises a variety of questions concerning the social production, political ideology, and cultural representation of nonconforming genders among men more generally.

Although my interest here is largely centered on African American men's relation to sissy impersonation as conduct and character, it would be irresponsible not to investigate how the sissy appears under the aegis of dominant whiteness as well as under other subordinating racial groups besides blackness. Part of my inquiry here concerns whether sissiness is manifested differently in different racial formations. I am not suggesting that there is no underlying commonality across race in the delineation of a sissy persona, only that such a delineation takes on different forms and consequences due to the peculiar circumstances adhering to the construction of black masculinity under white supremacy. In chapter 4, for instance, I examine the Cold War display of a white sissy like Truman Capote in contrast with Baldwin's sissy insurgency, itself contrasted with the different expressions of sissy conduct of Little Richard in early rock-and-roll and Sylvester James in disco music. In chapter 6, I consider how the pro football player Esera Tuaolo references his Polynesian heritage as a defense against the tendency in the white West to equate homosexuality with sissiness. While Tuaolo uses his "native" marginalized culture to gesture toward a third gender—the *faafafine*—he finds it difficult *not* to transliterate this word as "sissy," thus defeating his own insistence on a cultural distinction that makes a significant gender difference. Here again we run up against the limits of language to enrich, rather than to straitjacket, our perceptions of gender conduct. Nevertheless, Tuaolo communicates powerfully the idea that *faafafine* is indigenous to Samoan culture, even as he remains entangled in the sissiphobia that he says he learned from the Christian morality unfortunately imposed on his native culture by Euro-American imperialism. White sissies definitely represent a betrayal of the prerogatives granted not only to maleness but also to whiteness. Because white masculinity is the dominant norm for gender identity, white sissies must flaunt their open disregard for the undeniable privilege that white masculinity affords. Because black men are already at least once removed from the dominant norm, to be a sissy is paradoxically both a heightened risk and a cultural resource. As we shall see, across history black

men have enacted (both shamelessly and shamefacedly) and also avoided (both affectionately and aggressively) sissy identification. In chapter 5, for instance, we can understand the much-referenced homophobia evident in black cultural nationalist discourse by examining not only these writers' sissophobia but also their risk of seeing themselves as sissies exactly *because* of their sophisticated literacy. Amiri Baraka represents the perfect case of such, as his early fictional protagonist, Roi, seems modeled on Baldwin's John Grimes, while also enacting a narrative of maturation that ambivalently seeks to pivot the achievement of manhood on sissy-avoidance.<sup>45</sup> In chapter 6, we see how black pro athletes narrate their own sportsmanship through an ambivalent relation to sissiness, at once distancing themselves from sissiness while conspicuously embracing the sissiness in others. Although sissiness is normatively that which is to be avoided at all costs, its presence and influence in African American and American culture are inescapable.

The blossoming field of black masculinity studies has done much to complicate and enrich our understanding of exactly how race intersects with gender, often in confusing and contradictory ways. An especially helpful approach for this study has been Mark Anthony Neal's theorization of "illegible black masculinities."<sup>46</sup> Neal translates the problem of masculine identity formation into a question of legibility without losing the strong sense of what E. Patrick Johnson calls the "material way of knowing." Neal clarifies how we are beset by a multiple bind in accounting for the twists and turns of masculinity's black face when he engages in a project aimed at "rendering 'legible' black male bodies—those bodies that are all too real to us—illegible, while simultaneously rendering so-called illegible black bodies—those black male bodies we can't believe are real—legible."<sup>47</sup> Paradoxically, blackness tends to make masculinity both overly familiar—trapped in unforgiving and deadly stereotypes that have justified lynching castration after emancipation and police murderousness after the second emancipation of civil rights—and at the same time mysteriously alienated from conventional gender norms. Between the raping buck and the Uncle Tom eunuch, black manliness has suffered a pincer motion whereby white dominant culture refuses the in-between, despite centuries of black men who have modeled extraexemplary lives of unparalleled manhood integrity. When black men have, on rare occasion, been represented as sissies, it becomes something of a nigger joke confirming how easily the black raping beast with a superengorged cock can flip into an Uncle Tom eunuch. When posed as a peril for respectable black manliness by African Americans themselves, the black sissy can become a racial embarrassment, much like Du Bois's take on Washington, despite the long history of sissies, whether superciliously respectable or fiercely flagrant, who have achieved an oversized place within the pantheon of black history, from George Washington Carver to James Baldwin, from Little Richard to Dennis Rodman and beyond.

## NOTES

### Chapter 1. Can the Sissy Be Insurgent?

- 1 John Reid, *The Best Little Boy in the World* (1973; repr., New York: Ballantine Books), 1977. Reid's bildungsroman about the challenges of coming out as a gay youth in Nixonian America has even inspired investigations of "best little boy" syndrome in social psychology. See, for instance, John E. Pachankis and Mark L. Hatzenbuehler, "The Social Development of Contingent Self-Worth in Sexual Minority Young Men: An Empirical Investigation of the 'Best Little Boy in the World' Hypothesis," *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 2 (March 2013): 176–190.
- 2 Charles I. Nero, "Reading Will Make You Queer: Gender Inversion and Racial Leadership in Claude McKay's Home to Harlem," *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 2, no. 1 (2013): 74–86. Nero's article is especially helpful because he uncovers a long historical connection in African American literature between boys who read (too much) and the perception of incipient homosexuality. As we shall see, this is a trope that is not limited to African American culture, but is also evident in larger U.S. culture. Nero cites the study by Signithia Fordham, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), in which a connection is made by African American school children between a boy's academic success and queerness in Washington, DC, of the 1980s. Due to a facile equation between sissiness and homosexuality, figured especially through vernacular uses of terms like "gay" and "faggot," such studies often lack the linguistic subtlety and historical contextualization fully to understand the implications of contemporary black lingo seeming to link educational achievement with queerness in some subsets of the African American population.
- 3 Roderick Ferguson, "Sissies at the Picnic: The Subjugated Knowledges of a Black Rural Queer," in *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson, and Jennifer L. Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 191.
- 4 Ferguson, "Sissies at the Picnic," 191.
- 5 Vershawn Ashanti Young, *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy and Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007), xv.
- 6 Judith Butler has, of course, become strongly identified as the formative theorist of performativity in books like *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), esp. 134–141. For an argument in favor of performance over performativity as a way to theorize identity, see E. Patrick Johnson's *Appropriating*

*Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), which theorizes the import of performance as grounding us in “material ways of knowing” (6–12). Johnson clarifies what’s at stake in preferring performance over performativity: “Racial performativity informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning. Yet I must reemphasize . . . that to read blackness merely as ‘playful’ is to fall into a willful denial of what it means to live ‘black.’ Indeed, blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society” (9). Although my study is rooted in a theory of conduct more than performance theory, it takes seriously this critique of performativity and pursues Johnson’s insistence on praxis as crucial to understanding how “the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing” that “supersedes or explodes performance” (8).

- 7 Ahmed writes, “Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures.” She continues: “We could say that history ‘happens’ in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their tendencies.” See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, and Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 56.
- 8 E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness*, 6–12.
- 9 Houston A. Baker Jr., “Critical Memory and Black Public Sphere,” in *The Black Public Sphere*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 8.
- 10 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1901; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1986).
- 11 Kenneth Mostern, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 42.
- 12 Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, a Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Warner Books, 1988), 88.
- 13 Walker and Wright had a rather rough falling-out. In addition, she seems overly concerned with Wright’s lack of romantic interest in black women in general, and perhaps in her in particular; see Margaret Walker, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius*, 88–89.
- 14 The word “speculation” is loaded with negative connotations, but as Harper suggests, speculation may be the most apt tool when trying to unpack “structures of feeling,” the phrase coined by the English cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Harper writes: “The account that I offer will necessarily be speculative, my being no more able than any ‘outside’ party to apprehend fully the various affective elements in these exchanges, owing to their being not somehow ‘unconscious’ but, as Williams insists, *embryonic* with respect to discernible and articulate forms”; see Phillip Brian Harper, *Private Affairs: Critical Ventures in the Culture of Social Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 136. Also see Phillip Brian Harper, “The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Experience, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge,” in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 106–123. On the theory of the structure of feeling, Harper cites Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132; the concept can also be found

- in Williams's earlier book, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 26–27 and 35–45. Neal makes a point similar to Harper's when he, at the outset of *Looking for Leroy*, reflects back on his youthful speculation about the sexuality of the fictional character Leroy, the black male dance student from the TV drama *Fame*. Against the grain of encrusted stereotypes of black male bodies, Neal observes, those manifestations of black maleness that do not fit the stereotypes tend to become “illegible,” unless they can be pigeonholed into another stereotype of queerness; see Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 1–4.
- 15 See, for instance, Kwame Holmes, “What’s the Tea? Gossip and the Social Production of Black Gay History,” *Radical History Review* 122 (May 2015): 64–66; C. Riley Snorton, “Rumor Has It,” in *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down-Low* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 121–146; and Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 29.
  - 16 See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 177–205.
  - 17 Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, the restored text established by the Library of America, 1945 (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 227.
  - 18 Wright, *Black Boy*, 229.
  - 19 For a more extensive reading of this scene in relation to what I have called “race rape,” the equation of racially emasculating practices with metaphorical white-male on black-male rape, see Marlon B. Ross, “Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest,” in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 318–323.
  - 20 It is worth noting that Black Aesthetic theorists and nationalists viewed Wright as one of their greatest progenitors, based especially in his construction of the “bad Negro” character Bigger Thomas. See, for instance, Addison Gayle’s laudatory chapter on Wright, “The Black Rebel,” in *Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975), 167–202, and his biography, *Richard Wright: Ordeal of a Native Son* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1983); Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On: An Afterword,” in *Black Fire: Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, ed. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1968), 645–652; and Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (1968; repr., New York: Laurel/Dell, 1992), 103–107.
  - 21 Wright, *Black Boy*, 285.
  - 22 Wright, *Black Boy*, 285–286.
  - 23 Wright, *Black Boy*, 33.
  - 24 See James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (1955; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1990), 13–23.
  - 25 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 103.
  - 26 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 103.
  - 27 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 103–104.
  - 28 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 104 (phrase “[Italics added.]” in original).

- 29 Rogin instructively compares blackface minstrelsy to sexual cross-dressing; see Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 30–35.
- 30 The representation of Jim Crow's large hips might likely allude to the display of Sarah Baartman's buttocks in circus shows in Great Britain and in graphic representations of her hips in cartoon and scientific literature in the early 1800s. On the history and lasting impact of Baartman's exploitation, see the essays in Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, ed., *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
- 31 John W. Roberts historicizes the oral legend of the bad man in early twentieth-century black culture in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 171–220, documenting how the notion of badness acquires a dual meaning in African American culture that, on the one hand, perceives the bad man as dangerously amoral in his violence, but, on the other, takes him as a battling hero who puts white men and their superior weaponry to shame. According to Clarence Major, the use of “bad” to mean “positive to the extreme” or “the very best” comes across the Atlantic with the enslaved Africans, and accrues its inverted meaning as “a simple reversal of the white standard” in the process; see Major, *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 15.
- 32 According to Hazel Rowley, Wright started working on *The Long Dream* in 1957 and published it in 1958; see Rowley, *The Life and Times of Richard Wright* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 484; and Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed., trans. Isabel Barzun (1973; repr., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 450–454. In 1950 Baldwin begins work on *Crying Holy*, the manuscript published as *Go Tell It* in 1953. See David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 75–78.
- 33 William Blake, *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday and Company, 1970), 36, 37.
- 34 C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2017), esp. 5–11.
- 35 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 157.
- 36 Because I take “effeminacy” to be one important vector signaling sissiness but only one angle among many from which the sissy-boy recognizes himself and is recognized by others, I prefer “sissophobia” to Sedgwick's term. I want to challenge the assumption that nonconforming boyish conduct necessarily falls into girlish conduct even while acknowledging Sedgwick's point that our discourse is riddled with binary gender thinking. Tim Bergling has coined a similar term in his journalistic book *Sissyphobia: Gay Men and Effeminate Behavior* (New York: Haworth / Harrington Park, 2001), to describe, wholly from a white middle-class perspective, the animosity against effeminate gay men within white gay communities.
- 37 Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 157.
- 38 Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 275.

- 39 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 276.
- 40 And with the far-too-gradual acceptance of trans personhood in the twenty-first century, that which is speculated as sissy behavior can be projected onto trans identity as well. Clearly, however, not all sissy-boys can predict or predicate trans character just as not all sissy-boys prognosticate a homosexual in waiting. The term “gender fluid” has become a progressive way to signal any person who feels discomfort ascribing to either pole of the gender or sex binary.
- 41 Some prominent examples of scholarship on the differing cultural configurations of same-gender sexuality include Evelyn Blackwood, ed., *Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior*, Research on Homosexuality no. 12 (New York: Haworth, 1986); Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behavior outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750–1918* (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Joseph Carrier, *De Los Otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Roger N. Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); José Quiroga, *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Gilbert Herdt, *Same Sex, Different Cultures: Exploring Gay and Lesbian Lives* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997); and Walter L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1986).
- 42 Marlon B. Ross, “Some Glances at the Black Flag: Race, Same-Sex Desire, and Cultural Belonging,” in “Reading the Signs,” ed. Anne Herrmann and Ross Chambers, special issue, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 21 (1994): 193–219.
- 43 Ferguson, “Sissies at the Picnic,” 193.
- 44 Ferguson, “Sissies at the Picnic,” 188.
- 45 Amiri Baraka (aka LeRoi Jones), *The Autobiography of Leroy Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984).
- 46 Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy*, 8.
- 47 Mark Anthony Neal, *Looking for Leroy*, 8.
- 48 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: Free Press, 1998), 56.
- 49 Booker T. Washington, *The Story of the Negro* (1909; repr., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 1:332.
- 50 Theodore Roosevelt, *The Rough Riders* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1899), 144–145.
- 51 Christopher B. Booker, *“I Will Wear No Chain!”: A Social History of African American Males* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 128.
- 52 Booker, *“I Will Wear No Chain!”*, 125.
- 53 Roosevelt, *Rough Riders*, 143–144.