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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.[1] 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.

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Perhaps I instinctively sensed, as Charles I. Nero has so wittily observed, that "reading can make you queer."[2] 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

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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.[3]

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.[4] 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?

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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."[5] 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 sissyhood. As we shall see in chapter 6, and as mentioned in Ferguson's essay, the

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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.[6] 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

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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.

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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.[7] 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.

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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."[8] 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

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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."[9] 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*.[10] 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

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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

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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

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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."[11] 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, cognizantly, 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 sissiphobia, abets our understanding of how historical figures have negotiated charges of unfit manliness. Although sissiphobia—the hyperbolic fear of being perceived as, or being too proximate to, a sissy—obviously is closely

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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 a jailable 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."[12] 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 gossipy 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.[13] 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 gossipy, 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.[14] 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.[15] 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

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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.[16] 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

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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.[17]

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.'"[18] 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.[19] 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

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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.[20] 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."[21] 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.[22] 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.[23] 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,

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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.[24] 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,'"[25] Cleaver claims this as "one of Wright's few comments on the subject of homosexuality."[26] Feeling the need to distance the homosexually obsessed Wright (according to Walker) from homosexuality to make him a hardier 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."[27] 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."

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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.]"[28] 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.[29] 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

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

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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 jutted 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.[30] 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.[31] 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

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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.[32] 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

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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."[33] 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.[34] 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

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racial identity: the slightest hint of doubt about one's boyishness seems to catapult one into the realm of sissyhood. 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.[35]

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.[36] 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."[37] 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.

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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."[38] He asks whether the question "might be not what female masculinities borrow from male masculinities, but rather what do men borrow from butches."[39] 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.

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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

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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.[40] 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?

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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 sissiphobia.[41] 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.[42] 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."[43] 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

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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."[44] 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

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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' sissiphobia 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.[45] 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."[46] 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."[47] 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.

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Institutional Sissiness

In addition to speculative inquiry with an emphasis on the material, discursive, ideological expressions of racial conduct and character and on the social and psychic dimensions of liminality, this study also suggests that sissiness is crucial to the institutional operation of hegemonic masculinity. The institutions that regulate access to power depend on the prospect of sissy jeopardy to guard a proper masculinity, but this internal sissy threat may change in subtle ways according to historical and place-specific circumstance, including racial identity. In the same sense that masculinity is sustained through institutions, not merely through the individuals who manifest and perform the masculine, so it could be said that sissification is an institutional phenomenon. Against the discursive practice of conceiving the sissy as an isolated figure whose rarity codifies his abnormality, sissiness historically has been vital to the sustenance of those key institutions—politics, religion, the military and other policing forces, sports, academe, and the family—tasked with governing and protecting white patriarchal masculinity as the source and arbiter of power. The sissy serves as a bugbear scaring men toward proper masculine comportment through sissiphobic mockery, panic, shaming, and violence, but the sissy's present absence is also an odd source of inspiration, demarcating the limits of institutional acceptability even when the sissy lives at the heart of an institution. We can see the institutional function of the sissy at work in a range of venues studied here: from the government's large-scale purging of "soft" men during the Cold War to the intimate acts of sissy shaming portrayed in Baldwin's fictional Temple of the Fire Baptized, the Pentecostal church that his hero John Grimes attends in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; from the systematic sissy aversion that pro sports like basketball and football inculcate in their athletes to the mockery and dismissal that one of George Washington Carver's black male colleagues used to delegitimize his authority as head of academic agriculture at the Tuskegee Institute. Sometimes institutions seek to police sissiness in draconian ways, such as the Catholic boys' school that expels a postulate on suspicions aroused by his effeminate manner, as narrated in David Kopay's sports disclosure memoir. At other times, the institutional regulation of perceived sissiness can come in the guise of paternalistic encouragement, such as when Emile Griffith's boss, in order to coax him into a boxing career, must discourage his interest in ladies' hats based on the assumption that a black boy with such natural musculature would otherwise be wasting his native potential. The institutional influence of the sissy is not always through negational acts like coaxing, ridicule, dismissal, shaming, or violence, however. As we see with Booker T. Washington's wooing of white industrial patronage, James Weldon Johnson's handling of a career in the U.S. consular service, Truman Capote's exploitation of emerging televisual

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media, and the 1990s straight black sissy memoirists' use of sissiness to desegregate elite universities, sometimes a sissy demeanor can enable men to maneuver within institutions in which sensitivity, vulnerability, caution, and finesse are tolerated, as long as those characteristics are subordinated to larger masculinist ends. Perhaps the most apt example of institutional sissiness, though, is that of the church sissy, whose particular "soft" talents are highly valued by an institution otherwise doctrinally intolerant of gender deviation. One could even go so far as to say that the church without its circumspect, self-censoring sissies would hardly be church at all.

The sissy is a foundational institutional figure in that the most impactful agencies and organizations of white male power are structured to defend against his influence, much more his presence. The military embodies perhaps that institution whose regulation of hegemonic masculinity has been most uniform and forceful. Indeed, soldiering figures the sissy as its absolute contrary: the soft man, the yellow-bellied coward, the undisciplined soldier who flees the battlefield. The exclusion from and then segregation of African American men in military service in the United States provides an enlightening instance of how racialized sissiness anchors the institutional masculinity of soldiering. From the War for Independence onward, black men have historically been denied combat aptitude as men not quite self-disciplined enough for warfare. Black men have had to prove, again and again with each national war, that they are battle-worthy, and especially that they are worthy of military command. As W. E. B. Du Bois remarks, at the outset of the Civil War both northerners and southerners assumed that slaves would not fight for their own freedom. "Negroes on the whole were considered cowards," he writes, "and inferior beings whose very presence in America was unfortunate."[48] For African American men, and later women and gay men, eager to defeat the long-held assumption that black men would lack the courage to fight on their own behalf for freedom, military service has been one of the central ways to lay claim to those prerogatives of citizenship historically invested in white heterosexual masculinity. Booker T. Washington makes this point when he equates the battlefield valor of black soldiers during the Civil War with fitness for freedom: "The services of the Negro troops performed in the Civil War in fighting for the freedom of their race not only convinced the officers who commanded them and the white soldiers who fought by their side that the Negro race deserved to be free, but it served to convince the great mass of the people in the North that the Negroes were fit for freedom."[49] Because of this intimate link among manliness, citizenship, and brave soldiering, African American leaders were especially upset by Theodore Roosevelt's insinuation in *The Rough Riders* and elsewhere that black troops showed a lack of nerve during the Cuban invasion of the Spanish-American War.[50] As Christopher B. Booker documents, Roosevelt at first praised, privately and publicly, the black troops that fought under

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him, but "[after] returning to the United States and immersing himself in the realities of political life," he "began to downplay the performance of the black regiments and ultimately challenge their bravery and loyalty"—finding it not only ideologically convenient but also politically necessary.[51] "Yet, while encouraging an aggressive and venturesome masculinity for American whites," Booker writes, "Roosevelt's message for black males was quite the opposite. It was a message heavily influenced by the realpolitik of the era, which dictated that black males be kept at arm's length, even if they formed an important bloc of voters who consistently voted for his Republican Party."[52] In his attack on the manliness of black soldiers, Roosevelt repeats a common notion: that a colored man is not mentally, emotionally capable of comprehending good military discipline without the element of personal loyalty to a white superior.[53]

Because the military, along with sport, is the most prominent institution where masculinity has been tested along explicit racial lines, sissification plays a highly visible role in determining who is fit for service, and even more who is fit for command, based in racial claims of a natural hierarchy of gender within the masculine. For example, in John Richards's essay "Some Experiences with Colored Soldiers," originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in August 1919, we find a crystallized articulation of the sissification of the black soldier as a reaffirmation of white men's right to command. As with Roosevelt, this insult to the black soldier focuses on the notion of a loss of nerve on the battlefield. Needless to say, this stereotype merely mimes the one rehearsed by the performance of blackface minstrelsy, the Plantation School of literature, and the zip coon figure in vaudeville so popular across the slave and Jim Crow eras: the idea that the slave's métier is subservient loyalty to the master and his brood, but his weakness is a superstitious fear of haunts and a lack of moral compass. Richards explicitly alludes to the figure of the loyal slave when he tries to explain why it is not sufficient for black soldiers to have solely black officers: "I have said nothing about colored officers, because I have not known them: but this much I think is true: black still turns naturally to white for leadership, just as on the Southern plantation the slave turned questioning eyes to the planter."[54] This is why, for Richards, the colored soldier's only valuable attribute is obedience, absolute happiness in obeying white officers. He paints this scene to punctuate the assertion: "No troops will do well under a slipshod drillmaster, but the colored man will deteriorate and become slack more quickly than the white. He responds immediately, however, to snappy commands and a soldierly appearance."[55] This curtailed sense of the black man's capacity for soldiering is captured graphically in the image of the poorly commanded colored soldier's tendency to "become slack." A soldier at attention is the opposite of "slack"—a physical alertness visually cued as an upright body, spine stiffened, arms stiffly gripping the weapon, head facing forward, eyes

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eagle-focused ahead, mouth neither grinning nor grimacing. On the battlefield, the metaphor of slackness images a failure of regimentation, discipline, and obedience to command.

We can see how the mélange of slavish stereotypes promoted to insult black soldiering, when they are not focused on the hyperphallic raping predator, congregate around the image of black men's constitutional unfitness for virile manhood. "Given the prevailing racial attitudes of whites in the years before and during the war (and given that slavery had only ceased to exist some fifty years earlier)," Neil A. Wynn writes of World War I, "it is not remarkable that so little change should occur during the war. Even sympathetic whites tended to speak of Afro-Americans in the stereotyped terms of 'uncle,' 'Hottentot,' 'pickaninny' and as 'boys who do not grow up even under shellfire.'"[56] Cowardice is emphasized in these performances of Jim Crow maleness exactly because the coward is taken to be the contrary of proper (white) masculinity. This sissification of black men's military prowess helps to explain why white officers and enlisted men, like Richards himself, have damned with faint praise the achievements of black military men. To acknowledge without reservation the bravery of black soldiers would be to threaten white supremacy as institutionally executed through soldiering as the standard-bearer of masculinity's paramount virtue, courage under fire. There is no more vivid an image of this deliberate sissification of the black male soldier than that provided by veteran Frederick Williams, whose testimony is recorded in William Miles's documentary *Men of Bronze* (1977), on the experience of black military men in World War I. Based on Williams's oral narrative in the film, Phyllis R. Klotman reports: "At home the men had to train ignominiously with broomsticks—they weren't allowed guns; at home and abroad they were met with hostility from their own countrymen and were confined to the role of stevedores (labor troops) until they were finally assigned to the Fourth French Army."[57] The boy or man armed with a broom or mop often signals a sissy disposition, as we'll see in the cases of Booker T. Washington, James Baldwin, and Robert Stepto. The humiliation of black soldiers training with brooms is intended at once to suggest that a black man with a gun would be a threat to whites either because of incompetence or indiscipline while paradoxically also suggesting that he is not man enough for real battle as a real soldier. Even Washington, who eagerly imaged himself in 1901 as wielding a broom to gain entry into Hampton Institute, as we shall see in the next chapter, was upset by the routine typecasting of black soldiers as sissy cowards unfit for duty.

The figure of the brave soldier operates beyond the military institution as a guarantor of the courageous virtue of manhood, and for black masculinity the military soldier has historically been conjoined by black authors and activists to justify the masculine bravado of the race man who "fights" on behalf of civil

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rights and black liberation. In one of his most famous *Crisis* opinion pieces, "Returning Soldiers" (May 1919), W. E. B. Du Bois urges the soldiers coming back from World War I to "return fighting."

> But by the God of Heaven, we are cowards and jackasses if now that that war is over, we do not marshal every ounce of our brain and brawn to fight a sterner, longer, more unbending battle against the forces of hell in our land.
>
> We *return*
>
> We *return fighting*.[58]

Rather than merely a tired metaphor, "fighting" for rights by other than military means—synecdochically referenced as brains and brawn—extends the battlefield to "the fatherland" that oppresses them. Du Bois participates in a long historical discourse equating manly military valor with civil rights activism, exploited by speakers from across the political spectrum, including that of black Civil War veterans, Washington's controversial speech at the Spanish-American War victory parade in Chicago in 1898 (discussed in chapter 2), the *Baltimore Afro-American* newspaper Double-V campaign during World War II, and the Black Power activists of the 1960s (discussed in chapters 4 and 5).[59] According to the logic of this discourse, as so eloquently expressed by Du Bois, to fail to bring the discipline and courage learned as a soldier into the homefront battle is to be no less a coward and a jackass than a soldier who flees the battlefield under fire.

It may not be surprising that the military has historically been a key institution whose very mission is dictated by separating the men from the sissies through a racial logic that projected black men as inordinately sissified in their natural propensity for cowardice, but the same can be said of activism as an institution defined by opposition to the status quo. The struggle over racial justice in the United States has long been analogized to a war, with race leaders imaged as warriors, a logic that reaches an apex during the Black Power era, where Black Panthers modeled themselves on an insurgent military unit, black nationalists evoked imagery of the battlefield, and nonviolent protestors were mocked for refusing to fight like men and for putting women and children on the front lines. In "Dynamite Growing out of Their Skulls," Calvin C. Hernton cryptically captures this metaphor equating racial struggle with warfare and highlights the common idea that the men who advocate nonviolence must be queer: "The philosophy that compels any man to lie down before his enemies when he knows they are going to tread on his flesh—the flesh with which he makes love to his women—seems rather queer to me."[60] Many black nationalists extend the logic that equates the "passive" in "passive resistance" to the passivity of the penetrated faggot—so much so that Martin Luther King Jr. is compelled to defend nonviolence by insisting that it is not passive at all. In direct response to Malcolm X,

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King demands that the strategy be more accurately called "nonviolent direct action" rather than "passive resistance," for as long as even the hardiest resistance remains "passive," it is in danger of being perceived as sissified conduct rather than manly valor. King goes further to assert the manliness of "moral force" as an advance over physical violence:

> Acceptance of nonviolent direct action was a proof of a certain sophistication on the part of the Negro masses; for it showed that they dared to break with the old, ingrained concepts of our society. The eye-for-an-eye philosophy, the impulse to defend oneself when attacked, has always been held as the highest measure of American manhood. We are a nation that worships the frontier tradition, and our heroes are those who champion justice through violent retaliation against injustice. It is not simple to adopt the credo that moral force has as much strength and virtue as the capacity to return a physical blow; or that to refrain from hitting back requires more will and bravery than the automatic reflexes of defense.[61]

Against his nonviolent ethos, King goes on to structure the strategy through the lingo of warfare, soldiering, and military rank, trying to turn an increasingly troubling public image of unfit masculinity into one of fitness for nonviolent battle: "To join an army that trains its adherents in the methods of violence, you must be of a certain age. But in Birmingham, some of the most valued foot soldiers were youngsters ranging from elementary pupils to teen-age high school and college students. For acceptance in the armies that maim and kill, one must be physically sound, possessed of straight limbs and accurate vision. But in Birmingham, the lame and the halt and the crippled could and did join up."[62] Against the charge that women and children were replacing men on the frontline, King tries to retain the substance of manly courage and soldierly discipline while arguing for nonviolence as inclusive for people of all ages, genders, and the differently abled. He continues with this entangled analogy for several paragraphs, writing, "In Birmingham, outside of the few generals and lieutenants who necessarily directed and coordinated operations, the regiments of the demonstrators marched in democratic phalanx."[63] King's dilemma and his rhetorical response to it indicate how difficult it is to shift the epistemology of political activism and social revolution away from those dictated by a masculinist ideology. Even though King comported himself with apparent ease as a properly gendered heterosexual, his political and moral stance subjected him to sissy suspicion no less damaging than the attacks on Washington sixty years earlier. As we shall see in chapter 4, Baldwin meets a similar challenge by coyly embracing his homo-sissiness to proffer a more thorough critique of white male supremacy's masculinist mechanics.

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The military as a supreme institution of masculine command and the soldier as a supreme exemplar of masculine discipline loom large in the black male quest for masculine respectability. For the military and the militant, the sissy looms as large as a cautionary figure. The difficulty of the conduct of a soldier is that, while being expected to possess the most aggressive masculinity, even to the point of mass killing and daring self-sacrifice, he is also expected to possess characteristics usually projected onto a too-good sissy-boy: obedience, loyalty, fastidiousness in dress and grooming, and guarded intimacy with other men that staves off sexual attraction. The sissy is not just a haunting within the good soldier; he is also a haunting within the institution of military discipline. Rather than devoting a single chapter to the sissy in relation to the military institution, I have thematized this matter across the chapters of this study. Thus, we see African American men respond to assumptions about their soldierly unfitness—whether as exclusion or servility—as a sign of their manhood deficiency across the twentieth century from varying ideological, geographic, and socioeconomic perspectives. We see how Booker T. Washington adapts his hygienic persona in response to his mentor, Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who exploits white military command as a rationale for the kind of servile racial discipline he organizes to control the black students at Hampton Institute. We see James Weldon Johnson narrating his sophisticated negotiation of white military officers in the face of a lynching military mob in his hometown and during civil war when he is in the consular service in Central America. We see how black nationalists attempt to image themselves as armed warriors against the foil of civil rights leaders as cowardly sissies who would rather prostitute themselves to white men's power than man the frontline for black liberation. We see how gay soldiers and professional athletes turn to racial desegregation of the military and sport as a model for their own fight to serve openly on actual battlefields as well as on the metaphorical battlefields of sport.

The enactment of institutional masculinity by sissifying black men to exclude or subordinate them from command in these organizations operates beyond the military establishment in such rigorously guarded venues of power as politics, religion, science, and sport. Ironically, the very attempt to purge the sissy from such institutions causes him to haunt the national imaginings of a manhood crippled by perceptions of effeminacy, weakness, cowardice, and unspecified softness. In some ways, the sissy's institutional effect is all the more powerful in his fleshly absence from the corridors of power because that absence is never an accomplished fact, always a palpable threat to be warned off and fought against. Like a ghost without history or portfolio, the sissy seems to appear mysteriously out of nowhere and out of recorded time.

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Sissy Etymologies

The idea of the sissy as a sociopsychological phenomenon is appropriately shrouded in linguistic and historical obscurity. Examining the etymology of the word can get us only so far, but it is at least a place to start. We must keep in mind, however, that in the U.S., gender nonconformity is so entangled with racial assignation that a proper reckoning with the sissy figure can be accounted for only through a concomitant racial analysis. Although etymology cannot deliver to us the material granularity of the sissy experience, it can help us historicize and contextualize the changing semantics of the discourses related to the complex of behaviors and temperaments associated with the phenomena of male gender nonconformity. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term "sissy" as used in reference to a male is first recorded in 1887, derived from "sis," the shortened form of "sister," and was used to designate an effeminate man.[64] Thinking of the route from "sister" to "sis" to "sissy" reconfirms the gender, rather than sexual, connotation of the word. Like other terms popular during the period—"pansy" immediately comes to mind—it might be revealing that the term emerges in English vernacular at the same time as the development of sexology, which seeks to devise nonjudgmental, scientific terms like "invert" and "homosexual" to describe men who are sexually attracted to men. If "sis" is an endearing diminutive of "sister," was "sissy" originally used among queer men as a form of destigmatizing address, as "girl," "Mary," "Miss Ann," and even "bitch" were used among pre-Stonewall homosexual men, and still among some gay men today? Or was "sis" used by others to stigmatize men who were perceived as incompetently masculine? As we shall see in chapter 3, it is likely that the term "swish," whose provenance emerges in the early decades of the twentieth century, was first used by queer men among themselves, and the same could be true of "sissy."

I want to emphasize again how the extreme gender binary of masculine/feminine in English and other European languages tends to refuse any gray area between male as fully masculine and female as fully feminine. Therefore, to be less than masculine is immediately to be projected as "effeminate." The prefix "ef-" before "feminate" indicates the difference between normative femininity and the nonnormative feminine when exhibited by a person of the wrong (male) sex. Nonetheless, being feminine is not the same as being "effeminate" insofar as the former dictates an appropriate behavior performed by females, whereas the latter indicates discordance between the person's gender conduct and presumed sexual anatomy—whether as biopsychological behavior, naturalized bodily comportment, or social temperament and moral character. The prefix "ef-" means "away from" or "outward," which could indicate the discordance between femininity and its expression in a male; its effect is to intensify the root word it qualifies,

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such that "effeminacy" is always an exaggerated or panicked form of the feminine exactly because of its expression in or on a person perceived as male. The "ef-" prefix exclaims, heightens, distorts, and alarms both the person whose body or personality exhibits it and the feminine itself as an idealized contrary of not only masculinity but also maleness.

The binary extremism carried by the language, in this case the vernacular, disallows gender intermediation, whereby the "sissy" could be conceived as a conduct, conduit, condition, or identity existing somewhere between masculinity and femininity, if not as an entity or activity within masculinity itself. Because the masculine is the top term in an extreme vertical binary, however—just as white and black coexist in an extreme racial binary—any declension from the masculine necessarily falls into its contrary, a version of the feminine. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have explained in relation to the grotesque as a social category, such binary extremism in discourse always reverts as proof to the body itself—in this case the actual person of the sissy serving as the somatic proof of the gender anomaly referenced in the vague term "sissy."[65] Because of the hierarchical nature of extreme binarism, the top term (masculine) is not commensurate with the bottom term (feminine), nor is a declension from masculinity in a man commensurate with a variance from conventional femininity in a woman. For a woman to transgress conventional femininity certainly holds dire dangers, but they are not exactly the same dangers visited upon a male who transgresses hegemonic masculinity. This is why there is no exact corollary of "sissy" to indicate a woman who is incompetently feminine, although "tomboy" perhaps comes closest. "Tomboy" has some positive connotations, though, as it describes a girl who is unusually adventurous, and it also tends to be age-specific, indicating a girl who has not *yet* outgrown her boyishness, whereas "sissy" can be used for a male of any age. In other words, the opprobrium that routinely applies to a sissy-boy only begins to take effect for a boyish girl when she is perceived as having prolonged this behavior beyond tolerance. Even so, "tomboy" applied to a woman does not have the sting of "sissy" applied to a man, for it is a far greater crime for a man to betray his prerogative of manliness than for a woman to aspire to masculinity. Indeed, given that masculinity carries a higher value, it is seen as somewhat understandable, if not acceptable, that a woman would want to abandon femininity to be more like a man.

It is also revealing how such terms of gender transgression are not fully fixed across time and place. An epithet can even migrate from describing a gender-anomalous male to ascribing a gender-anomalous female. For instance, the other common vernacular term for a gender-dissonant female, "butch," was originally used for a tough street boy in the first decade of the twentieth century but by midcentury had come to be applied to the conduct of a masculine woman, especially as paired in a lesbian dyad with a feminine one.[66] In today's gay vernacular,

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"butch" has migrated back to a descriptor of male conduct, but as it relates to a homosexual dyad between a conventionally masculine man and his "femme" romantic partner. Ironically, terms coined in an earlier era to describe the female invert and her conventionally feminine female partner now are used to reference a similar pairing between two queer men.

Whereas the terms for gender-dissident women are comparatively rare, "sissy" belongs to a continuum of vernacular terms for various degrees and modes of masculine incompetence: pansy, nancy, nance, nelly, fan, flamer, flame, momma's boy, crybaby, namby-pamby, mollycoddle, pantywaist, lightweight, lily liver, softie, girly-boy, poofter, poof, puff, wimp, wuss, pussy, cunt, punk, swisher, swish, fairy, femme, queen, queer, bitch, cocksucker, fag, faggot, homo. Other terms—like being "light in the loafers" or, in black vernacular, having "sugar in the blood"—indicate how such opprobrium tends to spin out into colorful metaphor, as though mere single-term epithets are not enough to gauge the abnormality. These are statements not just about observable bodily comportment or suspect social behavior but also, and more disdainfully, about intrinsic moral character. The plethora of such terms indicates the deep, free-floating level of anxiety—indeed, panic—occasioned by the prospect of failed manliness, whether temporary (as in a moment of cowardice under duress) or seemingly intrinsic or essential (as in a man who cannot achieve or perform masculinity under any circumstance).[67] It is especially instructive how even a term like "punk," which in U.S. slang originally denoted a tough street boy, can be flipped into failed masculinity, as it is used more recently to stigmatize a male who is available to be penetrated, emotionally or physically—a boyish man who, though probably straight, has been forced into a "passive" sexual position with another man.[68] As I emphasize throughout this study, while insecurity, which breeds panic, is cast outside hegemonic masculinity as evidence of a sissy temperament, this constitutes a projection or deflection of an affect that is intrinsic to masculinity itself. To be masculine is to worry about whether one is ever masculine enough, but to shield such worry by projecting it onto the soft other. The sissy, instead, introjects this worry, as discussed above, as a hypersensitive awareness of the fungibility of the line that is supposed to separate virile masculinity from its contrary. The insecurity at the heart of masculinity can unmoor even the most conventional signals of masculine competence, just as the Castro Street Clones of the 1970s took the posture, demeanor, and vestments of working-class manliness and turned them into emblems of a militantly gay masculinity.

There is a correlation between a lack of manliness (penetrability, weakness, timidity, demureness, softness, cowardice), the presumption of effeminateness, and the plausibility of same-gender attraction. As a measure of virility, the sissy is someone who is (too) penetrable emotionally and/or physically and thus

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occupies the false status of a female (one who is "naturally" penetrated) and by extension a homosexual (one who is unnaturally penetrated). In the face of these correlatives, however, I want to consider how the sissy tiptoes on the line ostensibly separating the failed male from the natural female as well as the line isolating the failed male from the homosexual. Correlations are not here equations but are instead approximations with a difference. A failed male always has the capacity for masculine recuperation (for instance, through an act of courage), because he, after all, possesses the requisite anatomy to claim such virility. It is less certain whether the homosexual similarly has the potential for sexual readjustment, especially after sexual orientation becomes more a matter of physiological etiology and fixed social identity in the decades following the establishment of Freudian psychoanalysis and sexology. Unless he identifies as female or undergoes gender "reassignment" surgery, in which case she is no longer a sissy, the alarm attending the "sissy" epithet derives exactly from the fact that he is a male, one who is not conducting himself as such—not just a gender failure of social categorization but also a categorical moral flaw, if not a heinous sin.[69]

It is exactly in the space of gender differentiation *within* masculinity, the panic that necessarily attends the prerogative of the masculine, that sissy impersonation operates. If the sissy could be firmly ousted from maleness, there would be no reason for panic. Because he is perceived as anatomically male but socially not conforming to the strict idealizations of the masculine, he embodies a deficiency inside maleness and thus within the masculine, a liminal or subliminal boundary marking the masculine as such. The "sissy" epithet encodes gender alarm, then, exactly because, while sissy behavior, temperament, and physicality seem readily legible as failed masculinity, it is impossible to mark that line where a male becomes irretrievably sissified. Applying Mark Anthony Neal's theory of legibility to Rod Ferguson's observation about the diverse expressions of sissy conduct and character among African Americans in the late twentieth-century South, we can understand how a large portion of the panic over sissiness results from the fungibility of the term itself, as well as the fungibility of the kinds of conduct and character represented. Some sissies are so subtle in their behavior and temperament that they can "pass" for straight. Some boys and men can code-switch at the drop of a dime, shifting from a high effeminate manner to a "butch" posture based on a perceived threat or an implied demand for gender conformity in a particular situation. In other words, sissy impersonation is not always self-consistent, a fact that heightens alarm over sissy identity to the point of intensifying the social demand for the sissy to be made legible. That some men can perform conventional masculinity, however, should not be mistaken as merely an act put on for an audience, as we know from gender theories of performativity discussed earlier. Accounting for this fungibility within and across gender is where the theory of performativity

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is especially helpful. To observe sissy behavior as a kind of gender code-switching emphasizes the extent to which such conduct is a social practice interpolated by an individual subject in constant negotiation with other interested subjects. At the same time, however, for some boys and men sissy behavior seems so ingrained or unavoidable that even in the face of punitive violence, they cannot seem to change their manner. As a complement to performativity as much as a corrective, I deploy the concept of *conduct* here to emphasize that dynamic in which the enactment of sissiness operates somewhere between an habituated gender performance and an inhabited gender identity.

At the slightest hint of an improper gesture, intonation, voice, or affect, a male is immediately labeled and targeted—a zero-toleration policy of sissiphobic enforcement. One could even go so far as to suggest that U.S. culture is *more* comfortable with easily identifiable sissy-boys, who can be verbally mocked and physically violated to ensure their distance from the genuinely masculine, than it is with those boys and men who skirt the line more discreetly, not quite manly enough, a bit too proper, or a bit too gentle. Just as during the Cold War, the government and press saw "soft" menaces everywhere in the corridors of power and fomented policies to purge any male person who raised the slightest suspicion of homosexuality, equated with sissy legibility, so society more generally has taken some comfort in a physical display of presumed sissiness, preferring the obvious threat to the insidiously invisible one.

Likewise, differentiating between the sissy and the homosexual—however subtle, sometimes even indecipherable, as in the panicked reaction of a morally outraged straight man to the appearance of a homo/sissy—occasions a theoretical opening for our inquiry. The man who is physically penetrated by, or desires to penetrate, another male lacks a certain deniability or at least ambiguity—an ambiguity that characterizes the sissy as a male who has failed to be manly enough but has not *yet* crossed the line, as far as we know, into the nonmasculine space reserved for the penetrated homosexual.[70] As will be explored across these chapters, because the sissy is perceived as gender-aberrant, he becomes the vestibule of homosexuality, a liminal site that portends a same-gender sexual orientation and, *in extremis*, a desire to be anally penetrated, even when there is no hard evidence, so to speak, of such conduct. Thus, unlike with the cross-dresser, homosexual, or trans person, sissy conduct becomes primarily a matter of gossip, innuendo, and speculation rather than a matter of law, policy, doctrine, or theology. Also as a result, sissies, unlike homosexuals and trans persons, have not thus far organized an effective, discrete social identity.[71] In the postscript, I ponder this queer possibility in the age of gender fluidity: What would it mean for sissy-boys and sissified men to organize not in a benevolent cause for the softer gender—such as "Gentle Men for Gender Justice"—but instead for the equal rights and social prerogatives

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of their own soft selves? If there is any doubt that the cause of gender fluidity will be a long, hard battle, the postscript suggests, we need only remember the rise of Donald J. Trump and his blunt celebration of male sexual predation, bullying against those perceived as weak, and white supremacist militias like the Proud Boys. And if we ever doubted that a line still separates white hegemonic masculinity from even the most virile of black manliness, we need only consider how Trump has repeatedly pitted himself against black male professional athletes who support racial justice movements, whether Colin Kaepernick or LeBron James. At least in the embattled gender/racial moment when this book was being written, the fissures between a retrograde white heteronormativity and progressive black manhood could not be more at odds.

The question arises as to how race complicates the sissy's liminality within masculinity and between normative (white) manliness and passive homosexuality. Are there particular connotations to the usage of the term "sissy" among African Americans and other racialized social groups? Just as the vocabulary defining male nonconforming gender changes, at least around the edges, with time and place, so racial and color distinctions transform and migrate. Although white and black sissies are correlatives—cousins under the skin, so to speak—there is a distinction that emerges from the conditions that adhere to black masculinity as a gender formation conceptualized as proximate, if not inimical, to white masculinity as the dominant norm. Black masculinity might be theorized as a subdominant norm, prevailing within blackness however tenuously, but oppressed and marginalized by white male supremacy. We can take this inquiry further by asking whether or how color shapes the person and perceptions of sissiness. Is a light-skinned sissy perceived in the same way as a dark-skinned one? Given the impact of color on the management of black masculinity (by white society as well as through black culture), I would think not. Darker- and lighter-skinned men have different relations to masculinity, exactly because whiteness arbitrates the masculine ideal, and thus the shade of blackness must also predicate different relations to "failed" or liminal manliness. During early Jim Crow, for instance, dark-skinned men were seen as closer to the slave inheritance and thus closer to African savagery. Burdened with the stigma of either African savagery (and thus an aberrantly wild masculinity) or slavish unmanliness (bereft of manly character and of all claims to manhood rights as defined by white institutions), the dark-skinned male betokened the extremes against which white males defined racial and gender supremacy. This is why James Weldon Johnson's faux autobiography of the ex-colored man is so instructive for understanding how "color" colors manliness under Jim Crow. Often the offspring of the slave master, the "mulatto," along with his light-skinned relatives, was given greater proximity to white masculinity, though never allowed unfettered access to it. But skin color in men has been a fluctuating gauge

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of masculine character. In 1960s black nationalism, dark-skinned men were especially prized, at least symbolically, as preserving an African manhood otherwise diminished and contaminated in lighter-skinned men, whose legacy was defiled by the history of white men's rape of slave women. Lighter-skinned men at the head of the Black Power revolution often expressed self-conscious anxiety about their lack of melanin, and sometimes projected this guilt onto black women for having had intercourse with the slaveholders in the long racial past. As we saw with Wright's depiction of Shorty, there is also an idea that lighter-skinned men are punks—a word with particular resonance in the black vernacular, meaning both "unmasculine" and "cowardly," and that this lack of manliness is constantly threatening to lure them into passive or penetrable homosexuality. In recent lingo spreading in televisual and social media, "pretty boys" has become an expression that is used especially to designate light-skinned men whose preppy grooming and attire counter the popularity of thug fashion under the masculine hardness of hip-hop culture. Pretty boys are not necessarily sissies or gay, but there is an implicit sense that such "boys" are too aesthetically pleasing to be full-fledged manly men, and thus, given the high visibility of gay men in the current political climate, one can never know for sure.

One of the most prominent figures providing a fluctuating template for the interconnection of race, color, and masculine fitness in U.S. culture was constructed by a white northern woman in the 1850s: Uncle Tom, the eponymous character of Harriet Beecher Stowe's blockbuster novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In Stowe's hands, Uncle Tom exemplifies noble manly conduct through Christian martyrdom. As a dark-skinned slave, his very body contravenes all that is egregious in the white aristocracy of the slaveholding South, and everything that is complicit among northern white men too corrupt or cowardly to root out the un-Christian evil of slavery. For Stowe, Uncle Tom's upright manliness is not surprisingly represented as a Christ-like gentleness, sensitivity, fidelity, simplicity, and self-sacrifice—anchoring values of the domestic sensibility undergirding Stowe's abolitionist ethos.[72] Stowe seeks to transfer the slave's docile servility into a black man's exemplary Christian service. Aware of the strangeness of making a dark-skinned male slave "the hero of our story," she highlights his African features from the outset: "At this table was seated Uncle Tom, Mr. Shelby's best hand, who, as he is to be the hero of our story, we must daguerreotype for our readers. He was a large, broad-chested, powerfully-made man, of a full glossy black, and a face whose truly African features were characterized by an expression of grave and steady good sense, united with much kindliness and benevolence. There was something about his whole air self-respecting and dignified, yet united with a confiding and humble simplicity."[73] Uncle Tom's "glossy" blackness and African phenotype are intrinsic to his manly physicality (large, broad-chested, powerfully made),

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but it is hard to say whether this big black manliness produces or contrasts with the "soft" moral character he exudes: grave and steady good sense, kindliness, benevolence, self-respect and dignity, and humble simplicity. It is Uncle Tom's Christ-like sensitivity that ultimately seals his fate when he righteously refuses to whip another slave and later when he refuses to reveal to the evil slave master Simon Legree the route that escaped female slaves have taken. If the dark-skinned Uncle Tom could embody the high ground of manly Christian martyrdom in Stowe's Victorian moral system of gentle domestic self-sacrifice, his iconography was bound to shift radically as it migrated into African American culture. Despite Tom's resistance to Simon Legree, he immediately becomes an icon of unmanly race betrayal for African Americans, the worst epithet that can be uttered against a black man by another black person. Even though Booker T. Washington is more frequently aligned with Uncle Tom than not, Addison Gayle Jr. makes use of this black vernacular view of Uncle Tom when explaining the New Negro ushered in by Washington: "The New Negro, therefore, is no Uncle Tom, no cowering, pitying, tenderhearted old slave."[74] What Stowe composes as civilizing Christian virtues of manly self-sacrifice, fidelity, and sensitivity are transposed as unmanly attributes of subservience and cowardice in Gayle's discourse. Although Stowe's daguerreotype for a gentle Christ-like male slave was necessarily a big, glossy-black African man, this did not reflect the social reality of her time, as lighter-skinned men, often mulattoes like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, were perceived as more civilized, more akin to white manliness, and thus more fit to serve as leaders and intermediaries between black and white.[75] As Riché Richardson points out, in his speeches Malcolm X casts "the Uncle Tom as homosexual," or as bisexual when he depicts the slave "as having a ravenous desire for white women" as part of Malcolm's "strategy for questioning and attacking the manhood and masculinity of the prevailing civil rights leadership."[76] By the 1960s, such civilizing light-skinned leaders are vigorously attacked as Uncle Toms, even when, as in the case of light-skinned Ralph Bunche, the first African American to win the Nobel Peace Prize, he is considered heroic among the white American elite.

As Mark Anthony Neal has noted concerning early twentieth-century movements to provide "'positive' and 'strong' constructions of black masculinity that would directly counter images of the shuffling Sambo or blackface caricatures of black men by white minstrel performers," these caricatures still operate as shorthand epithets used by black men against other black men in an attempt to keep them in line with idealized images of the "strong black man." "Even today," Neal observes, "words like Sambo and minstrel are used by the 'talented tenth' to describe hip-hop."[77] Neal could add "Tom" as perhaps the most aggressive epithet, which, like the others, carries complex connotations of colorism and classism, and also packs insults driven by heterosexism, homophobia, and sissiphobia. By

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the mid-twentieth century, the Uncle Tom has become so anathema to black manhood aspirations that he becomes the contrary of virile, warring masculinity, often embodied in the historical figure of Nat Turner—so much so that when, in a 1967 Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, William Styron fictionalizes Nat Turner's story as a self-conflicted black man who is having sexual relations with both a white woman and a black man, prominent black writers come to the defense of Turner's manhood in a volume devoted to that cause. When James Baldwin defends Styron on the basis of artistic freedom, he catalyzes the black nationalist suspicion of him as a sissy traitor who prefers intercourse with white men over a united front with his battle-ready black brothers.[78]

Although generally associated with penetrability (weakness, passivity, softness, cowardice), the sissy is *not* always merely weak, soft, passive, or cowardly, a cultural-historical fact that is most prominently articulated in African American discourse and tradition, where sissies are sometimes imaged as street-smart, hard-assed, and knife-crazy. In fact, there is a long history of the *fierce* sissy, one who flaunts his gender anomaly to the point of being a swisher or swish. Less ostentatiously, the black sissy can achieve a certain kind of respectability as a leader of the race, a gender balancing act that hinges on repressive self-restraint, and most tellingly puts some distance between sissy demeanor (too soft, too nurturing, or too sophisticated) and passive homosexual conduct, as most visibly embodied in African American culture through the church sissy. The too-good boy can turn his obedient academic performance and often churchified conduct into professional prowess on behalf of the race, thus flipping a masculine deficit into a racial obligation, making sissy responsibility something to be tentatively admired within the race. There is a lineage of such sissy leaders—Washington, Carver, Johnson, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Owen Dodson, James Baldwin, and Bayard Rustin representing different manifestations of this phenomenon, and each indicating how sissiness fluctuates as a measure of virility or its deficiency, as well as a measure of same-sexuality and its absence.

Arenas of Masculine Competence

Each chapter of this study examines a different historical moment and a different aspect of the feud between sissiness and masculinity as a racialized dynamic. Focusing on the most prominent arenas where institutional masculinity is staged for public endorsement of male empowerment—politics, business, science, diplomacy, warfare, religion, activism, academe, and sport—the study demonstrates how in each of these venues the sissy lurks liminally on the edge or subliminally at the heart. Although it could certainly be argued that soft or nonnormative men

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existed long before the 1880s (mollies, for instance, can be traced back to the eighteenth century in England) when the term "sissy" first gets articulated, I begin this study in this period because of the peculiar situation of black male leadership after emancipation and on the cusp of Jim Crow.[79] As chapter 2 takes Booker T. Washington as a formative case, George Washington Carver as a complement and foil, and their accusers as crucial to understanding their unfit manliness, we find that to understand their quite different sissy dispositions, we must consider the actual material structures they negotiate—from Washington's deployment of business enterprise through industrial education while presenting himself as a happy housekeeper to Carver's tangibly effeminate comportment even as he achieves fame as an agricultural scientist and inventor, vocations usually reserved for the most mannish of men. In anatomizing James Weldon Johnson's gentle manliness in chapter 3, we shift from focusing on an all-black institution to go deeper into official institutions of white patriarchal power in the U.S., exploring the gender and racial politics of Johnson's diplomacy and later his activism as the first African American to lead the nation's premier interracial civil rights organization. Johnson's encounter with the Jim Crow state at home and abroad provides opportunities for examining how he negotiates the white male supremacist military by exploiting the "soft" resources of diplomacy—a deportment that civilizes him in the face of either dismissive insult while serving as consul in Central America or savage violence in his hometown of Jacksonville, Florida. In chapter 4, Baldwin presents the classic case of a homo-sissy, one whose apprenticeship in the black church defines his future career as a prophetic writer and civil rights spokesman on the world stage. Baldwin's transfiguration of church sissiness, though, seems especially conventionally heroic when contextualized through an emerging mass-media age in which hyperblond sissies like Truman Capote and Andy Warhol, on the one hand, and fierce black street swishes like Little Richard and Sylvester, on the other, demand the world's attention as faintly subversive unmanly men infecting the underbelly of a virile Cold War America hysterically fearful of white men's softened temper in an age of sedentary, bureaucratized office work.

When black men enter the arenas of white masculine self-empowerment—Washington in early Jim Crow politics and business; George Washington Carver as an experimental scientist; Johnson in New Negro Renaissance politics, social activism, and diplomacy—they do not necessarily enter as sissified presences, but these prominent cases must make us wonder how black men had to conduct themselves (behavior-wise and morally) over the course of the twentieth century as new technologies of cultural dissemination operated to broadcast gender conduct into the privacy of America's living rooms. Chapter 5 brings us into the arena of avant-garde art and elite higher education, arenas where we perhaps expect

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sissies to be, but until the post–civil rights era not a place where black men were as leaders of American artistic movements or formerly all-white university faculties until Jim Crow is made ostensibly illegal. Chapter 5 focuses on the transitive and fungible dimensions of gender formation, to borrow from Snorton, to understand how during the modern civil rights era and after, some leading straight black men construct developmental narratives that hinge on a transitive identity as sissy-boys while struggling to maintain their public reputation as heterosexual leaders fully equipped to speak on behalf of the manhood of the race. Amiri Baraka, for example, shifts from an ambivalently sissified persona when he is ensconced as a black token in the bohemian art world of Greenwich Village to a sissiphobic metaphorical warrior when he converts to black nationalism in the mid-1960s. Deeply influenced by Baldwin, he and other black nationalists exert great intellectual energy to pivot from that sissy influence to a virile black nationalism—a pivot that implicates them in the very sissiness they claim to despise. Confronted on the one side with a black ghetto male stereotyped as hypermasculine and on the other side with an emerging black "brother to brother" gay movement and a new white male image of militant gay pride, some black male public intellectuals in the post–civil rights moment negotiate the changing climate of masculine conduct by "coming out" as sissies in memoirs that navigate integrated institutions, academic feminism, cutting-edge gay/lesbian studies, *Cosby Show*–style sensitive patriarchy, and a public image of black maleness caught between affirmative action privilege and a masculinely incompetent black male "underclass." Like black male leaders before them, these men find a resource in sissiness, but explicitly naming it as such, while protecting their heterosexual prerogative by insisting that a sissy need not be a homosexual.

Finally, in chapter 6, we turn to sports as the most captivating arena of masculine self-empowerment, with perhaps the exception of the military, and the gay sports memoir as the most recent instance of how sissiness haunts rough-and-tumble masculinity in the era of gay rights. In fact, often modeled on warfare and the battlefield, the arenas and fields of professional sport embody the most spectacular celebration of manly conduct and character—fixed sites where the nation ritually re-mans itself by showcasing courageous feats of simulated battle usually without war's lethal consequence. Professional sport just might be the last vestige of unembarrassed sissiphobia.[80] Looking at the coming-out narratives of professional athletes in a form I label the sports disclosure memoir, we find the sissy estranged from the masculine norm at the turn into the twenty-first century even as gay men make lumbering strides toward acceptance in America's roughest sports. By concluding with an entrenched preserve of sissiphobia in America's most popular mass sports, the study spotlights again how the charge of unfit conduct

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even for the toughest of manly men cannot be segregated either from racial identification or from the spectacle of mass consumption and reception.

The sometimes subtle, sometimes blunt racialization that configures sissy signification in U.S. culture can help us decipher the nonconforming dynamics that obtain in masculine conduct and character. Like sissies, black men have historically been relegated to gender nonconformity and nonstandard sexuality. The persistent gender roles that dominant society has foisted onto black manhood have emphasized either masculine overdrive (the buck) or unmanly servitude (Uncle Tom), either hypermuscularity (natural athleticism) or extraordinary resources of seductive expression (in oratory and music). When the black sissy has appeared in dominant mass culture, he is invariably nothing more than a mockery of black men's animal masculinity, an exception that proves the rule, a gender joke whose appearance abets the anxiety and fear that are fueled by black men's overly masculine prowess. Within African American culture, however, sissies are everywhere once we begin to look. The history of racial and sexual oppression has forced black men to take seriously the question of masculine in/competence, perhaps to a point of heightened and deepened self-awareness of the high stakes involved in conforming to white supremacy's conventions of masculine conduct. Sissification is just one way, but a crucial one, that African American men have negotiated the multiple binds of a coercive black masculinity, suppressed in its potential kinship with white male supremacy, beckoning toward alternative tenors of manliness even while trapped by the domains of empowerment that a hard masculinity insistently promises.

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