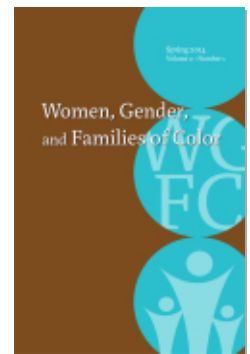Masculinity, Religion, and Modernism: A Consideration of Benjamin Elijah Mays and Richard Wright

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Masculinity, Religion, and Modernism:
A Consideration of Benjamin Elijah Mays
and Richard Wright

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Abstract

This article is a comparative consideration of Morehouse College president and public theologian Benjamin Elijah Mays (1894–1984) and novelist Richard Wright (1908–60). Their respective views on modernism were developed through a gendered lens of black Southern masculinity and religion that each experienced during his formative childhood. Mays and Wright responded differently to theism and Christianity. They also responded differently to the mothering women in their lives—one with affection, the other with disaffection. Both Mays and Wright viewed modernism as a means of navigating the political hegemony embodied by white males. Yet, they each reproduced the modernist heterosexism, unwittingly supporting the subordination of the women who mothered them.

Introduction

This essay explores the lives of Benjamin Mays and Richard Wright through their presentations of their individual lives and their engagement with the black freedom struggle as public intellectuals in the early twentieth-century United States. Mays was a minister, social activist, and president of Morehouse College from 1947 to 1967, as well as the mentor of Martin Luther King Jr. Wright was a novelist whose work both spoke to the white violence and degradation visited upon black people and challenged the status quo of white supremacy. I focus on the masculinist discourse each writer constructed and consider how each man engaged modernism to fashion a way forward for their race. While both were influenced by their Southern backgrounds, religious upbringings, and time in Chicago, they turned to starkly different interpretations of modernism. Mays represented

a masculinist, modern interpretation of Christianity, while Wright reflected secular Marxism. Each broke with premodern mores to vindicate the race and provide direction to an ongoing struggle to achieve "full manhood rights."

In their written work, Mays and Wright attempted to resist racialized subordination and address for themselves, and their respective audiences, existential questions about the meaning of life, transcendence, and the purposes of political struggle. Their writings suggest that masculinity served as an unconscious normative cultural practice for black male public intellectuals in the early twentieth century. The way these figures understood and practiced expressed modernism, both religiously and politically, substantially affected the direction of struggles for black liberation in the United States through the 1960s. However, their respective narratives, particularly with regard to the women who mothered them, unwittingly reinforced understandings of patriarchy that circumscribed the lives of black women.

This exploration rests primarily on a reading of Mays's autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, and Wright's autobiographical *Black Boy*, as well as other selected writings. In their narratives, the women significant to their upbringing—respectively, Mays's mother and Wright's grandmother—were totems against which each defined himself as a cosmopolitan black man in the global battle for democratic rights and freedom.

Approaching Modernism, Race, and Maternalism

By modernism, I refer to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project that attempted to rationalize human activity and limit the influences on thinking and practice based on an otherworldly providence. In this new era, human activities were increasingly understood not exclusively as acts of God but rather as practices guided by human structures and forces within cultural and material historical contexts. Modernism came in varying forms, including theistic, agonistic, and atheistic. Regardless, Enlightenment ideas were informed by long-established social, economic, and political hierarchies that categorized women, children, and the enslaved as irrational nonactors with limited capacity for full citizenship. Thus, while the Enlightenment called for universal freedoms, this universality was imagined as the province of men, with women, children, and the property-less excluded from representation and governance. Such norms continued through the late twentieth century. Moreover, to the extent that discourses of universal rights and political agency were countenanced as belonging only to men in the United States, this agency was wholly reserved for white men. Consequently, the modernist project,

though it appealed to the rights of all persons, was bound to, and guided by, deeply racialized ideologies of maleness.

For their part, both Mays and Wright seemed to have accepted the masculine assumptions of modernism. Born, respectively, at the turn of the twentieth century, each was reared and bound by the racial subordination of blacks by whites in the American South. Even as both men gave voice to aspirations of being free of societal racism and racial stigma using modernist discourses, they did so in a gendered voice of male dominance.[1] This reading of Mays and Wright suggests that even calls for liberation from societal oppression must be analyzed for its gendered ideologies of familial relationships, especially toward black mothers and grandmothers.[2] This reading of two mid-twentieth-century male shapers of black culture and politics raises questions for further research about how black men sentimentalize or demonize their relationships to the significant maternal figures in their lives. Explaining how Mays and Wright viewed religious faith and their respective turns to modernism in defining themselves as men may offer valuable insight into how black males accept and reproduce discourses about patriarchy, maleness, and intimate/familial relationships.

Additionally, this analysis offers insight not only into perceptions of black mothers but black fathers as well.[3] Hence, the use of a mother/grandmother in these writers' narratives also speaks to the absences of their fathers or their inability to control the worlds into which Mays and Wright were born. Their narratives about their maternal figures' religious faith is, perhaps, a critique of their fathers' faithlessness.

Generation, Region, and Religious Outlook

Mays, a Morehouse College president, public theologian, and civil rights ideologue, was fourteen years older than the novelist Richard Wright. Mays was born on August 1, 1894, in Epworth, South Carolina, while Wright was born on September 4, 1908, on the Rucker's Plantation not far from Natchez, Mississippi. Each man was born grasping for his humanity, attempting to free himself from the stranglehold of racial segregation, Jim Crow, which was rigidly adhered to in the American South and culturally accepted throughout the United States. Both Mays and Wright struggled to gain a formalized education in their search for a humane path to individual, social, and political freedoms. Mays would be lucky enough, as well as unrelenting in determination, to leave his life as part of a tenant farming family and navigate his way through elementary school, high school, and college, eventually earning

graduate degrees from the University of Chicago. Wright, on the other hand, was never able to sustain formal education; nevertheless, he educated himself through the use of racist dissimulation, library reading, and the intellectual apparatus of the American Communist Party via its periodicals and literary networks. Their lives paralleled by virtue of their generation, regional background, maleness, and respective need for self-respect through the rhetoric of manhood. Each of them fought to defy the logic of racism as whites projected it and as blacks may have internalized it.

Mays's and Wright's lives also corresponded intellectually, especially in their assessment of black religiosity in the black church. Mays and Wright saw religion through a masculine gaze, and each responded to religion via the significant women in his life. In response, each sought a varying kind of modernism. Interestingly, the University of Chicago sociology program heavily influenced both Mays and Wright, though the university's Divinity School shaped Mays's intellectual trajectory equally as much as sociology. While Mays and Wright shared a black Southern maleness and generational ties, they diverged significantly in their views on theism. For Mays, his path was discovered through religion, a critical modernist Christianity that was socially engaged in the black freedom struggle. For Wright, in contrast, religion was a hindrance to his personal freedom and a burdensome folly that kept black Americans from fully living.

Benjamin Mays

Louvenia Carter Mays was formative in Mays's religious life. Her self-sacrificing for her children, especially her youngest son, Benjamin, was crucial in his religious formation. His mother, born into slavery, was the cultural carrier of the melding of Anglo and African religious folkways, part of the Atlantic world's Protestant revivalist moment. Her beliefs and religious behavior of shouting, religious ecstasy, and her notions of prayer all were shaped in the cauldron of South Carolina's black population. Mays, then, grew up in a rich Afro-Baptist tradition that had been generationally passed on throughout South Carolina.[4]

He admitted never knowing much about his family's lineage; but, while he did not fully understand his parents' past as American slaves, he appreciated the culture that nurtured him.[5] The black Baptist congregations that dotted the landscape of South Carolina were institutions where women played significant roles, not so much as formal leaders but rather as the primary financial donors and the spiritual guides within these religious communi-

ties. When Mays made his obligatory acceptance of Christ in his Baptist church, he was doing what his parents, especially his mother, expected. At age twelve, he had a conversion experience that he recalled being moving but not overly dramatic.[6] So much of the life journey he fondly recollected seemed to revolve around his mother's prayer:

> My mother was very religious. Every night she called the children together for evening prayer before going to bed. She always led in prayer. . . . There was no doubt in Mother's mind that God answered prayers. She believed this to her dying day. When I made a trip around the world in the latter part of 1936 and the early months of 1937, Mother "knew" that it was her prayers that brought me safe home. (*Born to Rebel*, 10–11)

Her sense of faith and everyday religion was based on her belief in a God that intervened in the lives of ordinary people—protecting them, allowing them to live through tragedy, and at times helping them to succeed, as would be the case for her youngest child. Although Mays would write later in life about his mother's innocent notions about prayer, it deeply affected him and gave shape to his life in ways he never fully examined.

For Mays's mother, her prayers led her to act on his behalf so that he could achieve his long-sought-after goal of formal education. Ironically, it was his illiterate mother who prevailed on his resistant father to allow Mays to go to school full time in his late teens. She took over her son's responsibilities on the family's tenant farm so that he could attend classes without having to return to harvest or to plow. Mays often reduced her prayer to a kind of childlike innocence, but, in reality, her deep, abiding faith was concurrent with her actions. This was an intellectual position that Mays, as a public theologian, would often urge both students and readers of his columns in black newspapers to respect. While he understood the necessity of faith and action cohering, he never saw his mother's actions on his behalf being at the root of the message he consistently upheld in his public life.

When Louvenia Mays died during Mays's tenure as dean of Howard University's School of Religion, he wrote, "She came along at a time when Negroes had little or no opportunity to be educated. She never attended school a day in her life. But like most Negroes of the early period, she had great faith in what education might do for one." As he would repeat in his memoir later in his life, he explained that his mother

> did not wholly comprehend the restlessness that characterized me as a boy when I kept pleading that I be sent away to school that ran three or four months a year. Nor did she understand thoroughly why I kept going to school

> so long—to high school, college, and university. But she believed in me and somehow felt that if I wanted to go on, it was the thing to do. At no time in her heart did she discourage me.

She was selfless and gave him "sympathy, encouragement, and prayer." Louvenia Mays also physically toiled "in the field with the hope" that he would be able to attend school.[7]

Although Mays acknowledged that his mother's faith was deeply influential, his writings often used her faith as a foil for what was wrong with black Protestant religiosity. "Shouting in church was common in my youth, and Mother did her share," Mays recollected. Observing church life, he noted, "The preaching was usually otherworldly, and the minister often stirred up and exploited the emotions of the people. This fact, along with her somewhat turbulent home life, accounted for Mother's outburst in church" (*Born to Rebel*, 10–11). In retrospect, Mays viewed his mother's practices as being tied to his father's alcohol abuse and her living conditions under poverty and brutal segregation. He attributed her pattern of behavior, her "outbursts," to her domestic struggles. This might have been true to an extent; however, there was also in her behavior cultural retentions that Mays never fully appreciated.[8]

In *The Negroes Church* (1933), Mays argued that the primary problem within black churches was people's ecstatic behavior. He would see this as a holdover from slavery that had outlived its usefulness in modern times. From his observations, however, the main practitioners of ecstatic behavior and those comforted by eschatological theology were black women. Mays's critique of black religious practices was nothing new. It was current in one form or fashion among nineteenth-century male religious leadership. The AME Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne attempted to eliminate black women's ecstatic worship to make his denomination appear more respectable among the slowly urbanizing black population within the North.[9] Mays joined a long-established coterie of men challenging ritual performance, as well as an opiate theology of hope in an alternative reality known as heaven. He wanted, like so many male religious leaders and thinkers, a more muscular Christianity. As a college student, Mays had been ensconced in the language of the social gospel, a Protestant theological movement that tried to make Christianity a more challenging faith with regard to the social and structural ills of industrial America. This was a male-gendered theology that Mays imbibed.[10]

One can sympathize with Mays's need for a more powerful and socially forceful version of Christianity. His first memory, or at least the one he claimed publicly, was of the degradation of his father:

> I remember a crowd of white men who rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. Then they rode away. I was not yet five years old, but I have never forgotten them. (*Born to Rebel*, 1)[11]

This memory of his father's humiliation overshadowed his mother's religious contribution. White men subjugating a black man in front of a young black boy would haunt Mays and serve as the guiding mantra of his thought. Although he adopted his mother's faith, it was a faith guided by notions of manhood and manliness that connoted power and not submission to the forces of racial violence and racial segregation. His mother's religion, full of daily love in the domestic sphere, was not strong enough, in his mind, to challenge the social structures of the Jim Crow South. White men controlled the institutions that dictated life under segregation, and, for Mays, only a forceful religious faith, a manly one, could be mobilized to tear down the institutional barriers that forcibly determined the lives of black men like his father.

Richard Wright

If Mays absorbed his mother's religion (albeit critically), Richard Wright rejected his grandmother's religious faith and practice. Although Wright's mother was central in his rearing, his grandmother dominated his religious imagination. Mays was reared in the tradition of black Baptists and thus grew up in the mainstream of black Southern Protestant culture. Wright's thought, on the other hand, was shaped by his grandmother's Protestantism as a Seventh Day Adventist.[12]Adventism, like the black Baptist tradition, was a part of an American evangelical revivalism that emphasized strict adherence to the Bible. Within these churches, each believer was individually accountable before God. Both Adventist and Baptist theology called for personal conversion and members' public acknowledgment of their faith. Each believer was expected to attend church faithfully and shun behavior deemed ungodly. Believers were also expected to share their faith and "witness" God's salvation to others who were perceived as wayward or unredeemed. Annually, believers were subject to conviction for personal sins, but they could find renewal in annual revival meetings and church or by public confession.[13]

Both black Baptists and Adventists alike shared the American evangelical tradition. However, there were distinctions. Black Baptists rudimentarily

borrowed from the long and complex tradition of the English Baptist tradi-
tion and its doctrines of John Calvin and his disciples. This tradition tended
to emphasize full-immersion water baptism as a central sign of personal
renewal or redemption. This ritual of inclusion drew on the baptism of Jesus
found in the text of the Christian New Testament. It was one of the church's
chief rituals that initiated believers into the community of the faithful. The
tradition of Adventists, on the other hand, demarcated community through
dietary restrictions, the celebration of the Sabbath on Saturdays as opposed
to Sundays, and an emphasis on body purity. Black Adventists had a rich
history in the South, but they were a minority among black religious adher-
ents.[14] For Wright, this meant that he was, in a sense, a double minority—a
religious minority among black Southerners and a despised racial minority
in America. He vividly described in *Black Boy* his devoutly Adventist family,
which orbited around his grandmother, Margaret Bolton Wilson:

> *Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church* and I was
> compelled to make pretense of worshipping her God, which was her exaction
> for my keep. The elders of the church expounded a gospel clogged with images
> of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valley of dry bones, of the
> sun burning in to ashes, . . . of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into
> wine, or the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking; a
> salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns
> and eyes and feet . . . a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with the
> clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ.[15]

Wright's writing was eloquently descriptive and captivating. But it was by no
means an accurate account of what it meant to his grandmother to belong
to the Seventh Day Adventist tradition of Protestantism. Rather, as literary
scholar Qiana Whitted suggests, religion is here portrayed as a weakened
attribute that women use to hinder male characters from understanding
"manhood, human dignity, and race pride. As a result, Wright's literary
mediations on the black church act as signposts of his own struggle for
transcendence, even as they underscore the material angst and fragmenta-
tion of his characters."[16] More importantly, Whitted argues, Wright used his
grandmother as his motivation for escaping the South. He found it difficult
to deal with her domineering religious views, which he fictionalized in his
short story "The Man Who Lived Under Ground" (Whitted, "Using Grand-
mother's Life," 15–16).

According to Wright's friend, critic, and biographer Margaret Walker,
he felt that his grandmother's Adventist beliefs were completely repressive.

Wright, Walker states, told her that the Seventh Day Adventist was "the church where you burn in hell forever" and described the Sabbatarian rituals of his family negatively. Her assessment reflected her own sympathies and affections for Wright, as well as her own religious biases as a child of a black Methodist clergyman. Walker wrote:

> On the Sabbath Day in Grandma Wilson's house no work-a-day activities could be done. . . . They ate no pork nor did they cook with pork lard, fatback, bacon, or ham grease; any cooking vessel in which these had been used was unclean. Moving pictures were strictly forbidden, although Wright loved films and somehow found his way to the theater week after week. Once when Wright had built a radio, his grandmother destroyed it. Dancing and card playing were strictly forbidden, and Wright never learned to dance. Bible reading and praying were daily occupations. . . . The Bible was constantly quoted, and Wright was told early that nothing good would ever come of him, that he was consigned and damned to hell and the devil.[17]

Walker's depiction of Wright's Sabbatarian home life was not atypical anywhere in the United States, especially the South. Religious restrictions on personal behavior were normative for all black Southern children, and black religious people generally tried to abate the influences of popular culture, especially on their male children, and save them from the violence perpetuated against black men in the South.[18] Black Baptists and Presbyterians enforced Sabbath rules on Sundays in the same way that Adventists did on Saturday; what was different about the Sabbath in the Wright household was its Friday-to-Saturday ritual and the family's dietary restrictions. Walker adopted Wright's viewpoint that his family life was fiercely led by his grandmother's strict beliefs.

Wright interpreted this restrictive religious practice in a racialized context, as though his grandmother's faith kept him away from seeing the world as it was. This faith, in his view, also attempted to discourage him from changing it. Wright's description of his grandmother's ardent faith collapses anything that distinguished her Adventism from the general revivalist culture of southern black Protestantism. As Whitted argues, Margaret Bolton Wilson's faith "becomes the symbolic emasculating prototype of surrender in both secular and religious forms" ("Using Grandmother's Life," 7). As much as Wright was angry at the harsh patterns of the Jim Crow South, his rationale for leaving Jackson and then Memphis, Tennessee, equally involved his desire to escape the religious domination of his grandmother, something he never quite accomplished.

The Meaning of Manhood

In Wright's writings, black religiosity and Christianity were everywhere in one form or another. For Wright, like Mays, black Christianity was not muscular (Whitted, "Using Grandmother's Life," 25); it was effeminate, submissive and "otherworldly." Whitted commented that, while assessing "abuses [Wright] suffered as a youth within [his grandmother's] southern church community, he does not expand the same critical energy mining the historical processes that shaped her [nor for that of his mother's] pattern of behavior." Her spiritual hopes or aspirations are never quite grasped by Wright, Instead, she is used as a scapegoat for his inability to be free as a black man (ibid., 27). If Mays's Christianity, though favorable toward his mother, was gendered by masculinity, it was equally true of Wright's secularism and skepticism.[19] His unbelief, his search for individual freedom, and his hope for a humanistic vision, were all grounded in a search for a positive notion of what it meant to be a Southern black man in an oppressive society.

Both Mays and Wright grew up in an era when nineteenth-century Victorian notions of manhood were still prevalent in American culture. These notions centered on agrarian property ownership, economic thrift, male suffrage, and Protestant Christianity. Historian Martin Summers has argued that black men refashioned these ideals to reflect their own realities as part of a subordinated population. Summers observed that black men, though circumscribed by racial segregation, reconstructed manliness in response to rapid urbanization, industrial technological, the advancement of consumer culture, and the development of new forms of leisure and entertainment. Historian Robert Wiebe described this historical period of wide demographic shifts from agrarian to urban life as the "Search for Order." It was a reorientation of masculinity away from these antecedents.[20] Summers described not only the broad shift to urbanization but also the developing middle-class attitudes that grew among black men.

It may be true that black males developed their own self-styled manliness in urban America. Yet, it was also the case that, for many, gendered values and attitudes were regionally and culturally defined within the American South. Further, masculinity, whether it was understood as manhood broadly or urban manliness more specifically, developed alongside of, and in likely defiance of, white Southern masculinity. In the American South, racial segregation chiefly concerned white male cultural and political hegemony.[21] Even though black men were political subordinates in the South, they nevertheless shared with their white counterparts many of the same recreational activi-

ties, including gambling, drinking, cock and dog fighting, and hunting. Both Mays and Wright, as Southern black males, understood the shared culture they had with white males and appreciated aspects of it. However, in their respective autobiographical accounts, they focused their intellectual energies on breaking the stranglehold that white male political dominance had over their lives.

Historian Ted Ownby aptly surmises how slavery shaped white Southern culture:

> Slavery showed all Southerners the significance of physical force in human relations. The opportunities for cruelty and the need for readiness in the case of slave violence affected the consciousness of almost all Southern whites, and the most extreme forms of violence in the postbellum period— lynching, night riding, and Klan violence—were directed almost exclusively against blacks.[22]

Ownby's analysis shows prominently that white Southern life and its male prerogatives of power were violently directed toward black males to keep slaves from revolting and, following the end of slavery, to keep them subjugated through state-enforced racial legalities. White males counteracted black males' claims on "manhood" by denying them full participation in civil society. Specifically, black men were denied the right to vote and endured varied attempts, through law and violence, to limit their property ownership.[23] Male violence in the South aimed to subdue black people, though, given the patriarchal practices of the region, it was particularly directed at humiliating black males, who were viewed as potential rivals for political power. Historian Glenda Gilmore argues in *Gender and Jim Crow* that racial segregation was ideologically gendered and that it shaped and reshaped the configuration of Southern life for both women and men, blacks and whites, in a myriad of ways, especially as white women struggled to gain citizenship rights in the public sphere as voters.[24] In the context of the Jim Crow South, white males persistently exercised their dominance in civic affairs and domestic relationships.

Both Mays and Wright described the violent trauma and humiliation they personally experienced at the hands of white men. In *Black Boy*, Wright dramatically wrote of the disappearance and murder of his Uncle Hoskins:

> Each day Uncle Hoskins went to his saloon in the evening and did not return home until the early hours of the morning. . . . Often I crept into his room while he slept and stared at the big shining revolver that lay near his head,

within quick reach of his hand. I asked Aunt Maggie why he kept the gun so close to him and she told me that men had threatened to kill him, white men.

When Hoskins does not return, his distraught Aunt Maggie attempts to find him, only to realize that he had left his gun at home. As she attempts to run to the saloon, Wright tells us that a nondescript black man warns her that she, too, might be killed if she goes to his saloon. The situation was horrid for Wright and his family:

> My mother pulled Aunt Maggie back to the house. Fear drowned out grief and that night we packed clothes and dishes and loaded them into a farmer's wagon. Before dawn we were rolling away, fleeing for our lives. I learned afterwards that Uncle Hoskins had been killed by whites who had long coveted his flourishing liquor business. . . . There was no funeral. There was no music. There was no period of mourning. There were no flowers. There were only silence, quiet weeping, whispers and fear. . . . This was as close as white terror had ever come to me and my mind reeled. Why had he not fought back, I asked my mother, and the fear that was in her made her slap me into silence. (*Black Boy*, 53, 55)

Like Mays's earliest memory of his father's humiliating confrontation with white political terrorists, Wright's fear is a product of Jim Crow and the act of living in the region as a black man.

Additionally, white and black men participated in a masculine culture that emphasized hunting, gambling, womanizing, and drinking. Wright, in fact, used Southern male culture as the backdrop for two of his important short stories, "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Almos' a Man." In his autobiography, Mays also described the frequency of drinking and gun violence, including the murder of his older brother. In both of their narratives, their fathers are representative of the Southern male pastime of recreational drinking.[25] Their respective fathers are victims of the excesses, and pitfalls, of white Southern patriarchy. As a result, each man suffered not only from Jim Crow's systematic exclusions but also from his father's broken self-esteem and self-denigration.

In Mays's case, he was deeply disappointed that his father never became a landowner, a mark of manhood, but instead remained a tenant farmer.[26] Not only was Mays disappointed about Hezekiah Mays's inability to acquire property, but he was also disheartened by his father's repeated attempts to block him from his pursuit of formal education. The elder Mays saw education as futile in light of the role that black men played in the Southern agrarian economy. As a result, Mays consciously decided to live his own life in counterdistinction to that of his father, including avoiding alcohol because of his father's abusive behavior when drunk (Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 9–10).

Wright similarly noted how his father humiliated him and his mother in a saloon, where she had to beg for money and food after her husband abandoned the family. Both men admitted that they hated and later pitied their fathers because of these men's inability to escape racial inscription. Black Southern women then, as has already been discussed, were relegated to domesticating their partners through evangelical religious culture, as Ownby discusses (*Subduing Satan*, chs. 6, 7, 8).

What is most important to both Mays and Wright is how the Jim Crow system was inscribed on the physical bodies of black men. Subjugation in their writings is embodied in the way black men must physically carry themselves in front of other white men. In Wright's most famous novel, *Native Son*, the protagonist Bigger Thomas is characterized as one with considerable fear of whites.

To Bigger and his kind, white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force, like a stormy sky looming overhead or like a deep swirling river stretching suddenly at one's feet in the dark. As long as he and his black folks did not go beyond certain limits, there was no need to fear that white force. But whether they feared it or not, each and every day of their lives they lived with it; even when words did not sound its name, they acknowledged its reality. As long as they lived here in this prescribed corner of the city, they paid tribute to it.[27]

Of course, the laws of Jim Crow profoundly affected black women, as well as men. But the writings of Mays and Wright place black maleness at the center of the struggle to overthrow Jim Crow. In Wright's novels and novellas, his main protagonists are men trying to escape constraints. Mays, on the other hand, recognized women, though he nonetheless saw the problem of race as a masculine one. For Mays, much of the tension that lay below the surface of black-white relationships was sexual. In a discussion with the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, he explained that interracial cohabitation was key to understanding American race relations. White men were "bitterly opposed to desegregation because" they have had their way "with colored women, and now [fear] that colored men will begin to have the same way with white women. Miscegenous co-habitation has always been a way of life for white [men]."[28]

Mays went further, observing that the internecine violence that existed among black Southern men was at its root about the inability to protect their communities, especially women. Black men, he asserted, were angry for not being able to act more aggressively toward white men: "It was difficult, virtually impossible, to combine *manhood* and blackness under one skin in the

days of my youth. To exercise *manhood*, as white men displayed it, was to invite disaster" (Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 25–26). In a sense, all black men were impotent like Bigger Thomas. In fact, both Mays and Wright reported being physically harmed by white men for the simplest acts, such as being articulate, well dressed, and intellectually serious. The physical violence visited on young black men to keep them in their racial place is perhaps most vividly captured in Wright's essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow." Most of this essay describes the interaction of white men as they overpower black men.[29]

Freedom, in the minds of both men, was first about the physical protection of their bodies from white men who imagined and feared their potency as sexual competitors. Both men rebelled against the conscripted lives that they are forced to embody. Both Mays's and Wright's memoirs were written in the narrative tradition of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of a Slave*, in that each attempted to find a freedom similar to Douglass and so improved themselves with the acquisition of literacy, intellectual and analytical skills, and writing ability. Mays and Wright claimed that their own respective ideas and practice of modernism gave them the capacity to overcome obstacles and gain greater freedoms. In Mays's case, it was theological modernism, which emphasized the ethical dimensions of Protestant Christianity and not its miraculous elements. This form of Christianity allowed him to challenge what he perceived as the religious passivity of his rural upbringing in South Carolina. Mays equated the "otherworldliness" of his rural congregation with femininity, and, in his mind, this feminized faith provided black male clergy the cover they needed for collaborative politics.

Wright, too, would explore a similar theme in his short story "Fire and Cloud." In this narrative, protagonist Reverend Taylor must act manly and move his community away from collaboration with the racist order and toward revolutionary action. By the end of the story, Taylor utters, "Freedom belongs t' the strong." The sentence captures the growing consciousness of the character and his recognition that faith must be revolutionary.[30]

Throughout his autobiography, Mays consistently indicted his childhood pastor, James Marshall, for collaboration with whites. Specifically, he claimed that the pastor remained silent about the injustices of Jim Crow. Marshall, he asserted, was unwilling to challenge white supremacy. This served to justify the shift toward modernism that Mays chose as his path. He determined that theological modernism spoke to social realities more ethically and honestly. Faith, in his mind, had to be consistent with one's actions, and one needed faith to guide one's life in the modern world.

For Mays, the university offered him something more than an opportunity to rise above the status of his birth. It was a space to meet and make interracial friendships. Its environment permitted students to organize dialogues on racial inequities. In this space, for example, he had a chance encounter with W. O. Brown, a white Texan, who openly acknowledged white supremacy. Mays noted of this encounter that he was "really startled and amazed to hear such words from a Southern white man—and in public!" He and Brown eventually became friends and, as a result, "my horizon began to expand. I stopped generalizing about Southern white people" (Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 100). In this space, relative to that of his mother's church, he affirmed his manhood.

Wright found in literary modernism, a method for the liberation of black men independent of God and the church.[31] Whereas for Mays theological modernism embodied the search for a more socially assertive faith, for Wright faith was itself the problem. The philosophical naturalism found in social realist authors Theodore Dreiser and James T. Farrell, and his introduction to Marxism, buttressed his nontheistic position on the state of black men. Specifically, Wright insisted that they must free themselves from the constraints of religion because it served only to create passivity and effeminate responses to persistent physical violence and harm committed against black people:

> So our bent backs continued to give design and order to the fertile planta-
> tions. Stately governmental structures and vast palatial homes were reared
> by our black hands and to reflect the genteel glory of the new age. And the
> Lords of the Land created and administered laws in the belief that God
> ruled in Heaven, that He sanctioned this new day. After they had amassed
> mountains of wealth, they compared the wretchedness of our lives with the
> calm gentility of theirs and felt that they were truly favored of God. The
> lyrical mantle of prayer and hymn, accordingly, justified and abetted our
> slavery; and whenever we murmured against degradation of the plantation,
> the Lords of the Land acted against us with whips and hate to protect their
> God-sanctioned civilization.[32]

For both Mays and Wright, their final transformation into urbane and accomplished black men took place in Chicago, particularly at the University of Chicago. Mays was a formal student within the university's Divinity School, and Wright was an informal student of the Chicago School of Sociology. Each was influenced by the sociological thought of Robert Park, then one of Chicago's eminent urban sociologists. For Mays, Chicago was the capstone in his long quest to be recognized formally as an educated black man. It was

the institution where he earned his MA in the New Testament and a PhD. in theology. For him, this proved, once and for all, that he was not an inferior:

> Regardless of one's previous academic record, he takes a risk when he announces his intention to earn a Ph.D., especially at an institution like the University of Chicago. It was the prevailing opinion that the university made it difficult for those who sought the degree, and it was rumored that approximately half of those who started out in the department in which I was enrolled failed to accomplish their goal. [Self-assured, Mays added] I had no difficulty with the final two-day written examination, and I passed the three-hour oral examination on my thesis in a manner that satisfied me and won the praise of my examiners. (*Born to Rebel*, 137)

Mays used the theological modernism taught at Chicago to write a suggestively rich dissertation, later published as *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*. The work explored the relevancy of black faith for political struggle.[33] A faith that mattered for Mays was not one of ecstatic moments of release or sensual pleasure, but rather one that was manly and was able to deify the psychic and physical violations of Jim Crow's ethics. Although Mays couched his own male persona in the Victorian and scholarly rectitude befitting a college president and a Baptist clergyman of the time, his modernist theology was a radical break with a fixed, never-changing God that had been proclaimed in his oppressive childhood. Mays's God had to meet the needs of history, including black people's suffering under segregation and the horror of racial violence.

For Wright, the city of Chicago itself was a laboratory of research. It provided him opportunities to engage with young writers, like himself, who sought to learn the craft of imaginative written expression. For the first time in his life, he became part of a small interracial cadre. This intellectual and physical interaction fundamentally affected his Southern worldview and radicalized his thinking. His circles were many—the Communist-based John Reed Club, the Southside Chicago writers group, and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). His friends included nationally known black writers and artists such as Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, aspiring writers like the young Margaret Walker, and budding University of Chicago-trained black scholars Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake. The city, for all its dispiriting elements surrounding race and poverty, was nevertheless abundant with ideas and possibilities for an ambitious writer.[34]

What is interesting about both Mays and Wright during their respective and overlapping Chicago years is the way they grafted their particular modernist perspectives onto their Southern and masculine predilections.

Both men attempted to make radical breaks with their past, but they were not nearly as self-reflexive about their gender ideology. Each man received significant exposure to the intellectual currency of his era, which profoundly influenced how he thought about the complexities of race, social class, and world politics. However, nothing they studied seemed to undermine fully their initial gender formulations developed in their formative years in response to their concerns about women and religion. In point of fact, both men narrated current events concerning black churches, political freedoms, and racial struggles with assumptions of male power.

In 1933, Mays coauthored *The Negro's Church* with Joseph Nicholson. *The Negro's Church* painted a portrait of Protestant churches as the paramount institution in the lives of black people. Mays and Nicholson surveyed Census data, made statistical analysis, and provided oral interviews with clergy and others about the state of these institutions. The main point from the study was that these churches were not fully attuned to modern contexts. The book criticized black Protestant churches for failing to creatively meet contemporary circumstances, leaving its believers at times mired in an irrelevant institution. However, the coauthors' surveys did not report the concerns of women who, as Mays knew intimately, were the institutional guardians and stalwarts of black Christianity.[35] The structures that concerned him were the ones dominated by men. The failure and the strengths of the black Church were a failure of black male leadership. What is historically ironic about Mays's assessment of black churches was that they were actually more adaptable to forces of modernization, culturally and socially, than he gave them credit for. As historians Wallace Best and Anthea Bulter have respectively argued, black women played far more complex roles both as formal leaders and believers within churches. The particulars of their religious faith were institutionalized and addressed contemporary circumstances in ways not reflected by Mays and Nicholson.[36]

Mays's modernist faith resulted in God's immanence being a force for social change, a force for ending racial apartheid in human affairs. There were, of course, many women who shared Mays's faith that belief in God had to lead to ethical actions.[37] However, for many more women, like Mays's mother, worship was more. It was a spiritual means for confronting the daily pains of struggle and communal space where both existential joys and woes could be shared.[38] Within that community, black women, depending on their social class status, denominational affiliation, and regional context, often embodied worship in emotional and ecstatic ritual. In Mays's theology, this was "otherworldliness." Unwittingly, in his effort to make black churches more robust

in terms of social actions against racial segregation, he attacked the faith that women expressed as being insufficient to the task of creating social change. In *The Negro's Church*, as well as *The Negro's God*, Mays imagined a church and a God that must respond to the white male's prerogatives of power.

Richard Wright imbibed a similar critique as did Mays. Wright's is most evident in his review of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which appeared in the left-wing *New Masses* magazine in 1937. For Wright, the South is not a place of loving relationships between black men and women. Rather, it is a place of black male lynching, castration, and impotency. From this perspective, to emphasize loving relationships is to forget the structural forces that shatter and stifles men's lives. The world that black men and women inhabit is one, to quote Karl Marx, where "all solid melts into air." Black religion, the sphere where women interact and find a soothing balm, serves only as an opiate not a solution or an adequate description of the complexity of black lives:

> *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of Zora Neale Hurston's Janie who, at sixteen, married a grubbing farmer at the anxious instigation of her slave-born grandmother. The romantic Janie, in the highly-charged language of Miss Hurston, longed to be a pear tree in blossom and have a "dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace." Restless, she fled from her former husband and married Jody, an up-and-coming Negro business man who, in the end, proved to be no better than her first husband. After twenty years of clerking for her self-made Jody, Janie found herself a frustrated widow of forty with a small fortune on her hands. Tea Cake, "from in and through Georgia," drifted along and, despite his youth, Janie took him. For more than two years they lived happily; but Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage Tea Cake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved.
>
> Miss Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.[39]

Wright's chief critique of Hurston's novel centers on what he says is her "facile sensuality." Hurston's novel embodies black struggle through the ties of a woman's communal love, but this was not enough to depict and tell the modernist "Negro" story as Wright saw it. The forces that Wright viewed himself as facing were those wielded by men—not humanity, but men. Black love stories, like the other fictions that black people told themselves, did not

change their actual social conditions. Black life is overwhelmed by the challenges of being the underclass, as historian Adam Green presciently observes in regard to Wright's views about black Chicago.[40] Hurston does not ignore the social indices of black life; she simply places the emphasis in her novel on the internal conditions of black life, not on its structural deficits. For Wright, this was "facile sensuality," or, in the words of Benjamin Mays, "otherworldly."

Mays's and Wright's respective views on modernism, and what it was to be a modern man, were guided through the gendered lens of being socially oppressed black men.[41] Though Mays and Wright responded differently to theism and Christianity in the black South, they both understood how important it was in black life. Their responses to religious impulses formed amid black Southern communities are significant because they grew in relationship to the significant women and maternal figures in their lives. These relationships defined how one man viewed religion with deep affection and the other with disaffection. Both men saw modern intellectual theory as necessary to the survival of black Americans, and they viewed the various modernist intellectual theorizations—whether biblical criticism or Marxism—as the only ways to respond to a white patriarchal society. They believed, like in the case of many modernizing intellectual projects, that their particular masculinity spoke for all black people. Although they both fell short of their universalizing goal in their intellectual assertions, both were part of a larger African American intellectual tradition of thought and contestation that tried to articulate and make sense of what it meant to be human beings while living in a frenetic and fragmented world defined by race, religion, gender, and social class. They were part and parcel of what W. E. B. Du Bois called the dilemma of "double consciousness," though their way of defining black struggle at times missed the mark of being fully descriptive of the totality of black freedoms. Nonetheless, they are to be credited for their writings, which gave rise to mobilization and the search for more political and social freedoms.

Finally, thinking back to the ways these important men described the maternal figures in their lives reminds us how bound they were in their attempts to define themselves as males. Their narratives and writings exposed the accepted norms of family, sexuality, and gender, which they explored with little sense of self-reflection. They reproduced patriarchy, even though they were marginalized, by stereotyping black women's religiosity and the meanings of black maternity through either sentimentality or demonization. In the end, modernism in their writings hid a masculine discourse that diminished the inner lives of black women who nurtured them.

Endnotes

1. J. Edward Sumerau, "'That's What a Man Is Supposed to Do': Compensatory Manhood Acts in an LBBT Christian Church," *Gender & Society* 26, no. 3 (2012): 461–87.

2. This essay builds on Sumerau's "'That's What Man Is Supposed to Do.'" Sumerau demonstrates through ethnographic interviews how a group of gay men, though subordinated, reproduced the subordination of women and other sexual minorities. Though Mays and Wright were heterosexual political subordinates in the white South, they too, like Sumerau's subjects, reproduced masculine hierarchy in the ways in which they described the maternal figures who reared them.

3. I am indebted to Elizabeth Yukin's excellent insight on fatherhood. See "The Business of Patriarchy: Black Paternity and Illegitimate Economies in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 4 (2003): 746–79.

4. Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin' On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 235–36.

5. Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 1–2 (henceforth referred to as *Rebel* and cited directly in the text).

6. Benjamin Mays, "I Have Been a Baptist All My Life," in *A Way Home: The Baptists Tell Their Story*, ed. James Saxon Childers, 165–66 (Atlanta: Tupper and Love, 1964).

7. Mays, "A Mother Passes," *Howard University School of Religion News* 14, no.4, May 1938, 6.

8. On black women's religiosity, see Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "The Politics of 'Silence': Dual-Sex Political Systems and Women's Traditions of Conflict in African American Religion," in *African American Christianity: Essays in History*, ed. Paul Johnson, 80–110 (Berkley: University of California Press, 1994); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *"If it Wasn't for the Women" . . . : Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 2001); Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2003).

9. David Wills, "Womanhood and Domesticity in the AME Tradition: The Influence of Daniel Alexander Payne," in *Black Apostles at Home and Abroad: Afro-Americans and the Christian Mission From the Revolution to Reconstruction*, ed. David W. Wills and Richard Newman, 133–46 (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982).

10. Susan Curtis, "The Son of Man and God the Father," in *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America*, ed. Mark C. Carnes and Clyde Griffen, 67–78 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 74.

11. For more on the Phoenix riot from another African American, see Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977), 6–7.

12. On data on black Churches and the predominance of black Baptist tradition, see Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

13. For a very good overview of the broad tenets of evangelicalism, see Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdman, 1994), ch. 2.

14. Delbert W. Baker, "Black Seventh-Day Adventists and the Influence of Ellen G. White," in *Perspectives: Black Seventh-Day Adventist Face the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Calvin B. Rock, 21–27 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1996).

15. Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 101. All subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in the text.

16. Qiana Whitted, "'Using Grandmother's Life as a Model': Richard Wright and the Gendered Politics of Religious Representation," *The Southern Literary Journal* 36, no. 2 (2004): 14. All subsequent quotations from this work will be cited in the text.

17. Margaret Walker Alexander, *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius: A Portrait of the Man, A Critical Look at His Work* (New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1988), 33.

18. On this topic of black churches and entertainment and black boys, see Angela Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina, 1900–1930*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009).

19. On Wright's unbelief, see Robert Butler, "Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe: Richard Wright's Use of His Southern Religious Background in *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*)," *Southern Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2009): 47.

20. Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 1–16 Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1966).

21. Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), especially chapter 5.

22. Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 16.

23. Craig Thompson Friend, ed., *Southern Masculinity*: *Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), x-xii.

24. Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996).

25. Ownby writes, "Despite the popularity of swearing, shooting, and animal fighting, it is clear that drinking and drunkenness were the most popular recreation in Southern towns. Men drank while enjoying other recreations or drank as their sole recreation, drank at large gatherings or in small groups" (*Subduing Satan*, 50).

26. For examination of property ownership among black families and men, see Manning Marable, "The Politics of Land Tenure, 1877–1915," in *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity: Volume 2, The Nineteenth Century from Emancipation to 1917*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins, chap. 7 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

27. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 114.

28. Mays quote cited in Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 372.

29. Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," in *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper & Row, 2008), 1–15.

30. Wright, "Fire and Cloud," in *Uncle Tom's Children*, 157–220.

31. On Wright's naturalism, see Butler, "Seeking Salvation in a Naturalistic Universe," as well as Mary Hricko, *The Genesis of the Chicago Renaissance: Theodore Dreiser, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and James T. Farrell* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

32. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2002), 25.

33. Thomas J. Mikelson, "*The Negro's God* in the Theology of Martin Luther King, Jr: Social Community and Theological Discourse," Th.D. diss., Harvard University, 1988, 51–92; Mikelson offers an excellent analysis of Mays's *The Negro's God* as it influenced the work of Martin Luther King Jr. Mikelson's chapter is very good as theological analysis of Mays's book. However, the historical context of Mays's study in Mikelson's analysis leaves a lot to be desired. Also see Barbara Dianne Savage's trenchant analysis of the gender politics in *The Negro's God* in *Your Spirits Walk beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 62.

34. Besides Wright's account of his Chicago years in *Black Boy*, Margaret Walker offers invaluable insight into Wright's Chicago years in *Daemonic Genius*, chaps. 12–13. Also see Robert Bone, "Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance," *Callaloo* 9, no. 3 (1986): 446–68.

35. On black women's religion, see Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*.

36. Wallace Best, *Passionate Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

37. Evelyn Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

38. Marla F. Frederick, *Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

39. Richard Wright, review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in *New Masses*, October 5, 1937, 22–23. This selection taken from http://people.virginia.edu/~sfr/enam358/wrightrev.html (accessed January 11, 2013).

40. Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940–1955* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 5–6, 213.

41. Mays, who would live to be just months short of the age of ninety, would see in the 1970s the women's movement progress toward women's greater equality in ways he ignored earlier in his formal scholarship. Wright, unfortunately, died young at fifty-two and could not see that the universal claims of modernism, that he drew upon, were exclusive of women. We can only wonder about how Wright's sense of self-reflection on gender ideology might have changed had he lived as long as Mays.