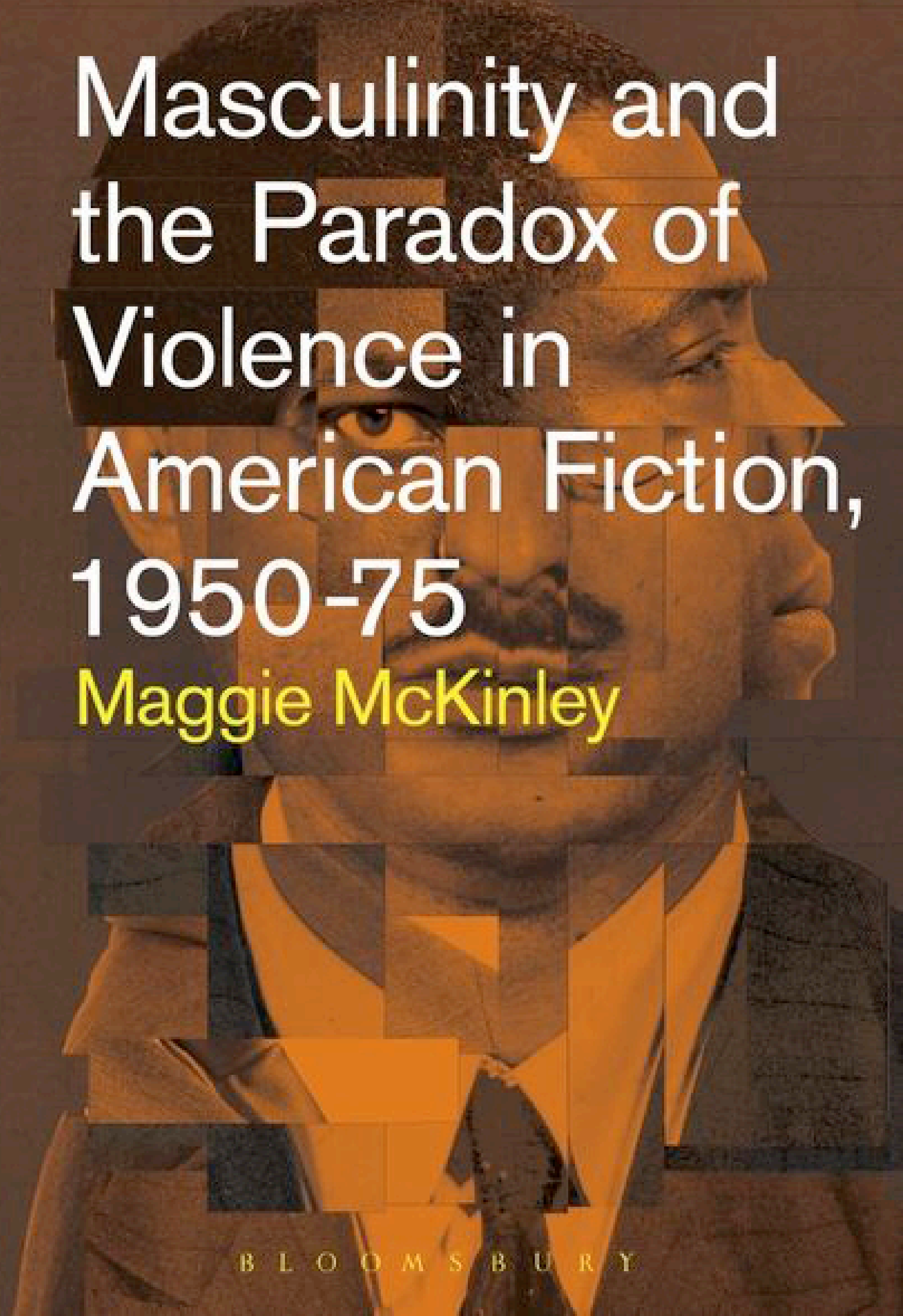
Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75

Maggie McKinley



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Introduction: Gendered Crises, Gendered Violence

The seeds of this project were sewn many years ago, when I first read Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*. I was surprised by my own reaction to the novel: at the time only vaguely aware of Mailer's former reputation, particularly among feminist critics, I had expected to feel somewhat ambivalent about the book. Instead, Mailer's unique ability to fashion a protagonist who was violent and misogynistic yet who also seemed to be simultaneously vulnerable and sympathetic intrigued me. Curious about the critical conversation surrounding the work, I delved into the scholarship surrounding the novel and was surprised to discover that while *An American Dream* had received much attention at the time of its publication, little had been said about the novel's intertwining representation of masculinity, race, and violence (a relationship that comprises the novel's central and most controversial themes) in the past 40 years.[1]

Mailer's work led me to other contemporaneous (and often similarly controversial) authors who also took up the issue of American manhood. Across a range of works penned by these authors, I observed many analogous literary explorations of the intersection of masculinity and violence—some of these representations bearing an almost uncanny resemblance—and I also observed a similar lack of recent scholarship on this specific topic. The question I asked myself then, and which has consistently guided my inquiry since, has been: Now that decades have passed and, to some degree, American cultural attitudes about racial and gendered conflict have shifted (though have certainly not been resolved), what new perspective might we have of these works? In particular, what now can be said about the novels' depiction of the shaping of masculine identity?

With the aim of answering such questions, this book explores the intersections of violence, masculinity, and racial and ethnic tension in America as it is depicted in fiction published by Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, James Baldwin, and Philip Roth between the 1950s and the 1970s. This particular time period, marked as it was by the cultural and political turbulence of the Civil Rights movement, second-wave Feminism, and later, the increasing Zionist sentiment during and after the Six-Day War, elicited passionate and often revolutionary arguments regarding race, ethnicity, and gender, making it a useful era on which to focus a study of the intersections among these topics. For example, the publication of works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) paved the way for further conversation about female social roles and, implicitly, male social roles at this time. Similar conversations were sparked by feminist writings by women of color such as Angela Davis, by the aggressively masculinist ethic espoused by the Black Power movement and modeled by such figures as Eldridge Cleaver, and by the controversial notion of "muscular Judaism" embedded in Zionist ideology at the time.[2] As Michael Kimmel has noted, in the wake of these new dialogues in 1960s America, the concept of a white hegemonic masculinity was threatened, and "the 'masculine mystique'—that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate, and swashbuckling hero—was finally exposed as a fraud" (173). As a result, tensions ran high among men themselves; as the general concept of "masculinity" itself was questioned, so too was the idea that one's race or ethnicity could either add to or detract from one's sense of a specifically "masculine" power.

With this critical history and cultural context in mind, I offer a reconsideration of existential questions about masculinity as they apply to texts in which the African-American and Jewish-American protagonists experience a period of transition amidst cultural and political upheaval and, so doing, become particularly apt figures for the study of masculinity in crisis during these decades.[3] Moreover, the texts' similar representations of violence as a significant factor in such gendered crises further invite a focused comparative study of these particular protagonists. While critics such as Eric Sundquist, Emily Miller Budick, and Adam Zachary Newton have laid the groundwork for putting black and Jewish authors in dialogue, and while some critical studies have addressed representations of race and gender in individual texts by the authors under consideration here, none have placed these texts side by side to explore their instructive similarities with regard to the role violence plays in each author's representation of masculinity. I seek to fill this gap in scholarship by highlighting how violence is problematically asserted in this literature as an inherent part of a man's existential freedom. Specifically, I argue here that the authors under investigation often figure violence as a central aspect of their respective constructions of masculinity, but that this use of violence harbors a problematic paradox, as its deployment in the name of liberation often reifies many of the cultural myths and power structures that these authors, or the protagonists who speak on their behalf, seek to overturn.

There are, admittedly, risks in engaging with the subject of masculinity and violence. Laura Hebert, for example, has noted that many scholars of gender studies fall into the trap of portraying men as "sharing a common masculine identity that is centered on violence and aggression," and thus unintentionally perpetuate the notion that masculinity can be defined and differentiated from femininity by some inherent propensity toward violent behavior (37). By directing my attention to the role of violence and aggression in the construction of masculinity, I have actively striven to avoid any suggestion that these are universal characteristics of manhood, emphasizing rather that they comprise a socially expected model of masculinity that men feel compelled to imitate, often to their own detriment. In fact, the majority of aggressive male protagonists in the texts I examine here either balk and hesitate in the face of violence or are racked with guilt in the aftermath of its deployment. Thus these oft-dubbed hyper-masculine men can ultimately serve to demonstrate that violence is not, in fact, intrinsically masculine, nor is masculinity intrinsically violent.

My specific study of the problematic role of violence in this study is situated within a larger critical conversation concerning constructions of racialized masculinity in post-WWII American literature.[4] I advance this scholarly work by taking a philosophical and historicist approach, drawing from the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in order to discern the status of violence in the modern existentialist reckoning of gendered identity, particularly as a key to understanding the many conflicting shapes of American masculinity. In fact, the basis of my understanding of masculinity here is founded on the idea that it is an existential construct—that, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre (whose existential philosophy informs much of my own discussion of existential constructs of masculinity), a man "is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (*Being* 22). Further, I work from the by-now widely accepted notion that gender is fluid, and that over time masculinity has been formed and reformed in light of social and political changes. Often, masculinity is employed as a mechanism for social organization: myths and archetypes of masculinity are used to categorize individuals according to various stereotypes within a hierarchical system whereby a certain "ideal" masculinity (typically white and heterosexual) is presented as the apex of power.

In the texts I investigate, protagonists who fail to conform to this normative "ideal" are often marked as unmasculine and, as a result, feel as though they must constantly struggle to prove their manhood and regain the sense of power that is tied up in that gendered capital. These men often seek to exercise an existential freedom they believe to be their right as they work to establish a definitive sense of masculine power in the face of a limiting and often oppressive standard; however, I contend that their actions often suggest that they have also internalized patriarchal masculine roles that prompt them to reassert the kind of violent performance of manhood that has contributed to their own oppression. This conflict in turn undermines their attempts to liberate themselves from the masculine model that oppresses them and simultaneously reinforces gendered oppressions against women and other marginalized men. Thus, existential theory allows us to see the problem and the paradox of violence: men make the choice to transcend oppression using liberatory violence that will purportedly allow them to become men, but their aggression often results in the oppression of others and/or their ongoing emasculation.

My study of this paradox is also informed by my belief that Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, despite its primary focus on the construction of femininity, can be particularly useful in helping to articulate the ways in which masculinity is constructed. Though Beauvoir focuses centrally on the situation of women who are "marked" by a lack, the comparisons she draws between gender and oppression allow for an extension of her theory to a study of the existential plight of certain marked masculinities as well. In the texts I investigate here, men who fail to conform to the normative ideal of hegemonic masculinity by nature of their race, ethnicity, or sexual preference, are often perceived to be lacking in masculinity and, internalizing this imposed sense of emasculation, feel as though they must constantly struggle to prove their masculinity and fashion a sense of self-worth that is tied up in that gendered capital.

These men, like the women Beauvoir discusses, are often deprived of the power and sovereignty that is granted to other men who possess this capital, and are thus fashioned into what George Mosse has referred to as a "foil" for a supposedly "true masculinity," which in this case is the white heteronormative masculine image that is set up within the text as the paradigm (6). As Robyn Wiegman has further noted, the trend of mapping gender onto the body has resulted in masculinities becoming so tied up in racial and ethnic stereotypes as to make the concept of masculinity itself a "disembodied" idea that "translates the logic of epidermal inferiority to interior, invisible differences" (47). In this way, certain myths surrounding masculinity become so intricately connected to race and ethnicity that they render certain masculinities "lesser" than others in the eyes of culture at large. Within this system, in order for a white heterosexual male to embody this "true" masculinity, he must subordinate men of other races and sexual orientations. In turn, the men who find themselves emasculated and subordinated by these factors also feel compelled to either imitate the actions of their oppressors or attempt to completely reject the racial identities and histories that have contributed to their imposed and internalized sense of inferiority. This tendency often translates into acts of interpersonal violence and aggression.

My intentions here are to explore what it means that the existential refashioning of masculinity in the face of this crisis seems to not only exhibit but also require this violence, and to highlight the various consequences of this trend. The following chapters (a) examine the manner in which specific male protagonists face existential crises of masculine identity marked by competing social and personal definitions of manhood, (b) demonstrate that violence plays an integral role in these masculine formations—most often, by serving as a means by which the protagonists attempt to reconcile contradictory definitions of manhood—and (c) work to locate the source of that violence's inefficacy. It is my belief that by making violence a central instrument of their masculine formation, the fictional protagonists actually serve to mire themselves more deeply within the racial and gendered conflicts that trigger their masculine anxiety. In other words, though the protagonists perceive violence as a way to step outside of an oppressive cultural framework, this very perception of violence also underscores the inherent complications that lie within this figuration of gendered identity, as it threatens instead to reinforce oppressive myths surrounding race, ethnicity, and gender rather than eradicate them.

Some of the criticism that I offer in this vein is in line with what I perceive to be the authors' own criticism of the representations of violence; for instance, I would argue that Roth builds a critique of the violence into both *Portnoy's Complaint* and *My Life as Man*, as does Baldwin in texts such as *Giovanni's Room* and *Another Country*. However, in some cases the critique of violence is largely my own intervention: in my view, for example, Wright fails to interrogate misogynistic violence in *The Outsider* the same way that he questions homicidal violence among men as a tool for liberation, a disparity also apparent in Mailer's work. It is my hope that an investigation of violence in these texts will illuminate some of these oversights and silences, while also demonstrating how we might employ existentialist theory to understand the conflicted nature of American masculinity as it is represented in these works of fiction.

An existential theory of gender construction

While all of the narratives I analyze in the ensuing chapters are linked by their representations of masculine construction as a particularly violent process, they are also connected by similar representation of masculine formation as following an existential path toward "transcendence." Because each of the texts references themes of immanence, transcendence, alterity, and individualism, and in fact figures these to be an inherent part of each protagonist's gendered project, Beauvoir's existential theory of gender provides a useful framework through which to conduct an analysis of these particular texts. As I previously suggested, Beauvoir's philosophy (and, by nature of association and influence, the existential model offered by Sartre) offers the language necessary to unearthing, articulating, and analyzing many of the latent and overt existential themes in this range of texts. Beauvoir's text also provides us with the tools to identify precisely where and how each narrative invokes a call for gendered liberation that she herself might endorse, and, on the other hand, how the male protagonists in these texts still espouse the very oppressive tendencies and beliefs about gendered hierarchy that she criticizes.

In *The Second* Sex, published first in France in 1949 and later translated into English for US publication in 1953, Beauvoir sets forth her argument that "the drama of woman lies in the conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential" (liv). That is, the primary focus of Beauvoir's project is to draw attention to the ways in which women are denied the possibility of existential transcendence, by the very fact that they are defined as a lack; in other words, the category of "woman" is understood by the nature of its being "not man."[5] This definition contributes to what Beauvoir calls the "immanent" situation of woman, or the condition of being rendered stagnant, passive, and prevented from achieving an equal place with white men in society.

Significantly, while Beauvoir focuses primarily on the plight of woman in the twentieth century, she makes direct connections between the culturally and historically embedded subordination of women and that of blacks and Jews to support her arguments. She notes there are "deep similarities" between these marginalized groups, as all "are being emancipated today from a like paternalism, and the former master class wishes to keep them in their place—that is, the place chosen for them" (xxix). For example, in her description of the white male perception of self as a "master race" in relation to woman, she also draws comparisons between the white male perceptions of blacks and Jews:

> In the same way the whites of Louisiana and Georgia are delighted with the little pilferings and fibs of the blacks: they feel reassured of the superiority conferred by their skin color; and if one of these Negroes persists in being honest, he will be maltreated the more for it. And similarly in the concentration camps the abasement of men was systematically carried out: the Master Race found in this abjection proof that it was indeed of superhuman essence. (221)[6]

In these analogies, Beauvoir exposes shared experiences of oppression, pointing out that the problem of belonging to one of these marginalized groups is a socially constructed one, fashioned by those who feel threatened by external differences. The black and Jewish protagonists in the texts at hand face a similar struggle, maintaining the conviction that they are "essential" while aware that they are perceived externally as "inessential." As a result, they bear a similar desire to move, as she says, "toward liberation."

In drawing on the similarities Beauvoir herself observes, I do not mean to elide the differences among racial, ethnic, and gendered communities, nor is my incorporation of Beauvoir's theory meant to imply that the experiences of each of these groups is the same or that these authors speak for *all* blacks or *all* Jews in America.[7] I would suggest, however, that Beauvoir's acknowledgment of similar oppression across this racial, ethnic, and gendered diversity makes her text useful to an investigation of gender beyond feminist inquiries alone. In this case specifically, it renders her study of gender relations particularly fruitful in exploring the ways that Ellison, Wright, Mailer, Baldwin, Bellow, and Roth use fiction in order to fashion masculinities in the face of racialized social conflict. By employing Beauvoir's study as a methodological analogue for my own, I seek to show that her discussion of alterity and essentialism provides a basis for discussing each author's fictionalized philosophy of masculinity, even for the ways that they move beyond her text to imagine a type of creative violence that might theoretically allow their protagonists to move toward liberation and transcendence.

For example, the main dilemma of femininity as framed by Beauvoir is defined by existentialist notions of transcendence versus immanence, a dichotomy that is also implied by—and at times even directly articulated within—the texts at hand. This is particularly revealed in the antagonism each man faces between the man he has been in the past and the man he wants to be, or believes he is expected to be. As Beauvoir writes, "The fact is that every human existence involves transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go forward, each existence must be maintained, for it to expand toward the future it must integrate the past, and while intercommunicating with others it should find self-confirmation" (430). The men in these texts struggle with this tension between immanence and transcendence as they work to overcome the conditions that have led to their oppressed conditions in the world (their immanence) by emphasizing their freedom to choose and create themselves, thus suggesting the possibility of transcending their current conditions. This potential transcendence is often imagined in these texts more specifically as the potential for a liberation that is as integral to the individual gendered projects of these male protagonists as it is to Beauvoir's discussion for women. As Beauvoir also posits, the path to freedom is attained by continually working toward transcendence, "through a continual reaching out toward other liberties" (xxxiv–v) for it is through this that man "creates values" (64). The men in these texts also reach out for these liberties, by which they might create a new set of values that extend beyond their various experiences of emasculation and intertwining racial, ethnic, sexual, or gendered oppressions.

Additionally, a sense of otherness contributes significantly to the feelings of gendered inferiority experienced by these male protagonists, just as it factors into Beauvoir's discussion of femininity. In the existential theorizing of Sartre and Beauvoir, the Other becomes "a necessity" to man; as Beauvoir repeats throughout her study, man "attains himself only through that reality which he is not, which is something other than himself" (139) and "seeks through the world to find himself in some shape, other than himself, which he makes his own" (57). However, while both acknowledge this "being-for-others" as essential to one's identity and existential freedom, they also note that this sense of otherness also has detrimental effects on one's sense of individual power. As Beauvoir notes, "man incarnates the Other, as [woman] does for the man; but this *Other* seems to her to be on the plane of the essential, and with reference to him she sees herself as the inessential" (329). Though Beauvoir's comment is couched within her larger discussion of women's designation to domestic spaces that have been historically rendered inferior, the universal terms she employs here point to the way her existential theory of gender is applicable to gendered struggles experienced by marginalized men, as well—particularly with regard to the inferiority complex that arises from this sense of otherness (which, as I argue throughout this project, is what often inspires acts of aggression). That is, the alterity that is constructed by another's gaze can be manipulated to fashion an idea of superior and inferior genders, as well as a notion of an "ideal" masculinity. This notion then informs the inferiority complexes and oppressions of those men who, like women, "share in that mysterious and threatened reality" of a preformed gendered identity defined by others (xix).

Thus, masculinity—like the femininity Beauvoir discusses—can be viewed as a construct defined by a particular cultural system whereby only certain forms become associated with power. Specifically, the white, heterosexual, middle- to upper-class male becomes synonymous with a culturally and politically powerful masculinity, while other races and ethnic groups are confined to stereotypes that relegate them to "lesser" forms of manhood. Though they exist in a fictional space, the male characters in these texts live under conditions where, as blacks and Jews in 1950s and 60s America, they find themselves defined by white heteropatriarchal American values, which place them—like the women Beauvoir discusses—in a subordinate cultural position. Their anxiety of masculinity arises from widespread perceptions of race or ethnicity that make them out to be "lesser" men: because American society also created stereotypes to define "Jewishness" and "blackness" as feminized and dehumanized identities, these men are not only denied the cultural capital conferred on a masculine identity associated solely with whiteness, but are also often denied their very humanity.[8]

As a result, each protagonist is represented as combatting this dehumanized image by asserting his masculinity, often via aggression, as a rebellious response to the various expectations regarding his gendered identity. To fashion a masculine identity that works against or extends beyond the values that are opposed from without, these men consistently reach toward a future that they cannot always fully articulate or clearly imagine. Yet their individual attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs to which we as readers are privy suggest that they, like Beauvoir, firmly believe that "there is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence, stagnation, there is a degradation of existence" (xxxv).[9]

In sum, the existential problem I investigate with regards to masculinity arises in these texts when each character's freedom to perform gender is prevented by actual institutional oppressions or perceived threats, from racial and ethnic stereotyping to feminine and masculine "others" who complicate and confuse each male character's sense of his own masculine self. While the men in the fiction I analyze here seek to exercise the existential freedom that is their right, their actions often suggest that they have internalized the aforementioned masculine roles and have embraced what Kaja Silverman would call the "dominant fiction" in culture (16). That is, rather than revealing and revising that fiction, these men seek to conform to a certain idealized masculine role, which contributes significantly to the failure of their individual projects.[10] They use an existential rationale to assert a masculinist ethic—often by way of violence—that undermines any attempt to liberate themselves from the masculine model that oppresses them, and simultaneously reinforces other gendered oppressions. Their actions are aimed to prevent or combat this sense of emasculation or failure, yet by crafting a masculine identity in response to the way they are stereotyped, these men often simply reenact another stereotype—that of the aggressive, patriarchal, oppressive male—that serves to reproduce the normative model that they have worked against.[11] Rather than leading to liberation, such behavior often results in a deepened sense of conflict and emasculation.

The role of violence in existential gendered crises

Despite its ultimately problematic and paradoxical nature in the construction of masculine identity, violence is often initially represented in these texts as a constructive exercise in each protagonist's gendered existential project. The regenerative powers mapped onto violence by the protagonists themselves make this element of gender construction both intriguing and controversial. In many cases, the acts of violence are intended not to destroy but to rebuild each man's sense of his masculinity, repairing what is imagined in the text as a fragmented identity. For example, in Ellison's *Invisible Man,* the climax of the narrator's journey toward self-discovery and racial awareness is notably marked by his decision to lance another man's jaw with a spear. In Wright's *The Outsider*, Cross Damon faces the opportunity to recreate himself as a new man, but finds himself compelled to commit four murders to maintain his newfound freedom. In Mailer's *An American Dream*, Stephen Rojack first contemplates suicide in the face of his own existential crisis, until he is overwhelmed with the sense of "rebirth" he experiences after killing his ex-wife. In Baldwin's *Another Country*, Rufus Scott asserts his own dominant masculinity through misogynistic abuse, and the repercussions of his own violent suicide affects the lives of all of the text's remaining characters. In Saul Bellow's *Herzog* and Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man*, both Moses Herzog and Peter Tarnopol fantasize about murdering their wives in order to regain control of the sense of manhood they feel has been compromised. These are only brief examples of the many instances in which these protagonists, faced with a faltering sense of their own masculinities, seek out violence as their primary recourse and temporary catharsis. In some cases, they imagine it to be a symbol not only of masculine power and freedom, but also of their rejection of "normative" social performances of manhood; in other cases, they use this violence to imitate what they believe to be the norm, assuming it will allow them to approximate a hegemonic masculine identity.

The goal of each of these protagonists is ultimately to set himself up as an existential "sovereign subject" by destroying an "other" that prevents him from doing so (Beauvoir 140). The idea that an act of aggression can result in individual agency and reclamation of manhood lends a redemptive quality to violence, and intricately links concepts of masculinity to freedom and power. Acknowledging this association between masculinity, individual freedom, and violence, Beauvoir herself notes the following:

> Many kinds of masculine behavior spring from a root of possible violence . . . for a man to feel in his fists his will to self-affirmation is enough to reassure him of his sovereignty. Against any insult, any attempt to reduce him to the status of object, the male has recourse to his fists, to exposure of himself to blows: he does not let himself be transcended by others, he is himself at the heart of his subjectivity. Violence is the authentic proof of one's loyalty to himself, to his passions, to his own will; radically to deny this will is to deny oneself any objective truth, it is to wall oneself up in an abstract subjectivity; anger or revolt that does not get into the muscles remains a figment of the imagination. (331)

This statement, I would argue, is key to understanding the way the protagonists themselves perceive violence as integral to their existential constructions of masculinity. Violence becomes an expression not only of physical strength, but also of existential freedom and independence.[12]

In fact, each protagonist's perception of violence as harboring a potential liberation is itself an idea based in existentialist ideology. Sartre views violence as a reparative force that "can heal the wounds it has inflicted," and believes that it is, in fact, the only way to "efface the marks of violence" that perpetuate to social injustice (*Being* lxii). This reparative potential of violence is likewise perceived by fictional characters like Cross Damon and Stephen Rojack. Each interprets his identity—and the masculinity that makes up a central and significant part of this identity—to be stunted by a larger oppression, be it racism and Communism (as in Cross's case) or the economic injustice and political totalitarianism of society (as in Rojack's case). Each also uses violence to combat a perceived threat of another violence wielded against their masculinities, to "efface the marks of violence" which undermine their individual autonomy and power.

In theory, these institutional violences that threaten the individual are also akin to what Pierre Bourdieu in *Masculine Domination* calls "symbolic violences." This kind of violence, in Bourdieu's view, is enacted constantly in society and has come to be an accepted form of masculine domination that privileges a patriarchal structure. These structures of domination are "the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction, to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions—families, the church, the educational system, the state—contribute" (Bourdieu 34). These violences, argues Bourdieu, are also particularly dangerous because they are often asserted "invisibly and insidiously through an insensible familiarization with a structured physical world" (38). Despite the fact that the protagonists themselves feel threatened by the institutional arm of this symbolic violence, many of them will come to reenact precisely this kind of violence as they attempt to extract themselves from the oppressions enacted upon them by other men who represent a hegemonic, heteronormative masculinity.

This violent tendency is largely demonstrated by their response to a second threat to their masculinity—that of women. In this case the "violence" these men feel to be enacted against themselves is also largely theoretical, though it involves a dismantling of masculine privilege and power. From Cross Damon's sense that the women in his life are conspiring against his freedom, to the understanding reached by both the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Fish Tucker of Wright's *The Long Dream* that their masculinities have been held in check by the forbidden allure of white women, to the emasculation felt by Stephen Rojack, Peter Tarnopol, and Moses Herzog at the hands of their wives, every single male character in these texts faces at least one moment (though often many more) during which he views a female "other" as an obstacle to the freedom and power that he believes should be his masculine privilege. In retaliation, he is then inspired to deploy misogynistic violence—physical, verbal, or psychological—in the name of masculine liberation.

The kinds of violence deployed by the men themselves differ across the texts in question, taking the form of homicide, physical aggression, misogyny, and suicide.[13] In some cases, it might also be discussed in the idiom of the Oedipal complex, since both the threat of violence that emanates from patriarchal institutions and the actual violence deployed by marginalized individuals in each novel are reminiscent of Freud's discussion of Oedipal cycles of repression and domination (as well as Herbert Marcuse's subsequent analysis and expansion of Freud's theories in *Eros and Civilization*).[14] Some texts, in fact, like Wright's *The Long Dream* and Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, explicitly invoke Oedipal themes in their representations of masculine strife. In those texts, men like Fish Tucker and Alex Portnoy often take on the role of the son who seeks to overthrow the authority of a patriarchal society, but in doing so violently, only begin a new cycle of oppression. Thus, these men—marginalized, feminized, and criminalized by nature of their races and ethnicities—come to use symbolic violence, misogynistic violence, and physical aggression practiced or endorsed by the very institutions that seek to diminish their senses of masculinity. In this way, cycles of specifically gendered violence become embedded in a cultural framework and individual violent acts of the oppressed, though meant to be liberatory, ultimately nurture the institutional violence of the oppressor.

The following chapters elucidate the various ways each text presents the cyclical and gendered nature of violence. In each, I identify the following: (1) each protagonist's perception of violence, (2) the manner in which this violence is deployed, (3) the degree to which the author embeds a criticism of this violent masculine ethic within the narrative itself, and (4) the consequences of this violence that have gone unobserved or undertreated in each text. To aid my discussion of these factors, I also draw from the meditations on violence by Hannah Arendt, who acknowledges violence as an embedded—and sometimes seemingly necessary—tool for social advancement, while also pointing to the instances in which this violence becomes corrupted and counterproductive.

While Beauvoir's existential exploration of gender provides the language and method with which to discuss each protagonist's gendered project and perception of violence, Arendt's work helps to articulate why this violence often proves unsuccessful as a tool for individual power. Arendt, a contemporary of the authors in question, engages with theories of existential violence posed by Sartre in her 1970 treatise *On Violence*. In it, she concedes the "obvious truth" that "force and violence are likely to be successful techniques of social control and persuasion when they have wide popular support," and also observes that many revolutionary groups have discovered the efficacy of violence to their respective causes (19). However, she also critiques Sartre's representation of violence as a redemptive or curative force, arguing that this idea of violence is a myth more akin to a primitive revenge tactic (20). In response to Sartre's glorification of violence as a tool for liberation, Arendt questions the ways in which violence is used to justify progress. An argument she cites for this justification's logic often includes the notion that "since the motion of this progress is supposed to come about through the clashes of antagonistic forces, it is possible to interpret every 'regress' as a necessary but temporary setback" (26). The problem with this view is that violence then becomes synonymous with power. Arendt herself wants to separate these two terms, and to question the way that the former has become a metonym for the latter, and the latter a justification for the former. Echoing her friend and mentor Walter Benjamin, she argues that "violence can always destroy power" but "what never can grow out of it is power" (53).[15]

It should be noted that, with some exceptions, Arendt often discusses violence largely as it is manifested in the political sphere and thereby places her respective critiques of it in the context of the law. The violence in the fictional texts at hand is, by contrast, highly individualistic—as is Sartre and Beauvoir's existentialist theorizing which, while it takes into account the social context of the time, applies largely to the condition of the individual man. Though this difference might seem to suggest a barrier in the theoretical application of Arendt's work to the texts under investigation, I would suggest that the variances between Arendt and Beauvoir actually *enrich* our understanding of the intersections between violence, existentialism, and gender. In her study of violence and politics in the work of Arendt and Beauvoir, for instance, Margaret Ogrondick gestures toward the usefulness of placing these theories side by side. While she contends that the two philosophers' respective treatments of violence "diverge in the more collectively oriented framework of Arendt's republicanism and the more individualistic rubric of Beauvoir's existentialist politics" (2) she also notes that Arendt's analysis "does not provide an answer to the individual's moral question of what s/he should specifically do in terms of participation or resistance to violence," a space which Beauvoir's work, in its focus on an individual ethic, might fill (6). To this point I would also add that Beauvoir herself notes that "the only public good is that which assures the private good of the citizens," thus inviting a direct connection between her study of the individual and the interest of the larger political sphere (xxxiv). With this in mind, I adopt Arendt's broader criticisms of violence to interrogate the existential justifications for individual violence in the texts under investigation.

For instance, a central point of Arendt's critique, which I apply to the individualized violence in the texts at hand, is her argument that while in some cases violence is the only way to "set the scales of justice right again," once there is any attempt to rationalize this violence and find in it some sort of "method for living and acting," it becomes "irrational" (66). In other words, though violence can sometimes serve to bring certain "grievances" to public attention, it cannot in itself create the kind of power that is desired by its users—something she emphasizes repeatedly throughout her text. As she explains, "To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power" (53), and she reasserts soon after that "violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance" (56). Moreover, she does not ignore the consequences of violence on an individual scale, observing that "single men without others to support them never have enough power to use violence successfully" (51).

Ultimately, what Arendt helps us to articulate is that if these characters seek through their use of violence a masculinity defined by *power*, what they actually fashion is only a masculine identity defined by *violence*. Each protagonist applies an existential theory of violence to his own situation—a theory that violence can be used as a tool to freely construct one's gendered identity with the aim of transcending a stagnant or oppressive situation. However, in nearly all cases the protagonists' deployments of violence epitomize Arendt's argument that violence "pays indiscriminately" and that "the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probably change is a more violent world" (80).

Some of the consequences of violence that I locate in these texts are in line with what I perceive to be the authors' own criticisms of the representations of violence; that is, the repercussions of violence are deliberately planted by the authors to undermine the authority of their aggressive protagonists. In fact, these authors rarely hold up their protagonists' violent actions as an unequivocal model for masculinity. Even Mailer, whose work is perhaps most controversial on this point, recognizes some of the caveats embedded within his endorsement of violence; like Arendt, he acknowledges the difference between liberatory and oppressive violence, and makes great efforts to distinguish between the two.

Still, in certain cases the consequences and implications of the violences in a number of these texts are not adequately addressed, lending a distinct ambivalence to each author's representation of masculine aggression. In *An American Dream,* for instance, Mailer questions but also triumphs the violence deployed by Stephen Rojack. In *Mr. Sammler's Planet,* Bellow uses Artur Sammler to reproach large-scale and revolutionary violence, but does not offer the same level of criticism with regard to his protagonist's own misogynistic and racist ideologies. By interrogating this violence more closely than these authors do themselves, I do not aim to condemn these authors or their works as racist or misogynistic, as has sometimes been done in the past.[16] As I argue throughout this book, in some cases the authors' own extra-textual commentary on gender and sexuality does understandably foster such criticisms, as do some of the ideals they appear to uphold or endorse in their fiction. However, several of the harshest criticisms of these authors tend to overinflate the connection between the authors and their protagonists, resulting in the labeling of the authors themselves as misogynist, homophobic, or racist—an unfortunate oversimplification that I believe continues to cause many readers to mistakenly dismiss their works outright as lacking in value. Thus, I aim to reexamine and recuperate works that have been derided or dismissed because of their controversial representations of violence and masculinity, with the goal of more clearly illuminating the underlying factors that contribute to each text's gender politics.

The connections between masculinity and violence that I illuminate here are not limited only to the particular works analyzed in each chapter, as various iterations of these themes can be found in the authors' other works (from Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* to Roth's *The Human Stain,* for instance). Nor are these connections limited to these particular authors: the discussion sustained here can apply to a number of other black and Jewish authors of the twentieth century, such as Bernard Malamud and Chester Himes, whose works represent male protagonists grappling with similar existential crises and engaging in different modes of violence. Moreover, in a larger sense, the analysis offered here might also be applied to the work of authors outside of these particular cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. In other words, because the protagonists in the works I have discussed here are shaped as a response to hegemonic notions of heteronormative masculinity, their fictional plights might also, ideally, shed light on the locus of some of the gendered oppressions, discriminations, and identity crises that extend beyond black and Jewish men and cross into a variety of different marginalized cultures.

The chapters that follow are arranged in a roughly chronological order, beginning with an investigation of Ellison' *Invisible Man* (1952) and concluding with an analysis of Roth's *My Life as a Man* (1974), with each chapter informing the thematic content of the next. The first chapter frames Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a basis for understanding the later texts, as Ellison's novel offers an in-depth investigation of the ways in which manhood can be both marked and invisible when it does not adhere to conceptualizations of the "dominant" masculinity. Because dominance is equated with whiteness in *Invisible Man,* Ellison is able to offer a pointed critique of racism in America by examining its specific effects on black masculinity. Moreover, *Invisible Man* also introduces a protagonist who grapples with a deep ambivalence about the use of violence as a way to claim or maintain a specifically gendered power—a theme that is echoed in texts published for years afterward.[17]

Chapter 2 examines the intersection of violence, existential gendered identity construction, and race in Wright's *The Outsider* (1953) and in his later novel *The Long Dream* (1958). In my analysis of both works, I observe the variant ways in which protagonists Cross Damon and Fish Tucker use violence as a tool to forward their existential journeys toward transcendence (projects that I demonstrate can be largely understood through the language of both Beauvoir and Sartre). As each man locates his loss of power in the political and cultural systems imposed on him by outside forces, he resorts to violence to eradicate this oppression and recreate himself as a new man. I aim to demonstrate that each man's flawed interpretation of violence, however, undermines his project, and prompts us to question what, if anything, this violence has succeeded in changing.

Chapter 3 explores Norman Mailer's controversial essay "The White Negro" (1957) and his subsequent novel *An American Dream* (1965). "The White Negro," employing what has been viewed as an extended racial stereotype, works from the premise that black masculinity embodies the capacity for violent behavior that operates outside of the law, and thus offers an escape from the oppressive totalitarian systems criticized by Mailer. While the essay is flawed, it represents one of Mailer's most ambitious experiments, as he attempts to put forth a philosophy that would liberate men from what he views as a "cancerous" society. The essay, however, in justifying itself by the ends it supposes, not only exemplifies many of the inherent problems with violence articulated by Arendt, but also provides the foundation for what will become a central problematic theme in *An American Dream*, a novel in which protagonist Stephen Rojack also uses violence as a way to resolve his existential dilemma.

In Chapter 4, I examine Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) and *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970), novels that also address the ambiguities and conflicts regarding the role of violence, race, and ethnicity in the construction of masculinity. As men of words, Bellow's protagonists do not resort to the same kinds of physical violence as either Wright's or Mailer's characters, and they more explicitly refuse to embrace violence in their own lives as an attribute of masculinity and individual power. Still, throughout each narrative, particularly *Mr. Sammler's Planet,* each protagonist's articulation of his masculine identity threatens to enact racist and misogynistic violences through language.

In Chapter 5, I examine how homosexuality factors into and complicates the construction of racialized masculinities in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962). I maintain that each man in these texts sets forth on an existential journey to transcend a situation in which he finds himself socially emasculated by his same-sex desire, an emasculation that in some cases is compounded by his sense of racial inferiority as well. In a recurring trend, these men often resort to physical or psychological violence as they attempt to reconstruct a sense of masculine power and value and assert their masculine identities. While violence is embedded in each narrative's representation of masculine construction, Baldwin's treatment of this violence differs from that of the other authors in question, in that he does not ultimately represent violence as liberatory or euphoric; rather, it becomes a last grasp at an elusive and unattainable masculine "ideal."

Finally, Chapter 6 examines Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1967) and *My Life as a Man* (1975), novels that closely examine the masculine constructions of two of