Human Sacrifice: Black-on-Black Violence and Mimetic Theory

Andrew J. McKenna, Loyola University Chicago
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Black-on-black violence, which has over filled our carceral system, is heir to the violence exercised by the long era of Jim Crow. Classic texts in African-American literature enable us to understand the sacrificial dynamic at work here. The overlapping insights of critical social theory (Franz Fanon, Paolo Freire) and of René Girard shed important light on the achievements of our best writers in this tradition. This will involve analysis of two textual sources as their insights cluster around one idea.

The first two texts are Chapter 12 of Richard Wright's autobiography Black Boy and Chapter 1 of Ralph Ellison's The Invisible man, frequently published in short story anthologies as "Battle Royal," and which clearly builds on the episode from Wright, who we know he was a mentor of Ellison. The one idea is brought forward in a ground-breaking essay by Fred Smith, formerly of Temple University, which engages René Girard's Mimetic Theory to explore black-on-black violence, and I engage it to further illuminate Ellison's insights.

René Girard has often been referred to a hedgehog, developing an anthropological theory out of one idea, as opposed to the fox's many ones. This one idea is mimetic or imitative desire, mediated desire, desire according to another, and how it leads to conflict when desires converge on objects that cannot be shared. Humans lack instinctual brakes to conflict of this kind that arises in the animal kingdom, such as pecking orders, alpha males, dominance patterns, etc., that prevent intraspecific violence. Mimetic desire is unique to our species and so is an internecine violence that knows no bounds: humans, as Dr Johnson remarked of our ferocious bellicosity centuries ago, is the "only animal that does not devour what it kills" ("Vultures and Men").

I will elaborate somewhat more on Mimetic Theory as various aspects of it will filter into my discussion of Wright and Ellison. It is an anthropological hypothesis of human cultural origins in sacrifice, in a scapegoat mechanism whose excrescences are still with us today, as Smith demonstrates in his analysis of black-on-black violence as portrayed by Wright. For Girard, the scapegoating is labeled a mechanism because it issues non-consciously from rivalry when the [1] violence of all against all, such as we find described in Hobbes famous chapter in Leviathan (I, xiii), [2] streamlines into the violence of all against one, [3] whose destruction ends the violence. There follows a moment of non-instinctual attention to the victim, which is divinized for being the source of unanimous collaboration in the kill and the calm which ensues when it is over. The origin of human culture is religious, and the newly experienced order among its members is maintained by ritual repetition of its violent origins, by the unanimity-minus-one of sacrificial violence, by the generative and re-generative scapegoat mechanism. We will encounter different stages of this process in the events narrated by Wright and Ellison, which are revealing studies of the sacrificial
violence of Jim Crow.\textsuperscript{1} The scapegoating dynamic that emerges from the insights shared by Wright and Ellison as illumined by Mimetic Theory reaches back to the insights of Greek tragedy as it explores its myths of cultural foundations, and also to biblical revelation which thoroughly demystifies sacrificial violence.

\textbf{Black Boy:} We can conceive Wright's narrative as a tragedy in 3 acts.

\textbf{Act I.} The set-up, or frame-up, is a twisted form of the Prisoners' Dilemma, in which the sentencing of detainees will vary according to which one squeals on the other. Wright and a black co-worker named Harrison are lied to by their white supervisors about each of them being out to knife the other to avenge an alleged offense. The two concur in denying the lie, but in a self-defensive mode insinuated by the whites, that is, without fully trusting that the other will not make a pre-emptive strike.

\textbf{Act II. Negotiation:} When the frame-up does not work, the whites resort to urging them to settle their (non-)grievance by a boxing match, which Wright resists but Harrison desires because of a $5.00 reward--essentially an irresistible bribe--for going ahead with it. Wright reluctantly agrees in consequence of a telling dialogue, in which he complains that "those white men will be looking at us, laughing as us," to which Harrison reasons:

"They look at you and laugh at you every day, nigger."

It was true. But I hated him for saying it. I ached to hit him in his mouth, to hurt him. (263)

The "n" word here is a most unwelcome reminder of the blacks' degraded status, bringing to the fore Erik Erikson's description of the identity crisis that is systemically fomented among them:

The individual belonging to an oppressed and exploited minority, which is aware of the dominate culture ideals but prevented from emulating, is apt to fuse the negative images held up to him by the dominant majority with negative identity cultivated in his own group. Here we may think of the many nuances of the ways in which one Negro may address another as "nigger." (in Smith 35)

These "nuances," a radical ambivalence, are an expression of W. E. B. DuBois' depiction of his culture's "double consciousness" which this episode dramatizes in its most stressful form:

\textsuperscript{1} Which is still with us in the form of our criminal justice system, among other places. It is, to anyone who inspects it just a little, a criminal system: it produces the criminals whom it recycles from late adolescence through its institutions ever upwards as violence replicates itself ever more lethally. See Michelle Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow}. 
It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (in Smith 36)

Wright depicts how "warring ideals in one black body" are manipulated into becoming a fierce contest between two black bodies, in which self-respect is hopelessly sundered.

The whites in the factory suspect that their victims are wise to their plot, but this truth does not set them free. They are ensnared in a double bind, a term first coined by Gregory Bateson and invoked by Girard to explain the paradoxes of desire (Violence 291-94). Here each tug against the knot of lies binding these men tightens its grip on them:

"And now they know that we know what they tried to do to us," I said, hating myself for saying it. "And they hate us for it."

Wrath against the whites, finding no possible outlet, turns inward against themselves:

I'd feel like a dog."

"To them, both of us are dogs," he said

"Yes," I admitted, but again I want to hit him. (264)

Here the perverse rationale for black-on-black violence is fully spelled out in its sacrificial and scapegoating significance. The hatred experienced from whites against their race is internalized within its members, turning them ineluctably against one another, each being a scapegoat for the rage that cannot find expression toward their oppressors.

Act III. The Tragic Finale

In the boxing match, the exchange of timid blows intended to fake the violence draws blood and leads to fiercer exchanges; in this mimetic violence, each man functions as a model, a trigger for the other's increasingly violent reciprocity:

The fight was on against our will. I felt trapped and ashamed. I lashed out even harder, and the harder I fought the harder Harrison fought. Our plans and promises meant nothing. We fought four hard rounds, stabbing, slugging, grunting, spitting, cursing, crying, bleeding. (265)

Those seven verbs serve to fully illumine the agency of violence in which individual freedom disappears:

The shame and anger we felt for having allowed ourselves to be duped crept into our blows and blood ran into our eyes, blinding us. The hate we felt for the men whom we had tried to cheat went into the blows we threw at each other....

I could not look at Harrison. I hated him and I hated myself. (265)

Smith comments aptly on the mechanism of sacrificial substitution here, in which each combatant is a scapegoat for the structure of violence that has set them against each other:
Every time Wright struck Harrison, he hit the white men who were the source of his shame. His own blood became the veil, blinding him to his fate. His hate of Harrison was the hate he felt for himself and his oppressors (39).

The veil referred to here is the one drawn over the boxers' consciousness by the scapegoat mechanism. Smith further remarks upon its social evolution:

According to Girard, scapegoating is not effective unless an element of delusion enters into it. I would go farther and say that black-on-black violence is a delusion that transfers the intergroup racial violence experienced in previous generations to the intra-group violence of the present generation. The scapegoating taking place is the displacement of the rage that is due to internalized oppression, and causes a transference of violence from its logical target to surrogate. (38)

In sum, every blow directed at Harrison also lands on himself, every punch comes back to his own body. The rolls of tormentor and victim couple and merge. As Girard remarks in Battling to the End, "violence is never lost on violence" (18). The violence of Jim Crow, the multifarious shocks administered to the black community cannot be reciprocated; that is materially and in every other way impossible. They will rebound and circulate among its own members.

As Martin Luther King and his allies understood, the only effective alternative to this "fate" was to absorb the violence without retaliating, and consequently to expose it fully to view, to publicly unveil it, raising a consciousness of it that the majority of the white population in the country would be compelled to repudiate. As Eldridge Cleaver famously uttered from his prison cell in San Quentin, "You are either part of the problem or part of the solution, there ain't no middle ground" (Soul on Ice). The violence that is received and not returned, not reciprocated by the victim, is not wasted here either. Instead, it is transformed into moral capital that is accumulated against the oppressors. To strike at the core of "centuries of socializing and intimidating conditioning" (Smith 38) is, paradoxically, not to strike back. The non-violent strategy that King derived partly from Gandhi, who derived it partly from the Gospels during his education in England, finds its model in the crucifixion, where the victim of a mob stirred to anger by political and religious manipulation asks forgiveness for his tormentors, "for they know not what they do," moved as they are by the non-conscious dynamics of crowd mimesis."² The Passion removes the divine sanction for sacrificial violence, exposing us to our own responsibility for it.

In Greek tragedy, the victim of ritual sacrifice is seen as a god for the harmony that his destruction or expulsion realizes in the community. Here in the US, the gods are the white instigators of violence, and the scapegoat victims are the blacks they set against one another. The white community is reconciled to its system of black inferiority around the spectacle of violence within the black community, which cannot be reconciled to the internal violence that it has

² See James Alison.
exercised: "I felt that I had done something unclean, something for which I could never properly atone"(266), says Wright at the end. The word "unclean" bears a powerful anthropological charge; it connotes the collapse or erasure of boundaries between values by which humans order our lives within a culture: inside/outside the community, true/false, moral/immoral, permitted/forbidden, do/don’t do, etc. (Douglas). Here it translates Wright's "double consciousness" in a state of paroxysm, in which the difference between white oppression and black suffering has been clouded, smeared. Smith quotes Paolo Freire aptly on the contestants in this issue: "They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressors whose consciousness they have internalized" (Smith 37)--and whose hatred they take out on each other.

It is traditionally to restore such differences that communities resort to sacrificial expulsion of scapegoats who are alleged—or ritually coerced, a case being royal incest (Girard, Violence 104-07)—to violate them. The purpose of sacrifice is to reconfirm or restore cultural differences, and above all to differentiate good violence, which unites a community, from bad violence which divides it. The simple genius of non-violent protest is to divide the majority white community against itself, against its own conscience: those like us (white) are unlike us (brutal). A nation born of rebellion in the name of human equality against alleged oppression will eventually have to come to terms with and agree to terminate oppression within its own body politic, however gradually and reluctantly. We know from statistics on poverty, unemployment, and incarceration that the task is far from completion.

Wright achieved a proper atonement, one that is proper to the offense, in and as his career of a writer who reveals the regime of lies and self-deception pervading American culture. Smith quotes Freire as a pithy summary of what Wright has recounted: "Members of an oppressed group often mistreat each other in an unconscious imitation of their own suffering" (37). Wright's achievement is to bring that imitation fully to consciousness, to expose to the view of all and forever the sacrificial mechanisms oppressing his people in vivid narrative form, while making his experience available to rigorous anthropological analysis. We can hardly ask more of a writer, anywhere or at any time. We are not surprised to learn that the bitterness of this "native son" never left him, being that of the visceral taste of black blood, his own and his fellow blacks, in his mouth. How do you atone for a complete loss of dignity at your own hands, for complicity, however enforced from above, in violence against your own, against yourself? I think we have to reflect on the full religious implications of the verb "atone" as it has come down to us from Hebrew scriptures and liturgies (Alison), involving an appeal for forgiveness that could only come from a transcendently merciful divinity which over time Western culture has made its own, though not without horrendously sacrificial scourges, each claiming ever more victims of a violence that is only more devastating for being deritualized. This is the legacy of our World Wars, and it is also the legacy of Jim Crow: as its lynching practices have been effectively outlawed, more subtle discriminations, in housing jobs, schooling, persist as the seedbed for black-on-black violence. With the erosion of Jim Crow in the South, intra-communal violence has increased everywhere, leading Smith to conclude on our
The mimetic hypothesis can account for these banal psychosocial propensities that are so pervasive in the structure and dynamics of society. What it makes available to critical social theory are everyday human emotions and tendencies of vengeance, scapegoating, resentment and desire. As such it helps us to see the formation of a culture of violence and poverty developing in the underbelly of American society. This critical social theory posits surrogate victimage at the roots of black-on-black crime and the resultant prison culture to which black boys seem destined.

And here we are, teaching literature in prison—and learning from our students the articulate confirmation of our best writers' insights. With Ralph Ellison's imaginative appropriation of Wright's experience, these insights are enlarged and deepened.

"Battle Royal": A tragedy in 3 acts, with an epilogue for today.

The title of Ellison's chapter is cruelly ironic, connoting high born contestants, whereas whites regale themselves with a spectacle of violence imposed on members of the lower social order at its command. The expression mocks the subordination of those committed to a violent free-for-all, while at the same time it advertises the white men's control of language, of meaning, a control for whose benefit this violence is fomented. Since nineteenth-century Romanticism, we speak of literature as "creative" because, in its narrative and dramatic forms, it produces imaginary beings for our contemplation. I prefer to view great writing as emancipatory, its formally conscious vocation being to free language from the myths, ideologies, clichés, bromides, stereotypes, etc., that serve as a vehicle for self-deception, and an alibi for oppression. Smith quotes Girard aptly on this score:

Why is our own participation in scapegoating so difficult to perceive and the participation of others so easy? To us, our fears and prejudices never appear as such because they determine our vision of people we despise, we fear, and against whom we discriminate. (Things Hidden 179)

It is one of the paramount roles of the literature that we admit to our canon to unmask the lies we live by, and to bring fully to light and in detail the myths we entertain by which to accept violence among us and even promote it (Bandera, A Refuge of Lies). It is important to recall here that the very notion of a literary canon is heir to Israel's monumental redaction of its Mosaic and prophetic tradition. It is not so important or interesting that literature invent or create as that it reveal, in the fullest, biblical sense of the word, as when the psalms and the prophets reveal a God of victims, of a captive people, a God who above all "wants mercy, not sacrifice." I am not arguing here for the use of literature for moral purposes; I am postulating the origin of humane letters in the moral energy made available to Western culture by its Scriptural legacy (Bandera, The Sacred Game).

In the first chapter of The Invisible Man, Ellison revisits Wright's boxing match episode in order to broaden and deepen its significance, raising it from a sociological to an anthropological
level. His nameless, "invisible" narrator begins by telling us, from the space beneath the streets of New York from which he draws light to his habitation from public utilities, "I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed" (15), as if picking up on the last lines of the chapter 12 in *Black Boy*.

Chosen for his "desirable conduct" (16), his docility towards the whites, to read a speech which will award him a scholarship to a black college, he gives voice at the outset to his double consciousness, as "a traitor and a spy" (16), traitor of his people as a spy for the whites, traitor of the whites as a spy for his people. The narrator's repetition of this phrase clearly intends to mark a conflicted identity, at war with itself as much as with its white antagonists:

When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean, and that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. (17)

The regime of lies is in full force. Amidst his own moral confusion, the narrator clearly apprehends the self-deception informing Jim Crow. The consumption of whiskey and the haze of cigar smoke symbolizes this "veil" effect, as well as operating a leveling effect among the white spectators from every social level into an undifferentiated mob, "a sea of faces": "They were all there--bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teacher, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors" (18).

**ACT I: The Orgy**

Social differentiation is reset, reconfirmed as a circle organized around a sacrificial center, a force field sustained by desire and fear, attraction and repulsion:

A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a magnificent blond--stark naked. There was dead silence. I felt a blast of cold air chilled me. (19)

Why the "dead silence" and the cold air chill? Death is indeed stealing into this space, in the form of a desire that this erotically charged sacred center will attract, a desire whose violence will shortly be transferred to the black surrogates of the inner circle. We can read the hallowed silence as if a curtain is raised on a spectacle, or a rite to be piously initiated, one that sanctions the impiety of undifferentiated desire as a prelude to the staged destruction of its proxies as blindfolded pugilists. Here we need to recall the origins of theater in representations of sacrificial ritual, as we find it in Greek tragedy, "tragos-oidè," [scape]goat-song. It is as if Ellison is restaging the origin of culture as a hierarchical system of differences whose institution and regeneration is effected in the transformation of the violence of all against all to the violence of all against one--or one group, the black boys summoned for the occasion.

It is this anthropological dimension that Ellison brings to the narrative scenario narrated by
Wright. Order is to be regenerated from a nearly uncontrolled staging of disorder. The "wave of guilt and fear" (19) that the narrator experiences is the guilt of desire and the fear of what it implies for a black man exposed to naked white flesh. This ambivalence is astutely explored; the narrator endures conflicting and complementary desires to "caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her" (19), to the point where he succumbs to a delusion, "a notion that of all in the room she saw only me with her impersonal eyes." The narrator's delusion is psychologically plausible, it is favored, all but enforced, by the radical ambivalence that the forbidden spectacle of white woman's flesh inevitably provokes: attraction and repulsion, desire and fear of its consequences for the beholder, desire mingled with hatred for the flesh that attracts him. The narrator is analyzing how these conflicting emotions result in a paralyzing fascination that projects onto the woman an intention, an exclusive attention, which is felt to be radiating from the idol by the force field of desire surrounding it.³

The blond's eyes are impersonal, of course, because they do not reciprocate the desire that her nakedness arouses, but there is too a vestige, a thematic trace of divinity about her, a transcendence of human emotions that favors idolatry. This is the delusion of the archaic sacred, as it fascinates its beholders, suspends each and every one of them in its powers of attraction and repulsion: "I was," he says, "transported," and in this he is no different from a white miming "in a slow and obscene grind" the swaying, "undulating hips" of the blond idol: "This creature was completely hypnotized" (20). The notorious ecstasies attending pagan ritual that anthropologists report issue from the fascination induced by mimetic desires, each one's attention driven by all the others'. Black desire for white flesh must be enacted, put on display, to justify all the brutal constraints exercised by Jim Crow, and it is deliberately induced: "Some threatened us if we looked and others if we did not." The "low-registered moaning of the clarinet" simulates erotic pleasure in echo of moans issuing from one of the dazed black boys (19-20).

In sum, the white woman/black desire dyad, a foundational myth of Jim Crow, is restaged here; the white goddess and the black savage are made to face-off, so that the latter can be subsequently immolated, first by a blind slugfest, then by a mock-electrocution, so that the sacrificial order of Jim Crow can be regenerated.

For mimetic desires to be brought under control, they must first be released so that the conflict they incite can be channeled onto victims selected for this purpose. The scene accordingly devolves in a bacchanalian orgy:

As the dancer flung herself about with a detached expression on her face, the men began reaching out to touch her, I could see their beefy fingers sink into her soft flesh. Some of the

³ Attraction and repulsion re-enforcing each other is what informs the experience of scandal, which clearly applies to Ellison's narrative. See Alberg Beneath the Veil of Strange Verses: Reading Scandalous texts.
other tried to stop them and she began to move around the floor in graceful circles and they
gave chase, slipping and sliding over the polished floor. It was mad. (20)
"Mad" is the right word; mimetic desire is heating up; rational consciousness is giving way to
violent undifferentiation in which the idol risks dismemberment. This dynamic is not without
precedent.

In Euripides Bacchae, the votaries of Dionysus, the maenads, will tear their king, Pentheus,
to pieces after the god has exposed him to their revelries as his surrogate. The mania--for it is the
same word--which the god fosters among his votaries transpires as cultural undifferentiation, men
dressed as women, with the hermaphroditic Teresias to the fore, and humans dressed in animal skins
betokening the collapse of culture back into nature. This cultural meltdown is facilitated by
Bacchus, the god's disciple, the catalyst of uninhibiting inebriation (Girard, Violence 126-44).
Dionysus is the god of the unbridled mob, in which all distinctions disintegrate:

Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her. They
cought her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college
boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her
eyes, almost like my own terror, and that which I saw in some of the other boys. (20)
The object of unanimous, mimetic desire is liable to dismemberment, as in the bacchanalian
diasparagmos that follows upon the orgy of desires unleashed by her presence. Her terror is the
same as the boys' own, because, as Euripides, and Ellison after him, intuited, the victims of sacrifice
and the god or goddess to whom they are sacrificed are two forms, two faces of the violent
orientation of mimetic desire. The Greeks wisely banned actual violence from the scene--whence
our notion of the ob-scene--lest it contaminate the spectators, lest they fall under its contagious spell
and rage through the community like a war god. The novelist can expose this violence entirely to
our consideration because our religious tradition has revealed it as lacking any divine sanction, has
demystified it.

If the idol is allowed to escape, it is because the mob has surrogates available for its
murderous violence; it has stand-ins, scapegoats for its rage, the young black men who will be
compelled to engage in the unfocused, blind, all-against-all slugfest that unfettered mimetic desire
leads to.

ACT II. The Battle

The boys are blindfolded--with a white cloth: the ensign of the oppressors’ violence-- and
made to punch it out to the jeers and threats of the white men:

“Let me at that big nigger!”

....

“Let me at those black sonsabitches!”

"No, Jackson, no" another voice yelled, "Here somebody help me hold Jackson."
"I want to get at that ginger-colored nigger. Tear him limb from limb," the first voice
yelled. (21)
The violence in the ring is manifestly contagious, and dismemberment is explicit, thematized, as Ellison intuits the logic of orgiastic pandemonium staged by Euripides: "Ring the bell before Jackson kills him a coon!" (22). White violence has to be constrained so the full force of black-on-black violence can be unfurled.

The violence of all against all is felt by the narrator as that of all against one. "Then it seemed that all nine of the boys had turned upon me at once" (22). This seeming is not fortuitous: the narrator experiencing in nuce, in miniature, the sacrificial violence of the mob instigated by the whites. For it is the same thing for all to strike against all and for one to feel all striking against him in this blind swinging of fists: "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity. He describes himself "like a baby or a drunken man" (22). The blindfold symbolizes that each is a function of others' motions, that individual agency, autonomy, and identity are erased. The blind boxers are stand-ins for their spectators:

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked.

The highly condensed syntax of this last sentence is modeled upon the undifferentiated violence it describes, in which all boundaries collapse, save the one separating the blacks and their beholders:

The smoke was agonizing and there were no rounds, no bells at three minute intervals to relieve our exhaustion. The room spun around me, a swirl of lights, smoke, sweating bodies surrounded by intense white faces. (23)

At this point, the transfer of white on to black-on-black violence becomes explicit, thematic, as the narrator plays the role that has devolved to him:

I played done group against another, slipping in and throwing a punch than stepping out of range while pushing the others into the melee to take the flows blindly aimed at me. (23)

The substitution mechanism could not be more emphatic. Nor could the necessary streamlining of the violence to one-on-one combat, not by its own dynamic in this case, but because "the boys had arranged it among themselves," as if in collusion with the whites. This leaves the narrator against "the biggest of the gang":

His face was a black blank of a face, only his eyes alive--with hate of me and aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened to us all. (24)

We are now back in the ring with Wright and Harrison, but only after navigating the full circle of desire and sacrificial violence explored by Greek tragedy. Before a knockout blow ends the match, the narrator returns this hatred of his rival brother enemy for standing between him and his prize speech. No divine cult issues from this mayhem, but the scapegoating mechanism emerges intact.

ACT III. The Gold Rush, Act I redidivus

As a reward for their effort the boys are encouraged to scramble for cash and what turns out
to be fake gold on an electrified rug, so that their flesh is burned while grasping for it. Its effects on one of the contenders are witnessed by the narrator as exactly those of the naked blond:

I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies. (27)

The semi-deritualized burning of this dancer is an alternative version, Girard would say a mythical variant, of the dismemberment that threatened the blond idol. His utter derision "amid booming laughter" being the counterpart to her destruction.

When the narrator gets to his speech, he describes how his voice risked being stifled by "blood, saliva, and all.... I closed my ears and swallowed blood until I was nauseated" (30). This is a symbolically resonant moment; the blood he is swallowing is his own and that of other blacks, coming under the heading of a speech on "social responsibility," and not, as he mistakenly blurted out, "social equality." Order and difference have been restored, by the name of Jim Crow, a telling moniker for a man and for an animal, a black one. The whites have had a good time, the blacks are choking on their own blood.

The free-for-all need not end in the death of any of its participant-victims. On the contrary, that is not the aim. It is only necessary that black-on-black violence be performed, paid for, in order that it provide the desired spectacle, the self-destruction of black community, the implosion of its human dignity from within, spawning a new generation of spies and traitors, the reduction of its members to dogs or cocks. With each boy striking out blindly, they might as well be striking out at their own body. The "hegemonic socialization system" (Smith 35) of Jim Crow exercises a violence against the blacks from above that is immune to rivalry from below because of laws in place that bring the full force of the police to its regime and give its oppression god-like power over the fate of blacks. Smith's comments on Wright apply here as well:

One cannot develop a violent mimetic rivalry with a god or an idol. Instead, the oppressed transfers the aborted mimetic rivalry with the internalized oppressor (idol) either to self (suicide, masochism, self-hatred) or to another (black-on-black crime). Then, he or she strikes out at another for the pettiest reasons. (35-36)

Which is to say, for no reason at all. Via the symbolism of the blindfolds, Ellison effectively stages the conflation of the alternatives suicide/homicide that is coursing through our city streets to this day.

EPILOGUE: Current Events

The narrator dreams he was at a circus with his grandfather "and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did" (33). The circus is a Roman invention emerging from the sacrificial festivals of their Saturnalia. In its modern, profane embodiment, it offers a variegated spectacle of human feats and freaks, of figures to admire for their prowess and courage against the
violence of wild animals or the forces of gravity, and of figures of bemused scorn, of curiosity and
disgust; their physical anomalies arouse both attraction and repulsion. The ubiquitous clowns,
universal objects of derision, are a figure for the abjectness of the scapegoat victim, which why in
Western theater the clown or the fool often figures as a sacrificial double of the king, as he did in
many courts of Europe as well. Culture has retained only a hazy intuition that the king keeps his
subjects in line at the cost of his former peers, or his double's abjection; that his divine right springs
from the ashes, the *disjecta membra* of ritual sacrifice. This is what I take to be the meaning of his
grandfather's bitter laughter at the words, "with a state seal," that visit the narrator in his
premonitory dream; it reads as a curse destined to follow him throughout his life, a curse directed to
us, the nameless reader: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." Or boxing,
or burning, it's all one. All the violent dynamics of initiation rites of passage (Girard, *Violence* 280-
88, 300-08) are in place, with a spectacular difference: in archaic religions, rites of passage confirm
the young person's adult membership in the community; what is confirmed here is his emphatic
exclusion.

Today we have found that he cannot run for president without a challenge to his birth-right
that only thinly veils a resentful nostalgia for a bygone racist order. What we learn from Wright and
Girard and Ellison in their overlapping revelations is that social order as such is won at the cost of
nameless victims. And because we in the US have officially outlawed sacrificial scapegoating, we'd
prefer they remain invisible. This is where great literature rejoins the chief insights of a biblical
tradition which we rightly hand down for generations to come and that we rarely live up to. But now
we know: we can run from the truths they reveal in common but we cannot hide them; we can run
from the truth, we can even hide from it behind myriad myths, stereotypes, euphemisms and
slogans, even ones in the name of freedom, of gospel even, but we cannot hide the truths of the kind
that our best writers bring to our admiring attention.

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