

TALES OF THE “GREAT BITCH”:
MURDER AND THE RELEASE
OF VIRILE DESIRE IN
AN AMERICAN DREAM

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The Doors seemed unconvinced that love was brotherhood and the Kama Sutra. The Doors’ music insisted that love was sex and sex was death and therein lay salvation. The Doors were the Norman Mailers of the Top Forty, missionaries of apocalyptic sex.”

Joan Didion in *The White Album*, 1979 (21)

“I think the condition of America is close to the condition of a man who is going to go psychotic in another year or two unless he finds love.”

Norman Mailer Interview (McGrady 114)

IN A 1965 LETTER TO FELLOW WRITER DON CARPENTER, Mailer expresses relief in finishing *An American Dream*, saying,

The seventh installment’s pretty good and the eighth has a bang-bang ending. You didn’t think I was going to be squeezing the last drops off my cock at the end, fellow-racketeer—no, I gave them the spatty bit bit spatty be-deet from my old tommy gun. (*Norman Mailer’s Letters* 49)

While the overt sexual nature of this comment was not uncommon for Mailer in this period—he openly discusses sex and sexuality in many interviews throughout the fifties, sixties and seventies—the way in which he equates the writing process with sexual virility is fitting for a novel as sexually graphic as *An American Dream*.

As early as the mid-1950s Mailer was already linking creative expression and sexual performance, using both to construct a vision of masculinity centered in virility and sexual release. In a conversation related in *The Spooky Art*, for example, Mailer remembers telling Gore Vidal,

The novel is like the Great Bitch in one's life. We think we're rid of her, we go on to other women, we take our pulse and decide that finally we're enjoying ourselves, we're free of her power, we'll never suffer her depredations again, and then we turn a corner on a street, and there's the Bitch smiling at us, and we're trapped. We know the Bitch has still got us.

Every novelist who has slept with the Bitch ... comes away bragging afterward like a G.I. tumbling out of a whorehouse spree—"Man, I made her moan" goes the cry of the young writer. But the Bitch laughs afterward in her empty bed. "He was so sweet in the beginning," she declares, "but by the end he just went, 'Peep, peep, peep.'" (58)

Mailer's conception of novel writing as having intercourse with a "Great Bitch"¹ reveals much about Mailer's concerns regarding his own performances—both sexual and creative. For Mailer, creative expression, like sexual performance, involved the release of something innately true about oneself.²

In Mailer's early fiction, characters who attempt to escape this essential masculine self are invariably thwarted; in the end, that is, the "Great Bitch" will get him. In that sense, Mailer envisions a masculinity in which sexual performance constitute a fundamental expression of gender identity. In addition, by gendering creative expression as the relationship between a man and his "bitch," writing becomes an exclusively male activity whose result resembles a sexual orgasm. The production of that orgasm—whether he "made her moan" or just went "peep, peep, peep"—directly correlates with

masculine power, and masculine empowerment becomes linked, both creatively and sexually, to virility.

An American Dream serves as a reflection of these beliefs—the culmination of a paradigm whose inception can be traced to World War II. Mailer's perception of his relationship to women parallels his relationship to the novel. Both, he eventually concludes, constitute a "great bitch" that threatens to emasculate him. At the same time, the story of Stephen Rojack becomes a symbol for the Cold War masculine condition, as Rojack undertakes a sexual quest that Mailer would argue lies in the heart of every man. Mailer offers an existential vision of masculinity. Rojack can empower his masculine identity through violent and sexual feats, but he can never really achieve the orgasmic Eden that Mailer describes in his 1956 essay, "The White Negro," where he asserts that men are always in search of "the apocalyptic orgasm" (347). Instead, modern man always remains in a state of nebulous flux, striving for something in a Sisyphean fashion that inevitably stays just out of reach, and engaging in a process of sexual validation that never ends.

CONSUMING HETEROSEXUALITY IN THE COLD WAR

The Cold War period, covering a rather broad area between the end of World War II and the fall of the Berlin Wall, has recently become a battleground for gender theory. In *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, for example, Michael Davidson suggests that this period is largely reactionary, in his view, by "reinstating an ideal of heroic masculinity and by returning to romanticism's cult of energy, orality, primitivism, and animism" (20). Many postwar artists, he aptly observes, overreact to a largely impotent modernist depiction of masculinity. Similarly, Suzanne Clark argues, "Manliness itself, and the old warrior ethic it invokes, was on trial" during this period (1), and male writers often responded with "hypermasculinity" (15). Sally Robinson suggests that men were "marked" in this period, observing that the male body became more visible, more a subject of discourse and debate. Most of these theorists, like Steven Cohan in *Masked Men*, suggest that the culture of the 1950s deceptively indicated that masculine identity was stable, while, underneath the surface, American men were undergoing a sort of identity crisis regarding a seemingly disempowered masculinity.

It is not always clear exactly what it means for masculinity to be in "crisis," or exactly what that crisis might entail. However, these crises arguments

all recognize that some basic concepts of masculinity were changing in this period, a turbulent period in American culture. James Gilbert calls this “male panic ... a time when men self-consciously rebel against real or imagined ‘feminization’” and links the “male panic” of the 1950s to a “tough guy masculinity” in which both media and government utilize a rhetoric of machismo and western clichés to discuss “the strengths of American determination and the character of our response to threats” (3). I would add that the precocious sexualization in this period does serve as a reaction to these mounting accusations of femininity and homosexuality. Furthermore, artists like Mailer were not particular exceptions in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Rather, they represented a growing number of American men who identified sexual aggression with masculine empowerment. From the popularization of Ian Fleming’s James Bond character to the celebratory rise of Hugh Hefner and his playboy philosophy, sexually promiscuous heterosexual men began to replace the heroic portrayal of the stoic male of the modernist period. The Jake Barnes of the 1920s and 1930s give way to the more aggressive Humbert Humberts and, in popular fiction, Mike Hammers of the 1950s.

While Norman Mailer was one of many authors in the cold war 1950s that adopted a view of gender as biologically constructed, the argument of this essay relies on my own belief that gender perceptions are social constructions, influenced by decades (if not centuries) of social and cultural change. That is, post-World War II concepts of gender and sexuality are inherently different from modernist concepts because they operate within a Cold War culture that was fundamentally different from the social climate of the 1920s and 1930s. I do not mean to imply that individuals cannot operate apart from social or cultural forces. While writers do not stand above nor are they subservient to prevailing social conditions, it is important to realize that individuals affect the culture they operate in even as they in turn are influenced by that culture. That is, individuals participate in creating the social conditions that influence them. Mailer was one of a number of writers—among them James Dickey, Ken Kesey, William Styron, and John Updike—whose work reflects a common (not merely artistic) masculine reaction to the social changes of the Cold War.

My argument focuses in particular on a combination of two social conditions that coincide with the popularization of the virile heterosexual masculine hero in this period: the culture of McCarthyism and a rise in con-

sumerism. A culture of fear not only pervaded the political ethos of red scare McCarthyism throughout the 1950s, but also combined anti-communist sentiments with an antagonism towards homosexuality and a romanticization of the heterosexual male and the nuclear family. Kinsey's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* sparks a decade-long debate on male-homosexuality and the feminization of the American Male. The public dismay that followed Kinsey's revelation of the commonality of homosexual thoughts and acts in the American male experience was exacerbated by the homophobic and virile-centered rhetoric of politicians like Joseph McCarthy.

Norman Mailer's aggressive and provocative gender ideology illuminates the way in which writers often appear to indirectly respond to cultural pressures. In this case, Mailer's life and work takes part in a larger social response to these Cold War fears of passivity by indeed embracing the concepts of virility and release. Mailer's own identity, and that of his male protagonists, entails his participation in a culture that consumed heterosexual promiscuity as a response to fears of homosexual femininity. Characters like Stephen Rojack not only serve as fictional enactments of "The White Negro" ideology, but also function as implicit arguments regarding the way men can rise above the "pink," feminine and potentially homosexual American public. In that sense, Mailer's work participates in a culture that responded to increased women's economic independence, growing fears of homosexual and communist infiltration, McCarthy hearings and atomic power by adopting a more overt, promiscuous heterosexual persona—something they could consume through pulp fiction, newfound men's magazines like *Playboy*, or popular literary characters like James Bond. Like the English playboy James Bond, *An American Dream*'s Stephen Rojack not only links masculinity to sexual performance and virility, he also reacts instinctually to his surroundings in both a sexual and violent way.

"THE WHITE NEGRO" AND SERGIUS'S AVENGER IN *ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF*

When Mailer published *Advertisements for Myself* in 1956, two works in it—the philosophical treatise "The White Negro" and a short story called "The Time of Her Time"—indicate that his preoccupation with sex and violence have become a paradigm, an ideology with provocative implications for gender identity. Indeed, in "The White Negro" sex and violence define the masculine self, as indicated by Mailer's assertion, "At bottom, the drama of the

psychopath is that he seeks love. Not love as the search for a mate, but love as the search for an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it" (347). Psychopathic masculinity is partly a consequence of what Mailer refers to as "the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb" (338), which he argues encourages one to embrace a nihilistic state of being. This new masculine figure, "must be able to feel oneself ... must know one's desires, one's rages, one's anguish, one must be aware of the character of one's frustration and know what would satisfy it" (341). He concludes that this "psychopath" grasps something of the truth of our very nature and that man's most basic identity is that of the sexual "psychopath" constantly in search of the ultimate orgasm.

The central claims of "The White Negro" not only link masculinity to sexuality and violence, but also posit sexual desire as an essential trait of men, suggesting that they are instinctually sexual and violent in a primal way. That is, men are sexual beings who, like caged animals, lash out when denied a sexual outlet. "The White Negro" also posits an existential masculinity, in which men always chase after something they can never find or keep.

"The Time of Her Time" shows this ideology reflected in a work of fiction. The main character, Sergius, is a bullfighting teacher who foresees that his hipster lifestyle will get him in trouble: "[S]omething was likely to follow from this. The weak would leave me alone, the strong would have respect," but "some sexed-up head, very strong and very weak, would be drawn to discover a new large truth about himself and the mysteries of his own courage or the lack of it" (482). Notice that violence will come from a "sexed-up head" and that the violent act will lead to a self-discovery, a "new large truth about himself"; both ideas can be found in "The White Negro." Given Mailer's "apocalyptic orgasm," it would be an article of faith that Sergius has seduced many women: "there must have been fifty girls who spent at least one night in [his] loft" (486). Mailer also portrays Sergius as a gentleman committed to the "noblesse oblige of the kindly cocksman," a creed that requires him to leave women "feeling at best a little better" and "with no great wounds" (486). Sergius, even so, keeps faith with his inner masculinity: "there were girls I worked to get and really wanted, and nights when the bull was far from dead in me" (485).³ When Sergius meets a woman who "so inflamed the avenger of [his] crotch, that I wanted to prong her then and there," he admits, "I was a primitive for a prime minute, a gorged gouge

of a working-class phallus, eager to ram into all her nasty little tensions" (488).

The story thus revolves around Sergius's attempt to confirm his manhood by using this "avenger" to release those "nasty little tensions." Mailer's depiction of two sex scenes in the story further associate masculine validation with power—the act of avenging or punishing a sexual object that threatens to emasculate Sergius. In the first scene, when the woman acts the part of the violent aggressor, Sergius's loss of control seems to equate to sexual failure. "She hammered her rhythm at me, a hard driving rhythm" (489) that Mailer implies reflects the "nasty little tensions" inside of her. Sergius recovers through emotional hatred and aggression: "[M]y anger found its way back again to that delayed and now recovered Time when I wanted to prong her at the party. I had been frustrated, had waited, had lost the anger, and so been taken by her (451). Notice the sense of loss, of failure, here. Being "taken by her" appears to Sergius clearly unmanly and requires a recovery through rage that we are told "came back" and allowed him to overtake her. Sergius is "astride" with her "teeth biting the pillow," but they make love "like ... club fighters in open exchange ... knowing neither the pain of punishment nor the pride of pleasure" (490). Sergius's taking control turns violent at the point of orgasm: "to my distant surprise ... my hand came up and clipped her mean and openhanded across the face" (490).

The real test of Sergius's masculinity comes when she informs him that she has never reached orgasm, despite many attempts. After a sex scene in which she has not yet reached orgasm, Sergius makes it the pinnacle of sexual achievement: "I would not exist for her unless ... I could be the first to carry her stone of no-orgasm up the cliff, all the way, over and out into the sea" (496).⁴ Sergius initially fails to complete this Sisyphean task, referring to his semen as "piddle spurtings with failures of gloom" (499), reflecting both the fear of, and the quest for, virile power and stamina. This juncture seems a critical moment in the story. She has called Sergius "inept" because of his inability to bring her to orgasm, and his manhood hinges on that accusation—the possibility that he cannot truly gratify her—hanging in the balance until Sergius can prove his sexual worth. In that respect, female desire exists as simply the means toward a masculine end, a vehicle by which masculine validation can occur. Her desire is not valued *per se*, but only inso-much as it satisfies his manly ego.

However, Mailer has departed from the Prufrockian anxiety-ridden Mickey Lovett, and so “The Time of Her Time” revolves not around the idea of carnal overpowering lust, but around the possibility of masculine fulfillment through sexual gratification of the other. Sergius’s sexual triumph, the story’s climax in both an aesthetic and literal way, empowers him fundamentally. Mailer’s choice of anal sex for this climactic scene entails a decision to place Sergius above her in a physically dominating position, and the orgasm itself implies a willful surrender that Mailer seems to imply is necessary to make the event truly empowering.

Nevertheless, Sergius’s quest for masculine authentication must continue beyond the end of the story, indicated when the woman has the last word, impugning his masculinity by calling him a homosexual. The ending creates a menacing uncertainty and implies that Sergius must move on, must seek another sexual subject to “ram” his “avenger” into.

THE ORGASMIC VIOLENCE OF *AN AMERICAN DREAM*

An American Dream encodes the ideology of “the White Negro” (as “The Time of Her Time” does), but does so in a more intense, more exacerbated, and more orgasmic way. Like an orgasm, *An American Dream* was a quick burst of energy: 20,000 words a month for five months in order to meet a deadline for serialization in *Esquire*. Just as “The White Negro” theorizes, Stephen Rojack wanders through the pages of the novel searching for a sexual experience that will fully validate his manhood, a search that had initially begun with Deborah. Rojack describes her initially as representing “a vision of treasure, far-off blood, and fear” (*An American Dream* 1), referring simultaneously to Deborah’s money as well as her virgin chastity, the ultimate treasure being the orgasm, sexual fulfillment and masculine affirmation that she could represent. Indeed, Stephen Rojack informs us on the first page of the novel that “The night I met her we had a wild ninety minutes in the back seat of my car” (1), immediately invoking a world of sexual desire.

Rojack’s relationship with his wife, Deborah, becomes anchored, from the very first pages of this dream voyage, in sexual attainment and sexual performance. That is, having “seduced a girl” who appeared unattainable—she “would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz” we are informed (1)—is not enough; it must be followed by an unparalleled sexual performance: the “wild ninety minutes.”

Stephen Rojack has, we are told, performed heroic duties, proving his physical worth as a warrior by killing four Germans and overtaking a bunker previously considered inaccessible. The juxtaposition of violent wartime acts and sexual acts exists subtly in these opening pages, but gathers import as the novel progresses. Mailer consistently links sex and violence in *An American Dream*, and Rojack's war experience becomes the primary way of forging that connection.

Rojack's description of his wounding is particularly sexualized, further linking military conquests with sexual conquests. His language contains unmistakable sexual connotations, especially his choice of analogy, likening the wound to "a delicious pain clean as a mistress' sharp teeth going 'Yummy' in your rump" (4). The actual wound, the piercing of the flesh, is akin to a sexual act. We see a similar rhetorical ploy when Rojack describes the sensation of shooting the German: "I pulled the trigger as if I were squeezing the softest breast of the softest pigeon which ever flew, still a woman's breast takes me now and then to the pigeon on that trigger" (4). Violence and sexuality—physical pain and sexual passion—have merged here; Rojack cannot appear to separate or distinguish easily between these two passions. Indeed, squeezing the trigger *is* like squeezing the breast for Rojack. Both acts are, in a sense, sexual for him.

In addition, Rojack's description of his enemy empowers his own masculinity by rhetorically separating him from a homosexualized other. His enemy had

a great bloody sweet German face, a healthy spoiled overspoiled young beauty of a face, mother-love all over its making, possessor of that overcurved mouth which only great fat sweet young faggots can have when their rectum is tuned and entertained from adolescence. (4)

Significantly, Rojack describes the other German, who is already dead, as "nothing but blood and carnage below the belt" (5), implying that the Germans lack the sexual attributes necessary for manhood. That is, these Germans are not men, but "faggots." They have no real masculinity, but are marked by "mother love," are "sweet" and "fat" with a rectum already tuned. They do not fuck, but are fucked; they do not possess, but are possessed. In that sense, Rojack kills femininity, directs his violence toward queerness, by

engaging in the more heterosexual, or masculine act of squeezing the trigger-breast.

That Rojack's relationship with Deborah would fail on both a sexual and emotional level is thus required to set the novel's plot in motion. Her existence, like the German homosexual's existence, undermines or threatens to undermine his own gender identity. Like Rojack's description of the German, his description of Deborah serves as a way of separating her from that orgasmic treasure that Rojack originally sought. She cannot provide him with the apocalyptic orgasm he desires, the text seems to suggest. Mailer once remarked that calling Deborah "'evil wife' oversimplifies" but that "'[t]ragic, tormented, half-evil wife' or something of that ilk might be more satisfactory" (*Letters* 51). To be sure, Rojack's description of her does either title justice, for we are told that Deborah's body "radiated a detestation so palpable that my body began to race as if a foreign element, a poison altogether suffocating, were beginning to seep through me. Did you ever feel the malignity which rises from a swamp?" (25). Deborah's touch is equally revolting, described as "soft now as a jellyfish and almost as repugnant-the touch shot my palm with a thousand needles which stung into my arm" (26). Even Deborah's odor is repelling: "When she drank too much, a stench of sweet rot lifted from her" (24). Such descriptions demonize the feminine by focusing on particular aspects of Deborah that one would associate with sexuality and desire. Her touch, her odor, her body have become repulsive and evil, foreign and repugnant. Female sexuality is rotting inside Deborah.

What eventually provokes violence in Rojack, however, is not Deborah's empty castle or her evil/half-evil essence, but rather her emasculation of Rojack. "'God, you're a whimpere,' " Deborah tells him, adding, "'[s]ometimes I lie here and wonder how you ever became a hero.... It must have been quite a sight. You whimpering and they whimpering, and you going pop pop pop with your little gun'" (23). The "pop pop pop" echoes Mailer's "Great Bitch" telling us that "he just went, 'Peep, peep, peep.'" Both instances reveal a primal fear to Mailer's protagonists: fear of an inadequate sexual performance. Later Deborah responds to Rojack's infidelity by saying, "'What a big boy you must be to take up with a sparrow'" (25). Such verbal becomes Rojack's primary motivation for murder; Rojack must respond to Deborah in some way that will validate his manhood and remasculinize him (through violence, sex, or some combination of both) or risk remaining feminized.

Mailer returns, in a sense, full circle in this chapter by linking Rojack's failure with Deborah to the recursive rhetoric of war and conquest: "[F]or the last five [years] I had been trying to evacuate my expeditionary army, that force of hopes, all-out need, plain virile desire and commitment which I had spent on her" (9). War, violence, and sexual relationships again merge. Rojack continues, saying, "I wanted to withdraw, count my dead, and look for love in another land, but she was a great bitch" (9); later he admits that "there would come a moment, there would always come a moment, after everything else had gone, when it was impossible not to call her ... it was the remains of my love for her, love draining from the wound, leaving behind its sense of desolation" (15). The image of "love draining from the wound" in particular has connotations that suggest virility, which is paralleled in the passage by a militaristic rhetoric—desolation and counting one's dead—that also implies concerns regarding his virility. Later, Rojack will compensate for these fears through two acts of aggression—murdering Deborah and having sex with Ruta. However, for the moment, Rojack finds himself with a need "withdraw" and "count" his "dead" sperm. Years later, Mailer suggested that the only idea in *An American Dream* was that human love can never be attained without paying an enormous price.

The ultimate transgression, and the catalyst for Rojack's act of rage, becomes the announcement of infidelities. Deborah, we are told, has been seeking sexual pleasure elsewhere, implying that Rojack no longer pleases her sexually. Deborah's five (known) infidelities had been announced to Rojack; he describes them as "each an accent, a transition, a concrete step in the descent of our marriage, a curtain to each act in a five-act play" (10). The emphasis on performance reminds one of Judith Butler's notion of performative masculinity, and hearkens back to the performative aspects of Mailer's own relationships. In this case, Deborah has made clear that Rojack's performance has been bested by at least five others.

Murdering Deborah is staged as a sexual act, provoked by threats and fears of emasculation that require a reassertion of virile masculine power:

[P]ulse packed behind pulse in a pressure up to thunderhead; some black-biled lust, some desire to go ahead not unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection came bursting with rage from out of me and my mind exploded in a fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling

embers, the arm about her neck leaped against the whisper I could still feel murmuring in her throat, and *crack* I choked her harder, and *crack* I choked her again, and *crack* I gave her payment—never halt now—and *crack* the door flew open and the wire tore in her throat (31)

The references to “Pulse behind pulse,” “blackbiled lust,” “thunderhead,” and “some desire” all suggest the murder is an instinctive primal reaction—a release of something inner, something innate, propelled by a rage to destroy “a woman against her cry.” Both acts, murder and rape, empower the perpetrator. Rojack begins to remasculinize himself by asserting this power, this domination of her physically, made even more momentous, more powerful because it is “against her cry.” Rojack’s virile power is presented here through images of a mind that “exploded,” and a rage that came “bursting” out. Choking Deborah silences the feminine other, shutting down the source of verbal emasculation, those accusations that he went “pop, pop, pop.” The result is an orgasmic “fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling embers.”

Rojack’s earlier description of the sexual thrill of murder verbalizes much of what was implied in the sexualized rhetoric of the murder itself. Rojack emphasizes the gendered aspect as well as the primal, instinctive dimension, saying,

Murder, after all, has exhilaration within it. I do not mean it is a state to entertain; the tension which develops in your body makes you sicken over a period, and I had my fill of walking about with a chest full of hatred and a brain jammed to burst, but there is something manly about containing your rage, it is so difficult, it is like carrying a two-hundred pound safe up a cast-iron hill. The exhilaration comes I suppose from possessing such strength. Besides, murder offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unisexual. (8)

Later, Rojack claims, “[T]here was suicide in me. (Murder I had known was there for a long time)” (8). Notice that suicide and murder are described here as essential parts of Rojack’s identity. Like masculine virility, murderous and violent tendencies are simply a “part” of him.

Rojack's emotional state after the murder suggests rebirth, and the beginning of a new identity. "I had never seen a face more handsome," Rojack tells us, admiring himself, adding, "I was feeling good, as if my life had just begun" (38–9). Without Deborah, however, Rojack is in need of a sexual outlet. We know that he has vast stores of sexual energy, for Mailer is careful to remind us of Rojack's own infidelities: "[T]here was a wife or two after all with whom I had done the five times eight years bit, and sweet was the prize—no offering like a wife so determined to claw her man that months of hatred are converted to Instant Sweet for the passing stud in the hay, and I felt all the stirrings of real compassion talking to *her* husband next time out" (10). The hypocrisy here, although perhaps obvious, is worth noting. Specifically, Rojack is guilty of the same behavior he dreads and detests in his wife—betrayal that had prompted him to murder—implying that, for men, sexual infidelity is natural while faithfulness is an unnatural act. The reference to hatred turning into "Instant Sweet" suggests that sex turns on hate, desire on violence, and highlights sexual relationships as another kind of power struggle, a battle. Feeling compassion for the husband creates a sort of homosocial bond, the result of making women, the "Great Bitch," the common enemy.

It seems important to Mailer that Rojack have the potential to be a great lover, for he reminds us several times of Rojack's abilities. "I had vitality, I could depend on stamina, I possessed my style," Rojack reminds us (18). Indeed the reason he returned to Deborah the night of the murder was his innate sexual desire: "[T]here would come a moment, there would always come a moment, after everything else had gone, when it was impossible not to call her" (15). This irrepressible desire still has hold of him—perhaps must possess him if he is to be Mailer's "White Negro"—and compels him to the closest sexual treasure, Deborah's maid Ruta. "I went with this force," Rojack tells us, adding that "[s]omething fierce for pleasure was loose" (41).

The rhetoric Mailer uses to portray sex with Ruta empowers Rojack from beginning to end. Rojack says he "lay back like a king lion and let her romp" (43) and describes his phallus as a "pure prong of desire" that he uses to "bugger" or "plug" her. Rojack is in control, a point Mailer's rhetoric seems eager to make clear, indicated not only through his physical actions—the way he physically controls her—but also through the way they are described. When Rojack says, "I felt like a thief, a great thief," Mailer suggests that Rojack believes he has found the "treasure" he referred to at the beginning of the novel (45).

Hatred does turn sweet here, as he previously suggested. Not unlike the earlier descriptions of Deborah, however, Ruta seems to have some essence of evil in her. We are told, for example, that “there was canny hard-packed evil in [her] butt” (44), and that Rita contains “[a] virulent intricate hatred, a detailed specification of the hardest world of the poor” that Rojack says “came out from her into me” (44). Mailer further uses Nazi references to add a tone of tension and violence to the scene, noting “[t]here was a high private pleasure in plugging a Nazi ... a host of the Devil’s best gifts were coming to me” (44).

At first, Ruta’s vagina is described as a “deserted warehouse” or “empty tomb” (45), suggesting that Ruta is no different from Deborah. However, later Rojack says, “[H]er cunt ... was no graveyard now, no warehouse, no, more like a chapel now” (46), and begins to intensify the religious terms used to describe the act of sex with her:

So that was how I finally made love to her, a minute for one, a minute for the other, a raid on the Devil and a trip back to the Lord, I was like a hound who has broken free of the pack and is going to get that fox himself, I was drunk with my choice, she was becoming mine as no woman ever had, she wanted no more than to be a part of my will. (45)

This battle between the Lord and the Devil becomes one of the overarching themes of the novel. According to Mailer, Barney Kelly (Deborah’s father) is evil,⁵ Deborah “half-evil,” Cherry a sentimental romantic notion of good, and Rojack, in his state of clarity, recognizes this and exists in a sort of purgatory. Michael Lennon describes this theme as epic; Mailer believes “in a heroic but limited God locked in struggle with a powerful, wily Devil, conceivably with the fate of the universe in the balance” (*Letters* 7). What is perhaps more important, from the perspective of gender, is that Ruta becomes “a part of [his] will” and accepts his power over her, which seems to play a part in making the sexual act successful, or empowering to Rojack, in Mailer’s eyes.

Perhaps as a result, there is some residue left after the event. Indeed, something does remain in the form of hatred or rage, which Rojack directs toward Deborah directly afterward:

I felt a mean rage in my feet. It was as if in killing her, the act had been too gentle, I had not plumbed the hatred where the real injustice was stored.... I had an impulse to go up to her and kick her ribs, grind my heel on her nose, drive the point of my shoe into her temple and kill her again. (50)

Also important, in a related way, is that Ruta has not completely satisfied Rojack. As Mailer stated in the quotation at the very beginning of this chapter, something should remain: "You didn't think I would squeeze the last drops off, did you?" Some drops should be left, some virility, some stamina needs to be left over. The masculine energy cannot have been spent. In that sense, when Rojack sees Cherry for the first time, although he has just killed Deborah and raped the maid, it would only be natural for Mailer to have Rojack pursue Cherry sexually. Rojack, the existential male hero, is always looking for the next, greater orgasm. Mobility, not stasis is valued here.

When Rojack leaves the police station and enters the nightclub where Cherry works as a singer, the images and feelings of rebirth arise again, implying that here Rojack can begin to develop a new masculine identity, free from the "Great Bitch's" power. As Rojack enters the club and says to himself, "I must be all of eight hours old by now" (93), the novel seems to suggest that Rojack can, in essence "make her moan" this time, for this new environment shows promise for masculine empowerment: "she was singing *Love for sale, love that's fresh and still unspoiled*" (95). That Cherry's promise of love would be "fresh" and "unspoiled" seems significantly different from the false promises of Deborah or Ruta. In addition, Cherry's name suggests that she is unspoiled, while also containing obvious sexual connotations. Indeed, Mailer seems to present Cherry as sexual, but not rotten or repugnant like Deborah, or "hard packed evil" like Ruta.

Rojack, moreover, seems wiser now, having learned enough about the ways of the "Great Bitch" to see through Cherry's exterior. Rojack refers to her as attractive, but remains wary of the "blonde devil" she may represent. As Rojack watches her, the newfound "treasure" that Cherry represents seems, once again, to have turned into blood and fear. "Women must murder us unless we possess them altogether (so said the luminous logic of this liquor in my hand) and I had a fear now of the singer on the stand" (100). Her painted toes, Rojack believes "talked of how bad this girl could be" (100).

Rojack also has masculine rivals, other men vying for Cherry's treasure. In the club, Romeo and Tony provide Mailer with the literary means to up the masculine ante in Rojack's quest for fulfillment. When Rojack stands up to Romeo, saying "I'll move on when the lady asks me to move, and not before'" (107), he seems to have passed Mailer's first test. Indeed, standing up to Romeo, in that sense, does empower Rojack in a way, but the real test comes in the form of Shago, an African American jazz singer whom Deborah describes as "the most attractive man in America" (180). When Shago is first introduced, Cherry's overtly sexualized description of him positions Shago as a sort of masculine ideal: "[M]y sister was just one of six girls Shago had waiting for him every time he passed through New York. And I decided she was too dedicated to him; she was just a kid. So I got together with her and Shago to shame him out of it, and crash! I became one of the six girls he had waiting for him in New York. I mean Shago's a *stud*, Mr. Rojack." (125) Shago's masculine power directly correlates with his sexual prowess. Primarily, Shago is a stud because he has the ability to seduce five women (in one city). However, Shago is also a stud, by implication, because he has the strength, stamina, and virility to satisfy all five women. Furthermore, the passage implies that Shago is so sexually potent that one woman cannot satisfy him. That is, it takes five women to satisfy Shago's sexual needs.

In that sense, Shago endangers Rojack's masculinity in a way that Cherry could never do alone. Now Rojack must not only make Cherry moan (in a literal and figurative way), he must do so better than Shago. Once again, Rojack has come full circle, for the potential emasculation here by Cherry/Shago parallels the troubles that Rojack had with the emasculating Deborah earlier in the book. Deborah emasculated Rojack by suggesting he was an insufficient lover (he just went "pop, pop, pop" with his "little gun"), but it wasn't until Rojack discovered that his sexual role has been usurped by other male lovers who performed better than he did that Rojack turned to violence and murder.

Like Sergius, then, in "Time of Her Time," Rojack's pivotal moment comes when he makes Cherry reach orgasm, something Shago cannot do. Sex with Cherry begins in an animalistic way, but eventually transforms into something that Mailer clearly sees as more momentous. Once again, art and sex mix, as Mailer describes "two professional dancers in a long slow study alone at night on a moonlit floor" (126). Once the "corporate rubbery obstruction" is removed, Rojack reaches orgasm and "felt love fly in like

some great winged bird, some beating of wings at my back, and felt her will dissolve into tears, and some great deep sorrow like roses drowned in the salt of the sea came flooding from her womb and washed into me like a sweet honey of balm for all the bitter sores of my soul..." (128).

Mailer has certainly described something that he thinks either equals or approaches what he called the "apocalyptic orgasm" in "The White Negro." However, the great irony of this existential masculinity of Mailer's is that it is always fleeting, dissipating, never static, never lasting. In the end, Rojack realizes this, admitting that "love was love, one could find it with anyone, one could find it anywhere. It was just that you could never keep it" (165).

Ultimately, then, Rojack's departure in the closing pages of the novel reinforces the existentialist masculine hero's need for constant motion. While Rojack has achieved something great, the novel seems to suggest that Rojack's masculinity will always be in a nebulous state of flux and desire.

SEXUALITY AND VIOLENCE IN MAILER'S EARLY LIFE

"Aja toro, aja! Come on, you little faggot, where's your cojones, did your ugly whore of a mistress cut them off, you son of a bitch!"

Adele, to Norman Mailer, November 19, 1960
(*Last Party* 358)

Many of Mailer's modernist predecessors—artists like Hemingway, whom Mailer idolized—legitimized masculinity by adopting appropriate cultural signs and symbols, such as boxing, bullfighting, or big-game hunting. Mailer did, indeed, take up boxing, and had a bit of Hemingway in him. However, unlike his idol, Mailer's primary way of defining manhood, something he reveals in numerous interviews, was through sexual performance. Not only was sexuality was the primary method for Mailer to legitimize his masculinity, but it also served as his way of separating himself from what he saw as more conformist masses. Thus, Mailer embraced the identity of the rebel figure he describes in his 1956 ideological treatise, "The White Negro," in the creation of his own persona. In that sense, Mailer's explicit use of sexual identity was complimentary to a larger political era of sexual conformity and censorship.⁶

Mailer saw sex and violence as inherently similar insofar as he defined both as instinctual and primal properties of masculinity. “The problem of civilization,” Mailer suggested in an interview, “is how to have the expression of some modicum of primitive violence” (McGrady 115), and he even proposed jousting matches for juveniles in Central Park, saying, “the sword’s his word, his manhood” (165). Biographers have noted the way in which the connection Mailer envisioned between sexual and violent instincts found its way into his sexual relationships. Mary Dearborn argues, for example, that “the air between Norman and Bea had always been highly charged, partly because of their continued sexual attraction, and their fights were florid, marked by shouted obscenities” (76).

Violence becomes simultaneously a response to taunting accusations of sexual inability and an attempt to validate or re-empower masculine force, that “draining from the wound” that Rojack refers to in *An American Dream* (15). In this sense, violence becomes sexual for Mailer. Like sexual orgasm, the culmination of this rage, the release of this emotional turmoil, is expended all at once in a rush of energy. Mailer’s creative work develops an ideology of sexuality and violence, building toward this orgasmic point in his career where his work can express that enormous need.

Ultimately, in a period that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. describes as one of “passivity,” “acquiescence,” and a lack of national vitality, Mailer’s life and work both enact a compensatory response through overt demonstrations of active aggression and an antagonism towards conformity. Mailer serves as an example of a larger trend in which men quite literally used the penis/phallus as an instrument for responding to social pressures and validate the vitality of the masculine self.

NOTES

1. Mailer uses the term “great bitch” in the novel to describe the character of Deborah.
2. In that respect, Mailer seems to want Vidal to operate as witness here to his sexual desires. As a homosexual, Vidal is perhaps a non-threatening witness, one who doesn’t appear to resemble a threat to Mailer’s masculinity.
3. The reference to bulls here not only links Sergius’s desire with the animalistic lust of Mickey Lovett in *Barbary Shore*, but also shows the continuing influence of Hemingway on Mailer’s work. When Mailer pursued an interest in bullfighting during a trip to Mexico in the mid-1950s, he read Hemingway’s *Death in the Afternoon* as a primer.
4. An allusion to Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

5. Mailer once called Barney Kelly, “the focus of evil in the book ... the Devil approached” (Lennon, 1988, 209).
6. It’s important to contextualize Mailer’s provocative work within the extreme censorship that was going on in this period, a political trend that Mailer’s work specifically rebels against. When publisher Rhinehart demanded Mailer cut some lines from *The Deer Park* that subtly refer to oral sex, Mailer immediately refused, a profound symbolic act for him. Mailer later remembers feeling revolutionary in taking his stand: “I was an outlaw, a psych-chic outlaw, and I liked it” (*The Spooky Art* 34).

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