HISTORICIZING FREEDOM, FEAR, AND SEXUALITY IN *NATIVE SON* AND *MUMBO JUMBO*

by

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Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) are both classics of African American literature, but they may seem to have very little else in common. Wright's *Native Son* directly and explosively confronts mentally and emotionally weighty material. Following conflicted Black protagonist Bigger Thomas in the 1930s, it provides an intimate look into his thoughts and feelings as he commits, or contemplates, crime after crime. He plans to rob a delicatessen with several of his friends, he masturbates in a public theater, and he brutally murders a white woman, Mary Dalton. Disposing of her body by hacking her head off, first with his pocketknife and then a hatchet, Bigger then stuffs the severed head and body into the Daltons' furnace. After trying to extort money from the Daltons with a ransom note for their missing daughter, he goes on to rape and murder his "girl,"[1] Bessie, in an old abandoned building, beating her in the head with a brick and throwing her body down an air-shaft. It is later revealed that the beating did not fully kill her, but the fall down the air-shaft combined with the freezing winter temperatures of Chicago finished the job. This final act of violence turns out to be the last free decision Bigger makes, as he is subsequently captured, tried, and sentenced to death. The remainder of the novel concerns Bigger's trial, as a communist lawyer takes his case and stands off with the city's attorney general. The often-violent material reflects the general atmosphere of the Great Depression—one of fear, of uncertainty, of economic despair and disrepair.

Like a ray of sunshine, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* burst onto the postmodern literary scene in 1972. Its quirky tone could not be more different than *Native Son*'s. The novel is an entertaining whodunnit set in the 1920s, following the movements of several groups within New York involved in a massive conspiracy. Art is stolen from museums. A contagious dance sweeps across the nation, causing people to leave their jobs and houses in favor of

moving their bodies in the streets. Characters are revealed to be thousands of years old and members of secretive societies. PaPa LaBas, who could be called the novel's protagonist, practices HooDoo, a mixture of Haitian Voodoo and African American spiritual beliefs and folk traditions that was, and still is, practiced outside the novel in mostly rural Black communities across the United States. One of his employees and companions, Earline, is possessed by a HooDoo spirit—called a loa—and proceeds to seduce a married trolley man. The novel delves into Egyptian culture and religion, tracing the uncontrollable spread of Jes Grew's roots back to the two gods Osiris and Set. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a witty satire on multiple levels, combining fact with fiction in a historical-creative hybrid. It critiques American culture in a clever and "often biting" way, but disguises it through humor (Reed, back cover). Reed sprinkles the book with entertaining and dryly sarcastic quotes such as "Fear stalks the land. (As usual; so what else is new?)" (50). One character goes to bed and "and spends a night dreaming of things too horrible to repeat. New Jersey. Things like that" (120). All in all, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a delightfully playful read, worlds away from the heavy material of rape and murder in *Native Son*.

Indeed, at first glance these novels, separated by thirty years, may seem to have nothing at all in common. One is immediately engaged with the contemporary, with very immediate and real issues that African Americans faced in the 1930s. The other has the tone of literary jazz, exploring nontraditional forms and media while satirizing current and past events. Not surprisingly, beyond Henry Louis Gates's famous comparison of the two novels in *The Signifying Monkey,* few authors have discussed the two side by side. However, a closer investigation reveals that *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo* are more alike than it would seem. Taken altogether, the novels explore a historical continuum from the 1920s to the late

1960s, and woven into this continuum is the carefully historicized theme of sexuality and sexual expression. In *Native Son*, Bigger's sexual expression is shaped by the fear he feels from the pressure of the world around him. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the concept of sexuality is explored through the light of freedom rather than shame. But even as the two novels share this theme, they approach it in different ways. Taken altogether, a larger picture emerges, one where freedom, fear, and the social and political atmosphere directly impact the discussion of sexuality and sexual expression[2] in each novel—in *Native Son,* negatively, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, positively. My goal in the following paper is to explore this connection, its implications, and its consequences. Its applicability extends beyond the constraints of the novels and into current events and everyday understanding of these intertwined concepts.

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The contrast between *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo* compels the reader to explore and understand the binary opposition between freedom and fear. At first glance, they may not seem an appropriate pair—one may assume the opposite of freedom to be oppression, for example, and the opposite of fear, confidence. However, a closer analysis of the novels invites us to consider the relationship between these concepts. In both *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, freedom is the absence of fear, and vice versa. Expression of not only one's sexuality, but also one's true self, is natural and genuine in a space without fear. Where there is freedom, there are no expectations or judgements. Fear, however, holds an individual back from acting authentically. Fear results in artificial movement, forced by expectations or desires outside a person's will. One cannot read *Native Son* without seeing the prominence of this exact fear. The first section of the novel is titled "Fear," setting the tone for the entire book. Fear is the foundation of Bigger's life and the motive for his actions. The author uses

Bigger's internal monologue and thoughts, along with his defense by the communist lawyer Boris Max, to intimately acquaint the reader with his fear. In fact, Max's defense of Bigger relies heavily on the emotions Bigger has felt and still feels throughout the course of his life––and Bigger certainly provides Max with more than enough proof that fear controls him. His feelings of helplessness can be traced back to his childhood.

In *Native Son*, fear controls Bigger through his lack of available choices. Everything around him limits his freedom, and this lack of freedom produces fear. He is living the script that others have written for him, a fact which he knows and acknowledges. He tells Max, "I hurt folks 'cause I felt like I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room. … I was trying to do something else. But it seems like I never could" (425). Bigger knows he can never escape the white influence on his life. He feels as if it has been planned out for him without his consent. He is hemmed by "redlining" into a section of the city with terrible competition for squalid overpriced housing, where job prospects are few, all low-wage, and controlled by white employers or doled out as charity by the state, where white power is as pervasive as the blanketing snow and the face of the State's Attorney glares from posters under the banner "You Can't Win." This powerlessness produces a gaping hole of fear in his life and the lives of his family. He sees his brother as "soft and vague," his mother as exhausted from carrying "a heavy and delicately balanced burden," and his sister as having "a fear so deep as to be an organic part of her" (108, 109). Bigger is sexually constricted, like other African American men would be during his time; however, his case comes to a violent climax due to his place in Mary's bedroom. He kills Mary Dalton precisely because he feels like he's inhabiting a script that has already been written. In his world, a Black man in a white girl's bedroom can only mean one thing, rape,

and the rape of a white girl by a Black man will inevitably lead to lynching. Trapped with no escape, unable to conceive of any alternative, he silences her—fatally—with a pillow. After murdering Mary, Bigger is granted a clarity of mind, either from shock or a sudden realization, which allows him to notice the effects of this fear. Wright uses Bigger's actions as an example of the extreme consequences of African Americans' oppressive emotions and experiences in the 1930s.

As an effect of living a life so permeated with fear, Bigger has no healthy way to express his sexuality. His only experience with sexual expression is through solo masturbation and some sexual encounters with Bessie, whom he claims as his own but does not love. He is clearly sexually damaged. In a twistedly ironic way, it may be no surprise that he eventually turns to the sexual script written for him by society; after he murders Mary, he becomes a rapist in the eyes of whites, and he eventually goes on to fulfill these assumptions when he rapes Bessie. Some of Bigger's negative approach to sexuality can be attributed to his oppressive living conditions and some to the crackdown on sexual freedoms in the 1930s and 40s. During these decades, society in the United States increased control of sexual expression through avenues like film censorship and investigations into high-profile sex workers. No positive examples of African American sexuality appeared in the newspapers of the day. As Wright states in his essay "How 'Bigger' Was Born," "Negroes are rarely mentioned in the press unless they've committed some crime," and usually a crime of a sexual nature (441). In sum, these influences—shaped by Bigger's historical moment and living conditions—produce a vacuum for healthy sexual expression, and Bigger and those around him become victims.

One of the most prominent themes in *Native Son* is the white gaze. Bigger often feels as if he is acting on a stage before a white audience, taking on a predetermined role in his own life. The reader of *Native Son* may not know, however, that the white gaze was also a stumbling block to the publishing and even the writing of the novel itself. Wright understood that by penning a book about an African American murderer and rapist, he would be seen as giving 'the other side'—white society—material to justify oppressive behavior toward African Americans. He writes about the turmoil over the decision in his essay on "How 'Bigger' Was Born."

> Like Bigger himself, I felt a mental censor—product of the fears which a Negro feels from living in America—standing over me, draped in white, warning me not to write. This censor's warnings were translated into my own thought processes thus: "What will white people think if I draw the picture of such a Negro boy? Will they not at once say: 'See, didn't we tell you all along that niggers are like that? Now, look, one of their own kind has come along and drawn the picture for us!'" (448)

Wright describes the struggle he went through in deciding to write Bigger as he did, "resentful toward whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, [and] depressed" (448). He states, "The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that if I did not write of Bigger as I saw and felt him, … I'd be reacting as Bigger himself reacted; that is, I'd be acting out of *fear* if I let what I thought whites would say constrict and paralyze me" (448). However, Hazel Rowley in her article "The Shadow of the White Woman: Richard Wright and the Book-of-the-Month Club" states that Wright "rather enjoyed provoking the wrath of both [white and Black people]; there was an element in him that liked to shock" (627). Wright was not concerned with the accusations of the public. He felt it was his duty to write

Native Son. As such, he followed through with describing Bigger as he saw him—like the other rebellious Black men and boys Wright had known in his lifetime. The white influence, however, was not done with him or *Native Son* yet.

With such controversial subject matter, *Native Son* was unable to escape a rigorous editing process which removed or changed much of its important content. In a surprising move, the popular Book-of-the-Month Club expressed interest in choosing *Native Son* for its readers. However, as Rowley writes, "selection was contingent on Wright making some changes—mostly in the form of excisions" (627). The appeal of being the first African American author to have a book chosen for the club, along with the publicity and promotion it would bring, was enough to convince Wright to make the necessary changes. The book certainly tested the boundaries of accepted sexual content; thus, it was reasonable to expect that most of these scenes would be removed. However, the Book-of-the-Month committee's changes altered the implications of many of the sexual scenes.

> After [committee member Dorothy] Canfield Fisher and her colleagues had gone through the manuscript with their editing pencil, the masturbation scene disappeared completely. So did the newsreel that then came on, which to Bigger's surprise, featured Mary Dalton (the daughter of his future employer) and her boyfriend, barelegged and kissing on a gleaming Florida beach. Bigger and Jack agreed that she was 'a hot-looking number' and whispered to each other that some wealthy white women would apparently go to bed with anybody. All this disappeared in the published version. (Rowley 629-630)

Not only was the Book-of-the-Month Club enacting censorship on some of the raunchier scenes, Rowley argues that "there was undoubtedly another sort of censorship going on"

(630). Though they may seem subtle, when put together, the edits portray a different relationship between Bigger and Mary—one where he is the jungle beast described in the newspapers and she is "the sleeping beauty" (Rowley 631). Wright's original portrayal of Bigger was that of a highly sexual man in the wrong place at the wrong time, with countless other factors influencing his actions—not the Black stereotypical ape who dreamed of intercourse with white women. Changing this important dynamic between Mary and Bigger diminishes Wright's argument, a fact of which the Book-of-the-Month Club may or may not have been consciously aware. In order to gain the important publicity from the Club, however, Wright had to sacrifice his own goals to white people who chose his message for him. His novel was censored, its meanings essentially rewritten; like Bigger's options in life, Wright was limited in what he was allowed to express. Bigger's life is scripted, and Wright—while the novel is on its way to publication—experiences some of those same scripted moments.

The many restrictions on Bigger's freedom to choose are further compounded by the omnipresence of the white gaze. Bigger understands he does not have access to the freedom to choose his way in life: "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (R. Wright 12). He has two options, both acting as walls pinning him inside a box. Bigger's lack of access to good education helps to reinforce the restrictions. He muses to his friend Gus that he wishes he could be a pilot someday. Gus emphasizes the improbability of such a course of action: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane" (17). They both understand the confines placed on them by white society. Their choices are limited. In order to survive, Bigger must

take the job Mr. Dalton offers out of a sense of white guilt and in the name of charity. In one case, while Bigger stands on the street, those eyes adopt a much more real form.

> The poster showed a white face. … fleshy but stern; one hand was uplifted and its index finger pointed straight out into the street at each passer-by. The poster showed one of those faces that looked straight at you when you looked at it and all the while you were walking and turning your head to look at it and it kept looking unblinkingly back at you until you got so far from it you had to take your eyes away, and then it stopped, like a movie blackout. Above the top of the poster were tall red letters: YOU CAN'T WIN! (R. Wright 13)

The poster of Attorney General Buckley, like the prison guard in the panopticon, acts as a constant and very physical reminder of the eyes on Bigger and the other African Americans during the 1930s. Indeed, the phrase 'you can't win' sums up Bigger's situation perfectly. Regardless of his actions, he constantly experiences an "old feeling, the feeling that he had [felt] all his life: he was black and had done wrong; white men were looking at something with which they would soon accuse him" (R. Wright 219). The white men pass judgement on Bigger many times over: first, that he is "just another black ignorant Negro," and then, that he is a rapist and in fact too dumb to enact a crime so "elaborate" (212, 245). No matter what he does, he will not even be able to choose the way he is understood and interpreted by others. Max is the first and only person to try and understand Bigger and his motives, to talk to him and discover his identity—how he sees himself and the world—before making a judgement. Whether in his employment, schooling, or even in how he is seen, the eyes of white society decide how he will live. There is no free will to choose in Bigger's life. He and

other African Americans in the 1930s and 40s had their movements scripted before they even occurred.

Much of this scripting has to do with white expectations in the 1930s, which Bigger certainly experiences in *Native Son*. Bigger lives a life which has been written for him by white society. Constantly being watched, whether directly or indirectly, he is fully aware of the expectations of those around him. He feels he is not free to choose his own way—rather, he is completely *unable* to choose his own way—and so he acts as he is expected to. There were many clear expectations and negative stereotypes associated with young Black men in the early 1900s. For example, Benjamin René Jordan writes in his book about the Boy Scouts of America that such stereotypes were used as a reference point for Scouts on good and bad behavior.

> American Scout literature depicted leading white boys distancing themselves from the home to learn men's work skills and serve the broader community, but the lazy African American boy in the 1921 *Boy's Life* sketch … still required his mother's prodding to work. … [T]he oversleeping boy appears content to put off his responsibilities and let others do the work while he just eats, plays, and sleeps. (Jordan 194)

The African American young man was the iconographic Black devil being compared to the model white citizen. Faced with no good options and no freedom to create more, Bigger fulfills this stereotype. His mother does indeed nag him to work: "You going to take the job, ain't you, Bigger?" she asks him repeatedly, following up with many admonitions and reminders of how working will be different than his normal leisurely life (R. Wright 11). "All you care about is your own pleasure!" she exclaims passionately—and somewhat

truthfully—to Bigger (9). Before going to the Daltons', he spends his day loitering, playing pool, and watching a film. He acts exactly as the whites around him expect him to act—"lazy … [and] carefree" (Jordan 196). Max explains that men and women in Bigger's position use "the backwaters of religion, gambling and sex" to drain "off their energies into channels harmful to them and profitable to [white people]" (R. Wright 394). Whether their vice was sex, like Bigger, or alcohol to dull the feeling of being alive, like Bessie, the ones who profited were usually the white bar or theater owners. African Americans had two options in the 1930s. They could become like the Bigger Thomas "type No. 4" Wright describes in "How Bigger Was Born," making a decision that felt more like their own and appearing to fulfill the lazy stereotype as a result. No. 4 "was never more melancholy than when brooding over the impossibility of his ever being free. He had no job, for he regarded digging ditches for fifty cents a day as slavery. 'I can't live on that,' he would say'" (436). Wright writes that this path eventually led the man to an insane asylum. The second option was to become like Bessie—working six days a week, tired to the bone, and using their vices as a means to escape the life they lived. Neither choice was a good one. Bigger sees these options and feels trapped, unable to make a decision that will truly matter. In his fear, he fulfills the expectations white society has for a young Black man: one who is lazy and hypersexual.

Part of this hopeless and trapped outlook on life can certainly be connected to the terrible living conditions endured by African Americans in the 1930s in the ghettos of Northern cities, crowded with recent migrants from the South. Called by Kathleen German "the single biggest demographic change in American history," between 1910 and the beginning of World War II, almost two million African Americans made the massive shift from residing in the South to a new start in the North, doubling the Black populations of

many Northern cities (162). The Thomases themselves are examples of such migrants, having moved to Chicago from Mississippi. The longed-for new start, however, was often not as rewarding as it was hoped to be. As demonstrated by Bigger's family, before WWII, many families had to rely on the relief to survive. Bigger's mother is reduced to nagging him to find work, but the only job available is through the charitable intervention of the relief. Black employment opportunities were mostly limited to labor for men and domestic jobs for women. Not every company, even ones with openings, would hire African American workers. Even after factory jobs were added due to industrialization, circumstances did not immediately improve: "Race continued to determine the jobs available, and the prevailing ideology that, regardless of the work done, African-Americans needed and deserved less pay than whites often resulted in low and inadequate wages" (Hunter 231-232). As whites began to move South fueled by WWII, opening up jobs in the North, race still determined the opportunities available for employment. German states that as time went on, "[t]he patterns of unbending racial exclusion that characterized the early twentieth century continued throughout the mobilization of 1940 and 1941. … The new opportunities for whites did not immediately include blacks" (160).

Those "new opportunities" that were available required long hours with little pay—or, at least, little enough pay to barely scrape by, as Bessie demonstrates in *Native Son* (German 160). "'All I do is work, work like a dog! From morning till night. I ain't got no happiness,'" she cries to Bigger in an apt description of her situation (R. Wright 180). According to the study "Occupational Segregation by Race and Sex, 1940-88," many Black women like Bessie found themselves trapped in housekeeping-style jobs. "In 1940, domestic service and agricultural work acounted [*sic*] for three-fourths of employment among black

women, compared with only 13 percent of white working women. … In 1945, median annual earnings of domestics were just 16 percent of those of all working women," and one can hardly imagine that it was much better before 1940 (King 30). Black women were usually a constant source of income for their families and communities during and after the Depression, according to Andrea Hunter's study "Making a Way: Strategies of Southern Urban African-American Families, 1900 and 1936." Oftentimes they were the only bread-winner, which could have severe financial consequences: "[F]amilies were faced with declining wages and increased joblessness which was particularly devastating given that [they] were often dependent on already low wages and needed multiple wage earners to survive" (Hunter 243). Though the Thomases do not live in the South, circumstances were not any different in the North, as reflected by the few job opportunities and low pay. Before the 1930s, a Black family would have sent the children to work, in order to increase the income. However, new child labor laws passed during the decade made it no longer possible for underage workers to support their relatives. In some cases, families like the Thomases had only one or, worse, no children old enough to work. As a result, the Thomases must survive on the meager income Bigger's mother earns taking in wash, supplemented by relief money and the charity of organizations such as the YWCA, where Bigger's sister takes sewing classes. Additionally, the "declining wages" which Hunter mentions would have been a blow to many families trying to pay their rent, especially since African Americans were systematically overcharged for the basic staples of life (243). Bigger notes that a loaf of bread, which cost him five cents, would cost a white person four cents "across the 'line'" (R. Wright 249). The combination of higher prices and much lower wages for incredibly taxing work was inhumane. Regardless of steady domestic employment for Black women, African

Americans and their families were afflicted with a variety of other economic troubles. The available work was exhausting and, in the end, not sufficient to support a family.

Bigger and his family, like many other African Americans in the 1930s, struggle with not only higher prices for food but also higher rent fees for terrible housing, contributing to a large-scale mental oppression. *Native Son* begins in the Thomas's one room apartment, where a large rat has taken up residence. A curtain divides the kitchen from the bedroom, which contains two beds for the four family members. Bigger and his brother have to avert their eyes while their mother and sister change clothes, and vice versa. They pay eight dollars a week for this apartment, which Bigger acknowledges is far too much for its sorry condition. When on the run from the authorities, he remembers that "he had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats" (R. Wright 248). "[T]he same kind of flats" Bigger refers to were in almost uninhabitable states of disrepair (248). In the novel, "[t]he rental agencies had told [Bigger] that there were not enough houses for Negroes to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation" (248). Bigger's home, Chicago, was not an isolated case. In her article "Albany, New York and the Great Migration," Jennifer Lemak goes into depth about the poor living conditions for African Americans on the eve of the Great Depression:

> In 1928, the National Urban League (NUL) studied African American housing concerns. …The NUL described one of the black sections of town along the Hudson River: "In this district many of the frame houses are untenable; brick walls are cracked and in need of painting; many of the rooms need artificial light all day long; toilets connect with the kitchen (often with no door in between); halls, yards, toilets

> are shared by many families; the district area is flanked on one side by the 'closed' red light district which is patrolled by policemen, especially assigned to that duty, for twenty-four hours a day." (54)

Other organizations often reported wide-spread "[a]bnormal rents … [g]ross insanitation … [c]ellar living … [w]indowless rooms … [and o]vercrowding" (Lemak 58). Of course, even if better housing existed, African Americans would be kept from moving. As Bigger notes bitterly, they were confined to the Black Belt of the city, "their side of the 'line.' No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (R. Wright 249). These 'set apart' locations were a direct result of "redlining," the "systematic refusal by a financial institution to make mortgage loans on residential property lying within certain districts—usually older, low-income neighborhoods—of an urban community" (Fisher 1). A Boston Public Library collection of articles on redlining details the following on the practice's origins: "When the Home Owners Loan Corporation first formalized the process of redlining in a 1936 'detailed survey and classification of mortgage credit risk areas …, areas deemed "hazardous" were colored red,' and such areas were deemed 'hazardous' explicitly because of their 'undesirable population" (Fisher 1). Because only low-wage jobs were available to African Americans, one can imagine a never-ending cycle of dilapidated housing and never enough financial stability to change the situation.

Bigger is an example of the perfect storm of circumstances and oppression experienced by most other African Americans in the 1930s. He lacks access to the freedom to be employed in a well-paying job. He simply has no choice in the matter. Not only is Bigger denied, by the color of his skin, access to aviation school and his dream of flying, even when

someone like Mr. Dalton helps make it possible for a Black man to get an education, he won't employ him afterwards (R. Wright 328). Without any realistic financial avenue of escape, Bigger, and his family, like those around them, are left with no option but to continue on, trapped in the same terrible conditions, doing their best to survive. These circumstances––living constantly under the watchful eyes of white society and expectations, which determined their low wages, physically draining jobs, and poor housing—create an overwhelming culture of fear, to which Bigger falls victim. This fear, however, is not only limited to Bigger's living and working conditions. It permeates his mind and spreads to all areas of his life, particularly his sexuality and sexual expression.

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In the context of *Native Son*, Wright focuses on this theme of sexuality and sexual expression alongside the theme of fear. Bigger's crimes are either assumed to be or are truly sexual in nature. He is portrayed as a libidinous man—masturbating in a theater, peeping on Jan and Mary when they are making love in the back seat of the car, and carrying on a relationship with Bessie purely for pleasure, not love. However, none of Bigger's sexual relations are *positive*. They consist of a list of social deviancies and a relationship based on escapism alone. These negative experiences are a result of both the overwhelming financial and emotional oppression Bigger undergoes and the overtones of shame and the cover of darkness that characterized sexual expression in America during the 1930s. Though the 20s had provided a breath of fresh air from conservative values, the following decades brought new censorship laws and a return to much more traditionally 'prudish' ways. The novel's portrayal of Bigger's sexuality as deviant, constrained, and shame-worthy reflects this larger cultural phenomenon.

One of the largest influences on the sexual culture, and simultaneously a reflection of the change in values, was the movies and films of the day, and we can feel the influence of this restriction in *Native Son*. During the 20s and the early 30s, some sexual content was permitted on screen. Filmmakers always knew exactly how to lead their audiences' imaginations, even if the content was not exactly explicit. The late teens and 1920s saw the advent of "sex education" films, which showed the viewers "live births and close-ups of healthy and diseased genitals and were narrated by 'expert' lecturers before audiences segregated by sex" (Stevens 84). John Stevens notes that even some conservative newspapers spoke of some of these films "as 'a step in the right direction' and praised the lecturer for his 'plain, earnest and helpful' comments" (85). Though they were far from perfect, these types of films discussed good hygiene habits and were educational for the communities who viewed them. However, not all pre-Hays Code films portrayed positive sexual content. As Steven Ross points out in "Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934," most of the very early 1930s sexual content in films had either the "fallen woman" or "bad girl" plots: "In the former, the female protagonist is forced into moral decline [in the form of prostitution] because of desperate times; in the latter, the woman sees sex as a tool of advancement and embraces what others would decry as moral decline" (273). The phrasing of "moral decline" in this article displays the way the American culture felt about sexual activities (Ross 273). Additionally, racially charged movies like *Trader Horn* (1930), which Bigger and Jack view in *Native Son*, "revealed a great deal about contemporary racial tensions, desires, and fantasies" before the Production Code's rigid standards (Ross 274). "By setting their plots outside the United States, films … could do what domestically set films could not: hint at sexual liaisons—some willing, some forced—

between blacks and whites" (Ross 274). Even before large-scale censorship began, the movies were reinforcing racial stereotypes and shame-laden views of sexuality on screen. In 1934, the censorship of movies ushered in a crackdown on the 1920s' freer sexual attitudes. The Production Code Administration (PCA) began requiring films to undergo more extreme review before being shown in theaters. Their goal was "to restore morality in Hollywood and the nation by controlling what audiences could and could not see on the screen" (Ross 270). Restoring society's definition of morality in films was certainly a large undertaking, and one which the PCA took very seriously until it was abolished in 1968. Under its guidelines, even the movie script was regulated before filming. According to "The Production Code & Precedent," the PCA also reviewed "song lyrics, costume photographs, and other details" (Simmons).

> When the picture was finished, the staff conducted its final review in the screening room and, if no further changes were required, issued a certificate authorizing the film to carry the Motion Picture Association seal of approval among its credits. That seal was the key to successful distribution. Without it, the large first-run theaters and most neighborhood and small town exhibitors would never book the feature. (Simmons)

The Production Code severely inhibited the subjects and characters which could be portrayed on screen. When sexual expression was portrayed on screen, it was through a condemning lens. For example, as Simmons writes, a film character with the role of a prostitute "must be punished and/or … a sympathetic character [must] condemn her sin. In other words, the screenplay had to demonstrate unequivocally that prostitution was always morally wrong." The PCA refused to let any positive sexual material through their censorship bans. Instead,

sexuality was intimately associated with moral decline and vice. Removal of the good, albeit imperfect, portrayal of healthy sexuality and hygiene on screen influenced the larger public's view of sexual activities, tinging them with shame.

The impact on the larger culture surrounding Bigger was perhaps more large-scale than the public realized, as sexual restrictions expanded to other areas. For example, high-end brothels endured a steady stream of "vice investigations" during the 1930s (Pliley 139). Many of the houses' operators were tried and convicted, regardless of their profits and services to many upper-level officials. In "an unprecedented effort to remake the FBI into a popular culture product," Hoover's administration pushed for the 'rescuing' of the 'poor, innocent girls' who had been 'forced' into prostitution by the brothel madams (Pliley 138). As Jessica Pliley writes in her article on these "Vice Queens and White Slaves," the return to more conservative values portrayed the FBI as "protecting the virtue of young women" who were too naive to understand they were being 'exploited' (139). In reality, many of the persecuted madams "had voluntarily become professional prostitutes" and were relatively well off, catering to "Pittsburgh's and New York City's most prominent men" (Pliley 149, 150). These facts, of course, were not included in the narrative told by the FBI. The concept of a woman choosing prostitution as a well-paying profession was not what they wanted the public to hear. Prostitution was described as 'white slavery' in the news and other accounts of the service. According to Pliley, the phrasing of 'white slavery' served double goal—it also deepened racial boundaries.

> Because the victims were constructed as exclusively white, the narrative functioned to erase the sexual exploitation of black women under chattel slavery; innocence was racialized as racist commentators assumed that African American girls matured more

> quickly and had a natural lasciviousness that precluded them from really ever being innocent. (140-141)

Portraying Black women and girls as naturally lascivious—easy—fueled the negative portrayal of African American sexual expression after the 1920s. African American women and girls were barely considered in the pursuit of dissolving brothels; in the picture presented to the public, the poor "victims [of prostitution] were invariably white" (Pliley 140). Even while assuming the role of the savior of 'young innocents,' the FBI made it clear that not every prostitute was valued equally. They spread the narrative that only the Black prostitutes truly *wanted* to be sex workers—the white women had been forced to it. For a white woman to willingly and consensually choose the same profession was unimaginable. The racial double standard continued to layer harm on the public's perception of Black women and girls. More broadly, the crusade against high-profile brothels reinforced the return to more traditional values about sexuality and sexual expression. The public devaluation of African American sexuality, however, was not over.

During the 1930s, there were no positive representations of Black sexuality in the news, and Bigger himself acts as an example of the worst of the depictions. Though African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance may have enjoyed some freedom—drag queens, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and even crossdressers were regarded with an amount of interest and curiosity—and the 1920s brought a brief interlude to the fear through Americans' admiration of the supposed sexual liberation of the Black community, those sentiments soon gave way to a more fearful view of Black sexuality. The crime Bigger is accused of committing, Black-on-white rape, was the generic fallback accusation against any Black

man, and had been so since the 1800s. Wright himself acknowledged the cultural relevance of the events in *Native Son* in "How Bigger Was Born."

> So frequently do these acts recur that when I was halfway through the first draft of *Native Son* a case paralleling Bigger's flared forth in the newspapers of Chicago. (Many of the newspaper items and some of the incidents in *Native Son* are but fictionalized versions of the Robert Nixon case and rewrites of news stories from the *Chicago Tribune*.) (455)

The fictional press's descriptions of Bigger are not simply exaggerations or liberties taken by Wright. In *Native Son*, Bigger is called "an ape," "a beast," and "an earlier missing link in the human species" by the *Chicago Tribune* newspaper (R. Wright 279, 280). Wright explicitly bases much of Bigger's press coverage in the novel on the real world 1938 coverage of a man named Robert Nixon. The most famous Nixon case headline appeared in the *Tribune*, "Brick Slayer is Likened to Jungle Beast," and a policeman in the article remarks that Nixon looks "[j]ust like an ape" (Leavelle 6). "His physical characteristics suggest an earlier link in the species," claims the *Tribune* (Leavelle 6). The Nixon case also concerned a murder which was followed by a rape accusation. According to *Black on the Block* by Mary Pattillo, the victim's name was Florence Johnson, an older woman who was beaten to death with a brick in her apartment on May 27, 1938 (42). Nixon, 18, was picked up by the police that night. He protested his innocence until "the night of the second day, [when] he 'confessed.'…Nearly every time the *Chicago Defender* reported on this case it put the word 'confessed' in quotation marks" (Pattillo 42). The police took Nixon to the scene of the crime to act out what he supposedly did to the woman, a tactic also used in *Native Son* to get Bigger to confess to more than just murder.

> The reenactment was front-page news in the next day's paper. Above a picture of Nixon and Hicks [his accused accomplice] was the caption 'Two Re-enact Sex Slaying of Mrs. Johnson'…. As if the true story were not sensational enough the caption conjured a sex crime where none had occurred, erroneously, but no less effectively, reinforcing an all-too-common gendered and racist trope. (Pattillo 44)

Nixon's case was not an isolated one. Many other African American men accused of crimes had rape charges added to their list of offenses. "Negro Butler Confesses N. Y. Murder, Denies Rape," reads a headline from a 1946 issue of the *Daily Boston Globe*. A similar headline from the *Chicago Daily Defender* in 1966 reads "Accused Of Murder, Rape, Negro Is Slain." *Native Son* follows the same pattern of an immediate rape accusation against a suspected Black criminal that Wright observed in his day. Bessie, after learning what Bigger has done to Mary, cries that "They'll say you raped her," knowing whether it is the truth or not will not matter to the press (227). They already have a pre-prepared, prefabricated narrative for Bigger. Essentially, Bigger undergoes media lynching—condemned before any details are released. Later, just as in the Nixon case, Bigger reads the newspaper headline "AUTHORITIES HINT SEX CRIME" alongside the mention of Mary's murder (R. Wright 243).

Overall, through the use of both fictional and historical context along with specific scenes, *Native Son* portrays sexuality as dangerous and wrong. The novel is permeated with shame, and each sexual act occurs in darkness, leading the reader to assume they are tinted with shame and a desire to be hidden. Bigger's family has a single room apartment, and the men and women of the house must turn their heads away from the shame of the others as they change clothes. The lack of personal space at home leads Bigger to masturbate in a

darkened theater, a public place which is in reality more private than the Thomas apartment. Bigger "looked round in the shadows to see if any attendant was near, then slouched far down in his seat" (R. Wright 30). He and his friend make a contest, racing to see who can finish first. Their actions are later brought against Bigger in court, where Buckley ties "the obnoxious sexual perversions" to an invented lust for Mary Dalton (410). The next important sexual encounter Bigger has is with Mary, who has already been sexualized in his mind through the newsreel earlier in the day. It is three in the morning; the house is dark; everyone is asleep. Bigger is tempted by her body, not because she is white, but because he has spent an evening watching her and Jan, simultaneously hating and lusting after her.[3] He is aware of the danger she presents, and he feels "excitement and fear" as he helps her to her room (83). Through his lust, he is fully conscious that the temptation of her body will bring him no good: "His fingers felt the soft curves of her body and he was still, looking at her, enveloped in a sense of physical elation. This little bitch! he thought" (83). Terrified of discovery, when her blind mother enters the room, Bigger suffocates Mary, because he "knows" he will never be able to prove his innocence regarding his place in her room. He has absorbed the narratives fed to him by society—that he, a Black man, *should* desire her, a white woman, and *should* take advantage of her, because it is simply what a Black man would do in this situation.

Bigger defines rape metaphorically as "what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one" (R. Wright 227-228). When Bigger feels trapped, he understands that this feeling produces a certain response. In Mary's case, that response was to instinctively suffocate her out of sheer panic, knowing what the assumptions would be if he were discovered. For

Bessie, Bigger's response, this time to the mounting pressure from running from the authorities, is literal rape—a warped sexual retaliation against forces he cannot control. The two find themselves alone in an unstable and freezing cold building. Bigger feels tension from his recent escape of the reporters and Buckley. His murder of Bessie is premeditated—"he knew that he had to … settle things with her, settle them in a way that would not leave him in any danger" from her giving their flight away—but before he follows through, he uses her body one last time (229). Despite Bessie's protests ("'Please Bigger….'" and "'Bigger.…*Don't*!'"), he pins her down and forces her to have intercourse with him (233). He follows the rape by beating her to death with a brick. This act is the crescendo to Bigger's sexual encounters. As the newspaper headlines make all too clear, he is unable to control the way white society sees him, so he becomes a fulfilment of those assumptions. Later in the novel, the courtroom cares less about Bessie's actual rape and murder than the imagined rape of Mary, emphasizing the norm of negatively portraying Black sexuality. The atmosphere of shameful feelings around sexual expression in the 1930s is clear in all of Bigger's sexual encounters. They are each committed under cover of darkness, tinged with deviance, danger, and animalistic desire.

Though American society had briefly celebrated the sexually liberated African Americans of Harlem, that time was over. In the 1930s, African American sexuality and sexual expression in the news was associated with rape and murder, to the point that it became an expectation. Fear and the white gaze come into play through this expectation—the very factors in play when Bigger murders Mary are his fear of discovery and its implications. As Becca Gercken states,

> Bigger inadvertently suffocates Mary because he knows what white people will "see" when they witness a black man carrying an unconscious white woman at night, in her bedroom. The power of the gaze to define black men as sexually uncontrolled and white women as their perpetual object of desire is what leads to Mary's death. (637)

Bigger is aware that his intentions and reasons for being in Mary's room will be assumed. The white gaze both controls him and judges his movements before they occur. He lives in fear because he knows his choices and their implications do not exist in a way that matters. As a result, the fear and atmosphere of the 1930s impacts every area of his life—including his sexual choices.

In *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas does not have a positive history with sexual expression; however, even those scenes in the novel which affirmatively portray sexuality have negative undertones. Bigger's relationship with Bessie is "a masturbatory one"—he buys her liquor and receives sex in exchange (R. Wright 402). There is no love between him and Bessie, only physical stimulation. The remainder of his recorded sexual expressions include sexual deviancy, assault, and rape. The first positive sexual scene in *Native Son* finds Mary and Jan in the back seat of the car, making love while Bigger watches their private pornography display. Second is a Black couple in their one room apartment, "moving jerkily in tight embrace" as the sun rises and Bigger watched through a window (247). However, even this mother and father cannot express themselves in the way they might desire; their children, three of them sleeping in a single bed, watch as their parents quietly engage in intercourse. Bigger remembers similar experiences in his own family's apartment, and notes bitterly that all five members of the Black family sleep in one room while he is alone in "a great big empty building" (247). Even this scene, though it shows a loving expression of

sexuality, carries hints of irony and shame, as the family cannot afford a bigger apartment to give the parents privacy.

In *Native Son*, where is the loving and consensual union between individuals? Where is any scene of willing intercourse—without the coercion of alcohol—between Bigger and Bessie? Where is the emotional connection, or even a description of pleasure, in sex? Through *Mumbo Jumbo*, written just 30 years later, Reed celebrates intercourse and the body as worthy of worship. Where is this sentiment in *Native Son*?

The answer lies in the vacuum of positive sexual expression created by the repressive and oppressive political and social environment which surrounds Bigger. He and other African Americans were constantly under the watchful eye of the white gaze. It set behavioral expectations for them, interpreting every move through the lens of an established stereotype. In a way, the white gaze removed the freedom to choose any course of action outside of the expected patterns. Forced to work difficult jobs and long hours, Black Americans were underpaid and spent their home life in dangerously broken-down residences. These political factors and physical circumstances, accurately portrayed in *Native Son*, affect every area of Bigger's life, including his sexuality. Additionally, the larger American culture's return to more traditional values—values which emphasized the purity of women and shunned even educational sexual displays on screen—fostered a public which no longer enjoyed the sexual freedoms they had in the 1920s. With so little to celebrate—subpar living conditions, the numerous difficulties of supporting a family, and the ever-present white gaze—how *could* Bigger find joy in sex? How could that loving and consensual union exist? During the trial, Max describes sex as one of the outlets that keeps men and women like Bigger from lashing out. Sex is redefined in the 1930s, transforming from a positive,

pleasurable action to a form of escapism. It also evolves from a natural movement into one which is artificial. Natural movement takes place in an environment of freedom, where no one is watching—or, at the very least, no one whose opinion matters. In Bigger's life, however, there is no room for freedom of sexual expression. He cannot find joy or pleasure in such activities. His fear, like the walls of a box, has constrained him, and those walls are made up of the white gaze. Even in his sexual life, Bigger is a puppet, "acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of people" (R. Wright 84). Wright's phrasing clearly argues that Bigger's movements are scripted and unauthentic. He proves this by displaying the worst of 1930s African American circumstances and critiquing their incredibly negative effect on sexuality. Thirty years later, however, Reed flips the theme of sexual expression completely on its head in *Mumbo Jumbo*. He portrays a much more positive angle which is just as influenced by the politics and culture of his time period as Wright's novel was by its own.

iii

If Bigger's life and the novel itself is dominated by fear, Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* is instead defined throughout by freedom, the very opposite of fear in the binary. Freedom does not restrict or inhibit movement. It encourages natural activity and expressions of personality. Those who live in freedom have the ability to be authentic and 'dance (*literally* in *Mumbo Jumbo*'s case) like no one's watching.' More specifically, those who are watching—such as the Atonist order in Reed's novel—do not *matter*. Though they may wail and scream against Jes Grew, they are powerless to stop it from raging across the country. The Atonists cannot control Jes Grew or those it infects. The African American resisters, the *Mu'tafikah*, the members of the Mumbo Jumbo Kathedral, and the practitioners of HooDoo do not care about the opinions of the Atonists. They dance the Black Bottom, sing Jazz and the blues, and

worship and celebrate in their own way. Like Wright, Reed was influenced by the society and culture which surrounded him. The extent and effects of this influence can be observed in *Mumbo Jumbo*. However, unlike Wright, Reed had a much more positive picture to present—one of authentic movement and freedom of expression unheard of under the circumstances of *Native Son*. The two novels also present their content in different ways. Whereas Wright's novel uses many of the techniques of literary naturalism to make concrete connections between Bigger's life to the lives of African Americans during the 30s, *Mumbo Jumbo*, through its wildly quirky and inventive postmodern technique, both embodies and presents freedom in a more conceptual and creative manner. Both forms of writing are equally relevant and valid, but whereas Wright's style excels at social critique, Reed's enables him to simultaneously critique and celebrate different aspects of culture.

Mumbo Jumbo is an interesting case study of historical contexts. The majority of the novel's events occur in the 1920s, but *Mumbo Jumbo* was published in 1972. It encompasses, in a way, two separate time periods which shared some features—most notably, the progress of sexual and political freedoms and the inevitable outrage this inspired. Reed's novel ties both periods together, grounding his novel in a sort of comparative history.[4] For example, in the novel, Reed explores the 1920s' rise in white curiosity about African American culture, dance, and music, later paralleled in the 1960s with Delta blues and Black soul music. Yet many other whites in the 1920s were offended by this interest; for instance, one of the oft-repeated complaints against flappers was their tendency to listen to jazz. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed satirizes this nationwide group of cultural fear-mongers, poking fun at the conservatives who disapproved of the nation's interest in African American culture. While the Great Depression fostered a culture of fear after the joy-filled celebrations of the 1920s,

the contrast between *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo* suggests that the 1930s formed the unpalatable middle of a freedom-fear-freedom sandwich that completed in the 1960s with an even more explosive sexual revolution and battle for freedom.

Though neither the 1920s nor the 60s were eras of perfect freedom, and their cultural innovations always inspired backlash, both decades saw social groups take important steps in the direction of freedom. In the 1920s, many of these changes concerned sexuality. Harlem, with its working-class sexually liberated Blacks, many reveling in a new freedom from small-town values made possible by their recent relocation to a newly born and diverse community of immigrants from across the Caribbean and American South, was very much in the public eye. Like the American expatriate writers who reinvented themselves and experienced sexual liberation in Paris during the 1920s, recent migrants to Harlem were able to do relatively the same thing. The society as a whole began to experience a shift in values. Flappers changed the way women expressed their gender. Clothing became more boyish and playful. Standards concerning intercourse and intimate behavior changed as well—with the advent of petting parties and companionate marriages, 'Victorian' and 'Puritan' became synonymous with 'stuffy' and 'outdated.' Moving forward forty years, the large-scale sexual revolution of the 1960s and 70s saw a steady incline in "premarital sex …, in step with the growth of cities and the car culture and the decline in parental control" (Angler). The Food and Drug Administration's approval of the birth control pill in 1960 inspired more open discussion and exercising of sexual freedoms and women's rights. Other countercultural groups also began to be louder in their disagreement with the status quo of remaining restrictive elements on individual freedom. The Civil Rights movement, the Black Power and Black Arts movements, and the Stonewall riots were begun by groups that were finally fed

up with the culture of fear and shame. Many of these rebels realized that to quietly adhere to societal norms and plead for freedoms was actually an effect of living in fear. They rose up to demand the rights they deserved, rather than simply ask for them. This larger context surrounding Reed allowed him to take many more liberties with *Mumbo Jumbo* than Wright could have in the late 1930s. Not only was Reed able to write an uncensored novel which celebrated sexuality rather than hiding it, he also was able to satirize the oppressors (as opposed to Wright, who made his point using less humorous means). *Mumbo Jumbo* was both an effect and a part of the shift toward more liberating values. Drawing on both the 1920s and the 1960s, Reed was influenced by both eras' fights for freedom of expression, weaving them together in *Mumbo Jumbo* to create a much more positive picture of sexuality than is found in *Native Son*.

To understand what *Mumbo Jumbo* is saying about history, one must take both the 1920s and the 1960s into account, as both contexts are implicit and explicit within the text and subtext of the novel. For example, Reed satirizes the 1920s conservatives' disapproval of the new 'loose' sexual ideas through the negative reactions to Jes Grew's sensual dancing, similar to the conservatives' response to the wild and free dancing of the 1960s. The 1920s ushered in a 'dance craze' as the nation was seized with a desire to learn African American dances such as the Charleston and the black bottom. The older, more conservative generation believed the dances to be highly inappropriate. *Mumbo Jumbo* extensively covers this outrage against dancing in the 1920s: "The kids want to dance belly to belly and cheek to cheek while their elders are supporting legislation that would prohibit them from dancing closer than 9 inches" (Reed 21). All the young people wish to dance, but "their elders declaim they cease and desist from this lascivious 'sinful' Bunny-Hugging, this suggestive

bumping and grinding, this wild abandoned spooning" (22). Newspaper clippings from the era validate these accounts. In one issue of the *Eugene Guard*, a police chief issued an order "barring the Charleston dance from public dance halls in Oakland" (4). The dance was called "indecent" due to its quick pace and tendency to show off one's knees ("Oakland" 4). Though many praised dancing's exercise benefits, there were still others who looked down upon such vigorous movement, protesting that it destroyed the floors in dance halls. Another popular dance, the black bottom, was equally decried, typically for racist reasons: "The Hiba, ritualistic dance of the Voodoo man, … has the same squatting posture that is characteristic of the 'Black Bottom'" ("Jazzing" 24).

Page from *The Morning Call* depicting parallels between the black bottom and "ritualistic dance" ("Jazzing" 24)

Regardless of the backlash, these dances grew in popularity. The obsession with African American culture, in spite of its progressive views on sexuality, continued throughout the 1920s. Jazz, blues, and other musical forms migrated into white American culture. Reed captures the public's elevated curiosity in *Mumbo Jumbo*, specifically pointing to the freedoms found in the Black forms of expression.

The African Americans in the novel have pride in their culture, a pride they would not have in a society dominated by fear. Their artists are what give Jes Grew its fuel: "Ragtime. Jazz. Blues. The new thang … Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, your poets, your painters, your musicians" (Reed 152). Reed satirizes the white conservatives who pushed back against the movement. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, they are only Atonists—descendants of Egyptian god Set, who "is also the deity of the modern clerk, always tabulating, and perhaps invented taxes" (162). Freedom, however, is found in the African American HooDoo religion, which can trace its roots back to Osiris and practices fertility rites through intercourse and vigorous dancing for enjoyment.[5] In ancient Egypt, under Osiris, the people "were eating good, the crops were abundant, [and] things were going smoothly" (Reed 163). Peace and pleasure were plentiful. Through these associations, Reed implies that freedom is to be found in sensual dancing, specifically using African American forms. Set, on the other hand, is the opposite of a role model. His stiff movements make him the laughingstock of Egypt. The Atonists follow his lead, protesting against dancing and enjoying life. But no, the African Americans in *Mumbo Jumbo* are quite happy living without Set's fear. They prefer to dance.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed celebrates the more liberal sexual attitudes embodied in the dancing, music, and arts of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1920s Harlem, the Black heart of New York, openly expressing one's sexuality—even if it was not heterosexual or

cisgender—became acceptable as it had never been before in America (with the possible exception of late teens Greenwich Village). While there was always pushback against new sexual liberties, the Harlem Renaissance created a more safe and open space for expression (Russell 102). As a result, a great deal of the Harlem Renaissance's art and music was produced by LGBT individuals. Thaddeus Russell writes that "the writers Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Augustus Granville Dill; the visual artists Richmond Barthe and Bruce Nugent; and the composer Porter Grainger" were all on the "impressive roster of prominent figures in the Harlem Renaissance who were homosexual or bisexual" (102). Additionally, the lower, working-class Black Americans were "stunningly open about their homosexuality and created what may have been the most liberated public space in U.S. history" (Russell 102). Harlem hosted multiple gay and lesbian bars, speakeasies, and nightclubs. Performers like Gladys Bentley, a cross-dressing lesbian, would regularly make suggestive and even openly sexual comments from the stage. Russell's article "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality" describes some of the songs featured in Harlem clubs and bars.

> [M]any blues songs acknowledged homosexual proclivities, though … even songs that were heterosexual were rarely heteronormative. Records such as … "Kitchen Man" [1929], "I Got the Best Jelly Roll in Town" [1930], "Tight Like That" [1928], and "Empty Bed Blues" [1928] celebrated the purely physical pleasures of sex without reference to romance, monogamy, or responsibility. (Russell 121)

Other popular Harlem locations hosted drag kings and queens. The Hamilton Lodge, one such place, held drag balls since as early as the 1870s. The Hamilton Drag balls "featured hundreds of drag performers, most of whom were young, working-class black men and

women, and … attracted thousands of spectators" (Russell 103). In fact, many of the drag kings and queens could even be found in drag on the streets. The Blacks of Harlem celebrated their sexualities, out in the open and unashamed. Whether they identified as LGBT or simply liked to have a good time, they created spaces where they could freely express themselves and their sexual choices without judgement. While Reed's novel does not explicitly reference the non-normative sexualities that flourished during the Harlem Renaissance, it certainly reflects America's sexualized curiosity about African American culture in the 1920s. Reed criticizes and pokes fun at those who would oppress freedom of expression, both during the 1920s and the 1960s, and he does this particularly through his attention to the Black expression of sexuality through dancing.

Beyond the Harlem Renaissance, American culture in the 1920s experienced a change in attitudes toward sexual relationships and sexuality. "Modesty, reticence, and chivalry were going out of style" and the more lenient sexual relations of the 1920s were 'in'"—no one wanted to be considered 'Victorian' or 'Puritan' (Allen 112). Petting parties became popular events for upper-class whites. During these events, couples explored each other's bodies through kissing, touching, and necking or 'heavy petting'—and not necessarily in a secluded space. Typically, only young people enjoyed these activities; however, Allen writes that the appeal soon spread to other ages as "men of affairs and women with half-grown children had their little taste of raw sex" (116). Automobiles also changed the setting of young peoples' relationships. Previously, a romantically interested man would visit a woman in her home, chaperoned by her family. The auto transformed that courtship space into a way for couples to be together, alone, and find themselves in all sorts of sexual mischief. Young people

finally had the privacy they wanted in order to have sex. The standards for purity, previously so high, had also started to drop.

> One began to hear of young girls, intelligent and well born, who had spent week-ends with men before marriage and had told their prospective husbands everything and had not been merely forgiven, but told that there was nothing to forgive; a little "experience," these men felt, was all to the good for any girl. (Allen 116)

Complete chastity was stuffy, old, and outdated. Young people wanted to have fun with each other.

Much as the pill would revolutionize sexuality in the 1960s, freer sexual dynamics in the 1920s led to a growing acceptance of sexual relationships such as the companionate marriage. Prior to the decade, Americans liked to imagine that intercourse existed only for procreation. It was generally understood that a married couple had sex in order to have children—no other reason. The 1920s, however, popularized the idea of the 'companionate' marriage. According to Rebecca Davis' article "'Not Marriage at All, but Simple Harlotry': The Companionate Marriage Controversy," this relationship "committed to the fulfillment of each individual's emotional and sexual needs" (1140). Pliley further explains that companionate marriages "dictated that the healthiest marriages were built upon a foundation of affection, compatibility, and mutuality" (143-144). A scandalous idea at the time, it advocated for a loving relationship between two people, monogamous and heterosexual notwithstanding, rather than a marriage of convenience or social status. Many individuals who engaged in companionate marriages were young. They wanted the pleasures of socially acceptable sex (i.e., inside the boundaries of legal marriage) without the traditional relinquishment of freedoms on the woman's part or the leadership responsibility on the

man's. Companionate marriages were also not strictly for the purpose of producing children. Judge Benjamin Barr Lindsey of Colorado was an outspoken advocate for this type of union. He pointed to its benefits of helping solve the problem of population growth, as it removed the expectation of children from the equation. As a result, individuals in companionate marriages were more likely to use contraceptives. They recognized intercourse was not exclusively for procreation but also for intimate and romantic sexual fulfilment. Furthermore, in Lindsey's book *The Revolt of Modern Youth* (1925), he argued that "[p]roblems with premarital sex arose, not from human depravity, but from the limitations set by accepted codes of marital behavior" (Davis 1141). Lindsey asserted that a freer sexual partnership—not a trial marriage, but a union where both individuals had the expectation that the marriage would succeed—would bring solutions to these problems. Though many opposed the new sexual freedoms, these were certainly steps in the right direction. More and more people realized that sexual intimacy and intercourse did not have to be the stiff, rare interaction tinged with the fear of unwanted pregnancy as it was for many women. This same freedom and delight in sexuality is quite evident in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed makes it clear that the trend toward more accepted and open sexual expression is a positive one.

Mumbo Jumbo exercises this freedom and enjoyment in sexual intercourse through pleasure, ritual, and celebration, oftentimes in combination. Sexual desire and frenzy in HooDoo are not turned away, but welcomed: "When a client is handled by an especially [sexually] vigorous loa the others stand around this person and give it encouragement" (Reed 50). Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" describes the religion as "sexual, sensual and digs the old 'heathen' good good loving" (809). "Reed describes how Berbelang and Earline reunite after one of Berbelang's absences, engaging in "some furious necking" with all the passion

of separated lovers (55). Earline wakes up feeling "warm under the covers, a contentment like bathing in the rich soap, the basil leaves" (55). When she is possessed by Erzulie, a loa who manifests through sexual expression, Earline seduces a trolley driver and takes him home. The next morning, she wakes up to find him "sound asleep. Snoring. A smile on his face that people must bear when they witness the Christian's Glory" (122). The loa Erzulie's manifestation is so powerful that even the married trolley man forsakes the treat waiting for him at home—his wife and Prohibition alcohol—for the satisfaction of Earline's body. He wants her, and his desire is sated through the ritual love-making of HooDoo. Moreover, none of the people who arrive at Earline's apartment shame the trolley man for his one-night stand. They ignore his protests. PaPa LaBas reassures him, "You couldn't help yourself. If you hadn't given in to her requests she would have destroyed you" (126). There is no judgement, only a concern for Earline's well-being during her possession. This contributes to the freedom of the situation, as Earline is free to accept the loa and express her needs without fear of judgement. Sex is good, not dirty as in *Native Son*. In fact, intercourse is the only way Erzulie can be drawn out of Earline. Through an elaborate ritual involving a mysterious drink and "some mellow blues," Black Herman performs the magical "Crisis de loa" (128, 129). He kisses Earline, who "suddenly kisses him back, passionately hanging on to him as he holds her from the waist up" (129). Black Herman's voice is "husky" as he persuades the loa, who makes Earline cry out "passionately almost inaudibly Yes! Yes!…please…please feed me!" (129). The sensual scene concludes in sexual satisfaction for both parties involved. Throughout these scenes of sensuality and sexual expression, the beauty of the Black body is celebrated—for example, Earline "lies on the bed clad only in a black slip and panties" before the loa is drawn out of her (128). The pleasure and enjoyment of sexual intercourse

stand in stark contrast to *Native Son*'s fear and repression. Here, natural movement combines with religion to create a space where sexual expression is a positive experience. Intercourse in *Mumbo Jumbo* is not shameful and hidden like in *Native Son*; rather, it is consensual, and fulfills both religious and sexual needs.

Writing against the backdrop of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and early 70s, Reed celebrates this nation-wide cultural shift in 1920s America toward freedom of sexuality, especially through his focus on and celebration of the body, specifically the Black body. In the novel, the Black body is intimately—in a literal sense—connected to ritual and display. HooDoo emphasizes the beauty of the body through both pictures of genitalia and the celebration of beautiful Black women. Early in the book, PaPa LaBas informs Abdul that in Ancient Egyptian religions, "the emblems used in ritual were so bold that foreign countries burned their temples of worship and accused the participants of 'obscenity' and 'pornography'" (Reed 36). Other Egyptian HooDoo rites include agricultural celebrations danced and acted out by "a theater of fecundation generation and proliferation" (161). LaBas notes that these "processes of blooming were acted out by men and women dancers who imitated the process of fertilization" through their bodies (161). The body is on open display, paralleling the historical sexual freedoms of the 1920s and 1960s in a much more emphatic and extreme way. Reed also glorifies the beauty of Black women, Isis herself being the prime example. In her encounter with Moses, she is "dressed in a scarlet see-through gauzy gown and covered with the odor of strange perfume. … Her hair was giant blackbird feathers" (180). She has "prominent firm black breasts," and Erzulie, "her spiritual descendant,"[6] takes on some of these same sensual characteristics, evident in her possession of Earline (181, 162). In LaBas' historical narrative, Moses' mother and her friends "were appalled at the

frankness of [the HooDoo] rituals, the Pussies and Dicks on the walls as decoration" (175). This type of display is certainly explicit, but Reed celebrates it to affirm the body's beauty and importance. Apart from the efforts of the Atonists, there is no darkness, no hiding away of sexual expression. Instead, Reed celebrates the body on display, making it a thing of ritual, worship, and admiration.

Though bobbing one's hair and showing one's knees is a far cry from "Pussies and Dicks on the walls as decoration," in *Mumbo Jumbo* Reed celebrates the sexual freedom embodied throughout the 1920s by the figure of the flapper (175). The second sentence of the novel presents us with such a figure, "Zuzu, a local doo-wack-a-doo and voo-do-dee-odo fizgig.[7] A slatternly floozy" in a quivering "green, sequined dress" (3). We later see Charlotte wearing her pearls, "black-felt hat," and "black suit with flapper skirt" (51). A flapper was a woman, typically young, who bobbed her hair, wore straight, short dresses, and behaved in traditionally masculine ways—drinking, smoking, and playing cards. Flappers celebrated their bodies by prioritizing comfort and youthful enjoyment. The early 1920s saw women's skirt hems slowly climb upwards, eventually halting around the knee. Corsets went out of style as women exchanged form-fitting waists for a more boyish figure. Frederick Lewis Allen, in his famous book *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*, writes that "some of the wilder young things rolled their stockings below their knees, revealing to the shocked eyes of virtue a fleeting glance of shin-bones and knee-cap," an amount of skin which would once have been considered highly immodest but was slowly becoming more common (89). Flappers began to make decisions about their bodies based on their own feelings and opinions, rather than conforming to the strictures of society. Many chose to bob their hair "chiefly on the ground of convenience" (Allen 105). All these clothing

style changes reflected a larger cultural shift toward women's freedoms. "Women were bent on freedom—freedom to work and to play without the trammels that had bound them heretofore to lives of comparative inactivity" (Allen 108). The youthful and boyish styles were a way for women to tell the world they would make their own choices about how to dress, who to listen to, and how to conduct themselves sexually. This, of course, was shocking to many. Traditionally rigid gender roles and acceptable manners of expression were being turned on their heads. "Mere man must save the nation from destruction at the flapper's hand," urged one author in a 1922 article from the *Freepoint Journal-Standard* (Little 1). Showing shins, shoulders, or even knees scandalized the nation's conservative would-be censors. Many of the nation's pastors and reverends had choice words on the morality of flappers. The Reverend Doctor J. Frank Norris, of New York, wrote one newspaper with the following condemnation:

> Every great war has been traced to the depravity of women and they never were as bad as they are today. When a woman shows her knees, you can see the finish of her and that of the nation as well. … Jezebel was the worst woman in the world. … The last thing that she did before she died was to paint her face, and then the dogs ate her. ("Take Your Choice")

Though many considered the trend a decline in morality, others endorsed it. Dr. Lee A. Stone of the Chicago Health Department, for example, offered his support regarding the new expressions of gender. "The flapper is a female who has lived down thousands of years of hypocrisy and now has become what for ages she has most desired to be—a human being," he states in the New York *Daily News*; "[flapperism] is the resumption of the original status of mankind" ("Flapper Retorts"). This shift in gender expression—away from maturely

feminine fashions and attitudes and toward the more youthful and playful—was one facet of the nation's change in values regarding sexuality and sexual expression. Ideals of female expression (and, by extension, what men grew to consider attractive) evolved and changed over the 1920s, with a trend toward more lenient expressions of gender. Women's rights and the advent of the flapper helped women find pride and confidence in their bodies. Freedom of expression through natural movement was finally a reality—for the women who ditched their corsets, this freedom of movement became literal. Forty years later, with the advent of the pill and the miniskirt, the sexual revolution of the 1960s shifted the way society viewed sexuality once again. Reed combines both decades and the new values they advocated through the celebration of the body in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

iv

Forty years after the 1920s, the 1960s welcomed a new flowering of civil and sexual rights, which Reed weaves into the novel through connecting the two eras. While *Mumbo Jumbo*'s main content covers the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance, it was written soon after the important events of the 1960s. Influences of the latter decade clearly surface in the novel. Perhaps *the* most important development in the 1950s and 60s was the Civil Rights movement and the African American fight for freedom. In 1954, the famous Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that the segregation of schools was unconstitutional. A second case a year later ordered that schools carry out desegregation "with all deliberate speed" (qtd. in Bankston). Though many scholars suggest that the Civil Rights movement began long before *Brown*, there can be no denying that the case was an important and vital step in the process. In *The Civil Rights Movement*, Brian Dierenfield states that "*Brown* meant that blacks would no longer wait for justice from the courts; they would demand it

themselves, now that the law was on their side" (28). Soon Eisenhower signed the first civil rights legislation passed since Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, to protect African American voting rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 followed, ending a century of Jim Crow laws and outlawing discrimination based on race, color, national origin, religion, and sex. 1965 brought the Voting Rights Act, and 1968, the Fair Housing Act. However, toward the end of the 1960s into the 1970s following the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, African Americans began to wonder—now what? What were the next steps?

The next steps, as it turned out, involved a shift in perspective regarding the fight for rights. Begun in the 1960s and inspired by Malcolm X, the Black Power movement was founded as a reaction to the nonviolent protesting methods used by MLK's followers, which pandered to the expectations of white society. In this way, Black Americans were able to foster a sense of pride in their Blackness, a feeling which Reed captures well in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Though the phrase 'Black power' had been used prior to the movement's formation, it gained traction through the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Stokely Carmichael. Carmichael "rejected King's approach altogether as cringingly deferential to whites. … 'We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin.' What we gonna start saying now is "Black power!"'" (Dierenfield 126). Members of the Black Power movement shared the same sentiments as Carmichael. They believed it was time to take the respect owed to their people. They began finding their identities in their Blackness—defining themselves not by their relationship to white society, but in a more positive and self-focused way. Black Power was less concerned with integrating into white society, and more concerned with being self-sufficient through starting their own institutions and programs.

Black Power was about being proud to be an African American. This was obviously very different than previous civil rights protests. As Robert F. Williams writes, "We've used [nonviolent] tactics; we've used all tactics. But we also believe that any struggle for liberation should be a flexible struggle. We shouldn't take the attitude that one method alone is the way to liberation" (158). However, Black Power's attitudes of demanding, rather than asking, were effective.

Influenced by leaders such as Malcolm X, African Americans—particularly those in the lower classes—began to lift each other up, rather than relying on white charity to do so. Whereas "[t]he leaders of the civil rights movement called for increased help from white people[,] Malcolm X spoke contrarily of the need for at least a sense of sufficiency and self-respect" (N. Wright 105). Instead of earning rights by becoming what white people wanted African Americans to be, Malcolm "spoke … of the need for racial self-awareness and for increased pride in blackness" (N. Wright 105). Jeffrey Ogbar, in his book *Black Power*, attributes Malcolm's appeal to the more 'ordinary' African American to his social status.

> To many, the Muslim leader was a true black man. He was upright, strong, defiant of white supremacy, and intelligent. He was not a privileged Ph.D. from a middle-class background who insisted that true manhood (and womanhood) meant allowing whites to beat, maim, and attack black people. (Ogbar 21)

Malcolm X's message of Black Power appealed to many who were tired of the traditional doormat techniques of protest. He was a more relatable character, one to whom they could connect with on a personal level, and he had a measure of disconnect from white power structures. Malcolm X and the Black Power movement acknowledged the fear inherent in requesting rights. The movement recognized that nonviolent protests were subconscious

submissions to the power white society held over African Americans. In their own way, they turned the tables on the white people: by *asking* for rights, Blacks implied that white people had the choice to deny them; by *taking* what they deserved, they removed the option for society to refuse. In doing so, they celebrated their identities as African Americans, having pride in their Blackness. They recaptured their bodily autonomy, taking back the ability and rights to do what they wanted—a goal which made the rest of society feel threatened. These Black pride sentiments also carried over into the arts, as seen through *Mumbo Jumbo*'s wild and uniquely African American writing and Afrocentric reimagining of world history.

Mumbo Jumbo exemplifies the spirit and goals of the Black Arts movement that gave aesthetic expression to the Black Power movement at the end of the 1960s. Many have noted that the Black Arts movement was almost a kind of second Harlem Renaissance, with its focus on Jazz and distinctly African forms. Amiri Baraka, largely considered one of the founders of Black Arts, states that the movement was formed because "we wanted an art that was revolutionary. We wanted a Malcolm art, a by-any-means-necessary poetry. A Ballot or Bullet verse. We wanted ultimately to create a poetry, a literature, a dance, a theater, a painting that would help bring revolution!" (29) The Black Arts movement combined poetry, writing, religion, and music in a way which celebrated Blackness. Black Arts particularly took cues from jazz and blues, an effect obvious in the joyously jazz-like writing style of *Mumbo Jumbo*. In "The Black Arts Movement," Baraka writes that African Americans "wanted [Black Art] to express our lives and history, our needs and desires. Our will and our passion. Our self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense" (28). The movement encouraged Black artists to move away from the traditional white manners of expression and create new ones centered in Blackness. Religion (such as Reed's tradition of HooDoo) and

history took prominent places in Black Arts. Due to its encouragement of Black self-sufficiency (and therefore nationalism) and Black Power, the concept of Black Arts terrified much of white society. The movement experienced significant pushback against its unique forms and uniting power. Reed echoes some of these same sentiments in *Mumbo Jumbo* with the Atonists' effort to stop the spread of Jes Grew. Dancing was freedom of sexual expression for both the characters in the novel and the real-life individuals in the 1920s. Through the act of movement, the Black body is both freed and celebrated. Reed ties these concepts into Black pride, using the *Mu'tafikah* to portray its subscribers' more unafraid and aggressive methods.

In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed uses the fictional *Mu'tafikah* to paint a broad picture of the confidence in Black pride, focusing on Black Power's strategies to fight fear by recapturing power. The movement's influences on Reed's novel are quite clear. For example, Reed includes a photo of a Black Power protest in *Mumbo Jumbo*:

The *Mu'tafikah*, "art-nappers" described by Reed as the "bohemians of the 1920s Manhattan," act out many of the same sentiments held by the Black Power movement (Reed 15). They wage a behind-the-scenes war against the Atonists, who keep the stolen art of other cultures in their museums. The Atonists' reason for keeping these stolen works is that "if these treasures got into the 'wrong hands' (the countries from which they were stolen) there would be renewed enthusiasms for the Ikons of the aesthetically victimized civilizations"—

something they could not control (15). The Atonists' goal is to control and repress others, and they use the art to this end. However, the *Mu'tafikah* begin "looting the museums shipping the plunder back to where it came from" (15). They re-steal the stolen art and return it to the cultures where it belongs. Berbelang, speaking to a colleague, presents a religious angle on the *Mu'tafikah*'s actions. He wants to "see the gods return and the spirits aroused" as the objects go home to their proper places, inspiring rebellion (88). They even manage to take a four and a half ton Olmec head and return it to its proper culture. The *Mu'tafikah* take what they want instead of asking politely. They acknowledge that part of Black Power and Black pride is fighting against forms of oppression which may have been previously ignored in favor of peace—and to do this they must take back the art that represents their cultural identity and power. They have a greater goal than simply stealing for the sake of stealing. Their motives are to bring liberation and "renewed enthusiasms for the … aesthetically victimized civilizations" (Reed 15). The *Mu'tafikah* understand that though their methods may be unsavory to some, the end result is necessary. They recognize that the Atonists retain control over other cultures by tauntingly displaying their artworks in European museums, and the *Mu'tafikah* know that returning the art is a vital step toward freedom. Central Americans and other marginalized groups would never have received their rightful property without the works of the *Mu'tafikah*. The art-nappers take what the Atonists had stolen without asking for permission. In this way, the *Mu'tafikah* exemplify the goals of the Black Power movement and the more aggressive protests of the day. The *Mu'tafikah* steal back the art from European museums because asking for the art, like asking for freedoms, would be an expression of fear, a legitimation of its colonial theft by whites, and an acknowledgement of whites' power.

A second way Reed asserts freedom and Black pride is through the more general use of dance, using this broader concept to argue for the importance of affirming the Black body and Black sexuality in the 1960s and early 70s. Reed shrinks this larger struggle for affirmation down to a more specific area: dancing. Those who have caught Jes Grew—and some individuals who just like to have a good time—want to express themselves through exciting and enjoyable movement. They want to "do the Charleston the Texas Tommy and other anonymously created symptoms of Jes Grew" (Reed 64). In the novel, the Atonist Order tries to restrict and repress the dance epidemic. It is too strange, too different, too frightening. The Atonist Creed reveals an extra dimension to their hate of dancing.

Look at them! Just look at them!
throwing their hips this way, that
way while I, my muscles, stone,
the marrow of my spine, plaster, my
back supported by decorated paper,
stand here as goofy as a Dumb Dora.
Lord, if I can't dance, No one shall. (65)

Here, Reed reveals that the Atonists' vendetta against dancing is due to their own inability to move in authentic and aesthetic ways. Set, the predecessor for the Atonists, only embarrasses himself when he tries to dance, and soon "Set can't dance became the cry" throughout Egypt (163). The stereotype that 'the white boy can't dance,' however, is only the surface of the problem. The true root is that Atonists resist dancing because it brings freedom, and to them, fear is much more comfortable. Their ways of living are predictable, and they want to force everyone into the same box they live in. The Atonists try to restrict the body and sexuality. In

the end, however, those who are free and dance are triumphant. Jes Grew lives on, even without a text—though Reed, breaking the fourth wall, uses *Mumbo Jumbo* as a kind of new text for the dance epidemic. The contagious Jes Grew acts as a means of expression which affirms the Black body and sexuality through movement. By breaking out of the constraints the Atonists try to impose, the Black characters act out their sexuality and freedoms. They dance, and through their dancing, Reed celebrates Blackness. During the last scene occurring in the 1920s, PaPa LaBas reassures Earline, saying "They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper. … A future generation of young artists will [create a new text]" (204). The fight will continue; there will always be those who resist, but freedom of expression and the identity found in Blackness wins in the end. Reed joins this theme within the novel to even more historical context through other countercultural groups.

Mumbo Jumbo's affirmation of the body and sexual freedom can be linked as well to the newly militant LGBT community at the end of the 1960s. As real-life actors in the struggle for bodily autonomy and freedom of sexual expression, the LGBT community also began to fight for pride, respect, and their freedom in the 1960s and early 70s, which Reed connects to the theme of fighting for expression. The community had previously taken a stance similar to that of MLK, aiming to gain respect from the public by not inciting violence. The events of Stonewall, however, changed that approach. The riots began on Saturday, June 28th, 1969, and continued for several days as "the first act of lesbian and gay resistance ever" raged on (Hall 546). According to Steven Hall's article "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," "beer cans and bottles were 'heaved at the windows and a rain of coins descended on the cops'" (545). The days following were half-block party, half-riot as allies, LGBT folk, and dissenters rebelled. Stonewall changed the way that the

LGBT community approached activism. Like the Black Power movement, the community began to *demand* rights, rather than ask politely. One woman in the crowd of a New York Mattachine meeting expressed her sentiments explicitly: "We don't want acceptance, goddamn it! We want respect!" (Duberman 211). These members of the community formed a new organization, called the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). The GLF was unafraid of being more forceful in their pursuit of rights. Like the Black Power movement, they had had enough of fear and submission. It was time to fight back. Their fight was twofold: the LGBT community wanted the same political rights as heterosexuals, and respect as human beings who chose to express their sexuality as they chose. Like Black Power, they began to create their own spaces to express these feelings and this freedom which they deserved. Though the LGBT community was multiracial, Reed implies parallels between community and the dancers in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Both groups fight for the same end—pride in one's identity and the right to freedom of expression. The opposition, conservatives in both the novel and real life, tries to repress these goals. Through fighting back, these groups work to regain and ultimately celebrate their bodies and sexuality. As Reed implies through *Mumbo Jumbo*, the Atonists will always try to fight the freedom with fear, but through freedom comes joy and celebration in one's identity.

By the same token, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed celebrates women's rights, women's freedom of expression, and women—specifically Black women—who are confident in their sensuality and beauty. For example, PaPa LaBas and the translator Abdul debate at a party over women's clothing. Abdul disapproves of the flappers who sensually show off their bodies. He calls them "[t]ricks" and "[s]luts," "[s]winging their asses nasty" (Reed 36). LaBas, on the other hand, suggests, "Maybe they felt that they should decide themselves

what was best for them to wear, Abdul. It wasn't any of your business" (36). This statement about a woman's right to choose her own sexual and gender expression ties to both the 1920s and the 1960s. In fact, LaBas goes on to say that the discussion surrounding sexual expression has been going on for centuries, dating back to "the ancient Egyptian religions" whose manners of worship were "so bold that foreign countries burned their temples of worship and accused the participants of 'obscenity' and 'pornography'" (36). In another instance, Earline, possessed by the loa Erzulie, seduces a trolley driver. As she moves to depart the trolley, she "walks, swinging her hips, down the isle" (120). Reed writes that after her display, "she eases closer to [the driver] and through her skirt he could feel her body" (121). Earline walks "serpentine and her hips move tantalizingly under the thin, white short dress" (51). Though some scholars have accused Reed of sexism and objectification in sections like these, it is important to look at the context surrounding them. Earline's very forward advances are not presented in a negative light in this scene. She is simply following the directions of the loa. Her actions are not her own, and she is not blamed for them; in Reed's novel, one should not be blamed for such open expression of sexual desire. Additionally, the loa can only be released through sexual intercourse between two consenting individuals—the "Crisis de loa" ritual performed by Black Herman (129). There is no shame or condemnation in her beauty and confident sexuality; instead, it is celebrated. Within the novel's historical context, Reed both reflects the changing societal values of the 1960s and gives a nostalgic nod to the celebration of sexuality during the 1920s. As Alan Petigny writes of such changes in American sexual attitudes during the 1960s, "Perhaps these changes were attributable to the burgeoning population of college students, or an increasingly sexualized

popular culture, or growing concerns over the ramifications of the Pill, or the steadily rising level of premarital sexual behavior; but whatever the reasons, attitudes were changing" (71).

Through this discussion of women's rights and sexuality, *Mumbo Jumbo* reflects the advent of 'the pill,' or oral contraceptives, in the 1960s, which utterly changed the way women expressed their sexuality—permanently. As many authors note, the invention of the pill did not mean that all women could finally begin taking lovers. It brought the topic of contraceptives and sexual rights to the forefront of the conversation once more. As with any other sexually charged topic, there were immediately moral objections. Family planning was still a stigmatized subject. It was uncomfortably close to the concept of eugenics, an issue which was on the minds of many due to growing concerns around overpopulation. Many were concerned that the pill would also cause a rise in premarital sex. In "Prescribing the Pill: Politics, Culture, and the Sexual Revolution in America's Heartland," Beth Bailey notes that the magazines of the day give an accurate picture of the conversation around the pill.

> Mass-circulation magazines and professional journals would not have devoted so much space to debates over pre-marital sex if there was no audience for them. And it is clear from these articles that significant and relevant portions of the U.S. population, in the mid-to-late 1960s, still strongly disapproved of pre-marital sex. (Bailey 835)

Conservatives found the ease of mind granted by the pill to be a moral problem. The general sentiment was that the threat of pregnancy had previously held back the floodgates on premarital sex. However, in the case of Lawrence, Kansas, women changed the conversation from a question of morality to a question of "women, rights, and freedom" in the early 1970s (Bailey 840). Safe and protected sex *was* a freedom, the women of Lawrence argued in 1972,

one which the University of Kansas was withholding by not providing women with the proper care. Unmarried women who wanted any reproductive procedure or care—whether a pap smear, birth control, or a normal check-up—were forced to listen to a lecture on the morality of their actions. One woman argued that the benefits of the pill outweighed any opposing arguments. She wrote, "I've seen too many girls on campus totally disregard school for several weeks as they suffer anxiety over a missed menstrual period. … If a girl takes one chance a year, that's enough to warrant taking the pill" (Bailey 836). Oral contraceptives certainly inspired debates around morality and reproductive freedoms, but they also were an important step in the process toward sexual freedom. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, these topics are brought up in obvious ways through the characters' own opinions and discussions. The novel contains multiple women, specifically Black women, who are confident in their sexualities. They enjoy their bodies through sensual clothing and movement. This type of open sexual expression would probably not have been discussed in such a positive light before the 1960s. Reed uses women's rights as yet another example of the historical picture surrounding *Mumbo Jumbo* bleeding through the novel's themes. He intertwines the current events and topics of the day with the fictional progress of the novel, presenting a final picture of free and joyful sexuality.

v

Of course, one cannot ignore certain problematizing aspects of the larger historical context. *Native Son* takes place in the redlined Chicago of the 1930s, while *Mumbo Jumbo* is set in the much less downtrodden Harlem of the 1920s. Additionally, no historical period was perfect, and African Americans have never experienced a period free from racism. In 1920s Harlem, racism still flourished. For example, at the Cotton Club, a popular nightclub, African

Americans performed exaggerated stereotypes to entertain white patrons. Black patrons were not welcome. The 1920s also saw peek membership in the Ku Klux Klan. As Reed understands, throughout the 1920s, conservatives constantly fought to stifle any type of freedom of expression, and such people remained a force in 1972, and continue to be a force to this day. On the other hand, no historical era was without hope either. There were people like Max in *Native Son*, ridiculed by others, who defended and fought for the rights of African Americans during the 1930s. Viewing the 1920s, 30s, and 60s through these novels and the lens of sexual expression reveals just how different these decades truly were. As seen through *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo*, sexuality and sexual expression have a direct relationship with historical circumstances. During severely oppressive periods, sexual expression is shaped by fear; in more liberal and free situations, it is much more positive and celebratory.

In *Native Son*, fear distorts Bigger's sexual expression. It is Bigger's fear which presses him to make decisions, as though he is not truly the one choosing his life path. It has already been chosen for him. Nothing Bigger says or does, including in his sex life, truly matters—white people will always assume and expect certain behaviors from him. In Bigger's life, fear limits freedom, and a lack of freedom produces fear. The absence of freedom so evident in the 1930s creates a vacuum for individual movement and expression. Nothing Bigger does is authentic. Everywhere he goes, he is under the white gaze. This atmosphere controls even the most intimate part of his life, his sexuality. Sex becomes merely a form of escapism for Bigger. He uses Bessie's body as if it had no more value than a lifeless doll. He masturbates in a public theater, sexually assaults Mary, who is too drunk to consent, and rapes Bessie. Throughout the novel, his fear drives and determines his actions.

Bigger's life story has already been written for him. Under the white gaze, he is lazy, violent, a criminal, a rapist, an animal. White society looks at him and sees a lazy young Black man. After Mary's murder, he becomes an animal and a rapist in their eyes even without any solid proof. In each sexual scene, multiple factors come together in the perfect storm: historical oppression, repressive societal values, racial biases, the white gaze, and above all, fear. Bigger is restrained, chained, and dictated by the fear which permeates his world.

Going forward or backward several decades to the 1920s and 60s, *Mumbo Jumbo* celebrate sexuality rather than hiding it, allowing the characters to experience joyful and positive sexual encounters in freedom. In Reed's novel, the body is put on display as part of ritualistic celebrations. This is only possible in a space where there is freedom. Freedom allows authentic movement, of which the dancing in *Mumbo Jumbo* is a prime example. The Black groups in *Mumbo Jumbo* are not afraid. The Atonists do not scare them. They are free––free to express themselves, free to dance, free to have sex, free to celebrate the Black body. In HooDoo, dancing and the body are intertwined with worship and ritual. They are not hidden as in *Native Son*. The body in *Mumbo Jumbo* is out in the open, on display through phallic and yonic imagery. It is made to be moved. The characters follow their desires and take pleasure in them, catching Jes Grew and grooving along to it. Black Herman has absolutely no qualms about intercourse with Earline (and Erzulie) in a combined act of sexual expression and worship. Isis, the most beautiful Black woman in all of time, expresses her sexuality through religion. Pleasure in *Mumbo Jumbo* is positive, a thing to be admired and chased. The characters' movements are authentic. Their self- and sexual expression are not affected by the disapproving Atonists. Unlike Bigger, the characters do not live in fear. Their lives have not been written out for them. On the contrary, Jes Grew is unpredictable; its

path across the U.S. cannot be pre-written. It cannot be controlled by the Atonists. As a result, the novel contains tones of enjoyment, fun, and hopefulness—and, like jazz music, a bit of spontaneity. Just as *Native Son* is a product of its culture, so also is *Mumbo Jumbo*. The larger societal values of the 1920s and the 1960s are seamlessly woven together in *Mumbo Jumbo*, uniting under a common theme: freedom.

The binary of freedom and fear reveals itself in *Native Son* and *Mumbo Jumbo* in a brand new way. Ultimately, its effects all boil down to power and control. *Native Son* illustrates how fear is the vacuum of freedom; how such a stifling existence is no existence at all, but more closely resembles a puppet show. Fear is also submission to those in power. As a type of everyman in Wright's novel, Bigger acts on the same fear that the whole African American community feels in the 1930s. He knows that white society has control over him. He knows that the eyes of the white culture dictate and interpret every move he makes. He is told where to live, where to work and go to school, and what kind of a man he is. White society and the press tell Bigger exactly what he did to Mary, regardless of its actual truth. His sex life is just as cramped and dictated as his public life. A rebellion against this exact fear was what inspired the Black Power movement's shift toward Black pride and confidence in their identities apart from white society. By making the decision to take what they deserve, they broke free of the power the oppressive groups held over them. Similarly, the *Mu'tafikah* in *Mumbo Jumbo* steal art because they know that Europeans will not give it willingly. The dancers and the practitioners of Hoodoo are able to express themselves through authentic movement because those who are watching no longer have the power to influence choices. As an example of the effects of living in fear, Reed makes it easy for the reader to poke fun at the Atonists. All their actions are stiff and artificial, and they are outraged over Jes Grew, a

completely harmless dance. With such old-fashioned, traditional concerns, is there truly any reason why their opinion would matter? The answer, of course, is no, and so the African American characters continue in freedom to dance and practice the sexual rituals of HooDoo. The Atonists have no power over them.

Freedom, fear, sexuality, sexual expression, power, political and social context—every factor affects the characters in the novels. Real life, however, bleeds into fiction. Those who were actually living during these decades of sexual freedom and repression were just as free or repressed as the characters in the novels. Thus, these conclusions have relevance for every time period. As time goes on, there will still be groups like the Atonists who try to stifle freedom. This struggle between freedom (pleasure) and fear (repression) is as old as time. PaPa LaBas' statement to Abdul proves as much. The themes discussed in both these novels, both separately and in conjunction, continue to have application in current events. These types of battles, and the discussions surrounding them, rage onward. The responsibility falls on the readers, the observers, and the analyzers to continue the conversation.

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[1] Here and in the rest of this paper, I use the word 'girl' in reference to Bessie for two reasons. First, because Bigger himself thinks of her as his 'girl.' Second, because the status implied is something under what we might normally call a 'girlfriend.' 'Girlfriend' may refer to a person in a casual or serious dating relationship, one where there is emotional connection often complimented by sexual connection. The title 'girl' removes the 'friend' aspect of this relationship, decreasing it to only a sexual one. (Max goes into some detail about their relationship on pages 401-402). Bigger and Bessie are not emotionally connected to each other; they are in a symbiotic relationship where they both receive what they want—sex and alcohol, respectively—with none of the emotional or spiritual commitment of a dating relationship. This, of course, ties into my argument that Bessie is (to some extent) nothing more than a sex doll to Bigger.

[2] Loosely, I use sexuality to refer to one's status as a sexual being in addition to one's particular sexual desires, while sexual expression refers to how one acts as a result.

[3] To some extent, Mary has also already been sexualized in Bigger's mind by the earlier newsreel. He sees "images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach" (R. Wright 31). Among this setting is Mary. The camera briefly focuses on her face as she stands with Jan, but soon pans to multiple shots of "only the girl's legs," followed by "two pairs of legs standing close together … [T]he girl's legs strained upward until only the tips of her toes touched the sand" (R. Wright 32). The movie, *Trader Horn*, parallels Mary's sexualization through its theme of the 'white goddess' figure. In both, a white woman is presented as an object of sexual desire—though the desire is different in the newsreel and the movie—and the juxtaposition of these two visuals is quite intentional. Though it may be unconscious in Bigger's head, the news

reel and *Trader Horn* sexualize Mary in his mind, adding to the plethora of factors eventually causing him to desire her body.

[4] Tamiko Fiona Nimura makes some interesting points about *Mumbo Jumbo*'s presentation of time in her article "'Time is Not a River:' The Implications of *Mumbo Jumbo*'s Pendulum Chronology for Coalition Politics." She argues that through the novel's representation of the flow of time, "Reed is able to comment on his authorial 'present,' the artists involved with the Black Aesthetic. Thus, as Abdul Hamid prophesies about the 'future,' this anachronism triggers a recognition about the 1960s/1970s. … Other critics have suggested that these are two major strategies that Reed uses throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*: the novel's 'juxtaposition' of the 1920s and the 1960 or the anachronistic references to the 1960s during a novel ostensibly set during the 1920s. The OED definition here is 'the attribution of a custom, event, etc. to a period to which it does not belong.' Yet 'belonging' or 'wrong' periods of time signify differently in the continuum of a pendulum chronology. Anachronisms are not 'wrongly' placed but deliberately placed. (93)

[5] "Osiris was called the Bull by the Egyptians" (Reed 163). In his "Partial Bibliography," Reed cites Jack Conrad's *The Horn and the Sword: The History of the Bull as Symbol of Power and Fertility*.

[6] In Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto," he connects Isis and Erzulie through (assumably) yonic implications: "When our theoretician Zora Neale Hurston asked a Mambo (a female priestess in the Haitian VooDoo) a definition of VooDoo the Mambo lifted her skirts and exhibited her Erzulie Seal, her Isis seal" (809).

[7] Doo-wack-a-doo and voo-do-dee-odo are nonsense phrases referring to refrains and rhythms in jazz music. A fizgig is, according to a 1928 article in *The Los Angeles Times*, "a flirty flapper" (4).