

## Sexed-Up and Dumbed-Down: Black Southern Men in James McBride's *Miracle at St. Anna*

By: [Tara T. Green](#)

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### **Abstract:**

James McBride's *Miracle at St. Anna* provides a fictional account of black World War II soldiers who find themselves stranded in an Italian village. McBride relies on a violent and foreign setting to interrogate a black experience. Here, Green explores McBride's depiction of Black Southern men in the novel.

**Keywords:** Literary criticism | Race relations | African Americans | Black Culture | Racial discrimination

### **Article:**

James McBride, author of the New York Times best-selling novel, *Miracle at St. Anna*, provides a fictional account of black World War Two soldiers who find themselves stranded in an Italian village. In his commentary about what inspired the novel's premise, McBride credits his step-uncle's statement to him as a child: "Boy . . . back in the war, the Italians, they loved us! And the French . . . oh, la, la! We was kings over there!" (259). One has to wonder what other stories McBride may have heard from his veteran step-uncle, in particular ones where his life may have been in danger, but what McBride recalls is a sense that the black man became a "king" to the Italians and French. Significantly, what influences McBride is his uncle's memory of having been treated better and differently by people who looked like his American oppressors, but were, in fact, as foreign to him as he was to them. While it is not clear where his step-uncle was reared, McBride's novel focuses on three African American men from the South and one man of African descent from San Juan. My intent here is to discuss McBride's representations of foreign or alien black Southern men.

McBride relies on a violent and foreign setting to interrogate a black experience. Melvin Dixon observes, "Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from mainstream culture

and segregated in negative environments, have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture and identity can flourish apart from marginal, prescribed 'place'" (2). McBride's novel shows the tension involved with balancing the challenges of presenting both alienation in segregated environments and flourishing black culture in alternative landscapes. Black culture and identity do not flourish in McBride's alternative landscape of Italy. While McBride presents black men of diverse backgrounds - from America and San Juan - he also presents curiously stereotypical depictions of the African American male characters in the novel. The novel focuses on four men - Bishop, Train, Stamps, and Hector - who are separated from their unit during a battle in Italy. They find their way to a village, but on their way one of the soldiers, Train, follows the orders of his comrade, Bishop, and goes into a barn and finds an abandoned boy. Along with the badly traumatized Italian boy, Angelo, the men move forward to the village where they meet and befriend the villagers. While there, three of the four men are killed during a German attack. Only Hector and Angelo survive. I will focus on the peculiar characterization of the three male characters that identify - with various levels of reluctance - as African American/colored/Negro and as Southerners. Both Sam Train and the man known as Bishop Cummings are uneducated Southerners. Aubrey Stamps is a college-graduate from Virginia. All three men are in the army for various reasons, but what each has in common is that they must serve a country that does not allow them to enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenship.

I build on the work of Riche Richardson's *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta*. She "examines the construal of black male Southerners as inferior and undesirable models of black masculinity within such racial hierarchies based on geography" emerge (3). Richardson argues that Uncle Tom's revisioning from the vile character of Harriet Stowe's novel to the asexual version in early plays and films, as well as the black rapist figure made popular by the film *The Birth of a Nation*, is still prevalent in film and literature. However, I want to emphasize here that the long term effect of these sexual, childlike, and rapist caricatures are also present in the works of literature written by authors of diverse ethnic backgrounds, but in the case of McBride, not of the South. After all, writes John Lowe, "to write creatively about the south may well demand some kind of Southern identity" (9).

I agree with Richardson's assertion that black Southern men continue to be seen as "alien or undesirable African American men" in the contexts of literature. Alien, as it refers to the South and people from the South, brings to mind the begrudging relationship between the North and South that came to fruition during the Civil War and has existed long past the elimination of Jim Crow laws that has relegated people of the South to be looked at as "others" or those who are not part of the norm. Of the South, Richard Wright observes, "Though the South is politically a part of America, the problem that faced her was peculiar" ("*How 'Bigger' Was Born*"). Wright compels his audience to consider how the South is "peculiar" in comparison to other parts of the country and his body of work also suggests the threats of violence that were used to control people of African descent, i.e. the lynching of young Emmet Till. Whereas during the 1930s-

1950s Wright focused on critiques of black Southerness by presenting black men who rebelled against its peculiar ways, McBride presents three black men of the 1940s, Bishop, Train, and Stamps, who communicate the undesirable. Their status is made even more apparent in the backdrop of Italy where their alienness is intimidating to some and intriguing to others.

Scholars have offered reasons for the behavior of black men that may fall into the category of peculiar or undesirable. Herman Sanders explains that black men have several reactions to not having access to social equality, including laughing it off, playing the clown, resigning, and rebelling (4). I would add assimilating. Whether they are crude caricatures inspired by historical perspectives of the dominant culture or they are metaphors for black masculine survival, McBride gives us three questionable characters: Bishop, a sexually charged, gambling, smooth talking black man from Louisiana; Train, a dumb giant from North Carolina; and, Stamps, a college-educated black man from Virginia (debatably the south by some people's standards) who is embarrassed by Train and Bishop. I argue that in his attempt to illuminate the black war hero, he succeeds in reviving, and to some degree revising, various aspects of the most popular alien African American male figure in popular culture - Uncle Tom (Train) and the black rapist (Bishop). Though he, too, is alien in America, Stamps attempts to resist this status by critiquing the undesirable aspects of African American Southern men, through his own self-hatred and fears. To frame my argument regarding the contemporary alien black male Southerner, I examine two issues. One is the impact that the South has had on the perspectives of black men as aliens. The second, and equally important to the first, is the impact that the South's history, as a haunted and objectionable region of the United States, has had on contemporary depictions of Southerners. To a lesser degree, I also offer an analysis of how this contemporary novel responds to earlier literary depictions of African American men. Ultimately, the success of McBride's novel and his depictions of African American Southern men compel readers to consider where the South resides in the consciousness of twenty-first century Americans.

As Richardson makes clear, the location of the South in literature is often closely related to the motivations of racialized characters. For example, how black men communicate with white men, how black men respond to the presence of white women, how white women interact with black women has much to do with the time in which the literary work is set, but there is very often a question about the presence of race(ism) and its impact on the outcome of these interactions. McBride's Southern blacks are naïve, illiterate and scared. This becomes clear in the first scene set in the South when Train recalls his first bus ride to High Point, NC and how a black "Yankee," a Buffalo Soldier from the war, "ruined it." We know that he is a "Yankee" because he is called as such by the narrator, but it is implied by his impudence. He takes a seat in the front of the segregated bus, and when the white bus driver tells him to move to the back he responds by cursing. He exits the bus in response to the Southern Negroes who strongly encourage him to leave, a consequence for making trouble.<sup>1</sup> Their fear inspires them to speak in support of the lone white driver who puts the man in his place and his place is not on the bus at all as he would rather walk than to sit with those who have not supported him. This black Yankee's presence

places him not only in opposition of the black Southern community that has alienated him and identified him as different from them ("a mooley bastard," says one), but he identifies them as different from him as well. He "glared" at them and "muttered at them in furious disgust" (7). It is not clear why these black folks felt compelled, at least three of them, to shout at the man when they could have remained silent or even whispered to the soldier to join them in the back. These Southern blacks have been sufficiently indoctrinated by their oppressors, resulting in a response that shows loyalty to whites and in opposition to any of their race who may think of themselves as deserving equal treatment. Although he is black and subject to racial conflicts in any part of the United States, the South as alien territory forces him into an existence where he is different and unwanted even among those who are America's most unwanted. His ideas about integration and freedom do not resonate with those who appear unaware of such thinking.

Train, influenced by his life's experiences in the South, becomes a World War Two soldier in Italy. His body strikes awe and fear in those, American and Italian, black and white, who see him. McBride describes him as a twenty-one year-old, illiterate, dumb, child-like man from Mt. Gilead, North Carolina.

At six foot six, 275 pounds, all muscle, with a soft-spoken charm, tender brown eyes, and deep chocolate skin that covered an innocent round face, Sam Train was everything the Army wanted in a Negro. He was big. He was kind. He followed orders. He could shoot a rifle. And, most of all, he was dumb. (8)

Train enters the novel at a disadvantage, one that marks him from his introduction into the narrative until death. He is seen from a visual point of view as a body that is needed to serve only the purpose of subservience. As a Southern black man, he is cast as not simply the perfect body for the Army, but the perfect one for survival in the South.

Otherwise, Train fears white men and what they represent. How he feels about white men wavers. While running during the German attack on his unit, he thinks that he "didn't trust his commander" because "He was from the South." He thinks further, "they must be right because they are white, or maybe not, but Train was from North Carolina and he did not know how to stand up to the white people like the coloreds from the north did. Train did not trust them either" (6). This is a loaded statement. Train's feelings about white men waver only as a result of his Southern upbringing. Consequently, his decision to run or stay is based solely on how he perceives race. Further, he stands on a belief that only northern blacks resist racism. And even they cannot be trusted. The North-South binary pervades this scene and further complicates the dumb marker that Train has been given. Train's ability to think logically and to think about anything beyond race even when he is in the throes of saving his own life casts him as incapable of thinking, so crippled is he by living in the rural South under the control of white men. Southern living, therefore, plays a role in his reaction to the violent deaths of his comrades and his decision to shoot and kill a German soldier. After Train finds the small boy and begins to suffer from mental withdrawal, he withdraws for one reason: white folks were dying. He reasons,

"They knew everything. He trusted them. Now they were dying too" (69). His unwavering belief in white folks, specifically white men, is what keeps him silent when the black soldier "ruins" his first bus ride in the city. Train relies on the certainty of his alien world where white men have power, make the rules, and control outcomes. As such, rather than to admire the man's decision to not follow Jim Crow laws, he regards the man as an intruder, one who interrupts the routine that he has come to expect.

Sam Train's inability to function in any literal world forces him into a fantasy state of being as he develops an ability to become invisible. The first time Train becomes invisible, he is thinking about whether to trust his white Southern commander or the black Northern lieutenant. While in the midst of bullets flying and grenades exploding, he sees others shot, but somehow he is spared. He assumes that he is invisible and cannot be harmed. Train has lived a life of invisibility to survive the South. Train's propensity towards invisibility contradicts the visibility of his size and skin color. People regard him as a body made for labor. That body is kind to white folks and does not question them. That same invisible body remains silent when other blacks on the bus berate the black Yankee soldier. Invisibility is as much a coping mechanism for him as it is a form of tolerance for those who do not see him beyond his bodily presence. Meeting the boy changes that for him.

Not unlike the Uncle Tom figure of both the novel and pop culture, Train's soft-spoken charm is attractive to a white child. Angelo, struck by Train's color, thinks he is a chocolate giant. His thinking is plausible. By the time he meets Train, the six-year-old has gone through the traumatic experience of having seen his mother killed when she came back to save him from a German soldier's bullet, has almost starved to death, and has almost been crushed by a large piece of wood. Train's body, as are all of the black soldiers' bodies, is foreign in Italy and therefore further illuminates his enormous size and skin color. However, their relationship, within the Uncle Tom tradition, is not unusual. Considering the narrative's progression, it is almost expected. The boy becomes a reincarnation of Little Eva, an innocent child whose life is saved when Tom jumps into the Mississippi River to retrieve her before she drowns. In this context, Tom, like Train, becomes a hero when he uses his bodily strength inspired by his Christian sensitivity to save the innocent. As a result, Little Eva wants Tom near her and their relationship develops:

Tom, who had the soft, impressible nature of his kindly race, ever yearning toward the simple and childlike, watched the little creature [Eva] with daily increasing interest. To him she seemed something almost divine and whenever her golden head and deep blue eyes peered out upon him. . .he half believed that he saw one of the angels stepped out of his New Testament (231).

Stowe's description of their relationship sets the tone for the one between Train and Angelo.

Like Tom, Train sees the divine in Angelo when the two see each other. Consequently, the boy becomes a favorite of Train when he looks at him. Train convinces himself that Angelo sees him. Angelo sees him, according to Train, in a way that lifts the veil between black and white, making it possible for Train to possess a knowledge that his "dumbness" could not comprehend earlier. Train's longing for acceptance by white Americans becomes apparent in his reaction to the child's curious gaze and touch: "He felt the little hands pulling at his head, the innocent young eyes searching his face, and shame washed over him like water. A white person had never touched his face before. Never reached out and stroked him with love, and force of it, the force of the child's innocence, trust, and purity drew tears to his eyes." (74) When the boy touches him, Train feels qualities that "he'd never known existed in a white man," including "mercy, humanity, love, harmony, longing, thirst for kindness, and yearnings for peace" (74). Train's life as a black Southerner, whether he realizes it or not, has gotten him to the point where he feels the need to be seen by a white person, to feel accepted by whites rather than to be looked at with "derision, fear, or loathing" as he clearly has his entire life (74). The child's action of extending his hand and of locking eyes with him, for Train, gives him a purpose in his life whereas his physical service - working in fields, shooting rifles in war - has little to no worth. His purpose becomes to nurture the one whom he has connected with on what he sees as a spiritual level. When he looks into his face, he sees a "reflection of himself" that he had not seen before in white or colored eyes (74).

In keeping with the Uncle Tom representation, Train is deeply religious. He sings Negro Spirituals that are soothing to the boy and to the soldiers. One such spiritual is "Take Me to the Water." The song, often sung at the time of baptisms, is a call from the participant for a member of the religious community to take him/her to the location for the baptism. Baptism, of course, suggests, a cleansing and a spiritual renewal from one phase of life to the other. He begins to sing this song as the soldiers move towards the town where three of them will die in combat; in this context, McBride surely places this here as a foreshadowing mechanism.

Train's death brings forth a mosaic of all the Southern markers that have been used to identify him. While holding on to his belief that he is invisible to his enemies, he is shot and fatally wounded. His only desire is to save the innocent child and to do this in the vicinity of the church. His last statements return him to a rural Southern landscape. He tells Bishop, "Lord, Bishop! I see the dog at Old Man Parson's place! He's buried in the field out back. . . . And there's Uncle Charlie, fiddlin'" (289). Train's spiritual return, his heaven and home, is to North Carolina - the place where he cannot escape, even in his last moments.

Bishop differs significantly from Train. He follows the tradition of the feared black man, the "bad nigger" stereotype of the brutish black rapist intent on sexually demoralizing innocent white women that was promoted, for example, in D.W. Griffiths' film *The Birth of a Nation*. By 1965, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* challenges this myth when Malcolm X declares that his personal experiences show that white women were just as curious about black men as black men were about white women (70). As proof, he offers his relationship with a white woman he names

Sophia and the records of their arrest (154). By 1971, the bad nigger is urban and defiant as seen in *Shaft*, a man who has sexual liaisons with both white and black women.<sup>2</sup> Bishop is a sexually masculine black man from the Deep South and he lives in defiance of whites' expectations of/ restrictions on him.

The man known as Bishop migrates from Louisiana after he serves time for fraud and changes his name. His Southern identity is one he attempts to leave behind as a result of his anger with his deacon father, a man who apparently beat his mother to death. While he professes to not believe in God, it becomes clear by the end of the novel that he is merely mad with God. He appears to have a calling to preach, but uses that calling merely for profit. Even dumb Train knows that "he can talk the horns off the devil" (73).

Train's description of Bishop reveals the charlatan's two-ness as a black man reared in the south and relocated to the Midwest.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, how he identifies himself teeters between his knowledge of Southern practices and his defiance of those ways. He is a preacher that goes by the name of Bishop (a clear religious moniker) as far as his comrades and his followers in Kansas City know. He has the ability to make them forget the burdens of their lives as black people in a world that has no respect for them. They are not aware that he has lost his faith. As a preacher, he is able to convince the downtrodden to give him their money, in the name of the Lord. His defiance of religion places him in the rebellious black man/bad nigger category. Bishop's questions about God and his ability to easily manipulate poor, illiterate blacks allow him the opportunity to illuminate the hypocrisy of their beliefs in a God that appears powerless in the face of the white man's power. As one with the ability to trick even the devil, his bad nigger image is complete with trickster qualities. When we first meet him, he is wearing the boots of a fellow soldier who lost to him in a card game. He also makes it clear to Train that he expects to get the \$ 1,400 that he won from his friend in a card game. The only reason why Bishop is in the army is because he answered the draft thinking that he would receive an appointment as chaplain thereby avoiding combat (86).

Despite these characteristics, he has a clear affection for Train. It is Bishop who attempts to breathe life into him when he fears that he has been injured by German fire in the attack against the troops. Unfortunately, the scene between the two Southerners is tainted with the legacy of buffoonery. Bishop sees blood on Train's face and exclaims that he has been hit in the head. Train confirms that blood is there when he wipes his face, and as result he lies down on his back and prepares for death. The narrator says, Train "opened his mouth to taste the sweet smell of heaven and felt instead stinking, hot chicken breath blowing down into his lungs" (10-11). The smell of hot chicken and hog maws overshadows soldier's attempt to save the other. Of course, they later realize that the blood belongs to one of the lieutenants who was killed during the battle. Bishop cannot show his concern for Train, instead he tells him he saved his life in order to collect \$ 1,400. Train's comparison of Bishop to the devil is all but proven through Bishop's ability to cheat death and to convince Train that he has helped him to dodge it as well.

Bishop's willingness to save the life of his friend has significance. During their last battle, Bishop who was too afraid to go get the white boy and instead sends Train is the same Bishop who runs to Train and the boy after Train has been shot and badly wounded. Bishop admits that his faith was stunted by his anger when he shouts, "You made my mother die!" and we can only assume that she died at the hands of his religious father who beat her (290). At the last moments of his death, after he goes back to retrieve the boy who appears dead, Bishop comes into knowledge of God's love and an understanding of his own failures and shortcomings, and all this is inspired by "the giant's belief in miracles, the giant's love of a boy who was one of God's miracles" (290). In his last heroic act, he blows life into the lifeless child. The focus of the black men's ability to change, to see life differently is based on the look of one white child. Without it, they would not have had redeeming moments that made them Buffalo Soldiers.

Bishop's contentious relationship with Stamps has much to do with Stamps' hatred of his powerless status and Bishop's way of defining his own black masculinity despite their status. Their challenges become clear in their interactions with one another, which are painfully revealed in the little Italian village. During the exchange they bait each other on how they feel about their role in the war and how the white commanders perceive them. Bishop accuses Stamps of "shining" up to Nokes and Bishop calls Stamps a "tap dancer" (166). Their names for one another are their ways of describing how each man chooses to respond to an individual who clearly has no respect for either one of them simply because of their skin color. In keeping with the development of Southern "types," McBride presents Nokes as a stereotypical white Southerner: a racist. There is no question about this when he blatantly ignores the request of Lt. Stamps to shoot in one direction while they are under fire and Nokes, not wanting to take orders from a person he minks is unknowledgeable, shoots in the wrong direction. The result is the death of the black American soldiers and not the Germans. Nokes' action affirms the notion that black men are not safe in the presence of white male Southerners. Bishop's comment to Stamps that he ran to their current location to be near the Germans, "I got a better chance with the Germans man I got with my own" is his response to nearly losing his life by Nokes' faulty judgment (166). Bishop's use of "my own" reveals a reluctant acknowledgement that he and the ones he does not trust have something in common. Bishop's reluctance intertwines with the anger he feels about his treatment as a black man. In this case, both Bishop and Stamps have more in common than either would confess to the other.

Without question, their most significant conflict is represented by the feelings they have for Renata, the Italian woman. Renata feels more attracted to Stamps, but he is not as aggressive as the smooth-talking Bishop. Bishop makes constant comments to her that have sexual innuendoes, and it is not clear if she is aware of their meaning or not. One such exchange occurs when she asks what the difference is between the black soldiers and the white ones. Stamps is too embarrassed to answer when Bishop prompts him to give her his preferred answer. Bishop's insinuation that the difference is anatomical returns them to the fears of being Black and male in the United States. During a moment when Stamps fantasizes about taking Renata back with him,

holding her hand as they walk through his neighborhood, the fantasy is disrupted by a vision of his black body swinging from a tree (231). Bishop is the risk-taker and has no fantasies about romantic walks. On one night he leaves with one of the women in the village where Renata learns that he tried to "kiss her and more" (228). She sees him as the sexualized bad nigger: "He was not afraid to touch, not afraid to flirt, not afraid to suggest the forbidden" (228). She thinks further that Stamps is a safer version of Bishop, of whom she had an almost "irresistible curiosity" (229). Bishop's circling around the beautiful Renata finally pays off. When Stamps realizes that he has had sex with Renata and hears him say that she "sucked his Roscoe," he loses his Lieutenant's composure and the two "dance" like they are in a street brawl (265). Bishop is as rebellious as one of the types Richard Wright says influenced his development of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*:

The Jim Crow laws of the South were not for him. But as he laughed and cursed and broke them, he knew that some day he'd have to pay for his freedom. His rebellious spirit made him violate all the taboos and consequently he always oscillated between moods of intense elation and depression. He was never happier than when he had outwitted some foolish custom. ("How 'Bigger' was Born")

Bishop is a racialized rebel who will use any means at his disposal to confront the boundary holders and to cross into guarded territories. Renata, in Bishop's mind, represents the forbidden as defined and marked by white authority. Stamps is in charge of keeping the order; after all, he keeps reminding himself that he went to officer's school. The sexually charged, self-centered Bishop's weapon is indeed what makes them different from the white soldiers and it is not the size of his appendage. To be sure, he knows the weaknesses of one black man are the weakness of all, even if the black men have no respect for one another's ways of navigating the world that despises them.

On the other hand, Stamps' weakness is his fear that he will always be seen as nothing more than a black man, inferior. He hopes that going to college and volunteering for service will change that. Finding out that American racism is deeply rooted far beyond the American south makes him resentful of other blacks, and probably even himself. Stamps' upbringing in Virginia informs his adult choices. One of his most memorable childhood moments occurs when the talented swimmer is given chocolate ice cream by his coach after a meet when all of his white teammates are given vanilla. He understands that he is perceived as different, alien and it is that perception of difference that he challenges.

His hope that he will transcend race falls flat as soon as he enters the base to receive training as one of the famed Buffalo Soldiers. There he sees black men "punished severely by Southern commanders, Negro plots to retaliate by killing white commanders, Negroes on furlough beaten to death by white civilian mobs ... Negroes knifing each other ..." (188). He describes a system of disorder and dishonor and it is all based on racial tensions in the United States that each man has brought with him from wherever he has come - North, South, East, or West. This tension finds a

place on their post in the western state of Arizona. While there, Stamps is ordered to keep command over black soldiers in 110-degree heat while white soldiers eat with German POWs in the comfort of a diner. They are later served out of paper plates in the back of the diner by the outhouse. Stamps is ashamed by the position he must take in obeying the command to enforce the humiliation of himself and fellow blacks - a situation that Bishop reminds him of when they discuss racial progress (230). Bishop seems to forget this when he thinks, "The Negro draftees from the South like Train were a puzzle to Stamps. He could not understand their lack of pride, their standing low, accepting the punishment that whites doled out, never trying to take the extra step" (67). We have no evidence that Stamps has a lack of pride or has stood low, but we do have evidence that he knows intimately why they "accept the punishment that whites doled out" (67).

Stamps despises reminiscences of humiliating experiences that involve racism. As a result, he builds on his fears and sees himself as better than the "buck privates," especially Train, who reminds him of the father whom he loves (170). Stamps knows that he could easily be one of the people he has left behind in his community: "He was exhausted by these country Negroes. He had seen them all his life, at the bus stop, in his neighborhood, the women swabbing floors . . ." (68). He goes on to list working-class blacks, whom he refers to as passive-aggressive. Stamps has convinced himself that the working-class of whom he most certainly has come from, if he has seen them all his life, are a disgrace to the race. Clearly, he is reacting to his fear that he will become like them, although he is working hard to have access to the privilege of living white in America. He thinks later that he loves the Army because it has brought him to Italy where he feels a kinship with Italians, but if he returns to the United States a German can become rich, while he would be lucky if he can get a job as a mail carrier. Stamps' hatred of American racism is transferred to those who suffer most from that experience - the members of his community.

His hatred of Blacks and of himself and his refusal to not move beyond these feelings is likely why little attention is given to his death. As ridiculous as Train's death is - the romantic return to fiddling men and an old man's dog in North Carolina - and as valiant as Bishop's death may be perceived, Stamps's death is marked by his fighting tactics and not by any high degree of heroism. We know the changes that Bishop has undergone in the last moments of his death, but we only see Stamps there. He goes down shooting and is able to pull off an explosion that will certainly kill him. Hector notes that the flesh of his face was mangled. Centering on the look of his face helps us to think more about his personality. Prior to his death, Stamps complains that Bishop does not understand his conflict of having to keep a "good face" and to deal with the problems of racist commanders. Renata often made note of Stamps' good looks. In the end, the good face is gone, and the problems of racism and their results have appeared. Having rejected his place in black communities, his desire of being treated as an equal comes to fruition. He dies an American soldier and is remembered, at least by Hector, for his combat actions.

In sum, McBride relies too heavily on the literary perspectives of the nineteenth century to critique American racism of the early twentieth century. While there are times when he produces beautiful writing, complexity is marred by stereotypes and caricatures. Are we to believe that the

only way for a black man to see beyond race and to save a white child in need is if he is an innocent giant like Train, John Coffey in *The Green Mile*, Bojangles opposite Shirley Temple, or Uncle Tom? John Lowe asserts that mere exists a "problem of writing a new perspective of the South" (7). One can only hope that more writers will move beyond simplistic stereotypical Southern imaginings and lean more decidedly on the realistic complexity of what it means to be both black and Southern.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> I write this article in Greensboro, NC, just ten minutes from the High Point and Greensboro city line. Greensboro, of course, is the location of the Sit-in Movement, which began February 1, 1960, no more than twenty years after this fictitious incident. The sit-in movement began in Greensboro, but spread to other cities, including High Point.

<sup>2</sup> *Shaft*, released in 1971, starred Richard Roundtree as a tough African American man in New York who boldly takes on the white police and African American thugs. The film was an intentional counternarrative to earlier films featuring African Americans as subservient and comical.

<sup>3</sup> I intentionally borrow from DuBois' attention to "two-ness" in his description of the identity struggle of African Americans in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

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### **Author Affiliation**

Tara T. Green is an Associate Professor and Director of the African American Studies Program at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro. She is the editor of *From the Plantation to the Prison: African American Confinement Literature* (Mercer UP: 2008) and the author of *A Fatherless Child: African American Men's Autobiographical Perspectives* (U of Missouri P: 2009). She has published on gender themes in the works of Richard Wright, August Wilson, Malcolm X, Tina McElroy Ansa, and Jewell Parker Rhodes.