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Pastoral Psychology

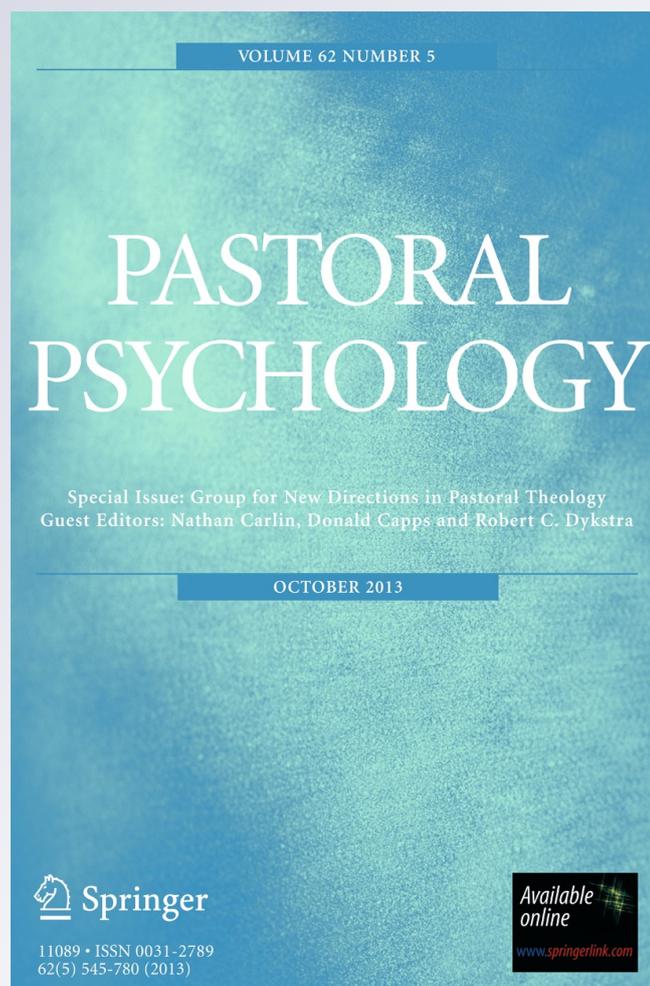
ISSN 0031-2789

Volume 62

Number 5

Pastoral Psychol (2013) 62:649-669

DOI 10.1007/s11089-013-0514-z



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The Dark Night of Rage in a Culture of Nihilism: An Interdisciplinary Examination of Remembered Faces

Gregory C. Ellison II · Hashim Pipkin

Published online: 30 January 2013

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Abstract This interdisciplinary survey of literature examines varied definitions of rage in social psychology, psychoanalysis, pastoral care, criminology, literature, and Biblical scripture in order to develop a more robust understanding of the destructive and generative elements of rage impacting the lives of many African American young men (ages 15–35). Specific attention is given to cultural forces of nihilism (consumption, chance, codependence and concealment) that incubate feelings of rage in numerous African American young men.

Keywords Rage · Black rage · Anger · Nihilism · Daimon · Charles Darwin · Sigmund Freud · William Grier and Price Cobb · James Baldwin · Bell hooks · Cornel West · Mark 5:1–19

Introduction

—28 September 2012, 9:25 am

Rattling outward in muted tones, chilled air forces its way through a loosely hinged vent. As a thick cover of nervous chatter blankets the white noise, a hint of daylight slips through a pane, steers past the cramped bodies, and stretches around the armed guards. Downcast faces eclipse this sliver of hope. Nearing half past nine, the second hand tolls like a knell, and the, now, stale air gathers at the corners of our mouths. Quietus. Rising from the belly the pitch of clattering chains. Red eyes. Weathered wood. We fill the rage. “All Rise”

<<rewind<< 6 November 2010

Thirty miles west of Atlanta’s urban core on a blisteringly cold November night, scores of teens descend on a cul-de-sac in the suburbs of Douglassville, Georgia. What was intended as an intimate gathering of high school friends ballooned into a block party spilling over into

I am honored to co-author this article with Hashim Pipkin, a former student that I taught and learned with in 2011–2012. Pipkin’s uncensored thoughts are recorded in the section on Black gay rage in *Giovanni’s Room* (2000/1956). The body of the article surrounding that section are thoughts of my own. However, in many of the first-person references, Pipkin conferred that the usage of “I” was collective and representative of many of his own beliefs about and experiences with rage.

G. C. Ellison II (✉) · H. Pipkin

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the street. Hard-hitting baselines of hip-hop vibrated through the bodies huddled under gunmetal streetlights. Heads turn to the frenzied commotion near the house. In the scuffle between two young women, Emanuel Boykins is hit. A powderkeg lit. In a stance of twisted chivalry, Boykins announces he would not hit a female. No, he vows to “pop off” on the next male he saw. Bobby Tillman unknowingly was at the other end of Boykins’ gaze. In seconds-glance, Tillman received Boykins’ stunning blow, was knocked to the ground, and thrust into a world of rage. Boykins steps back. Tracen Franklin and two others step in. Having never seen Tillman’s face before that moment, the young men “stomp” him. In a half a minute’s time, Tillman’s clock stops: a punctured heart. Blue lights, blood red concrete, yellow cautionary tape, and white chalk mark the site where Bobby Tillman would breathe his last breath.

> *Play* > 28 September 2012, 10:44 AM

Distracted by the unhinged vent, sniffled whimpers, and shifting chains, my mind drifts: “How did I end up at Tracen Franklin’s sentencing?” Nearly 2 years ago, I sat unnerved before my television as I heard local and national reporters detailing the randomness of Tillman’s death. As if I had known them, I felt an immediate connection to the five young men in Douglasville. Outfitted in his tuxedo, Bobby Tillman was a spitting image of my own best friend who was also murdered at eighteen. Tillman, like my former classmate, was an ambitious student who had recently started classes at Georgia Perimeter College. Ironically, hours before his last breath, he attended a church function on anti-bullying.¹ Tracen Franklin, a college freshman at Alabama State University, aspired to join the university’s football team to no avail. Behind the darkened pupils of his reddened eyes, I saw the faces of dozens of young Black men I had known and counseled, men whose crumbled hopes ground down into fury. In Franklin’s quivering voice, I heard, again, the jangling chains of unspoken pasts. Only knowing them symbolically, the stunted lives of Tillman, Franklin, Boykins and the two other alleged young men, compelled me in the Fall of 2011 to publish an article about the impact of fantasy aggression on youth. I traveled to five states and two countries, lecturing and telling their story as a cautionary tale. But, I never imagined I would be here on the day of Franklin’s sentencing as a pastoral support for the family of the deceased.

In moments, I would hear the Douglas County Superior Court Judge William McClain rule that Tracen Franklin would live his natural-born life in prison with no possibility of parole. But at a quarter till eleven, before Judge McClain uttered his first word, Tillman’s family addressed the judge, court, and cameras gathered. The vent ceased to shake and the hairs on my arm stood on end as the air seeped out the room. With each breath my lungs filled with the rage of those around me; a rage that Franklin and I, and countless other Black men I have encountered throughout my life, inhaled. As Tillman’s grandmother shared her remarks, the noxious rage now in my lungs forced me to choke back tears. She recounted that earlier in the trial Franklin stated that he stomped her grandson because he “couldn’t play football.”²

¹ Ironically, during my first week of elementary school Brandon Williams intervened when two older students bullied me. We remained friends until his untimely death my junior year in high school.

² From the research gathered, Franklin was a standout athlete in high school. According to the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, he attended summer courses at Alabama State University prior to the official start of his freshman year. While not stated in any of the articles available about the case, an educated guess suggests that Franklin was attending summer classes to increase his grade point average in order to qualify for collegiate athletics, specifically football. In this regard, his statement referencing his inability to play football could be connected to failing to qualify for the team academically.

[STOP.]

As much as the Freudian in me recognizes the death instinct's need to discharge aggression in socially acceptable means, the lack of Franklin's ability to play football did not register. What did register was the striking familiarity of rage on his face.

In Tracen Franklin, I recalled the cocoa brown face of the mild-mannered, highly intelligent, soft-spoken young man who sat directly across from me my entire seventh grade year. Four years later, he pulled the trigger and ended the life of a classmate. I remembered the dark-hued face of the gang member I counseled in Newark, who was told by his grandmother if he didn't avenge the death of his cousin he would no longer be considered family. I recognized the furled brow of the ivy-league seminarian who steeped and stewed silently in class for fear that he would exchange the disregard offered him by faculty and peers with a wrath neither he nor they could fathom. I caught sight of the the espresso colored face of a closeted gay minister turning beet red and spewing obscenities in a cafeteria confrontation over microwave usage. I see a very particular strand of rage in the faces of many young black men because I have seen Rage's face in the mirror. Years of therapy and the prayerful guidance of mentors taught me to channel rage in creative and constructive ways. But many of the faces that flashed in my mind did not receive that same training.

For years, I have struggled to define the contours of Rage's face.³ This interdisciplinary article, while painfully incepted, marks a first attempt to review the literature on rage and construct a working definition of rage that considers the unique socio-psychological and theo-cultural forces that birth, fester, and trigger rage in African American young men (ages 15–35).⁴ To construct this definition, the article begins with a comparative survey of definitions of rage in psychology, psychoanalysis, pastoral care, literature, and gender studies. Recognizing that for many African American young men, rage incubates in a culture of nihilism; the next section examines how the cultural forces of consumption, chance, concealment and codependence cultivate feelings of rage. In a peculiar twist, the article concludes with Mark's scriptural account of the daimon-possessed man, Legion, to re-examine the degenerative and transformative elements of rage. Considering the varied interdisciplinary findings about rage, the article concludes by revisiting the many faces of rage encountered in this survey and presenting a succinct definition of rage that encompasses the varied complexities facing African American young men.

³ I provide a three-paragraph foreshadowing of this article in my forthcoming book, *Cut Dead But Still Alive: Caring for African American Young Men* (2013). This longer treatment of rage stands as supplement to that text.

⁴ More than any other piece of writing that I have published, this article is intended for self-instruction. In full disclosure to the reader, my personal struggle during a period of rage conjoined me with a group of young men that the average citizen might detest or deem as maniacal. Having the benefit of therapeutic guidance, supportive family, and trusted mentors, I did not explode, but learned to siphon my rage into a form of writing and teaching predicated upon fearless dialogue. In Spring 2013, in conjunction with the release of my book, eleven African American men who have excelled in fields like education, healthcare, community development, and the arts will join me on the Fearless Dialogues Tour. Together we will travel to five states, hear stories, offer trainings and hold town hall forums. From these meetings we seek to vitalize hope, recast the image of the African American young man, and equip local leaders to serve more efficiently as a community of reliable others. On this journey, I anticipate meeting scores of young men with the marks of rage scowled on their faces. This article stands as preparation for the traveling road ahead.

The evolution of rage: a literature review in brief

What have scholars made of rage? Is it animalistic and instinctual? No different than heightened anger or repressed aggression? Does it protect unspoken hurts or cloak unfounded fears? Is its fury directed at specific individuals or impersonally targeted at systems of oppression? Could rage possibly be a constructive source of ingenuity that elicits change? For centuries, scholars have posited and pondered over rage's origins and ends. The following survey of literature gives attention to the questions posed above.

The Oxford English Dictionary connotes that rage has many faces. Dating back to the 1300s, the earliest definition explains rage as "violent anger, fury, usually manifested in looks, words, or actions." Later definitions connect rage with madness, extreme hunger, acute pain and even a heroic spirit that marshals indignation and inspiration.

The innate impulse of rage

Nearly 600 years after the term's inception, the evolutionist Charles Darwin (1890) wrote of rage's instinctual qualities in *The Expression of Emotions in Humans and Animals*. In the chapter on "Hatred and Anger," Darwin notes that anger and indignation differ from rage only in degree (p. 188). While the aim of Darwin's work was not to equate people with lower primates, but to demonstrate that all human emotions can be recognizable in animals, he does assert that a rage response to retaliate or defend oneself from threat is as programmed into humans as it is in other species (Tavris 1982, p. 32). For instance, Darwin observes that in fits of rage, circulation causes the human face to redden, muscles tighten, hairs bristle, mouths froth, lips retract, and clenched teeth become exposed. To further the imagistic connection with ape-like animals, Darwin notes that "young children, when in a violent rage, roll on the ground on their backs and bellies, screaming, kicking, scratching or biting everything in sight" (Darwin 1890, pp. 183–188). While Darwin's biological and animalistic observations mirror some of my own visceral responses in the courtroom at Tracen Franklin's sentencing, other theorists have posited that rage is far more complex than a gross, primitive reaction.

Not long after Darwin's contributions, Sigmund Freud began his conceptualization of the unconscious. Like Darwin, Freud believed that raged aggression was biologically innate. But, while Darwin saw rage as self-defending and adaptive, Freud believed that humans fall prey to the violent and destructive wrath of the death instinct (Tavris 1982, p. 37). Alongside the life instinct, the death instinct generates continuous counter-pressure to snuff out life and discharge aggression to the external world (Freud 1965, p. 105). However, due to social mores and ethical principles, aggression may not find suitable outlets in the external world (p. 105). In instances when aggressiveness cannot be diverted outward, the withholding individual is susceptible to general unhealthiness, illness, or even mortification (Freud 1969, p. 7). The death instinct's compulsion for discharge is so great that Freud believed, "[It is] necessary for us to destroy some other thing or person in order to not destroy ourselves" (Freud 1965, p. 105). Pessimistic that the life instinct might not overcome destructive aggression, for Freud, rage imbedded in the death instinct bids release at all cost. In this regard, might football have been Tracen Franklin's only socially accepted release valve for his years of compressed rage? While I appreciate that biological and unconscious reactions spur rage in times of threat and necessarily

divert aggression, I remain unconvinced that Franklin, and others like him, respond solely on instinct and lack the internal human fortitude to hold the tides of the death instinct at bay. The rage in their (our) faces seems far more complex.

Uncontained rage and narcissistic injury

In a comprehensive review of five decades of psychoanalytic literature on rage, W. Walter Menninger (2007) differentiates rage from anger, charts its development from infancy, and identifies five critical elements that prompt fits of uncontained rage. To distinguish rage from anger, Menninger builds upon Freud's studies of aggression. While not nearly as pessimistic as Freud, Menninger views aggression as dualistic—having the power to motivate or destroy. Further, he notes that brain factors, constitution, and learning determine which path the aggressive person takes. Notably, when one's capacity to be in control of what happens is compromised, we experience trauma. Posttraumatic reactions occur when life events become overwhelming and the capacity to be in control over one's life is stripped away (p. 118). This lack of control over one's life triggers aggressive responses that may take the form of anger, hostility, hate, or rage.

On the continuum of aggression, Menninger defines anger as “an emotional reaction aroused by being interfered with, injured or threatened, which is characterized by . . . overt or concealed symbolic actions of attack or offense” (p. 119). For Menninger, aggressive anger seeks to regain a sense of integrity and control. Rage, however, does not seek to overcome obstacles. Rage is “a response to an injury of the self . . . that is more intense, less focused, and longer lasting.” In sitting before persons who have committed unspeakable acts of rage, I have come to believe that rage is impersonal; directed at no one and everyone at the same time.

From Menninger's survey of literature on the development of rage from childhood, two central themes arise: rage emerges from an inability to integrate conflicting experiences and rage develops from psychological “assaults” or narcissistic injuries. Heinz Kohut's “narcissistic rage” encompasses both of the central themes. For Kohut, children develop a normal, healthy self when needs are not instantly and fully met. The frustration of unmet needs creates an inner conflict and requires the child to “introject something of the significant other to create internal balance” (Augsburger 1996, p. 77). Key to assuaging frustration and promoting internal balance within the child is the presence of an empathic relationship that “affirms the [child] in nurturance and confirms the [child] in guidance by modeling what a mature, caring human being can become” (p. 79). When not afforded an affirming, empathic relationship, to confirm and model balanced self-structures, the child incurs narcissistic injuries. Two key consequences result from such lack of integration: the archaic structures are repressed or disavowed, only to reappear in threatening situations.

Whether in childhood or later in life, narcissistic injuries inflict wounds that on one hand elicit feelings of embarrassment and anger, and on the other, evoke feelings of intense shame and violent rage. When narcissistically injured, anger identifies a clear target to blot out the embarrassment. Narcissistic rage unearths repressed or disavowed archaic structures and exhibits a far more diabolical character than anger. Whether exhibited in an acute outburst or in unrelenting resentment, narcissistic rage is driven by an unforgiving hostility that shows no empathy whatsoever to the offender. (Augsburger, pp. 80–82).

[Stop.]

I know little of Tracen Franklin's upbringing other than the media's oft-repeated fact that he was born to a teenage mother and delivered in a juvenile detention facility while she was

servicing time. The oldest sibling of two sisters, Franklin was oft-referred to in media coverage as the “man” of the house. Without the benefit of a more substantial family history, it would be unwise to speculate of the severity of the narcissistic wound caused by not having an empathic father to confirm, affirm, and model basic self-structures. However, I can speak authoritatively of a similar narcissistic wound in my own family. After years of questioning, I did not learn my paternal grandfather’s name well into my late twenties. It is safe to say from such ardent repression and disavowal my father and his siblings bore the scars of intense shame and rage regarding their father’s absence late into their lives. While my uncles fought at the mildest slight throughout the teenage years, my father, who was more cerebral, headed a militant Black nationalist organization in college to *vent* his narcissistic rage. Tracen Franklin, my father, and uncles share a wound of fatherlessness all too familiar for countless African American young men; one that awaits explosive outburst at any given moment.

While my father and his siblings *vented* their narcissistic rage as youth through physically and psychologically violent mediums, one cannot discount the empathic relationships that they formed with extended family and male community members (i.e., coaches, church deacons, teachers) who offered guidance. Prior to college, it is possible that Tracen Franklin, a standout athlete, received similar tutelage from teachers and coaches who encouraged him to use his athletic ability to better his lot. But, the inability to play football and receive further training from instructive male figures, coupled with the shame of not measuring up academically may have aggravated an already fragile self-structure. If, indeed, these hypothetical suppositions were present on 6 November 2010, Tracen Franklin was volatile, at best.

Menninger concludes the article by examining the case of Gary McKnight, a former marine, who in 1993 released his uncontained rage with unforgiving hostility. After his killing spree in Topeka, Kansas, the former serviceman took his own life. Utilizing the previously reviewed psychoanalytic studies as guides, Menninger arrives at five critical elements that precipitate outbursts of uncontained rage:

- (1) An individual perceives their experience of a narcissistic injury as being profoundly *unfair*.
- (2) The individual has no hope for achieving a reasonable resolution of that injury.
- (3) The individual reaches the decision that injury cannot be tolerated further and must be responded to with action.
- (4) The individual has access to weapons to enhance the capacity and potency to respond.
- (5) The individual feels a sufficient sense of potency and/or disregard of the consequences to initiate violence. (Menninger 2007, p. 128, emphasis added)

Menninger’s central tenets differ in-kind from Darwin’s and Freud’s instinctive responses in that items three through five allude to premeditated action. While the premeditation represents a shift from the earlier theories, an area of interest not afforded substantive attention in Menninger’s review is the source of the unfairness of the narcissistic injury mentioned in item one. Black psychologists, who have written on rage, have not hesitated to name the profoundly unfair self-injuries affecting African Americans as resulting from a long history of racial oppression.

A long shelf life: black rage

<<rewind<< 1984–1999

Wedged between Leroi Jones’ *Home, Songs of Zion*, and an old family Bible, the small paperback eyed me from the living room bookshelf. While the Bible was pulled down for

morning devotions and evening revivals, the weathered paperback stood at attention fixed upon the shelf, eyeballing me as I moved from toddler pants to a graduate's cap and gown. Not until my first year of seminary did I dislodge it from its home. The crisp pages, now orange and matted together, contrasted with the bold black letters of my surname (my father's surname) written in upper case letters on the compressed pages opposite the spine. My father, then a more moderate businessman, watched silently from his brown leather chair as I leafed through the well-worn pages. With each passing page the silence grew louder. I heard my dashiki clad, afro-wearing parents shouting demands at college administrators only protected from jeering white students by raised right arms and clinched fists. Tucked under my father's left arm during his college standoff was the book I now held in my hand . . . *Black Rage* (1968).

Published in 1968 as the ashes cooled from urban riots and racial tension fevered following the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, *Black Rage* outlined in a "mournful, painful, and desolate" tone the psychological consequences of white oppression on blacks. Drawing on dozens of cases from their years of psychiatric practice, William H. Grier and Price Cobbs unveil how centuries of senseless cruelty and degradation have created within black men a sorry tale of "hatefulness and inferiority." In the final pages of the book, Grier and Cobbs confess the dismal tone was a deliberate "attempt to evoke a certain quality of depression and hopelessness in the reader and to stir these feelings, [for they] are the most common feelings tasted by black people in America" (p. 174). From this vantage point, the authors not only write about Black rage, but they *vent* their own rage filled discontent word-by-word and line-by-line to internalizing readers.

Returning to seminary from Fall Break with this text now under my arm, I reference Grier and Cobbs' theory on multigenerational traumas in one of my first pastoral care papers submitted at Princeton Seminary. For the authors, the culture of trauma that was born in the bondage of slavery passed from generation-to-generation, and accounted for much of the constricted development and pathology in Black people (p. 24).

While fascinated by their work 14 years ago, in this article I return to *Black Rage* with matured eyes. My attraction to the subject is no longer academic or ornamental. In this most recent reading of those orange pages, I see familiar brown faces at the bottom of the well. From this dark place, I draw on personal experiences and therapeutic encounters to recount some of the "strange impediments" that stunt the development of "black boys" and ignite Black Rage. Grier and Cobbs pinpoint that as impressionable children,

Schools discourage [the black boy's] ambitions, training for valued skills is not available to him, and when he does triumph in some youthful competition he receives compromised praise, not the glory he might expect. In time he comes to see that society has locked arms against him, that rather than help, he can expect opposition to his development . . . [I]t is not so much a matter of acquiring manhood as it is a struggle to feel it his own. Whereas the white man regards his manhood as an ordained right, the black man is engaged in a never-ending battle for its possession . . . He must penetrate barriers and overcome opposition in order to assume a masculine posture. For the inner psychological obstacles to manhood are never so formidable as the impediments woven into American society. By contrast, for a white man in this country, the rudiments of manhood are settled at birth by the possession of a penis and white skin . . . [Conversely] throughout his life, at each critical point of development the black boy is told to hold back, to constrict, to subvert and camouflage his normal masculinity. Male assertiveness becomes a forbidden fruit, and if it is attained, it must be savored privately. (pp. 49–50)

Not unlike the narcissistic rage described above, Black rage is fueled through psychic injury and smolders because of external pressures to repress and disavow the pain. However, for Black rage, the psychological injury develops from an unrelenting social pressure of systemic racism that has existed for the black boy long before his birth and follows him at each stage of development. Having seen a bit of progress, the black boy wants to attain what many other Americans “don’t think or talk about but simply have: social and economic power” (Coles 1968, p. 37). But, Grier and Cobbs assert that constant reminders of inferiority, lack of affirmation, and limits on self-expression and assertiveness color the psyche of black boys. These profoundly unfair social conditions erode hope, and root Black rage. And, as demonstrated in the authors’ deliberate efforts to “go after reasonably unbothered and hopeful people—the mostly white, middle-class men and women who will read [their] book—to cause them pain and discomfort,” Black rage’s target is White America (p. 36).

After Grier and Cobbs’ introduction of “Black rage” into the national lexicon, researchers from diverse disciplines explored the explosively taboo topic.⁵ A particularly riveting and copiously footnoted text on the subject is Rosevelt Noble’s (2006) *Black Rage in the American Prison System*. Noble, a sociologist at Vanderbilt University, utilizes the concept of Black rage to expand criminological theory on race and crime. In this mixed methods study, Noble combs inmate narratives and victimization studies to uncover that within prison settings a felt sense of powerlessness fosters Black rage in African American inmates which is manifested in increased prison violence (p. 45). Moving a step beyond Grier and Cobbs’ theory that multi-generational trauma from slavery is the primary source of Black rage, Noble analyzes ten contemporary sources (ranging from police brutality and racial profiling to special education tracking and the employment gap) that heighten Black rage in African American prisoners (pp. 58–84). While Noble’s contemporized sources differ from Grier and Cobbs’ more historic origins, they both arrive at a common end: “[G]iven the history of race relations in the U.S., research indicates that Black inmates engage in target violence, with White correctional officers and White inmates being the primary victims of preference” (p. 21). In the absence of power and the constant pressures of psychic pain, for Grier and Cobbs and Noble, Black rage explodes in the direction of the perceived oppressor, White Americans.

It would be shortsighted and misguided to think that explosions of Black rage do not occur far beyond the confines of prison walls and urban centers. The profile of rage in African American young men is not limited to the socioeconomically disadvantaged, prison-bound, or hyper-masculine. To the contrary, many of these rage-filled young men are decidedly middle-class and/or homosexual.

Ellison meets Baldwin: the rage of the privileged class and black gay rage

>Forward> Fall 2004

For three hours every Tuesday evening, a dozen doctoral students sat encircled around Dr. Cornel West and his protégé Dr. Eddie Glaude in a scantily lit Princeton classroom to discuss the “African American Intellectual Tradition.” Customarily the philosophical gurus would set the tone for the deliberations by exegeting a pericope of the evening’s sacred text. After

⁵ Other noteworthy publications on Black rage not referenced in this article are: Jewelle Taylor Gibbs’ (1988) *Young, Black and Male in America*; Paul Harris’ (1999) *Black Rage Confronts the Law*; and, Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Wanna Holler* (1995) and *Them* (2007).

the invocation, one of us disciples would share our own prepared insights on the hallowed writ. As word spread of these teachings, crowds gathered.

On one exceptionally chilly evening, the room filled to capacity around the teachers and the twelve: the sacred text for the evening, James Baldwin's *Price of the Ticket*. Nearing the end of his routinely stirring invocation, Dr. West shared the story of Baldwin's first meeting of Ralph Ellison. Baldwin, the fiery writing expatriate of questioned sexuality, was recognized internationally for overtly challenging White racism. Ellison, a soft-spoken, stiffly formal, accomplished novelist, drew questions from African Americans regarding his commitment to the Black Freedom Movement. From West's account of the initial meeting of these two literary giants, the two exchanged only a few words and a firm handshake. In this gripping moment, chills shot down Baldwin's spine, and he noted that he had never met a Black man with more rage than Ralph Ellison.⁶

>Forward> March 2011

A firm handshake marked my first meeting with Hashim Pipkin. Pipkin, an inner city public school teacher, who began his collegiate studies on African American identity politics at age sixteen, found his vocational wings clipped by administrative bureaucracy. (Gregory) Ellison, a tenure-track professor committed to fearless dialogue, had a snipped wing of his own. Surrounded by faces of a different hue, the two locked eyes in an admissions interview and fiercely debated Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain*. As chills ran down my spine, he saw the rage in my eyes and I saw his. Days later he was awarded Emory's most prestigious fellowship. One year later, he dropped out. No longer could he repress! However, numerous middle-class African-Americans, like Ellison, bite their tongues and allow their rage to stew in silence.

Ellis Cose (1993), award winning journalist, and author of *Rage of the Privileged Class*, labels self-censorship and silence as one of the "dozen demons" that irk African American professionals and pique their rage (p. 66). For nearly 200 pages, Cose tells story after story of African American vice presidents, law partners, professors and high level executives who squelch their rage at the cost of excruciating pain. In several of the cases reviewed in Cose's text, the reader can readily identify moments when the interviewed working professionals stilled their voices, swallowed their disappointments, and even denied their racial identity to meet the status quo or excel. Using the words "anger" and "rage" interchangeably, Cose also notes that many members of the Black middle class refuse to speak publicly of their rage because society is intolerant of privileged members harboring serious complaints. From this space of mutedness, Cose poses the unspoken question, "How the heck do we solve something we can't talk about?" (p. 32). For many, the resolution comes slowly, if at all. The survival tool of Black self-censorship has become synonymous with mobility. At the razor's edge of this tool is rage.

With limited spaces for self-expression, rage masked by silence may linger in unnoticed corners of the Black professional's unconscious, thus making rage filled outbursts startling to the sufferer and those around him. Throughout my schooling and even now on the other side of the desk as professor, tight-lipped students, like Hashim, have long dismayed me. These students write for freedom, but opt for silence in class. Not out of lack of knowledge or ill-preparation, these gifted students close their mouths out of fear that their challenging comments might unsettle their professors and peers. Unvented rage rattles in bastions of

⁶ A bibliographic reference of the meeting between Baldwin and Ellison could not be located for this paper. Students in the class with me believe that James Baldwin personally shared the story with Dr. West and it has yet to be recorded in print.

higher learning as loudly as it does in the corporate sector, but few are attuned to hear the pressing air of stifled dialogue.

So deceptive is the mask of silent rage that compliance is confused with caring and the protestations of the prim seem imperceptible. Cose believes America [assumingly White America] has grown so comfortable with the raw racial rage of bullet-ridden ghettos peppered with drug deals and dilapidated houses that when explosions come the cause is clear (p. 36). Ironically, he asserts that this same America expects “‘decent black people’ . . . [who are] paragons of middle-class virtue’ to rescue socio-economically challenged African Americans from this violence. Little does this America know that those paragons of hope are ‘in a state of either silent resentment or deeply repressed rage’” (p. 37). Another cross-section of young men who teeter between silent resentment and repression to incendiary anger and rage are African American gay men.

A decomposing rage: black gay rage in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's room*

Things are exploding in the open. They have been ready to for a while now. Explosions that once took place timidly in the imagination, under sullied sheets, or behind dark doors are being replaced by explosions that are expansive, loud, violent and soul-charged. In “Harlem,” Langston Hughes’ famous poem about “a dream deferred,” he suggests that it takes time for rage to dry, fester, become stinky, and crystalize into syrupy sweet suga. Hughes knew well that, for African Americans, dreams were not being dealt out fairly and this unfairness activated an internal decomposition. Only 5 years will have passed when that prophetic quality in Hughes’ 1951 poem was brought down from the heavens by James Baldwin in his contested work, *Giovanni's Room*.

Giovanni's Room follows David, an American who traveled to Paris to contemplate marriage with his girlfriend, Hella. While in Paris, David becomes entwined in a sexual affair with Giovanni, an Italian bartender. Out of financial desperation, Giovanni performs a sexual act on his boss, Guillaume, a closeted French aristocrat. After receiving this sexual favor, Guillaume refuses to compensate Giovanni, and Giovanni explodes into a murderous rage and ends his boss’ life. The remainder of the novel paces the characters emotional turmoil leading up to Giovanni’s execution and tracks David’s reluctant acceptance of his love for Giovanni and inability to accept his own sexual and personal truths.

Although a surface read of *Giovanni's Room* would strike out the possibility of Black gay rage because of its seemingly all white characters, in actuality, Baldwin presents a story that is staked at the nuances of race and rage. Undergirding this claim, Aliyyah Abur-Rahman threads together scholarship on the strategy behind Baldwin’s apparent all white characters. She writes:

In a recent reading of *Giovanni's Room*, Mae G. Henderson posits that “the characters perform in racial drag.” Henderson’s postulation is not only astute but also critically paramount in that it insinuates a critique of racial authenticity by bringing to bear considerations of gender disruption and homoeroticism. Henderson agrees with Sharon Patricia Holland’s assessment of the characters in *Giovanni's Room*: “basically, these are black characters in whiteface.” While my own analysis of the novel builds on the important work of both Henderson and Holland, I take care not to dismiss the whiteness of the characters to access their putative blackness. (pp. 479–480)

Abur-Rahman provides a constructive focus for theorizing the races of the characters in *Giovanni's Room*. Whiteness as a choice was utilized to open up blackness so that it can be included in “race talk” and not simply remain the antagonistic antithesis of whiteness. Blackness, within the novel, is not a color with synthetic political personality in literature, but a formidable contender in talking about those messy things of the human story.

The title makes it clear that Giovanni and his messy room matter to this novel. Giovanni's room is the extended metaphor used by Baldwin to add spatiality to the dislodging of blackness from privilege. Giovanni carries a history familiar to those with a diasporic past, similar in salient ways to those who identify as black. Abur-Rahman sums up the biography of Giovanni and likens it to that of African-Americans: “Giovanni's dislocation in Paris, his failure to belong, and the extreme poverty he faces emblemize the alienation that African Americans experience wherever they are on the globe, including in the country of their births and citizenships” (p. 482). Giovanni's lack of privilege and access, notably money is equated to his room. The room is small. The room is cramped. But Giovanni owns that room. It is Giovanni's tabernacle. Giovanni's power prevails in that messy room.

Another room of significance, where the messiness of race and rage intermingled was Guillaume's office above the bar. In this space, Giovanni's manhood was systematically denied. Moments before his killing rage exploded into reality, Giovanni came to realize the function of his gay, racially Other-ed body to the business of sustaining privilege and white desire. Black queer studies scholar Robert Reid-Pharr situates Giovanni inside the questions asked by the novel's overarching interest in masculine anxiety: “One might argue, in fact, that Giovanni becomes simply a creature of his body, a creature of sex and desire, by which other men are able to gauge their own humanity” (Abur-Rahman 2007, p. 482). Giovanni is an add-on, an accessory for both Guillaume and David, something that can be stationed for convenient use. His body lies ready for homosexual men to deposit repressed yearnings. Giovanni's connection to the Other is bodily, but for purposes of tracking his rage is also textured in economics. Giovanni works at Guillaume's bar, a marketplace of gay pleasure. This life at the bar was not only dehumanizing, but made Giovanni faceless and eventually discardable when no longer viewed as lucrative for business. Abur-Rahman explains Giovanni's visibility crisis as the genesis of his rage explosion further:

Giovanni exacts revenge on Guillaume for utilizing him sexually and then refusing to grant him respectable employment after Giovanni's sexual use has been exhausted . . . the problem, as Baldwin puts it forth, lies in the economic ordering of society that places on sale emaciated, foreign boys to be purchased and in every way ab(used) by wealthy, sexually rapacious, closeted natives. (p. 484)

Constricted by financial strain, physically sapped from the depersonalization of his body, and psychologically anguished because of his invisibility, Giovanni explodes. In Baldwin's words:

Giovanni, like a falling movie star, has lost his drawing power. Giovanni certainly feels this and the rage which has been building in him for many months begins to be swollen now with the memory of Guillaume's hands and mouth. He stares at Guillaume in silence for a moment and then begins to shout. With every word exchanged Giovanni's head begins to roar and a *blackness* comes and goes before his eyes. (Baldwin 2000/1956, p. 156, emphasis added)

Baldwin deliberately has David classify the explosion of Giovanni's rage as “blackness” to thread together sexual tycoonage, a national image of manhood, and the racial legacy and unfortunate circumstances that placed Giovanni in the room above the bar. Wedged between

a history of oppression and a lifetime of dehumanization and shame, Giovanni kills Guillaume in a fit of rage. bell hooks describes her battle in self to unleash her “killing rage” on a white man in a plane that was complicit in an act of racism on the plane: “I felt a ‘killing rage.’ I wanted to stab him softly, to shoot him with the gun I wished I had in my purse. And as I watched his pain, I would say to him tenderly ‘racism hurts.’ All around me everyone acted as though they could not seem, as though I were invisible” (p. 11). hooks makes the argument that rage is an effect of relentless invisible renderings on a person enacted by racism. This is how Giovanni’s rage should be theorized—not as an act of violence, but as a plea for visibility and presence. Rage, in this sense is and to that end, has the potential to be functional. Giovanni’s black gay rage, like that of so many black gay men in this cultural moment, has functional and healing potential once it is no longer conceived of as a subsidiary of something straight, or white, but as a legitimate emotional outpouring that has radical truth potential to disturb gaps of silence. In this functional and healing way, rage points towards presence and sees all those pushed to the margins—gay, black or otherwise.

Breeding rage in a culture of nihilism

While Darwin and Freud connected rage to primal and instinctual drives, and Menninger found that narcissistic injuries created by profoundly unfair incidents spurred rage, the African American sources cited in this article linked rage to histories of oppression, denial of self-expression and/or a lack of visibility. To be sure, each of these references represents a conceivable source of rage. But, in the laboratory of care giving—where I dissected nightmarish confessions of Black-on-Black gang violence, I observed top-tier students weighing and balancing the risk of explosion, and I learned to distill my own feelings into a firm handshake—I discovered a mutated strand of rage in African American young men. This mutation may have had its genesis in slave pathologies, but contemporary Black rage may no longer consciously view White America as its greatest enemy or its chosen target; other Black faces now stand as foes and targets to receive its wrath. In the 21st century, rage grows in a culture of nihilism like a virus in a Petri dish.

Not unlike alcoholism and drug addiction, nihilism is a culturally induced disease of the soul that forces people to cope with a life of meaninglessness, hopelessness, and lovelessness (West 1993, pp. 18, 29). Having parasitic qualities, nihilism eats away visions of possibility, and creates a numbing detachment from others and self. It desensitizes, disorients, and leads to a life of drifting and instant gratification. At each stage, the disease of nihilism further suffocates vital functions of compassion and love, while rage imbeds itself more deeply.⁷ For Cornel West, nihilism is the greatest threat to black survival in America because, devoid of meaning, hope, love, and vision, African Americans are unable to imagine new possibilities and work towards overcoming oppression (West 2001, p. 23 and Cowan 2003, p. 135). Devoid of these healthy virtues, rage precipitates and bids release.

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West (2001) posits that culture, like economics and politics, is a structure that is rooted in institutions and possesses the power to influence behavior. While cautious to not suggest that culture dictates and determines behavior, he does not dismiss the impress of culture to create or destroy (pp. 18–19). Through a creative reading of social critics Cornel West and Dwayne “Lil Wayne” Carter, I have developed a heuristic device to

⁷ As I write this sentence on the all-pervasive culture of nihilism, my chest tightens and I receive a text message that a long-time classmate was sentenced to twelve years in state prison. He was released from a four-year bid in federal prison just over 5 weeks ago. [Stop].

name three cultural phenomena that heighten feelings of nihilism and breed rage: The culture of consumption, the culture of chance, and the culture of concealment and codependence.

First, a word on “Lil Wayne.” Since 1999, he has captivated the minds and rapt the ears of a generation. A culture-swaying tour de force, throughout his career this gritty Bayou drenched rapper has charted 109 songs on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100; surpassing the crooning king of cultural influence, Elvis Presley (Brown, 2012). Known for his staccato paced rhymes, Carter is a modern-day griot who once sold one million albums in a single week by spitting the nihilistic life stories of inner city youth over catchy beats (Barnes 2008). Years ago while bobbing my head to one of Carter’s head-bangers, I realized that for some African American young men his hood tales served as baseline anthems for their pulsating rage. Given Lil Wayne’s social reach and influence, three of his more popular songs are examined below as case studies representative of the rage instilled in countless African American young men struggling to find visibility and voice in a nihilistic culture.

Culture of consumption: consuming and consumed

Peaking at 87 on the Billboard Hot 100, the highly materialistic ever-misogynistic “Hustla Musik” (Carter, 2005) established itself as one of Lil Wayne’s most disturbing street anthems. Working with incarcerated gang members shortly after the song’s release, I learned that these violent-ridden lyrics were often played as “ride-out” music to get adrenaline pumping prior to fisticuffs and gunplay.

The song starts

I’m gonna paint the city red with this one. I’m ahead with this one, see you fucking with the boys who tote toys way before Christmas. No assistance just, that’s persistence with, that’s commitment if I don’t get it somebody gonna die tonight. I know my vibe is tight. And I deserve the throne. And if the kid ain’t right, then let me die in this song . . .

The chorus follows

Baby you gotta know that I’m just out here doing what I gotta do for me and you and we eatin’. So baby, baby why is you trippin’? I’m taking these chances. My head to the sky; My feet on the ground; My fingers to the judge [read: gun] if the money don’t move. Then I won’t budge (won’t budge); No, I won’t budge; No naw

Verse two continues

Money is the motivation. Facing the avenue. Back touching the wall. Got the weed, got the gun . . .

The final words spoken and not rapped . . .

Better guard your kids, guard your face, guard your body, we warned the place we here!

A closer look at this street anthem reveals a cutthroat culture of consumption that places material gain over human life and livelihood.

From the onset of “Hustla Muzik,” the listener gathers quickly that “money is the motivation” and that those most committed to attaining these ends must have “persistence,” “commitment,” and be ready to die in its pursuit. West (2004) analyzes this relentless quest for capital in *Democracy Matters*, where he examines the market forces promoting a culture of consumption at every socioeconomic level. At the top of the economic ladder, corporate elites race to the bottom line, pursue profits by any legal (or illegal) means necessary, and develop strategies to convince the public to consume. West further notes, in an air of

cynicism, that media barrages lull middle-class Americans into “sleepwalking from womb to tomb” by luring them into consuming goods that support their personal comforts and convenience. These titillations of tasteless consumerism disillusion the middle class, stifle social outreach, and subversively undermine a sense of meaning (West 2004, p. 27). In sum, even on the top ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, the quest for material gain creates a numbing detachment that subverts purpose.

Of greatest concern for West is the nihilistic response to the culture of consumption by those with most financial need; persons who cannot be active participants in the market forces that shape their lives. When these individuals are unable to attain the sensory pleasures upheld by market morality, their self-worth is challenged and confronted by feelings of despair, meaninglessness, and existential anguish (Johnson 2003, pp. 21–22). The net results of such anguish are manifestations of rage that explode in the forms of destructive behaviors espoused in the lyrics of “Hustler Musik.”

Similar to corporate elites who pursue profits by any means necessary, Hustla Musik evokes images of gun-toting gang bangers for whom monetary gain and street credibility take precedence over their own lives and the livelihood of others. In a less direct way, consumerism drives many of the disgruntled and tight-lipped African American male students I encounter. The pursuit of “A” grades at all cost, regardless if it comes at the expense of self-censorship and repression of one’s most authentic self, represents reckless materialism. In both cases, attainment of the desired ends bolsters a sense of self-worth: when denied access to these ends, despair, meaninglessness, and existential anguish seed rage.

Careful examination of Lil Wayne’s music, Tracen Franklin’s sentencing and Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*, reveals that in a consumption-driven culture rage itself is also a commodity. Far from entertainment, Lil Wayne’s street tales market a brand of African American nihilism to be induced by publics that may never set foot on the blocks he lyrically describes. Such tunes valorizing the meaninglessness and hopelessness of young African Americans not only heightens the rage of ride-out gangsters, but also emboldens stereotypes that make Americans grow comfortable with the raw racial rage of bullet-ridden ghettos. Likewise, through his sentencing, Tracen Franklin’s rage is commodified. As a lifetime laborer with few benefits, Franklin and other black and brown faces will provide cheap labor in a prison industrial complex that pumps millions of dollars into the American economy. Finally, Giovanni’s body is objectified, squandered, and eventually discarded when viewed as possessing little redeemable value. In short, a culture of consumption not only breeds rage, but also feeds on it.

Culture of chance: a high stakes game of life and death

To analyze the high stakes game of life and death in a culture of chance, additional focus is placed on “Hustler Musik” and “The Motto,” a collaboration between Lil Wayne and Drake that became a cult-classic and musical directive for reckless behavior.

Verses from “Hustler Musik”

Money is the motivation. Facing the avenue. Back touching the wall. Got the weed, got the gun. Got to run when I hear that bird call (birrrr)

Dang hop in that thang and merk off, swerve off. You know me, they call me Birdman Jr. Any body murderer . . .

There's a full court pressure, I'm just going for the two. If I'm open for the three, I'm a take it in a second. Even if there's one second, I'm a make it. It's nothing. I don't take it for granted. I don't take it for nothing. I take it for what it is worth

Chorus from "The Motto" by Drake featuring Lil Wayne

Now she want a photo. You already know though. You only live once: that's the motto nigga, YOLO. We bout it every day, every day, every day. Like we sittin' on the bench, nigga we don't really play. Every day, every day, fuck what anybody say, Can't see 'em 'cause the money in the way. Real nigga what's up?

On the strength of the four letter acronym, YOLO, in late 2011, "The Motto" rose to number 14 in the Billboard Hot 100. YOLO or "you only live once" morphed into a teen mantra akin to "Carpe Diem." However, YOLO fell short of "the noble idea of living life to its fullest—and focused more on brash decisions and their consequences" (Judkins 2012). Maura Judkis, of the *Washington Post*, explained that after the song's release, YOLO became an excuse for risky behavior and a *chance* to play mean pranks. For instance, consider the following Twitter posts flagged in Judkis' article: "Switching seats while the car is goin 100+ #yolo." "Just got a call from my brother he got kicked out of his hotel in panama for peeing off the balcony. #cantstoplaughing #YOLO" (Judkins 2012). While these posts from two white teens advertise public mischief to a virtual community, YOLO internalized by enraged young men in a nihilistic culture can promote a game-like mentality where life and death are mere strokes of chance.

In "Hustler Musik," Lil Wayne likens his day-to-day actions to a contest of cat-and-mouse. With "money as the motivation," he toted guns and sold drugs until he heard a bird call warning of enemies or police. He expands this gaming metaphor by comparing street life to a high stakes basketball game. Akin to an adrenaline-filled baller who sizes up his opponent to score the final bucket as time expires, Carter states that he is willing to stand toe-to-toe with death up until the last second and take the (gun) shot if challenged by a foe. In the full-court pressure of imminent death he advocates taking the shot. Implied in Lil Wayne's suggestive storytelling is a decision where the sharpshooting gamer weighs the reward of getting money over the possible risk of the penultimate loss, his freedom or the ultimate loss, his life.

Social psychologists call this constant game-like negotiation, aleatoricism. In their classic text, *Group Process and Gang Delinquency* (Short and Strodbeck 1965), social psychologists James Short and Fred Strodbeck suggest the ways in which gang members expose themselves to incidents of potential harm can be conceptualized as a game of risk and reward. They assert that delinquent motivations of gang members are not impulsive; instead, decisions are made rationally in recognition of the chance, or aleatory process, by which consequences—both good and bad—are possible (Short and Strodbeck 1965, p. 248). When viewed as a rational negotiation of chance, one gathers that decisions are not made blind to the possibility of unfortunate consequences. Like playing dice, in the gang member's world where there are so few actual "wins," one fabricates wins out of being on top of losses.

Indeed, gang members may not be conscious of every psychic wound, but in the midst of the dismal scenery of limited prospects for gainful employment, community policing and disproportionate prison rates, any hopeful possibilities grey and escape from nihilism appears bleaker. So too might the tight-lipped student hustling for A's find possibilities of self-expression, visibility, and voice meager. In these hot and dreary spaces of nihilistic confinement, rage grows with each risk-laden chance to gain money, grades, visibility, or voice. However, when the rewards and possibilities that rage creates exceed the potential

disadvantages, explosion occurs (pp. 250–251). The trigger squeezed. The student snaps. Game over.

Culture of codependence: seeing beyond the faceless veil

On a blisteringly cold winter night, I drove past a homeless man curled into the fetal position and resting on a bench in a three-sided plexiglas bus stop shed. In minutes, I return with my father-in-law, hot cocoa, food, and a blanket. We find the man shivering in the freezing temperature with the hood of his coat drawn tightly around his head. His face was undetectable. From the passenger seat, my father-in-law rolled down the window, dangled the cover outside, and yelled, “Hey buddy, want a blanket?” The man gruffly responded through the small hole of the hood covering his face, “I don’t have room for your blanket.” From the driver’s seat, but clearly unseen by the man because of the darkness in the car, I raised my voice, “Want some food, some hot chocolate?” He barked back, “I don’t want your food.” Puzzled by the encounter we drove off.

At least two problems existed here. One, we could not fully see the homeless man. Two, he could not fully see us. But, it was more than darkness that impaired our vision.

In retrospect, both parties were faceless and nameless. Shielded from the elements by a tightly drawn hood and blanketed by the cover of nightfall, the face of the man at the bus stop was indiscernible. In haste to offer care, neither my father-in-law nor I asked his name; he was merely, “Hey buddy, want some . . .” But what might he have seen? Certainly not our faces. Maybe he saw in us the physical threat of robbery. At the least, he saw a hand dangling a blanket out of the window, and possibly my shadowy silhouette in the driver’s seat. In the freezing temperatures our names were of no concern to him. Facelessness and namelessness posed a challenge to authentic relationship and the ability to give or receive care.

Facelessness and namelessness are implicit causes of nihilism because in such instances neither the care-seeker nor the caregiver views the other as fully human. This lack of sight thrives in a culture of codependence and concealment. In short, codependence is a tendency to partake in excessive caretaking placing the needs of others at a higher priority than one’s own. Lebacqz and Barton (1991), authors of *Sex in the Parish*, explain that ministers are particularly susceptible to codependency because many are driven by a felt need to rescue the lost, and justified in denying their own issues by uncritical theological references to the Christian servant who sacrifices for the good of God’s people (pp. 76–79). Thus, under the guise of service, codependent caregiver’s unintentionally transform care recipients into objects; faceless and nameless abstractions that fill the caregiver’s void.

In a sense, the homeless man, of whose name I did not ask, had no unique identity. Instead, he was part of a homogenous bloc of impoverished people shivering in the cold and in need of care. I would like to believe that my motives to care were driven by the imperative Christian virtue of hospitality to the stranger. But, what if I did not *see* him and my gift to the freezing recipient of care was impelled by patronage or my unfilled void to induce “a warm and fuzzy moment” of satisfaction? Instead of being a person with a problem, he then becomes a problem person in need of rescue (West 1999, pp. 103–104). Under conditions of codependence the care recipient is robbed of individuality and any possibilities for genuine relationship are diminished.

While the homeless man may have been suspicious of the outstretched arm of codependence dangling covered needs outside of the window, it is symbolic that he tightly drew his hood strings and concealed his identity. In “Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization,” West nods to Du Bois and Paul Lawrence Dunbar by noting that marginalized persons are separated from more dominant groups by “a thick wall or (“the Veil”) that requires role-playing and mask-

wearing rather than genuine human interaction” (West 1999, pp. 103–104). To better understand “the Veil” between the homeless man and me, and the walls between enraged African American young men and caregivers, I turn again to the insights of Lil Wayne.

In “Drop the World,” a song artistically portrayed in video as a doomsday apocalyptic end of the world, Lil Wayne (accompanied by fellow rapper Eminem) speaks of the admixture of concealment and rage that orders his day.⁸ The lyrics of the third verse and chorus reference this toxic concoction:

Third Verse: It hurts but I’ll never show. This pain you’ll never know. If only you could know just how lonely and how cold and frostbit I’ve become. My back’s against the wall. When push comes to shove, I just stand up and scream ‘fuck em all’

Chorus: So I pick the world up and I’m a drop it on your fuckin’ head

Just as the homeless man sat in suspicion inside the plexiglas wall as our vehicle approached, akin to the verse above, countless African American young men conceal unseen *hurts* and *pains* in suspicion of the caregiver’s motives. However, in moments when caring seems heavy-handed and impersonal or when the probing become intrusive, these faceless recipients *stand up and scream*, “*Fuck em all!* I don’t want your food! I don’t need your charity.” In my forthcoming book, *Cut Dead But Still Alive* (2013), I chronicle the explosions of five young men, who no longer willing to remain muted and invisible, “Pick the world up and Drop it on your fucking head.” The violent act of dropping the world on the heads of those who deny visibility and voice indicates a concealed rage that can no longer be contained.

In the empty space of nihilism where meaningless and hopelessness collide with rage, a closer examination reveals that care recipients harboring rage also objectify codependent caregivers and manipulate their needs to achieve a particular end. In my experiences as a counselor and confidant, I encountered enraged young men who viewed outstretched hands as an object to be manipulated. From this vantage, the caregiver ceases to be human and is only a hand. A hand that gives warmth, holds the keys to prison release, or gives the grade for entry into doctoral study. The caregivers hand becomes a means to an end, and over time even the most well-intentioned caregivers may recognize their own traces of rage festering from the constant dehumanization and manipulation.

A culture of nihilism built on the pillars of consumption, chance, codependence and concealment casts shadows of rage on care-seekers and caregivers alike. But, as this survey uncovered, the manifestations of rage are not solely violent, destructive, and manipulative. Amidst the shadows of nihilism, hints of luminous rage slip through the panes of pervasive darkness.

The sanctified daimon: Rage as luminous darkness⁹

Currently, we are bombarded daily with mass media images of black rage, usually personified by angry young black males wreaking havoc upon the “innocent,” that teach everyone in the culture to see this rage as useless, without meaning, destructive. This one-dimensional misrepresentation of the power of rage helps maintain the status quo [It] ensures that there will be no revolutionary effort to gather that rage and use it for constructive social change (hooks 1996, p. 18).

⁸ “Drop the World” climbed to 18 on the Billboard Hot 100.

⁹ While seated in a hotbed of rage, I gather inspiration from Howard Thurman who, throughout his life and in his publication of *Luminous Darkness* (1965), sought to see beyond the fear of America’s shadow-side of racial intolerance and see with confidence a peculiar vision of hope. In the prologue of that book, he cites the following verse from Psalm 139:11–12: “If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me, Even the night shall be light about me. . . . The darkness and the light are both alike to Thee.

As articulated in the epigraph quote from *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, bell hooks (1996) dispels the misconception that rage lacks meaning and is wholly destructive. Instead, she frames rage as a multifaceted emotion with generative power. On the one hand, she pinpoints moments in society, literature, and in her own life when it was nearly impossible to “choke down” yearnings to lash out in a violent, “killing rage” (pp. 11–12, 23). On the other hand, she devotes most of the text to unveiling rage’s healing possibilities and its propensities to bolster self-actualization, heighten self-determination, and catalyze constructive change (p. 19). For hooks, progressive activists who reckon with their own rage have the responsibility to show how to take that rage and move it beyond the fruitless scapegoating of any group, linking it instead to a passion for freedom and justice that illuminates, heals, and makes redemptive struggle possible (p. 20).

The temple-table-turning Jesus was one such progressive activist. He reckoned with his own rage, took interest in the daimon possessed, and capitalized on opportunities to graft those bound in chains into His liberative movement of redemptive struggle.

Years ago, I stumbled upon a jargon-heavy edited volume released by the American Academy of Religion entitled *The Daemonic Imagination* (1990). To my surprise, included in this volume was a plainly stated, but carefully exegeted, reflection on Mark 5:1–19. Penned to be read aloud, Eugene Lowry’s “Cries from the Graveyard: A Sermon” chronicles a pivotal turn in the life of the possessed man named Legion who encountered Jesus’ miraculous power of healing rage. As much as Lowry’s sermon chronicles the miraculous healing, it also critically examines the community’s investment in Legion’s rage and their displeasure with his righted mind. A brief examination of the tenuous relationship between Jesus, Legion, and the townsfolk illumines the potential perceived threat of a constructive rage.

The sermon unfolds by defining the uneasy truce between the townsfolk and the possessed man. “That is, he would stay out there in the graveyard among the tombs . . . and they would stay in town. He wasn’t fit to be among the living . . . and so he lived among the dead” (pp. 27–28). The quietus of the graveyard and the enchained daimon-possessed man sequestered there invoke a striking image of disparity and a profound unfairness. The environment creates a sphere of nihilism and deepens the rage of an already injured man. Lowry’s imagery helped me envision our modern-day graveyards for the living. Far away from the “civilized,” the enraged tear at their chains and indiscriminately explode at the slightest infraction because they are rarely heard or seen as human, but cast out as the living dead. Thwarted opportunities to leave or move beyond this grave reality only tighten the chains, and eventually, the marginalized internalize they are cut dead but, still alive. Until, at least, someone can *see* them differently and convince them to do the same.

Not seeing the man solely as a faceless and “dis-eased soul,” Jesus inquired of his name. “‘My name is Legion.’ Get it? To paraphrase: I feel like 6,000 soldiers are inside me . . . I’m pulled one way, then another. There’s an army inside me, and I think I’m losing the war” (pp. 30–31). Not clear of the inner disruption within this man, Lowry interprets Legion’s sharing of his name as a cry to Jesus “for unity, for integrity, for wholeness” (p. 31). Seeing liberative potential in the man, Jesus casts Legion’s volatile army in to a heard of pigs that squeal and scurry down a steep embankment into the sea. It is the villager’s reaction to Jesus’ actions that intrigued both Lowry and me.

With the once-possessed man now clothed and in his right mind, “you would think [the villagers] would have given [Jesus] the key to the city. Instead they suggest a bus ticket out of town. ‘Get out!’” (p. 34). To the reader it is unclear whether the townsfolk are more disappointed by the loss of their pigs or the healing of the man. For Lowry, the two are connected. “Any time any healing takes place . . . any person or group gets a freedom they never had before, somebody else loses pigs” (p. 35). The dying pigs represent a socioeconomic privilege and political power being stripped away from the villagers. This power allowed the townsfolk to declare an unfair truce and banish a man (symbolic of a community) to a place surrounded by death. Once healed, Legion was no longer the townsfolk’s scapegoat—a shadow on which to cast their demons and fears. With him no longer in that shadowy place, they would have to face their unspoken rage: “Did we chain [him] up . . . because [he] had a demon or did [he] get the demon . . . because we tied him up?” (p. 38). In the court of public opinion, Jesus stands on one side declaring the power to heal rage, while the enraged mob, having to face their own shadows, stands on the other. Rage fills the scripture.

The passage and Lowry’s sermon conclude with Jesus’ commission to the healed man: “Go back to your friends, and tell the world what the Lord has done’ . . . But he didn’t have any friends—except the *new* kind which can be bonded among the former “chain-ers” and “chain-ees,” both freed by Jesus’ visit” (p. 39). In this commission, the now-healed man is entrusted to manage his rage and become possessed by a daimon that would transfer his past hurts into creative mediums to build the kingdom.

This word, daimon, actually predates the Christian word demon, and even in Jesus’ time it was believed to be an inborn and immortal spirit that had power to consume thoughts, impel actions, and determine one’s destiny (Diamond 1996, p. 66). In a fascinating book, entitled *Anger, Madness and the Daimonic: The Psychological Genius of Violence, Evil, and Creativity*, Stephen A. Diamond (1996) argues that the all-consuming yet resonant spirit of the daimon draws upon rage as a constructive force of change. Quoting psychoanalyst, Rollo May, Diamond notes:

The daimonic is apt to come out when we are struggling with an inner problem; it is conflict which brings the unconscious dimensions closer to the surface where they can be tapped. Conflict presupposes some need for a shift . . . within the person; he struggles for a new life as it were. This opens up channels to creativity (p. 258).

Far from a mere ventilation, the creativity unleashed by the daimon forces the enraged person to make sense of personal problems and grapple with the collective cultural conflicts of the day.

To show how rage and creativity cycle together within the daimon to create change, Diamond examines the lives of seven artists whose rage forced them to reckon with internal wounds and social maladies. One of the seven artists chronicled was Richard Wright, the accomplished African American novelist most noted for *Native Son* (1940). Born in the backwoods of Mississippi, the bitter seeds of suffering rooted early in Wright. In addition to the persistent horrors of lynchings, poverty, beatings and extreme prejudice outside his home, within his home, a wrathful destiny was birthed by his father’s early desertion and his mother’s physical abuse. “He would learn to write as a means of expressing that [rage]. His [rage] would have many targets: his family, the society, the white man, [women,] the white race, and the more fortunate” (Diamond quoting Richard Wright biographer, Margaret Walker 2000,

p. 285). As a boy, he censored those feelings of rage, but as he matured “his writing provided a positive outflow for his resentment, a *blessed release* which permitted him . . . to maintain some measure of balance and equanimity during most of his life” (p. 286, emphasis added). The maturity of blessed release that comes through deference to one’s daimon is far from the unprocessed ventilation of rage. To the contrary, as he explains, the process of healing rage takes a lifetime:

Some childhood wounding or trauma is inevitable in this imperfect world of ours, and such fateful psychic damage becomes our daimon—part of our destiny—forming our character and more or less informing our future actions. In adulthood, emotional laceration may be recognized, made conscious, placed in a wider perspective, and, sometimes healed. But “healing” does not mean forgetting Healing entails the mature acceptance of the traumatic facts of one’s emotional fortification We cannot change the past nor undo the wound We can, nonetheless, allow ourselves to feel rage and grief over the irretrievable loss. We have the power to determine our attitude toward the past. We may even—with some good fortune, time, and grace—find within ourselves the capacity to forgive those who we feel inflicted our agonizing injuries. But we cannot ever expect to totally exorcise such demons. They have taken up permanent residence; turned into an integral part of us; molded our personality; made us who we are. To deny them or try to eradicate them is tantamount to self-renunciation. To live *with* them is what is required, and for this creativity is key (p. 286).

To the reader, I apologize for such a long quote, and the bricolage in which this paper has evolved. But, in Diamond’s words I see faces of hope: that the Tracen Franklins might crack their vaults of concealed rage and in the company of reliable others come to see themselves as more than childhood wounds and rattling chains; that the Ellisons and Wrights might loosen their lips and move from recognition of emotional lacerations to healing and progressive activism; that Baldwin’s Giovannis might throw off the yoke of emotional and bodily hatred and grieve the irretrievable losses that shower them with shame; that the families of the fallen might find the capacity to forgive those who inflicted agonizing injuries; and that the townsfolk, previously unaware of their own rage, may stand face-to-face with Jesus and the ones He has healed.

To those in rage: May reliable others and The Reliable Other see us clearly and beckon us to leave our respective graveyards that breed nihilism and self-destructive rage. For each and all, may the sanctified daimon bid us strength to face this rage and guide us through luminous darkness to a place of blessed release. And now, a working definition for the days ahead

Rage: a psychic injury grounded in past traumas (multi-generational pathologies or childhood wounds) and sown in a culture of nihilism. When repressed or disavowed, rage leads to self-destructive thoughts or behaviors, but when seen and reckoned with, this same rage has the potential to sprout forth into a daimonic creativity that can bring healing to past wrongs and seed a revolution.¹⁰

[Stop . . . exhale.]

¹⁰ I am grateful to my colleagues at the 2012 New Directions in Pastoral Theology Conference whose constructive comments and probing questions on this paper deepened my understanding of rage. Commensurate with the conference theme, “New Directions on Old Connections,” this multifaceted definition of rage stands on the edge of the tensions between body/soul, flesh/spirit, and self/other.

Acknowledgment A special word of thanks to Brandon Williams, Antoinette Ellison, Marita Harrell, Reginald Wilborn, the family of Bobby Tillman, and a spiritual and literary cloud of witnesses, for spurring me to face my rage and write with a freedom only granted by the Holy Spirit and the sanctified daimon within me.

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