BLACK MAN KNEELING, BLACK MAN STANDING:
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By

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ABSTRACT

BLACK MAN KNEELING, BLACK MAN STANDING: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SECULAR AND SACRED SPACES IN REPRESENTATION OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *JONAH’S GOURD VINE*, JAMES BALDWIN’S *GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN* AND ERNEST J. GAINES’S *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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To what can we attribute the social plight of black men in American culture? This thesis explores a cultural misuse of language as one possible answer to this enduring question. Specifically, it considers the ways in which language has historically functioned to delimit and devalue black male identity. Perhaps most importantly, it examines the language of binary opposition (words or ideas that create oppositional dichotomies in order to establish a system of social hierarchy) through which black male identities are frequently inscribed, considering the ways in which it can be re-conceptualized to complicate the one-dimensional and/or fetishistic perceptions of black male identities perpetuated by the media.

Further, this thesis interrogates the ways in which the languages of television, film, newspapers, magazines, the Internet, etc. frame black masculinity and establish these binary oppositions (sacred/secular, saint/sinner, etc.). It argues that experiencing a more nuanced black masculinity starts with changing the ways in which we read, think about, and discuss black men. Thus, by examining three languages that reconstruct black men in works by Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin and Ernest J. Gaines (the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, and the language of redemption, which I define at length in my thesis), it argues that ultimately, a re-contextualization of language deconstructs binary oppositions and expands perceptions of black masculinity.

First, this thesis explores Hurston’s 1934 novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, considering the ways in which John Buddy Pearson (the black male protagonist) rethinks the possibility of his identity as a result of his relationship with his wife Lucy Potts, whose sass, humor, and exhortations challenge John to change the way in which he looks at himself. By exploring John Grimes’s wrestling with homosexual desire in the black church in Baldwin’s 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, this thesis also considers the ways in which complex black male identities—like those through which John moves—can be voiced in culture. Finally, this thesis focuses on the ways in which black male identities can be saved from the language of binary opposition at a communal level by exploring the interactions that take place between black men of different beliefs and backgrounds in Gaines’s 1993 novel *A Lesson Before Dying*. Ultimately, then, this thesis explores the importance of voice and communal exchange in the creation of languages through which to perceive black male possibility.
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INTRODUCTION

RECONSTRUCTING BLACK MASCULINITY:
Having Church through Language
“I refuse to be another black statistic.”
—Kerrion Franklin, “Outro” on Kirk Franklin’s Hero

When I was twelve, my father asked me, “Boy, how come you frown and fuss and fidget every time we sit down in that sanctuary?” I remember shrugging. Shaking his head, he continued what became a mini-sermon. “We all need church, don’t we? We all need someplace where we can go and feel like somebody cares about who we are. Someplace where we can be free ‘cause we know our voice matters. Someplace where we talk and somebody listens, where we cry and somebody wipes our tears. We all need a place where somebody understands what we’re going through. That’s church, son. How could you run from a place like that?”

Our encounter that Sunday morning was the first time I questioned the cynic inside of me. I had never heard anyone in my family make church sound so liberating, so possible of empowering me. At that moment, however, my father’s words transformed my perception of the church. At that moment, the church was much more than the shouting and dancing I had grown accustomed to. Through the power of my father’s language, I saw the church as a site of identity transformation. I saw the church as a space for voicing possibilities. It became a space I could call my own, wherein my personal testimony mattered because somewhere in the pews, somebody understood what I was going through. Somewhere in the pews, someone wanted to be free just like me.

As I think about my frown-and-fuss-and-fidget routine in connection with the social plight of black men in contemporary American culture, I would argue that our culture needs some church at least as badly as I did. First, we must understand that when
I speak of frowning, fussing, and fidgeting in culture, I am talking about the ways in which our major information providers—especially the media—treat the issue of black male identity and representation. Take, for instance, Erik Eckholm’s recent article in the *New York Times*, titled, “Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn”:

> Black men in the United States face a far more dire situation than is portrayed by common employment and education statistics…new studies…show that the huge pool of poorly educated black men is becoming ever more disconnected from mainstream society, and to a far greater degree than comparable white or Hispanic men (1).

From Eckholm’s choice of words, I read the condition of black male identity either with a sense of frustration or a sense of hopelessness. By reading these opening lines of the article, I understand *The New York Times* as describing “poorly educated black men” as “disconnected from mainstream society.” This remark would seem to point to a need for socioeconomic uplift in the black community, especially among black men. Again, however, I read the headline: “Plight Deepens for Black Men.” If we note that the headline does *not* say, “Plight Deepens for Poorly Educated Black Men,” then I would argue that the subtext here is that black men *as a group* are *collectively in danger*. What this article fails to identify, however, is *why* they are in danger. It fails to answer the question: *to what can the social plight of black men in American culture be attributed?*

Thus, the article frowns, fusses, and fidgets. It reinforces for its readers the names and prejudiced perceptions of black male identity that already permeate culture through television, film, magazines, and the Internet. We read about “poorly educated black men” who are “disconnected” from culture. The rest of the article is hardly astonishing. Professors and statisticians tell us that “young black men [are] falling farther back” (Eckholm 1). An ex-convict speaks of being “tired of incarceration” (Eckholm 2). And
then a slew of cold, hard facts come crashing down on us, including “in the inner cities, more than half of black men do not finish high school” (Eckholm 2). Thus, even in its attempt to create awareness about the condition of black men in America, this article constructs black masculinity in binary oppositions. Black men are either poorly educated due to socioeconomic circumstances or willfully ignorant because of their involvement in crime.

I would argue that this article (and the American media-base at large) lacks the language through which to talk about its main characters—black men. Like the boy who can’t sit still in church, American culture cannot seem to stop talking about the social plight of black men. However, American culture can only frown and fuss and fidget because it does not know how to speak about black men. Further, American culture does not know how to speak about black men because it cannot hear its black men. It cannot hear Kerrion Franklin crying out, “I refuse to be another black statistic…I refuse to wear a barcode across my chest/I refuse to let a black tee or throwback jersey define me.” It cannot see black male survivors of Hurricane Katrina getting supplies for their loved ones because culture is too busy calling them looters. In other words, because of the limiting language through which black male identity is contextualized in culture, America cannot even begin to understand the complexity of black male identity.

Thus, black men need to have church. Like a boy seeking to be understood in church, they need to find a place in language where their voice matters—a place where they can talk and be heard. They need a place where they can challenge the limiting language of their culture with the power of their individual testimonies. They need to
find a place in language that can reveal to American culture the vast spectrum and complexity of their identities. They need ways to re-contextualize language—ways to dismantle the fetishistic, stereotypical gibberish that emerges from the binary oppositions that American culture has created to contain their identities, because black men need to be understood.

Thus, in the pages that follow, I argue that the language of binary opposition must be re-contextualized if we seek to complicate our understanding of black men. In my thesis, Black Man Kneeling, Black Man Standing: Exploring the Interplay Between Secular and Sacred Spaces in Representations of Black Masculinity in Zora Neale Hurston’s Jonah’s Gourd Vine, James Baldwin’s Go Tell It on the Mountain, and Ernest J. Gaines’s A Lesson Before Dying, I explore three languages of black male possibility in each of the works of three twentieth-century African American authors. In Chapter 1, I define the language of ambivalence as the use of contradictory names as a means to place an individual in opposition to oneself. The language of ambivalence at its most basic level limits black male identity because it creates binary oppositions; however, when one is aware of its presence and disidentifies with its system of binary thinking, this action enables the individual to claim both or neither of the identities it expresses. In the same chapter, I go on to define the language of possibility as words or ideas that challenge systems of thinking about oneself by creating an alternative discourse through which to perceive one’s identity. Finally, I identify the language of redemption as words or ideas that expand an individual’s self-perception through the processes of self-exploration and self-affirmation.
In Chapter 1, I focus on the ways in which a multiplicity of languages must be heard for a vast spectrum of black male identities to be envisioned. Thus, Zora Neale Hurston’s 1934 novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* is crucial to my argument about re-contextualizing language in order to re-conceptualize black male identity. In *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the black male protagonist, John Buddy Pearson, is frequently told who he is or who he is not by his black stepfather Ned Crittenden and his white biological father Alf Pearson. Their use of the language of ambivalence seeks to contain John’s complex identity. Thus, Lucy Potts, John’s wife, is crucial to comprehending the power of language in this novel. Lucy’s frequent application of the language of possibility in her sassy, humorous, and inspirational exchanges with John (“Be uh man. Cover de ground you stand on. Jump at de sun and eben if you miss it, yuh can’t help grabbin’ holt uh de moon”) help him to envision himself as being more than what his fathers see. In the end, Lucy’s ability to talk about John in a variety of contexts also moves readers away from viewing him in the limiting language of early reviewers—as “an Alabama Negro who became a preacher…but who couldn’t still his passions” (Lippincott qtd. in West 65).

In Chapter 2, I explore the ways in which the articulation of black male possibility from a “chorus of voices” (Clark 132) facilitates the power of self-liberation in the process of envisioning black male identity. In this chapter, James Baldwin’s 1953 novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is essential to my argument because Baldwin de-centers voice throughout the novel. He includes multiple narrative accounts of the same events in the novel. Thus, we come to understand the protagonist, John Grimes, as a complex individual from the various characters that speak to him and about him. Ultimately, the
The juxtaposition of these voices throughout the novel enable John to see his identity as fluid and ultimately lead to his articulation of his identity ("I’m saved!") through the language of redemption at novel’s end.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I examine the ways in which communal exchange creates awareness and appreciation of black male possibility at a community level. In this chapter, Ernest J. Gaines’s 1993 novel *A Lesson Before Dying* is crucial to my argument because throughout the novel, Gaines creates conversation among black men of different beliefs and backgrounds. For Gaines, then, it is not enough to envision and voice black male possibility; one must work to reconstruct black masculinity for the purpose of communal uplift. Thus, Gaines places an atheist black schoolteacher and a fundamentalist black minister in a cell with a falsely-accused young black man and through their dialogue, demonstrates the ways in which three perspectives of black male possibility can aid these three men and the community at large in expanding their perceptions of black male possibility.

In short, this thesis will achieve its purpose if readers can understand that understanding and re-contextualizing language is essential to understanding black male identity and possibility. For at the end of the day, there is no way to fix the problem of black men in American culture. As with any group of individuals, it is likely that there will always be aspects of black male identity that we cannot understand. However, if we can change the way we read, think, see, and talk about black men, we can begin to hear their stories rather than our interpretations of their stories. We can begin to appreciate those stories. And through language, black men may finally have a place where they can
talk and be understood. In language-spaces existing outside of binary oppositions, black men can finally have church, get saved, and free themselves from the limiting languages in which their identities have been held captive.
Works Cited


CHAPTER 1

“SAINT AND SINNER”: Complicating Black Male Identity through the Languages of Ambivalence, Possibility, and Redemption in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*
“A saint is just a sinner who fell down and got up.”
—Donnie McClurkin, “We Fall Down”

The day I got baptized, I heard a sermon that I would never forget. I didn’t run around the sanctuary, hand-clapping, knee-slapping, whooping and hollering *hallelujahs* like everyone else did. I didn’t even stand up. No, I just scrunched up my eyebrows at the burly black man above me, and wrote down everything I heard. As I struggled to make sense of what he said, people listened to him. People responded to him. People loved him for those words he was saying.

When the offering plate went around, my pastor asserted, “You are in this world—” and then shook his head as if to discredit what he had just said. After what felt like five minutes, he finished, “—but not of this world.” He told us to repeat his revelation. I just smiled. Aside from being the kind of soul-satisfying word play that makes black church traditions feel like “communal theater in the community” (Lowe 97), Reverend’s words sang to me because of their intrinsic discord—because they boasted a paradox that challenged even a preacher-man’s performative powers. After all, how can one be at once in the world, but not of it? The space we call “world” shapes our social, psychological, and spiritual identities. In other words, the world is circumstantially connected to the many parts of who we are, regardless of whether we choose to accept this statement as gospel truth.

Given this insight, perhaps the following is a more intriguing question to pose: in what ways does our understanding of “world” change when we envision it as a space that is not merely secular or sacred? If we can imagine, for instance, a “world” in which black male identity is at once secular and sacred, we may acquire a level of social
magnification capable of detecting black men who exist outside of the myopic perspectives that normalize American culture through its major information providers—television, film, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. In the multidimensional space of our imaginations, a “world” of black men can emerge unframed by the aforementioned flat-screens. In this “world,” black men can become complex individuals whose personal stories deconstruct the book covers we all too frequently fear, fetishize, or misjudge—the black male prisoner, athlete, high school dropout, thug, comedian, crack addict, preacher, rapper, and janitor, to name a few. We can more fully appreciate these stories—the performances of these black male bodies—when we use language in a way that contextualizes them in spaces outside of the binary constructions defined by an American culture to which black men have never belonged.

Further, if “framing the man of color, like framing an artistic image, also formalizes a delimited two-dimensional vision of black men in America” (30), as black masculinities scholar Maurice O. Wallace suggests, then the time has come for us to let go of the frame. The time has come for us to let go of the insufficient language that frames black men, whose fluid identities move beyond the secular/sacred boundaries that characterize an American “world.” Why am I suggesting that there is an urgency to let go of this language-frame? Because the languages of television, film, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet are working so convincingly that even the words of a persuasive professor or preacher are powerless against their visual attack. Their words cannot keep us from witnessing O.J. Simpson as the legendary running back who surely killed his white ex-wife. They can’t keep us from seeing black rap star Nelly as little
more than a pervert as he “swipes a credit card between a woman’s buttocks” (“BET Provides More ‘Exposure’” 1) in his oft-broadcasted “Tip Drill” video. They can’t keep us from viewing Bishop T.D. Jakes as the stereotypically larger-than-life black man who ushers in Sunday morning praise and worship. In other words, because the language-frames that produce these flat portraits of black men often go unquestioned, the performance of these black male bodies—the black men framed by mass media’s stereotypical subtexts—distort many individuals’ perceptions of the vast spectrum and complexity of black male identity.

Thus, unless we interrogate the language that the media uses to define black men as villain or hero, sinner or saint, secular or sacred, we will not envision new possibilities for black male identity. When we change the way in which we talk about black masculinity, however, we will see black men who are at once villains and heroes, sinners and saints, secular and sacred—as opposed to being merely one or the other. The way in which we understand and employ language, then, is essential to envisioning a more nuanced black masculinity.

This notion of interrogating and reworking language as a means to re-vision identities brings us back to my pastor’s assertion that saints must be “in the world, but not of the world.” As we think about re-contextualizing language in order to un-frame black masculinity, I challenge his assertion. In his hit single “We Fall Down,” gospel music artist Donnie McClurkin sings: “a saint is just a sinner who fell down and got up.” If we consider the ways in which his seemingly paradoxical testimony (how can one be at once saint and sinner?) liberates sinners and humbles saints, I pose the following questions:
how can we contemplate the complexity of black men without discussing the ways in which black men are both “in the world” and “of the world?” How can we envision the possibility of their identities if the language we use to contextualize them relentlessly frames them in a sinner/saint, secular/sacred binary?

In the following pages, I will explore these questions by examining the ways in which Zora Neale Hurston uses language to create ambivalence, possibility, and redemption as three boundary-defying mediums through which we can appreciate the fluidity of black male identity. Further, I will define and examine the ways in which the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, and the language of redemption collectively function to un-frame John Buddy Pearson, the black male protagonist in Hurston’s 1934 novel titled, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

II

*Possibilities for a Promiscuous Preacher-Man in Black Masculine Studies?*

First, we must realize that if there was ever a man who could be described as “in the world” and “of the world,” it was John Pearson. Karla Holloway describes John as “a paradox—both saint and sinner” (38, italics added). “As bearer of the Word,” Larry Neal asserts, “[John] is both the Son of God and the Son of Man, [but]...he can be fully neither one nor the other” (27, italics added). Regardless of whose perspective we privilege, it is clear that these critics concur on the dual nature of John’s identity. For Holloway and Neal, John is a conundrum who complicates essentialist conceptions of identity; he is a black man whose life unites moral convictions and sinful addictions.
Still, we may ask ourselves: what distinguishes this narrative about a black man’s battle with loyalty and betrayal from similar tales of black preachers who sleep around—like the Reverend Gabriel Grimes’s narrative in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on The Mountain*? After all, at first glance, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* tells the story of a black man who consciously uses his position as preacher to fulfill his sexual desires—as Gabriel does in Baldwin’s novel. At first glance, Hurston also reveals the ways in which this black man manipulates the discourse of the pulpit—perhaps the most celebrated site of patriarchal power in African American culture (Lowe 88)—to stroke his hypermasculine ego as preacher-man and silence his suspecting wife, just as Gabriel does. But let’s look closer.

John Pearson is the son of a white man named Alf Pearson—his black mother’s former master—who never claims John as his son. In John’s formative years with Ned Crittenden, his black stepfather who envies and mistreats him because of his lighter skin, John struggles to feel like a man in the color-struck, white/black world of the South, a world in which John is misunderstood by both blacks and whites. Thus, John’s struggle for a sense of identity—his need to prove himself as “a sho ‘nuff big nigger” (96) in a color-conscious world into which he does not fit—makes him believe that his identity as a black man lies in his sexual prowess. This misunderstanding leads him down a path of promiscuity that ruins two marriages and makes him the source of controversy among his parishioners at Zion Hope Baptist Church.

By examining the novel carefully, then, we see that “through John, Hurston critiques a notion of black masculinity that arises out of racial insecurity and plays itself
out in the oppression of women” (Meisenhelder 37). Unfortunately, this confused and misunderstood John Pearson is not the complex individual that early reviewers envisioned when they discussed Hurston’s protagonist. Rather, they saw in their minds a black male body they could stereotype—a type that they could frame and name in the language of their own discourse. For instance, on July 11, 1934, *The New Republic*’s Martha Gruening declared, “[John] was a hero and a coward, *a magnificent animal* following his lusts and a church member praying to be cleansed of his sins” (Gruening qtd. in Gates and Appiah 3, italics added). Earlier in the same year, Margaret Wallace of *The New York Times Book Review* called John “the big yellow Negro preacher [who is]…part and parcel of the tradition of [his] race, which is as different from ours as night and day” (Wallace qtd. in Gates and Appiah 8). Perhaps most condescendingly, publisher J.B. Lippincott sensationalized the words of reviewers who viewed John through lenses of primitivism, fetishism, and stereotype in his ad for Hurston’s novel in *The New York Times Book Review*, calling John “an Alabama Negro who became a preacher…but who couldn’t still his passions” (Lippincott qtd. in West 65). Clearly, these early reviews present John to the reading public as appealing not because of his complex identity; rather they fetishize John because he seems to fit the narrow scope of their authors’ perceptions of black men. For Gruening, Margaret Wallace, and Lippincott, John is either “a magnificent animal” controlled by sexual urges, or a “big yellow Negro preacher” controlled by the power of “Pagan poesy” (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, 119). In either case, their perceptions of John are dehumanizing because they perceive him as being powerless. Never once do they refer to John as a man with real power—as
a complex individual whose struggle for self-worth causes him to struggle with what it means to be somebody (“a sho ‘nuff big nigger”) in a world that doesn’t understand him.

I would find it hard to believe that the John these early reviews create is linked to the John that Hurston desires for her readers to experience. This John—framed in the language of binary opposition (secular/sacred, barbaric/civilized, animalistic/human, etc.)—is nothing more than a black male body that is “vulnerable to racist interpretations and negative criticisms” (West 54).

The need to deconstruct this language barrier as a means to envision a more complex John Pearson—as opposed to over-determined depictions of the protagonist—is precisely why *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* deserves critical attention in contemporary black masculine studies. Like many black men in America, we first experience John through a language that is not his own. In other words, it is not Hurston’s dialogue and description that shape our initial perception of John Pearson. Rather, publisher J.B. Lippincott gets the first word in by the way in which he employs the languages of imagery and critical acclaim on the novel’s front and inside covers:
Visible on the exterior of the dust jacket of Jonah’s Gourd Vine is a black man in a clerical collar surrounded by six other figures, five of whom are female. With arms outstretched the preacher towers over the others. Immediately, then, the cover orients readers to the black community, the black church, and the largely female admiration of the pastor. To a degree, the image deceives. While John’s struggles with the church are important, he does not accept the role of pastor until nearly halfway through the novel (West 60).

Here, both the image we see—the larger-than-life John Pearson juxtaposed against a frail-looking flock of black females—and the summary on the inside flap—“The lusty, revealing story of a big, roistering Alabama Negro written only as one of his race could write it” (Lippincott qtd. in West 65)—indicate Lippincott’s monolithic reading of John Pearson. Further, if we consider Lippincott’s arrangement of the cover and summary as examples of what Gérard Genette calls *paratexts*, “the liminal devices...that mediate the relations between the text and reader” (xi), then it is clear that through paratextual language, Lippincott has given himself a pre-textual authorship and subtle authority over Hurston’s text. In other words, long before readers experience John Pearson for themselves, Lippincott has told them—through use of a stereotypical illustration and misleading summary—who this black man is. Lippincott, like the slave-owner of antebellum America, has named John Pearson. And what is particularly telling about Lippincott’s naming of John—“a big, roistering Alabama Negro”—is that it not only places a subjective modifier on his character—“roistering”—but it also discounts his masculinity. The John Pearson we meet through Lippincott’s eyes is not a man, but an “Alabama Negro”—a black male body that fits the “carnal sensualist stereotype” (West 65) already at work in some of the minds of Hurston’s white readership.

Why is Lippincott’s paratextual framing of John Pearson problematic, or even worthy of consideration in my exploration of John? Because Lippincott’s framing of
John’s body-as-text functions to subtly suppress black male possibility in a novel in which the protagonist’s complex identity can challenge the boundaries of binary constructions and the limitations of racialist discourse. Because we unconsciously overlook dynamic characters like John Pearson in a world in which “any significant subversion of [black male identity] is always already contained—framed—by the subtextual work of the black male stereotype” (Wallace 21). Thus, raising questions around issues of paratextual authorship challenges the intentions of the publisher and reviewers of Hurston’s complex black male protagonist. Rather than questioning Hurston’s creation of a seemingly simplistic, “stereotypically lascivious” (West 55) black man—as many reviewers who disliked Jonah’s Gourd Vine did—interrogating the language that frames her protagonist enables us to un-frame him. Thus, I continue my exploration of John Pearson through the process of language interrogation, in hopes of experiencing a black man who is “more sophisticated and subversive” (West 55) than the promiscuous preacher-man that ads and reviews of the novel have created throughout the twentieth century.

III

“House-nigger” and “walking orgasm”: John and the Language of Ambivalence

When we encounter John Pearson in the text, he first appears to us through the language of ambivalence. I define the language of ambivalence as the use of contradictory names as a means to place an individual in opposition to oneself. The language of ambivalence, then, in the most pejorative sense, is a verbal weapon. It can provide a way of linguistically inscribing the identity of an Other as inferior to one’s own
identity through its denigration of this Other’s difference from the self. However, the language of ambivalence, when used constructively by an Other, can also provide a space through which to critique the language out of which this binary relationship has been established. In other words, if this Other disidentifies with the system of binary thinking responsible for the contradictory names he or she acquires, then the need to choose a name or identity that is most fitting disappears. To place this discussion in terms I used earlier, by choosing to disidentify, this Other does not have to be secular or sacred—he or she can be both, or neither. Through the language of ambivalence, then, this Other can exist in the fluid spaces outside of binary constructions and ultimately avoid the challenge of fitting into their over-determined boxes.

Throughout John’s formative years, he is this Other, and the language of ambivalence shapes him in the manner I have just described. On the one hand, the degrading names that John is called by Ned and Alf limit his representational power in the already color-conscious South. For instance, being told by his black stepfather Ned that he is a “punkin-colored bastard [who]…don’t b’long heah” (Jonah’s Gourd Vine, 10) only reinforces through language what John already sees as he watches the ways in which Ned and his white biological father Alf disown him. Yet, as the protagonist in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man realizes upon witnessing Rinehart—whose names reveal that he is a numbers-runner, pimp, and preacher; thus, both “rind” and “heart”—the names John acquires, and the multiplicity of connotations that can be derived from these names, demonstrate not who John is, but rather who John can be. They imply a certain level of fluidity in his identity—the ability to be much more than the “bastard” (5) and “house-
nigger” (6) Ned describes or the “splendid specimen” (18) and “walking orgasm” (45) Alf sees. Thus, if we recognize that John can reject and/or reconstruct these myopic perceptions of his identity—as he does by becoming a husband, carpenter, preacher, and moderator who is far from perfect, but capable of being human, of being “both saint and sinner” (Holloway 38, italics added)—then we can begin to understand John as a complex social being.

When we are first introduced to John, however, he is a “fool” (*Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, 4), “de house-nigger” (6), and “dat punkin-colored bastard [who]…don’t b’long heah” (10). He receives these degrading titles from his black stepfather Ned, who calls him these and other names as a means to exercise the autonomy and authority that he is denied because he sees himself as a black man living within the emasculatory world of slavery. In other words, Ned sees himself as white men like Major Rush Beasley and Captain Mimms see him: as a “uh yard dawg” (8), as a poor black sharecropper whom they can name, devalue, and order around even though he is technically not a slave. Further, by choosing to situate his identity in simple, binary oppositions (white/black, light-skinned/dark-skinned, master/slave, etc.) Ned sets himself up to be threatened by his stepson’s identity, which constantly challenges these over-determined polarities. Thus, Ned feels that he must employ the language of ambivalence by calling John a “house-nigger”—someone who he is not—in order to identify him as the Other (different from and opposed to him) in the slavery-shaped world Ned experiences: “John is de house-nigger. Ole Marsa always kep’ de yaller niggers in de house and give ‘em uh job totin’ silver dishes and goblet tuh de table. Us black niggers is de ones s’posed tuh ketch de
wind and de weather” (6). Clearly, Ned’s myopic perception of black male identity—as being dependent on a relationship with a white master who can name him and structure his identity as either a “house-nigger”/“yaller nigger” or a “black nigger” condemned to work in “de wind and de weather”—displays his sense of powerlessness. On the one hand, Ned knows that he is not a slave. But when he looks at his stepson, he feels enslaved to the fact of his blackness. In other words, Ned feels at once powerless to Beasley and Mimms—white men who treat him like a slave—and to his stepson John—whose lighter skin color convinces Ned that he will receive access to a world of power that he has never known. This overwhelming sense of powerlessness—which emerges through the self-hatred inherent in the language of slavery, ultimately makes Ned envious of John, as Susan Edwards Meisenhelder reveals:

Ned is clearly a tragic victim for Hurston…who emulates his own oppressor in his relationships with and his views of black people. Accepting the white world’s divisive, false characterizations of black people as ‘house niggers’ and ‘field niggers,’ light-skinned and dark-skinned, he consistently echoes the slave owner’s attitude …Ned tries to make himself feel…more like a man by treating his family and his race as animals (43,44).

Given Ned’s sense of powerlessness, it is not surprising that he “echoes the slave owner’s attitude” in his relationship with John. By telling his stepson that “niggers wuz made tuh work” (Jonah’s Gourd Vine, 7) and by calling him a slave (“house-nigger”)—something John is not—Ned seeks to empower himself. Through using the language of ambivalence in this manner—as a weapon of contradictory naming—Ned can identify John as being at once an animal/slave he owns and “uh bastard” (5) he disowns. Thus, Ned uses the language of ambivalence to tear John down and build himself up. He uses it to
rationalize his mistreatment of John—as if to say that he calls John degrading names and treats him like a slave because John is and always will be better off than him.

This brings us to one reason why individuals use the language of ambivalence as a weapon—fear. It is clear that Ned uses the language of ambivalence against his stepson because he is afraid of him. He feels threatened by John’s power to be neither black nor white. While he thinks this power of choice comes from John’s lighter skin color, we know that it comes from John’s initial rejection of the binary-reinforcing language of slavery (house-nigger/field-nigger, light-skinned/dark-skinned, etc.) as a source of self-identification. In Ned’s mind, however, John’s exclusive power to create an identity outside of slavery’s discourse (white/black, master/slave, etc.) makes him enviable—he even refers to John as “a yaller god” (4) soon after calling him some of the aforementioned degrading names. Sadly, Ned’s inability to let go of seeing identity through slavery’s language of binary opposition is the only thing that denies him access to this same power of choice.

Clearly, then, Ned’s calling John a “house-nigger” (a slave I hate, a man I own) is a way to inflict him with his own paralyzing sense of powerlessness through language. Calling him “uh bastard” (no son of mine) is a way to do the same thing. Both names demonstrate Ned’s fear and/or hatred of John’s power. At times, Ned’s verbal attacks prove effective, creating anguish and insecurity within John. After all, how constructively can an adolescent think about his identity when his stepfather openly asserts, “Ahm de pappy uh all but dat one” (5) or, “Ah feeds ‘im and clothes ‘im but Ah ain’t tuh do nothin’ to dat yaller god” (4)? In other words, as the only visible father in
John’s life, Ned’s use of the language of ambivalence affects the way in which John thinks and speaks about himself—John actually becomes unsure of who he is and whose he is. At one point in the text, John is so hurt by Ned’s remarks that he declares: “Sometimes I jes’ as soon be under Mimms ez pappy. One ‘bout ez bad as tother” (8). For John to say that he would rather live with and/or work for Mimms—a white man—shows the degree to which Ned’s words have wounded his spirit. Further, John’s need to feel like a man—his need to feel victorious over Ned’s verbal attacks—causes him to threaten his stepfather. In the last days that John spends working for Ned, he vows to beat him up.

It is clear, then, that by the time Ned orders John to leave his house, John has been hurt by Ned’s name-calling/use of the language of ambivalence. Subconsciously, however, John has begun to surmise the reason for Ned’s name-calling—the fear and hatred that Ned has for the possibilities that he believes exist only within the fluidity of John’s identity. This realization, voiced in John’s declaration, “Ah ever wanted tuh cross over” (12), demonstrates the ways in which the language of ambivalence—though intended by Ned to humiliate John—ultimately opens the door to John’s discovery of the fluidity of his identity.

Another individual who uses the language of ambivalence against John in his youth is Alf Pearson, the white man we presume to be John’s biological father. Unlike Ned, Alf never calls John “uh bastard” or a slave (“house-nigger”). Instead, Alf uses a more silent form of the language of ambivalence: Alf doesn’t acknowledge John at all. For Alf, John is a bastard (no son of mine) without his need of saying so because in his
eyes, John’s mother, Amy Crittenden, is not a woman. She was his slave. Thus, as the offspring of a black and therefore subhuman sex object, John is simply a black male body that Alf feels he can name, commodify, and fetishize like a slave at the auction block. When he first encounters John, for instance, he calls him “a fine stud” (17) and exclaims, “you would have brought five thousand dollars on the block in slavery time!” (17).

Later, reflecting on John’s stature and ability to work, Alf asks: “Did you ever see such a splendid specimen?” (18). Alf’s way of making John into a product through language, then, enables him to ignore the possibility of John’s identity. Equally, by calling John “a walking orgasm” (45) and commenting on John’s courting interests and sexual exploits, Alf distances himself from John’s humanity. Ultimately, Alf would rather fetishize John as a black male body by affirming stereotypes regarding the power of his labor and sexuality than consider the possibility of his identity.

Nevertheless, Alf’s dehumanizing of John through fetishistic language is undercut by his recognition of John’s humanity—by his visual knowledge of his relation to John. This, then, is the language of ambivalence at work. Even before Alf asks who John’s mother is, he says: “Your face looks familiar” (17). In making this connection, Alf subtly acknowledges that this black male body is not a faceless laborer—it is his bastard. Yet by calling John “a fine stud,” “a splendid specimen,” and “a walking orgasm,” Alf maintains his power in their relationship, which parallels a master/slave relationship. Further, John only knows Alf Pearson as “Mist’ Alf” (45) because Alf knows that if he were to acknowledge John as more than his black male laborer—if he were to indicate that John is his son—John might think of himself as worthy of some or
all of his white father’s privileges. Thus, Alf uses the language of ambivalence to own John as his laborer (“fine stud”) and disown him as a son (“Your face looks familiar, but I can’t place you”).

John does not fight against Alf’s use of the language of ambivalence as he did with Ned. This is primarily because John never recognizes that Alf is using this language against him. Alf simply avoids doing anything that would make John feel that he is anymore than the fetishistic and degrading names that he calls him: “fine stud,” “splendid specimen,” and “walking orgasm.” In fact, Alf’s use of the language of ambivalence is more damaging than Ned’s use of it because it is silent, subtle, and hidden from John’s perception, as Josie P. Campbell highlights:

If Ned never loves or treats John as his son, Alf never acknowledges he is John’s white father. How can he in a society that demands, legally and socially, strict separation of the races? […] The lack of a positive father—indeed of any father—in John’s life permeates the novel from beginning to end, coloring John’s relationship with women and his own children (51).

Clearly, the lack of a visible father figure during John’s youth affects the way in which John sees and speaks about his identity. Both Ned and Alf—the two men who we might expect to play a major role in constructively shaping John’s understanding of identity—use the language of ambivalence to disown John and treat him like a slave. It is no surprise, then, that this language both opens John’s eyes to the fluidity of his identity while simultaneously limiting his understanding of what this fluidity ultimately means. For even though he knows he can be more than what Ned and Alf have called him, John spends most of his adult life searching for ways to prove that he is “a sho ‘nuff big nigger” (Jonah’s Gourd Vine, 96). In fact, he struggles to see his identity as existing or
having meaning without being in someway connected to a white/black binary, as Meisenhelder reveals:

[John] cannot...imagine a black world independent of a white one; when he comes to Eatonville, he is puzzled as to who ‘bosses’ the town in absence of whites. John cannot imagine a black world equal to a white one either; when Lucy urges them to buy their home, he responds, ‘Dat’s uh bigger job than Ah wants to tackle, Lucy. You so big-eyed. Wese colored folks. Don’t be so much-knowin’” (44-45).

Thus, while the reader can appreciate the ways in which the language of ambivalence empower John’s understanding of his identity, the kinds of language that sons experience in their relationships (or non-relationships) with their fathers strongly shape the ways in which they use language to contextualize themselves and others within culture (Black 143). So while John’s ability to envision himself outside of the binary constructions in which his fathers see him does occur at various points in the novel, his actions throughout his adult life prove that he does not fully understand or accept the fluidity that this vision affords his identity.

IV

Lucy’s Language of Love, John’s Language of Possibility

As Hurston’s plot continues, the ways in which John’s identity is shaped by the language of ambivalence becomes more readily apparent. After John’s heated exchanges with Ned, John desires to experience the “over-the-creek-niggers” (14)—those black people who live on “the new and shiny side of the Big Creek” (13), which John has never explored. As he sets foot in this new territory, however, John’s identity is immediately called into question. Soon after he arrives on the other side of the Creek, John is surrounded by a crowd of flirtatious black girls, and the youngest one—his future wife—
remarks: “Where you reckon dis big yaller bee-stung nigger come from?” (14) At first, the girls laugh at a silent John to the point that “he felt ashamed” (14). John, whose stepfather makes him feel unwanted on the side of the Creek from which he came, feels equally out-of-place on this “new and shiny side of the Big Creek.” After moments in this new world with “the school house” (14) and “colored folks that went around with their feet cramped up like white folks” (14), John feels inferior to the girls that he sees. The stinging words of “the little tormenter” (14) he encounters seem to remind him that he does not belong on either side of the Creek.

It seems that through the language of ambivalence, then, John has again been reminded of the ways in which his complex identity is unwelcome. On the one hand, John can see that the girls are attracted to him. One girl “threw herself akimbo…and came walking out happily behind the other, challenging John to [an] appraisal of her person” (15). Another “pulled her apron a little tight across the body as she advanced towards [John]” (15). In other words, these girls welcome John’s presence through flirting because they find him attractive. Yet they also tease John about his appearance (bare feet) and speech (he calls white men “Master” as opposed to “Mister”), which makes John conscious of their class differences. Thus, the girls appear to use the language of ambivalence to make John feel inferior to them, as with the girl who calls him a “big yaller bee-stung nigger.” Yet, I believe that Hurston would want us to notice that there is much more going on within John at this point in the text.

If we look closely, we note that while John deals with rejection on both sides of the Creek, John finds comfort, peace, and possibility in the space that separates them.
The night before crossing the Big Creek, John gleefully swims in it. John has just left the side of the Creek on which his black stepfather disowns and despises him, and will soon encounter a new side of the Creek, which will greet him with taunting from both his black peers and his white biological father. Yet in the Creek—in this fluid margin where John feels comfortable stripping naked and exploring himself in all of the contexts under “the new sun” (13)—John Pearson (not “punkin-colored bastard,” “house-nigger,” “splendid specimen,” “walking orgasm,” or “big yaller bee-stung nigger”) first comes to life for the reader. Here, John Pearson dreams. He thinks about the possibilities (laughter, girls, etc.) that exist in the world that awaits him. Further, by telling himself “No more Ned” (13), he forgets about the people and systems that have previously shaped his way of seeing himself and the world. In other words, in the fluid margin of the Creek, John prepares himself for a new language to help shape the formation of his identity. John prepares himself for experiencing the language of possibility.

I define the language of possibility as words or ideas that challenge systems of thinking about oneself by creating an alternative discourse through which to perceive one’s identity. Unlike the language of ambivalence, which can be used as a weapon, the language of possibility is used only to uplift an individual. Its only destructive quality is its tendency to eliminate a previous discourse by revealing its limitations. To place this discussion in terms I used earlier, an individual who uses the language of possibility would challenge the function of the secular/sacred binary in the process of identity formation. He or she might ask, “Why must I be sinner or saint? Why must I be sinner and saint? Why must I be neither one nor the other? Why must my choosing to be a
sinner imply the existence of a saint, or vice versa?” By interrogating the limitations of the discourse out of which a given identity arises, as in the language/system of binary opposition described above, the language of possibility seeks to free an individual’s perception of the self. The individual achieves agency through recognizing that he or she can be more complex than what the secular/sacred binary can capture.

John discovers the language of possibility through his exchange with Lucy Potts, the small girl who initially teases John when he arrives on the other side of the Creek. This girl who in one breath calls John a “big yaller bee-stung nigger” smiles approvingly at him in the next. Unlike Ned—who calls John names and sneers at his fair skin—or Alf—who calls him names and gawks at the size of his black body—after Lucy calls John a name, she “[looks] right into his eyes” (15) and gets John to laugh with her. In other words, Lucy engages John as a person—as an individual whom she does not exist in opposition to in any way. From the coy, confident manner in which she interacts with him, then, it is clear that Lucy sees John’s differences as possibilities rather than limitations—as reasons to experience rather than question his identity. Through her use of humor, Lucy becomes the first to demonstrate to John that the language of ambivalence—which Ned and Alf have used to disown and/or mistreat John—can be transformed in a way that can allow John to focus not on who he is (in opposition and/or relation to others), but rather who he can be (outside of binary constructions). In other words, Lucy’s gaze and word plays challenge John to envision himself outside of the system of binary opposition through which Ned and Alf define John’s identity.
During their courting days, Lucy deconstructs the language of ambivalence through which John’s identity has been previously inscribed by interacting with John through witty, rhyming verbal duels. Frequently, her word plays—which combine humor and poetry (arguably, two genres of writing that playfully change our perspectives of the world)—challenge John to find another way to say something, just as her hopeful gaze challenges him to find another way of contextualizing himself amid the many class-conscious, color-struck individuals who live on either side of the Creek. Take for instance, John’s feeble attempt at greeting Lucy: “‘Hello agin,’ John greeted her, glad at her friendliness. ‘Hello yuhself, want uh piece uh cawn bread look on de shelf’” (16). At first glance, this exchange merely sets the stage for a comedic courtship routine. However, if we consider the ways in which this exchange and the ones that follow, laden with humor and poetry, create a language of possibility that challenges John’s way of thinking about language and identity, then we can see the importance of Lucy’s verbal dueling with John. In this exchange, for instance, Lucy challenges John to greet her in his own language—in a way that is distinguishing—just as she says hello in a way that is distinctive of her personality (“Hello yuhself, want uh piece uh cawn bread look on de shelf”). Debra Beilke expounds further on the way in which Lucy’s humor and poetry introduce John to the language of possibility and a positive self-image:

While John was certainly born with a gift for speech, [Lucy] is the impetus behind its full development—not only through her emotional support of him, but more importantly, because of what he learns from her skilled comic performances. Her laughter initiates him into the possibilities of a racial pride which celebrates creativity and playfulness rather than the violence and dreariness of his stepfather’s home (26-27).

Clearly, for John, the opportunity to develop a sense of pride about his differences through the “creativity and playfulness” of verbal duels with Lucy, as opposed to
questioning himself after the “violence and dreariness” that Ned’s verbal attacks wreak upon his spirit empowers him.

In marriage, Lucy’s words change from schoolgirl rhymes to inspirational exhortations, but her messages to John still function within the powerful language of possibility. Long before John chooses to become a carpenter, preacher, and moderator, Lucy expresses her belief in John’s ability to work, preach, and lead a community. When he is looking for work in Eatonville, Florida, she tells him: “You knows how tuh carpenter” (94). Sure enough, John’s success in carpentry follows her faithful affirmation. Later, after John is called to preach, Lucy assures him of his ability to lead greater masses: “There came the day, with Lucy’s maneuvering, that John stood up in the State Association, and was called Moderator” (100). In other words, as a woman whose self-confidence and identity are rooted in the power of language, Lucy’s verbal duels with and inspirational exhortations for John afford him a medium through which to re-conceptualize the limiting ways in which he has been raised to contextualize his identity.

Perhaps most stirring is Lucy’s challenge for John to step up to the responsibility that the language of possibility affords him as a man: “Be uh man. Cover de ground you stand on. Jump at de sun and eben if you miss it, yuh can’t help grabbin’ holt uh de moon” (82). John, hearing perhaps the aggravation in Lucy’s voice rather than the hopeful expectancy of her message, responds to her charge with mannish obstinacy, accusing Lucy of “tongue lash” (82). Here, John’s response foreshadows the tragic mistake that will torment him throughout the text: John fails to receive Lucy’s language of love—the language of possibility. In this instance, John rejects the language of
possibility because it scares him to think about himself as an individual existing outside of the binary oppositions that Ned and Alf have instilled him. It scares him to identify outside of a white/black binary. It scares him to think about himself as an individual independent of what these systems of binary oppositions inherently overstate: his race, class, and sexuality.

For John, it is easier to envision himself through a hypermasculine, “sho’ nuff big nigger” code of honor. In other words, since Zion Hope adores his preaching, since Eatonville adores his community spirit, since women everywhere cling to him, and since “his dark blue broadcloth, his hand-made alligator shoes, and his black Stetson” (100) speak to his socioeconomic prosperity, John uses these superficial markers of class, achievement, and respectability to define his identity. Thus, “John’s attitudes about black possibilities are dependent on white definitions” (Meisenhelder 45) and his black-and-white way of thinking foreshadows his self-destruction.

V

*Practice What I Preach, Not What I Live: John’s Salvation through the Language of Redemption*

As we think about John’s rejection of the language of possibility and the ways in which he clings to the binary oppositions that comprise the language of ambivalence, I must consider a biblical proverb that corresponds with the events leading up to John’s death: *Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall* (Proverbs 16:18). For John, pride is the source of his ultimate self-destruction. We see this self-destruction take place when John’s marriages and friendships fall apart, when Lucy—the wife he loves—
dies, when his promiscuous lifestyle leads to his congregation calling for his removal from Zion Baptist Church, and finally, when John is hit by a train after cheating on his second wife, Sally Lovelace. It seems that John’s refusal to give up the way in which he has been brought up—which involves his seeing himself within the language of binary opposition—dooms him, in a sense:

Caught initially between the legacies of slavery and freedom, body and soul, black and white, father and mother, then trying to choose between ‘nat’ul man’ and priest, hedonistic pleasure and familial responsibility, John’s ambiguities doom him to torment and irresolution (Lowe 101).

Here, the words to focus on in John Lowe’s observation are “initially” and “choose.” When the novel begins—“initially”—John is a victim of the language of ambivalence, fighting for a way to perceive his identity outside of the master/slave, white/black, light-skinned/dark-skinned binaries that Ned’s and Alf’s name-calling reinforce. However, Lowe’s word choice suggests that John’s tragic error is his inability to realize that he can “choose”—that he can conceive of his identity outside of this oppressive discourse. This power of choice is most apparent in John’s relationship with Lucy since Lucy’s language of possibility enables John to see himself as an individual rather than an antagonistic force whose identity depends upon his difference from someone else.

Sadly, however, John’s perpetual silencing of Lucy’s language of possibility in their marriage reinforces his willful participation in binary oppositions (a male is to be heard/a female is to be silent), and reveals the oppressive nature of his pride. In other words, John’s need to feel like a man—like “uh sho’ nuff big nigger” (96)—leads him to repeatedly ignore or attack Lucy’s language of possibility, as he does when he calls her re-conceptualization of his identity “tongue lash” (82). The truth is that John refuses to
“jump at de sun” (82)—as Lucy urges him to do through the language of possibility—not because binary-structured identity perception is all that he knows; rather, it’s all that he wants to know. John, like so many black men in America, has chosen to be the victim of the language of ambivalence. He has chosen to identify himself through the names that others have used to degrade him. He has chosen that he will either be like Ned—a black man whose racial insecurity causes him to physically and verbally abuse his family, just as John does with Lucy—or like Alf—a white man who abandons his child at birth, just as John does when his daughter Isis is born. Thus, John’s willful blindness to Lucy’s language of possibility foreshadows the way in which pride will bring about his fall from grace.

Yet John’s tragic flaw—pride—is necessary for our reading of John as a complex black male protagonist. For while John’s pride blinds him to understanding the complexity of his identity, because it is so excruciatingly visible in his relationships with people, John’s pride also makes John imperfect and therefore capable of salvation. Thus, when John dismisses Lucy’s language of possibility, calling it “tongue lash” (82), he is actually expressing his recognition of his own short-sightedness. Like the name-calling that most of us have engaged in as children, John calls Lucy’s perception of his possibilities “tongue lash” because her language of possibility threatens his perception of masculinity. It reminds John that he has not thought for himself during his process of identity formation. Rather, he has allowed Ned and Alf, and now Lucy—a woman—to try and tell him who he is. Thus, John feels that he must silence Lucy with mannish pride. Her words, he decides, cannot have any real meaning—they are “tongue lash.”
However, by reacting in this childish manner, John is revealing to the reader his desire to be saved, or perhaps stated more accurately—his desire to save himself. As a man blessed with the gift of “Pagan poesy” (119) John desires to save himself through the power of the word. This salvation through language is made possible through what I call the language of redemption.

I define the language of redemption as words or ideas that expand an individual’s self-perception through the processes of self-exploration and self-affirmation. This language simultaneously inspires and saves others because it blurs the boundaries of self and other. It implies that identifying and/or disidentifying through language is not merely an individual pursuit—rather it is a dialogic process of communal salvation and uplift. In other words, an individual using the language of redemption would not ask: “Am I/you secular and/or sacred, or neither?” Rather, he or she would ask: “Who are we? Can I hear your perception of yourself? Will you hear mine?”

In the novel, John uses the language of redemption when he calls himself “a false pretender” (167). During this moment before a train barrels down the tracks and smashes into his car, John is changing the way in which he thinks about himself. No longer consumed with being a “sho ‘nuff big nigger” (96), an elderly John is finally “looking inward” (167). John is finally taking ownership for embracing the binary oppositions that led to his myopic perceptions of his identity. John is finally letting go of the pride that kept him from seeing himself outside of this limiting discourse, as Campbell notes:

Like the biblical Jonah, John Buddy needs to look inward…to understand his own pride. John Pearson has run from his capacity for betrayal all of his life. Only at the end does he accept responsibility for his promiscuity. For the first time he accuses himself of pride and hypocrisy. For the first time John Buddy looks inside himself and reflects on his own soul. In this act lies his redemption (52).
Here, by emphasizing that this moment of reflection is “the first time” that John uses the language of redemption, Campbell reveals the way in which John’s understanding of his power of choice leads to his salvation and the salvation of his community. In other words, only when John conscientiously acknowledges that at different moments in his life he has been pious preacher and lustful transgressor, faithful lover and disloyal husband, saint and sinner—“in the world” and “of the world”—can he find peace in his complex identity. Only when he chooses to be honest with himself can he move beyond the judgmental gossip of his self-righteous congregation. Only when John considers himself in a multiplicity of contexts can he forgive himself for his mistreatment of Lucy and Sally. Only when John lets go of his pride can he (and his community) be saved from the binary oppositions that Ned and Alf have used to frame his identity.

Thus, John’s use of the language of redemption creates scenes of salvation in the last chapter of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. In a funeral service that overflows with emotion, John becomes a Christ figure—an individual who dies for his or her beliefs and lives again through the life-saving power of language. We learn that “multitudes from all over the State…had come to do John Pearson homage” (167) and that his Zion Baptist congregation made sure that “his high-backed, throne-like chair was decorated” (167). In other words, some of the very people who condemn John in life believe in John after his sacrificial death because they can finally witness the ways in which John believed in himself. John’s complex life as promiscuous preacher-man, as “saint and sinner” (Holloway 37, italics added), has meaning to them because it reveals his humanity. Suddenly, while John is not the saint he pompously purported from behind the pulpit, he
is also not the heartless sinner the congregation has created through their gossip. John, like each of them, is human and beyond the definitions of such a limiting secular/sacred binary, as John reveals in his (subconscious) use of the language of redemption after one of his sermons:

> When Ah speak to yuh from dis pulpit, dat ain’t me talkin’, dat’s de voice uh God speakin’ thru me. When the voice is thew, ah jus’ unnother one uh God’s crumblin’ clods…Ahm a natchel man but look lak some uh y’all is dumb tuh de fack” (Jonah’s Gourd Vine, 104).

At the time, John hurled these words at his congregation as a means to evoke pity from them, for they openly expressed their disapproval of his promiscuous lifestyle and mistreatment of Lucy. Yet by novel’s end, these words have taken on another meaning because John has accepted that his choice to be powerless to promiscuity is as much a part of who he is as his choice to be powerful in the pulpit. In other words, John has realized that the possibilities of his identity are fixed only if he chooses to be a black male preacher according to the standards established by his community. Yet when he chooses to look inward, these boundaries are erased, and John’s preacher-man identity becomes fluid and liberating because it is based on a language within which he chooses to inscribe himself. Thus, through the language of redemption, John’s sins can be used with his piety to aid in communal uplift.

This point becomes readily apparent when both Sally—John’s third wife, whom he loves like Lucy—and Hattie—the ex-wife who utterly detests John—arrive at the funeral. These women’s responses to John’s death are very different because the nature of their relationships with John speak to the duality of his character. Sally mourns John because she sees him as a morally-sound preacher-man who has always been true to her
(though the reader knows of his final sexual encounter with Ora Patton). Hattie mourns John because she believes he loved her so much that he would cheat on Lucy to fulfill her financial and sexual needs. Furthermore, the congregation mourns for John because his powerful words struck a chord with their spiritual psyches. In other words, John’s death allows his lovers and community to realize that he was much more than “uh bastard,” “big yaller bee-stung nigger,” “walking orgasm,” adulterer, or inspirational preacher—he was all of these and more, for better or for worse:

The funeral scene at Zion Hope Church reinforces the tight intertwining of familial and spiritual plots, of the secular and the sacred. […]. The mourning for John Buddy Pearson gathers together the secular and sacred plots: as Sally Lovelace mourns John personally, saying over and over that he was true to her, God delights in John’s appearance (Campbell 41).

It is clear, then, that through memory and mourning—two examples of “the processes of self-exploration and self-affirmation” that I point to as characterizing the language of redemption—John lives on. As Campbell points out, “the mourning for John…gathers together the secular and sacred plots,” which complicates John’s identity and empowers a community of individuals whose lives are both “in the world” and “of the world.” As they witness the lives that John has touched, they realize that their identities, like John’s, are fluid when they move beyond the language of binary opposition.

Thus, as we think about contemporary American culture, the borderless space that John creates for identity perception through his sacrificial death can liberate black men from their subjection to fetishistic or stereotypical perceptions—like those that emerge from Lippincott’s paratextual framing of John. Further, if we agree with Holloway that “Jonah seems to bend over backward to establish [the] point that language is a controlling element in one’s life” (54), then we must be willing to engage language the
way John does by novel’s end. By constructively applying any or all of the languages that I’ve discussed (the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, or the language of redemption) as alternative lenses through which to contextualize black male possibility, we can collectively be redeemed from media-based misinterpretations.

VI

Zora’s Gift: The Power of Language in Contemporary Black Masculine Studies

When James Weldon Johnson asked Hurston about her creation of John Pearson in 1934, Hurston’s response revealed her understanding of the power of language—particularly the ways in which ambivalence, possibility, and redemption play into the complexity of her black male protagonist:

I have tried to present a Negro preacher who is neither funny nor an imitation Puritan ram-rod in pants. Just the human being and poet that he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit. I do not speak of those among us who have been tampered with and consequently have gone Presbyterian or Episcopal. I mean the common run of us who love magnificence, beauty, poetry, and color so much that there can never be too much of it. Who do not feel that the ridiculous has been achieved when someone decorates a decoration. That is my viewpoint. I see a preacher as a man outside of his pulpit and so far as I am concerned he should be free to follow his bent as other men. He becomes the voice of the spirit when he ascends the rostrum (Hurston qtd. in Neal 26).

Clearly, Hurston’s response speaks to the ways in which “a Negro preacher” is both “in the world” and “of the world,” yet her focus seems to be on the artistic function of this duality. In other words, Hurston is interested in both the language that others use to create John, and the language that moves through his own mind and mouth. For her, the preacher is a poet whose words can create new images, new worlds, and new possibilities—an individual whose participation in language can turn a world on its head, and change the way we look at it, him, and ourselves within its fluid space.
Perhaps this is why Hurston situates John and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* in spaces between the secular and the sacred. John jumps out to us in the languages of multiple worlds, and his ability to transition between these languages and worlds enables him to touch and change our lives in the same way that he has transformed the lives of his community and congregation. Here is a man whose participation in Christian discourse (the sacred) allows him to identify with his readers on a spiritual level. Here is a man whose signifying on Christian discourse through dialect and word plays (the secular) celebrates the African roots from which he came. Here is a poet, Negro preacher, African griot, and trickster figure who lives between the sacredness of religious tradition and the secularity of cultural heritage, between the Bible’s story of Jonah and the comedic folklore of black oral tradition. Here is a man whose battles with love and lust, right and wrong, and courage and fear are struggles with which we can all relate. Here is Zora’s gift to us—not a black man; rather, a work of art.

As I consider again the ways in which *Jonah’s* publisher and early reviewers used “racially charged language” (West 55) to identify John over half-a-century ago, and the fetishistic ways in which many of us think about black men today (Wallace 21), I am thankful for Hurston’s gift. I am thankful that the vision of an early black feminist created a black man whose life story—like so many of ours—was based on language. I am thankful for my own revelations about the ways in which John uses language to save himself and others because sometimes, we need difference, ambivalence, possibility, and redemption to shake up our world(s). Sometimes we need to see new faces. Sometimes, in those spaces between our fears and prejudices—between the sacred and secular
world(s) we choose to create—we need to see works of art. Sometimes, we need to see black men.
Works Cited


CHAPTER 2

DECONSTRUCTING BINARY OPPOSITION:
The Power of Black Male Voice in the Languages of Ambivalence, Possibility, and Redemption in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*
“Go Tell It on the Mountain...inaugurates a reconception of voice in black masculinist literature. [...] Baldwin de-centers his narrative...he inscribes a chorus of voices.”
—Keith Clark, “Baldwin, Communitas, and the Black Masculinist Tradition”

As a youngster, I hated church. My scrawny seven-year-old frame always got boxed-in by old, cotton-covered bodies whose wide behinds pressed me against the end of the pew. Then my neck would wind up worn-out from having to turn to someone’s over-perfumed mama every other minute to exchange a prophetic rhyming couplet. Then my own mother, seeing my yawn-and-fidget routine, would glare at me from her spot in the choir stand. Didn’t she understand what Sunday afternoon football meant to an adolescent male? She would always tell me that church wouldn’t be so bad if I would just choose to make the most of my experience. “Think about the words, baby,” she’d say when we entered the sanctuary.

Still, even for as much as I hated that old, stuffy steeple-house, whenever the Inspirational Chorus started singing, something happened to me. I tried to think about the words. But something more powerful than words always cried out to me. Immediately, my body would start rocking, my hands would thrust themselves in the air, and I’d leap up, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Many times, the words the choir sang were as simple as “He’s my Rock.” But what accentuated their simple language was something far more powerful than language itself—it was the sound of the voices. The opportunity to hear the Word from so many different voices made me feel free in those hot, overcrowded pews. In other words, by experiencing language through harmony—through voices big and small, old and young—church was liberating, even for me.
As I return to my exploration of black masculine identity in literature and culture, I believe that seeking out and celebrating the diversity of black male voices can be equally empowering. In the previous chapter, I examined the ways in which Jonah’s Gourd Vine employed the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, and the language of redemption in order to create spaces through which to envision black male identity outside of the myopic lens of binary opposition. In this chapter, I wish to build on this notion of complicating black male identity through these languages. In the following pages, however, I seek to highlight the power of voice in the expression of these languages, for while Huston’s aforementioned novel enables us to see black men from more nuanced perspectives, I would argue that we don’t hear the dialogic harmony of these voices.

This next level of deconstruction emerges in James Baldwin’s 1953 novel Go Tell It on the Mountain through Baldwin’s de-centering of narrative voice and structure. On multiple occasions in the text, we encounter the intimate thoughts and expressions of one character regarding the actions and behaviors of any number of other characters. We encounter, for some period of time, the first-person perspective of one character, and then Baldwin moves us into the conscious and subconscious expressions of another. The novel begins, for instance, with an intimate look into the mind of John Grimes, but swiftly moves to the thoughts and expressions of Florence, then Gabriel Grimes, and then Elizabeth Grimes before returning to John’s thoughts at novel’s end. Baldwin achieves this de-centering of narrative voice by dividing his novel into prayers. In Part Two, for instance, we move from “Florence’s Prayer” to “Gabriel’s Prayer” to “Elizabeth’s
This frequent shifting of centers—or prayer voices/recollections—brings us to the realization that in order to understand Baldwin’s characters, we cannot privilege any one center—or voice—over another. As Vivian A. May reveals, “Baldwin critiques conventional notions of human identity invested in exclusionary thought processes and in oppositional dichotomies…what is ‘true’ is unclear, as is who is ‘right’” (98). In other words, we cannot proclaim any one narrative account that we encounter as true or untrue, because there are multiple truths that are revealed. Baldwin, then, seeks to reveal that this notion of declaring a universal truth, like the belief that identities can be inscribed and articulated within the (limiting) language of culture, is both subjective and restrictive to the creation of a complex plot. Therefore, Baldwin’s de-centering of voice throughout the novel—which May refers to as “narrative dissonance” (98)—creates characters who are multifaceted, characters who are neither completely admirable nor wholly despicable, characters who are neither saints nor sinners. Thus, as we think about the discontinuities among and within the multiple narratives, especially in relation to the black men in Baldwin’s novel (John, Gabriel, Brother Elisha, Roy Grimes, Richard, and Frank), we consistently see and hear a deconstruction of the saint/sinner binary I refer to in Chapter 1. Like my leaping for joy upon hearing the diverse body of singers in the Inspirational Chorus, we feel liberated from the claustrophobic language of binary opposition when we choose to witness their black male possibility through Baldwin’s de-centering of voice. Thus, through “[Baldwin’s] chorus of voices” (Clark 132) he effectively complicates the
language(s) through which his black male characters (and his readers) comprehend their identities.

As we move this discussion of de-centering voice and language from literature to culture, I raise the following questions: if listening to a “chorus of voices” can help us to comprehend the complexity of Baldwin’s black men, in what ways can the presence of these diverse voices equally help us to consider the complexity of black male identity in American culture? In what ways can the dual interrogation of language and voice further complicate our understanding of ambivalence, possibility, and redemption as languages through which black male identity can be re-conceptualized?

In the following pages, I will explore these questions by considering the ways in which Baldwin uses a “chorus of voices” to situate his black male characters outside of the language of binary opposition. I will identify the presence of the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, and the language of redemption in Baldwin’s novel, considering specifically the ways in which they function with the black male voice to liberate black male characters from binary-structured identity perception. Ultimately, I will explore Baldwin’s use of voice as a means to understand the ways in which systems/institutions of power suppress black male voice and possibility in American culture.
II

Singing the Discord of Ambivalence: John Grimes and the Language of Ambivalence

First, we must recognize that ambivalence permeates the pages of Baldwin’s novel in a way that challenges the conventions of narrative structure. Ambivalence occurs not only among and within the narratives that Baldwin’s characters divulge—it also occurs in the way in which Baldwin (de)constructs time in the novel. As May notes, “Baldwin’s oscillation between time frames, and between different characters’ points of view…provides readers with conflicting and fluctuating understandings of textual meaning” (97). While in real time (if we agree that such a thing exists) the events of the novel span a weekend, Baldwin situates his multiple narratives in a non-chronological chaos. Through the spontaneous entrances into and exits from the past that we experience through the prayers of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, Baldwin disrupts our expectation of any semblance of order in narrative structure. After Elizabeth’s prayer, for instance, her dialogue (which occurs in what we perceive as the present) with Sister McCandless and Praying Mother Washington is periodically interrupted by the voice of Richard, her lover from the past:

‘When you see all these things, know that your salvation is at hand,’ said Sister McCandless. ‘A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand—but it ain’t going to come nigh thee. So glad, amen, this morning, bless my Redeemer.’
‘You remember that day when you came into the store?’
‘I didn’t think you never looked at me.’
‘Well—you was mighty pretty’ (209-210).

Here, the italicized print highlights the separation between past and present, but the subtle discourse surrounding this passage undercuts the elementary nature of this observation. Elizabeth is weeping uncontrollably during this scene. By the nature of their comments,
we presume that Sister McCandless and Praying Mother Washington attribute Elizabeth’s tears to her son’s triumphant entry into manhood by way of getting saved. However, Elizabeth tears are not for John—they are for herself. She is remembering the ways in which the now-deceased Richard loved her and aided in her understanding of her womanhood.

Thus, Baldwin de-centers order through creating narrative discontinuity. His incessant interweaving of past dialogues in present conversations demonstrates that he does not privilege present narratives over past narratives (or vice versa). This constant interplay between past and present demonstrates Baldwin’s authorial use of the language of ambivalence in the constructive manner I defined in Chapter 1—as a means through which to critique the language of binary opposition.

Why is Baldwin’s way of complicating the past/present binary significant in my exploration of black male identity in Go Tell It on the Mountain? Because by Baldwin creating a “chorus of voices” to tell a story in a time-space that can be defined as neither “past” nor “present,” we can understand the characters who move in these fluid spaces as being equally un-definable by the limiting language(s) of their culture. These characters cannot be fixed: there are just too many contradictory narratives and (when we move between past and present time frames), too prominent a “mutability of roles” (May 97) within and among these characters for us to privilege any particular language or voice over any other at any particular point in time.

Take, for instance, the novel’s black male protagonist—John Grimes. Like John Pearson in Jonah’s Gourd Vine, this John also struggles with fitting into the binary-
structured (secular/sacred) world in which he is raised. He frequently feels subjected to and/or degraded by the names that his father, church, and community call him, and further, what these names signify or assume. The key difference between these two characters, however, is that John Grimes *speaks*. Remember, the closest John Pearson comes to actually articulating the fluidity of his identity occurs when he declares “Ah ever wanted to cross over” (10) before he crosses the Big Creek. Throughout *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, then, we witness the ways in which John Pearson is victimized by the language of ambivalence, rather than the ways in which he constructively employs the language of ambivalence *to speak* to the power of his possibility.

John Grimes, however, consistently uses the language of ambivalence in the constructive manner I described in Chapter 1. This John frequently disidentifies with the dominant systems of identification in his life (i.e. the language through which his father, family, church family and community inscribe his identity) by using his voice. Thus, we not only *visualize* the possibility of his identity—*we also hear* this possibility spoken, and can situate and complicate it among the “chorus of voices” that seek to name, claim, or disown John throughout the novel.

The integration of voice in John’s re-visioning of his identity occurs in two ways in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: through John’s lengthy reflections and through his use of verbal irony. First, John speaks to himself and his readers through the sound of his private thoughts. In the novel’s opening line we discover that “everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father” (11), and we discover in the next line that John “had come to believe it himself” (11). Yet even though
John’s church family imposes their sense of order on John at an early age by telling him how they would always see him, John Grimes speaks out against them. Of course, this does not occur directly: John never openly denounces this title in front of the saints who tarry at The Temple of the Fire Baptized. But because Baldwin takes us deep into John’s mind, we come to understand that John views himself as being far more complex than a “preacher.” In other words, we hear John’s inner voice. For while John’s church family thinks of “preacher” as a compliment of highest regard (signifying all that is positive), John does not consider “preacher” as being remotely close to a positive marker of identity. Although initially flattered by their affirmation (“John…had come to believe it himself”), witnessing and enduring the frequent physical and verbal abuse of his stepfather Gabriel—who is the preacher the church family has in mind when they call John “preacher” (“just like his father”)—makes John hate even the idea of being called “preacher.” In fact, we learn that as a teenager, “[John] had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father’s fathers…he would have another life” (19). Like many others in the Grimes family, John recognizes that his stepfather is “a holy handyman” (51) who turns his Christianity on and off when it is convenient for him; thus, his abuse tarnishes John’s perception of “preacher” as signifying all that is positive.

What is significant about this visualization, however, is the presence of John’s voice behind it. By telling us that “[John] had made his decision…he would have another life,” Baldwin reveals the way in which John articulates that he does not desire to be connected to his stepfather in any way. Baldwin’s choice of words here is intended to make us hear from within John the way in which he disidentifies with the system (the
church) that seeks to narrowly define him. Baldwin also accomplishes this feat by taking us deeper into John’s consciousness, for only a few pages later John’s thoughts reveal that his disgust for his stepfather’s portrayal of a preacher evokes his distrust of all his fathers—including his Heavenly Father: “John’s heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God’s minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father” (21). Here, while John’s rejection of God stems from his pride—his unwillingness to “bow…to his father”—it more interestingly demonstrates his rejection of the church as his system of self-identification. Perhaps subconsciously, John realizes that the church (which is connected to his father) provides only one myopic lens through which he can identify himself. Thus, while the church has called him a name that most would smile at, many of John’s thoughts in this portion of the text demonstrate his knowledge that the term “preacher” can never come close to defining his complex identity.

For John’s church family, however, John is either a preacher or no one worthy of their love and attention. To place this discussion in the terms of the secular/sacred binary I introduced in Chapter 1, John’s church family sees him as either saint or sinner. Yet through John’s voice—the articulation of his thoughts—he disidentifies with their language of binary opposition, which in turn enables him to consider and create another system of self-identification. The discussions in which John participates at school, for instance, provide a lens through which he can deconstruct the systems that seek to narrowly define him (like the institutions of church and family)—through their rejection of binary opposition:
John excelled in school…and it was said that he had a Great Future. He might become a Great Leader of his People. John was not much interested in his people and still less in leading them anywhere, but the phrase so often repeated rose in his mind like a great brass gate, opening outward for him on a world where people did not live in the darkness of his father’s house, did not pray to Jesus in the darkness of his father’s church, where he would eat good food, and wear fine clothes, and go to the movies as often as he wished. In this world, John, who was, his father said, ugly, who was always the smallest boy in the class, and who had no friends, became immediately beautiful, tall, and popular. People fell all over themselves to meet John Grimes. He was a poet, or a college president, or a movie star: he drank expensive whiskey, and he smoked Lucy Strike cigarettes in the green package (19, italics added).

Clearly, John’s desire to focus on school demonstrates his knowledge of the ways in which accepting the name his church has called him (“preacher”) limits him. At school, John realizes, he can dream. He can be whatever he imagines—“immediately beautiful, tall, and popular.” Perhaps, more importantly, school provides a space wherein John can occupy and move between multiple identities—he can be “a poet, or a college president, or a movie star,” all at once, and yet simultaneously much more. In others words, school is a fluid world for John in which his decision to identify in one way does not necessarily place him in opposition to others. For instance, when interacting with individuals in school, John’s decision to go to the movies, drink whiskey and/or smoke cigarettes would not place him against anyone. He would not be subject to being called “sinner” in this space, because in school, sinners don’t exist. In fact, the secular/sacred, saint/sinner binary has no meaning in John’s contextualization of school. In other words, at school, John achieves an understanding of himself as an individual not because he is a “preacher” or a “sinner;” rather, John finds meaning in committing himself to fluid visions.

In short, this lengthy passage documenting John’s intimate thoughts about his identity in the school environment attests to the power of the black male voice. In the realm of black male possibility, the presence of voice—even if it emerges indirectly as it
does here—demonstrates an active response to the language of ambivalence. For while the ability to see oneself in another context is crucial to fighting against names (which I’ve defined as language-markers demonstrating binary opposition), an individual can experience moments of liberation when he or she gives voice to this vision. Thus, vocalization represents the most constructive application of the language of ambivalence I described in Chapter 1 because it leads to free movement between identities in performative spaces.

John’s use of verbal irony also demonstrates the ways in which he integrates voice in his use of the language of ambivalence in the novel. To understand his use of verbal irony, however, we must take a moment and think about the ways in which John’s voice functions in connection with or in response to the major events of the novel. *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is, arguably, a *bildungsroman* or coming-of-age-novel, as it literally tells the story of fourteen-year-old John Grimes coming into his social, familial, and spiritual voices. It opens with John questioning whether the people who claim to love him will remember his birthday (as they seem to overlook and undervalue his love for school, movies, etc.)—whether his family (in the broadest sense of the term) appreciates who he is. Yet for the portion of John’s birthday to which Baldwin exposes his readers, most characters are too busy singing and praying, or whooping and hollering during a tarrying service at their Harlem storefront church to really hear John’s humble cry. With the exception of John’s mother, Elizabeth (who is constantly concerned for her son), most characters are seeking answers for themselves and for their community. They are invested in reconciling the struggles of their past and present lives.
Nevertheless, John is also seeking answers. Throughout the novel, John is searching for a way to get his community to understand who he is—as more than the “preacher” the church sees, more than “Frog-eyes” (216) or the “sorry little boy” (216) the boys on the street witness, as more than “the smallest boy in the class” (19) who his brother Roy mimics in a “shrill-little girl tone” (23), as far from the “bastard” (214) and “face of Satan” (27) that his stepfather Gabriel odiously describes. In other words, in his quest to explore himself as a complex black man, John, too, is searching for his voice. He realizes, however, that in his family and community, the church’s threshing-floor—the space of “visionary conversion experience” (Sivan 29) that holds the congregation captive—is perhaps the only place wherein he will be heard and understood, if only in part. John, then, uses the threshing-floor as a space wherein he can speak. On one level, he speaks in tongues and offers praises to God in a language that his church family knows and adores. After rising from the threshing-floor, for instance, he repeatedly proclaims, “Praise the Lord!” (207). However, I would argue that as John rises from the threshing-floor, he is using verbal irony as a means to speak in a voice that he can call his own—as a way of giving voice to the fluidity of his identity. Thus, even if it is a subconscious act, John desires to constructively use the language of ambivalence for “movement from imprisonment to freedom” (Sivan 30). He uses the language of ambivalence to move into his own voice and disidentify with the dominant system of identification (the language of binary opposition) to which his stepfather and church family cling so unquestioningly.

Consider again the moment after John rises from the threshing-floor and finds himself staring at his stepfather. To the joyous, weeping crowd surrounding John, the
words that he exchanges with his stepfather represent a testimony of his trust in God:
“I’m saved….and I know I’m saved…my witness is in Heaven and my record is on high”
(208). Upon hearing this affirmation of faith, for instance, Praying Mother Washington
declares, “The Lord is a wonder” (208), and John’s aunt Florence replies, “You fight the
good fight…don’t you get weary, and don’t you get scared” (207-208). However, we
must consider the discourse underlying John’s triumphant proclamation. If we recall the
way in which John voiced (in his earlier thoughts) his disgust for Gabriel (“[John] would
not be like his father”), we realize that his words here actually have a double meaning.
Of course, John is saved in the spiritual sense because he has come before the
congregation proclaiming Jesus and apparently gets filled with the Holy Ghost.
However, I would argue that this fanfare of religiosity simultaneously acts as a cover for
the emergence of John’s voice—a cover which galvanizes John’s disidentification with
the system of binary opposition that his stepfather and church family have imposed on
him. Thus, in his expression of verbal irony—by saying one thing, and yet meaning
another—John acquires his voice, and is liberated. In this moment, the power of John’s
voice distances him from the names that his stepfather and his church family have used to
limit his way of thinking about himself.

If we look closely at the hesitancy Baldwin highlights in John as he prepares to
speak in the language of his fellow Pentecostal worshippers, we can see how John
accomplishes this feat. John does not embrace this language; at best, he rattles off clichéd
phrases of Christian discourse. Perhaps John’s hesitancy to speak in the language of
black holiness culture reveals the difficulty he has in walking the thin line between use
and ownership of the master’s tools (the church’s and his stepfather’s Christian discourse) in the process of dismantling the limiting system of identification that has been established for him:

John struggled to speak the authoritative, the living word that would conquer the great division between his father and himself. But it did not come, the living word, and something died in John, and something came alive. It came to him that he must testify: his tongue only could bear witness to the wonders he had seen. And he remembered suddenly the text of a sermon he had once heard his father preach. And he opened his mouth, feeling, as he watched his father, the darkness roar behind him, and the very earth beneath him seem to shake; yet he gave his father their common testimony (208, italics added).

Perhaps the “something” that dies in John in this scene is the hope that his voice—“the living word”—will have the degree of meaning he intends for it have for his captive audience. If we can agree that this is a possibility, I would argue that the something that “came alive” in John is the knowledge that he can still be “saved” from the language of binary opposition (the names his stepfather and the church family call him) by redefining the language. In other words, when John remembers “the text of a sermon he had one heard his father preach,” he realizes that he can use his father’s words to give the appearance of accepting the language of binary opposition (the names his stepfather and the church family call him) and yet acquire agency through using verbal irony to de-power this language. He can say one thing and yet mean another. In the text, then, John defines himself outside of his stepfather’s Christian conservative discourse by using his words against him: “I’m going to pray God…to keep me, and make me strong…to stand…to stand against the enemy…and against everything and everybody…that wants to cut me down” (207). Clearly, as John stares in his father’s face, Satan is hardly “the enemy” he has in mind. Thus, by using his voice (by way of verbal irony) to deconstruct
the language of binary opposition (name-calling) used against him, John applies the language of ambivalence in the constructive manner I described in Chapter 1.

III

_Wrestling as a Metaphor for Possibility: John, Richard, and the Language of Possibility_

In Chapter 1, I define _the language of possibility_ as words or ideas that challenge systems of thinking about oneself by creating an alternative discourse through which to perceive one’s identity. The language of possibility has power in _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_; however, whether this power is liberating is arguable. Lucy is perhaps the only character who gives the language of possibility voice through her use of humor, word plays and exhortations (“Jump at de sun and eben if you miss it, yuh can’t help grabbin’ holt uh de moon”), which function as ways through language to get her husband John Pearson to focus not on _who he is_ (in opposition and/or relation to others), but rather _who he can be_ (outside of binary constructions). John Pearson, however, repeatedly rejects Lucy’s language of love—the language of possibility. Thus, in _Jonah’s Gourd Vine_, black male characters do not integrate voice in their experiences with the language of possibility. Consequently, neither John Pearson nor his cronies are liberated through the power of possibility because they never speak it into existence.

In _Go Tell It on the Mountain_, however, black male characters make use of their voices in ways that enable the language of possibility to give liberating power to their identities. By wrestling with the possibility of their identities in their speech, both John Grimes and Richard demonstrate the ways in which using their voices to consider and
claim possibilities can liberate them. Perhaps this point is most evident with the novel’s black male protagonist, John Grimes.

Early on in the text, John reveals the way in which wrestling will function as a central metaphor for the way in which he can use the language of possibility to verbalize his fluid identity in his family and at church. The power of this metaphor is most evident when John physically wrestles Brother Elisha, a sanctified, born-again Christian man who everyone adores at The Temple of the Fire Baptized. On one particular occasion, their wrestling produces no clear winner or loser. In fact, the homoerotic undertones of their wrestling make it clear to the reader that winning or losing may not have been the point of John and Elisha’s sexualized interaction:

*With both arms tightening around John’s waist* [Elisha] tried to cut John’s breath, *watching him meanwhile with a smile* that, as John struggled and squirmed, became a set, ferocious grimace. With both hands John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha’s belly. Usually such a battle was soon over since Elisha was so much bigger and stronger and as a wrestler so much more skilled; but tonight John was filled with a determination not to be conquered, or at least to make the conquest dear. With all the strength that was in him he fought against Elisha, and he was filled with a strength that was almost hatred. He kicked, pounded, twisted, pushed, using his lack of size to confound and exasperate Elisha, whose damp fists, joined at the small of Johns back, soon slipped. It was a deadlock; he could not tighten his hold, John could not break it (52-53, italics added).

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this scene is the language that surrounds it. From Baldwin’s choice of words we learn that wrestling is an activity in which John and Elisha engage for satisfaction, rather than for competition. The presence of words like “smile,” “squirmed,” “thrust,” and “conquered” reveal not only the sexualized power in their actions; it also reveals the way in which the language of their wrestling challenges conventional understandings of the purpose of a wrestling match (either to win or to lose). When John and Elisha wrestle in this scene, they push, press, slip, slide, and
tumble around on the ground, searching not for strengths and weaknesses, but rather for a moment of satisfaction, or liberation. I would argue that though they are engaged in a wrestling match, John and Elisha are acting out the language of possibility by deconstructing the established discourse of *winners or losers* (terms whose oppositional dichotomy reflect the language of binary opposition), as Brian R. Washington reveals in his exploration of this wrestling scene: “Though they do not have a name for it, John and Elisha are wrestling with homosexual desire” (90-91). Washington’s remark here identifies that John’s and Elisha’s wrestling represents an opportunity to explore homosexual possibilities outside of the heterosexual-regulated structure of the black church. More generally, their wrestling functions as a way to explore possibilities—to move outside of systems of strict delineation (like the language of binary opposition)—because, of course, “they do not have a name” for what they are doing. For even if we contest Washington’s reading of homosexual desire, since John’s and Elisha’s wrestling (a form of roughhousing) is most likely an action that the strict, conservative Temple of the Fire Baptized would most likely disallow because of the *physical* (rather than ideological) danger it poses, it represents a moment wherein John and Elisha liberate themselves by breaking the rules—by moving outside of the church’s standards of what kind of behavior is right or wrong (again, a deconstruction of the language of binary opposition).

Thus, when John and Elisha “stared at each other, half grinning” (53) after their match, they have smiled because they have both engaged in an activity considered taboo. The presence of this line after their mutual recognition of their “deadlock” reveals that
John and Elisha do not care about defining themselves as winners and losers. They are simply excited to escape the monotony of their Saturday cleaning duties while doing something they love in secret (when they wrestle, John and Elisha are the only ones in the church building). In this context, then, wrestling represents conscious, active participation in the language of possibility. Wrestling is voicing and/or acting out possibilities that exist outside of those oppositional dichotomies that reflect the language of binary opposition.

As we think about wrestling as a metaphor for the integration of voice in the language of possibility, we can understand John and Richard as black men with complex identities because they give voice to their fluidity. First, John wrestles with how to view his father Gabriel, whose identity the church has aligned with his own, as I discussed earlier (“Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father”). John wrestles by asking questions—by verbally interrogating the language of binary of opposition that frames his identity and his stepfather’s. Thus, John speaks in the language of possibility, and this process liberates him in his understanding of his father and himself. Take, for instance, John’s initial questioning of his stepfather’s character: “Mama…is Daddy a good man?” (24). Here, John’s seemingly elementary inquiry functions on another level through its interrogation of the good/bad, saint/sinner binary. In other words, John’s question suggests that John, whose earlier thoughts demonstrate the disgust he has for his father (“[John]…would not be like his father”), desires to know whether his stepfather can be understood as merely good or bad.

Further, John finds pleasure in wrapping his head around this idea, for if it is possible to
understand his abusive, hypocritical stepfather as somehow more than good or bad, then I would argue that John feels that he, too, must be understood as representing something greater than the binary-structured names his stepfather Gabriel calls him.

This point becomes visible in the mirror scene wherein John is coming to terms with the way in which Gabriel has degraded his facial features through language. In this scene, John seeks to understand his stepfather’s interpretation of his face as being “ugly” (27), yet John voices to his readers that what he sees when he looks at himself is someone who is neither “ugly” nor beautiful. John sees that these limiting terms cannot define his complex identity.

His father had always said that his face was the face of Satan—and was there not something—in the lift of the eyebrow, in the way his rough hair formed a V on his brow—that bore witness to his father’s words? In the eye there was a light that was not the light of Heaven, and the mouth trembled, lustful and as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know. And, having thought of it as the face of a stranger, he tried to look at it as a stranger might and tried to discover what other people saw. But he saw only the details, two great eyes and a broad low forehead, and the triangle of his nose, and his enormous mouth, and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the devil’s little finger. These details did not help him, for the principle of their unity was undiscernible, and he could not tell what he most passionately desired to know: whether his face was ugly or not (27, italics added).

Here, John’s inability to comprehend “whether his face was ugly or not” demonstrates the way in which the language of possibility is at work in his self-perception. Although John seeks “to discover what other people saw” upon viewing his face—including, of course, his stepfather’s description of his countenance as devilish—John cannot see what other people see because he has previously voiced his identity as being possible outside of their limiting language (the language of binary opposition). John has previously expressed the pleasure he has in viewing himself as being “a poet, or a college president, or a movie star” (19). Thus, even when John seeks to identify something on his face that reflects
Gabriel’s degrading descriptions, he sees “only the details.” These details represent the language of possibility, for John can see himself outside of the language of binary opposition (beautiful/ugly) when he focuses on them. When he focuses on “only the details,” John can see himself as having “two great eyes,” “a broad low forehead,” and an “enormous mouth”—among other facial features. In other words, because “the principle of their unity [is] undiscernable,” John’s privileging of the details—of the many intricate components of his face—demonstrates that John sees himself as a complex individual whose facial features cannot define him within a beautiful/ugly binary. Later, Baldwin describes this habit of re-visioning as John’s ability “to do something [others] could not do; [John] was able, as one of his teachers said, to think” (30, italics added).

Later in the novel, we are introduced to another black man whose integration of voice with the language of possibility stimulates self-liberation. Richard, John’s biological father, voices the language of possibility in his early courting days with Elizabeth. On these occasions, his suggestions for their dates—“Well, maybe we go to a museum (165)”—demonstrate his verbalizing of the language of possibility. For while Elizabeth is hypersensitive to their presence as the only blacks visiting the Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Richard is focused on educating himself and Elizabeth. In other words, Richard’s suggestion deconstructs the language of binary opposition functioning in Elizabeth’s concern regarding “[whether] they would be allowed to enter [the museums]” (165). He does not allow the way in which other visitors may read them—as black bodies interrupting a traditionally white space—to quench his thirst for education. At this point in their relationship, Richard’s integration
of voice in the language of possibility demonstrates to Elizabeth the self-liberating power that arises from articulating unseen possibilities. Baldwin reveals, for instance, that as they walked through the halls, Elizabeth did not witness a militant black man—Richard was somehow more than this: “[Elizabeth] saw another life to [Richard]” (164).

Still, while Richard, like John, wrestles with his identity by voicing the language of possibility, his tragic flaw is his underlying desire for legitimacy. In the creation and re-creation of their self-perceptions throughout the novel, both Richard and John shift between privileging the language of possibility they voice and the language of binary opposition that their church, families, and communities use to define them. Richard, however—like John Pearson in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*—ultimately rejects the language of possibility. As Clark notes, “[Richard] privileges and centers a dominant white culture and looks to it for validation, albeit in the guise of black militancy” (139). In other words, Richard feels a need to define himself within a white/black binary even as he voices the possibilities that free him from such a limiting discourse. When Elizabeth asks him about his love of education, for instance, he declares:

> I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch nowhere never talk me down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet back, front, and sideways. Shit—he weren’t going to beat my ass, then (167).

Here, the presence of racially-charged language—“them white bastards” and “no white son-of-a-bitch”—indicates Richard’s conscious participation in a white/black binary. For Richard, getting “to know everything” means nothing if he cannot acquire this knowledge and “know it better than [whites].” Thus, Richard de-powers the voice of his own possibility from his earlier affirmation “maybe we go to a museum” when he seeks for
voice and identity in a white, patriarchal system that defines itself in opposition to Others like Richard.

Thus, when Richard commits suicide after being imprisoned for a crime that he did not commit, most readers are hardly surprised. As Clark indicates, “[Richard’s] suicide bespeaks his vitiated attempt to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s language” (139). Even in his militancy, then, Richard looks to the language of binary opposition to define him. He cannot see himself as existing as more than a hated, victimized black male body, as evident in his endless protesting against the white polices offers who arrest him and tell him—“You black bastards…you’re all the same” (171). Thus, Richard kills himself not because voicing the language of possibility prevents self-liberation. Rather, Richard feels that such freedom is futile because he sees (white) society as functioning through binary opposition and accordingly identifies as the racialized Other through its limiting discourse.

IV

Redefining Salvation through the Language of Redemption:
John and the Veil of Verbal Irony

As we think about the way in which voice has been so central to the narratives in Go Tell It on the Mountain, Richard’s verbalized rejection of the language of possibility (“I just decided me one day that I was going to get to know everything them white bastards knew, and I was going to know it better than them”) triggers my questioning of black male possibility in this novel. If we think again about the desperation that Richard’s suicide bespeaks, I pose the following question: what is gained by voicing the
language of possibility if this vocalization cannot ultimately save an individual from the
limiting discourses of dominant culture (i.e. the language of binary opposition)? Perhaps
the answer to this question lies in a careful examination of the power of voice in the
articulation of the language of redemption—a language which John discovers as capable
of redefining salvation in a way that liberates and saves him from the limiting language
of binary opposition.

First, we must return to my previous discussion of the language of redemption to
understand the way in which voicing this language affords John an opportunity to be
saved. In Chapter 1, I defined the language of redemption as words or ideas that expand
an individual’s self-perception through the processes of self-exploration and self-
affirmation. I also discussed the way in which the blurring of Self/Other boundaries
enables this language to inspire and save others, thus aiding in communal salvation and
uplift. For John, playing on the meaning of salvation through verbal irony represents his
use of the language of redemption, and ultimately his salvation from the myopic
perceptions of his identity he encounters throughout the text.

Early in the novel we discover that John’s greatest fear is voicing what he
perceives as his humiliating difference from others. One day at school, his teacher
demands that he “speak up” (20), and John is certain the he has been selected for some
form of punishment and/or mockery. Even if this is not the case, John is prepared to be
humiliated simply because he is “always the smallest boy in his class…who had no
friends” (19). Nevertheless, John’s teacher uses this opportunity to encourage John by
calling him “a very bright boy” (20). John, whose interactions with others frequently
reveal the way in which his name is connected with difference in a negative, oppositional context ( “Frog-eyes,” “bastard,” “face of Satan,” etc.), is shocked to hear someone
connect his name with a possibility outside of this language of binary opposition. John is
amazed because his teacher calls John “a very bright boy”—not “bright” compared to
anyone else, just simply, “bright.” In a sense, then, by voicing “bright” as a possible
identity for “John,” John’s teacher introduces John to the verbal irony he will later voice
to save himself from the language of binary opposition that his church and stepfather use
to narrowly define him—for when she says “John” she means “bright boy”—not
“preacher,” “bastard,” or “sorry little boy.” John identifies his teacher’s play on word
meaning (in connection with his name) as a saving power reflective of the language of
redemption:

That moment gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon at least a shield; he
apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in himself a power that
other people lacked; that he could use this to save himself; to raise himself; and that,
perhaps, with this power he might one day win that love which he so longed for (20,
italics added).

Here, John’s recognition of verbal irony, which Baldwin defines as “a power that other
people lacked,” describes a power beyond self-liberating. When spoken, John realizes
that “he could use [verbal irony] to save himself” and others. In other words, despite the
namelessness that John feels subjected to by the language of binary opposition through
which his stepfather and church have inscribed his identity, by playing on their words by
using them to mean something different than they intend, John can voice possibilities that
save himself and others through the veil of verbal irony.

Further, as E. Patrick Johnson demonstrates through his assertion that Baldwin
intends for homosexuality to go unnamed in Go Tell It on the Mountain, the power of
voicing possibilities through veiled language makes Baldwin as effective with verbal irony as John: “Baldwin calls attention to…the homoeroticism implicit in the black church worship service [by]…revealing through the gayness of John’s gaze upon Elisha’s worshipping body that the Christian body may also be a queer body” (403-404). Baldwin saves himself from the black church’s limiting language of binary opposition through voicing his possibility for being redeemed despite being a queered outcast—like John. Through situating John as a queer body in a secular space, Baldwin disrupts the saint/sinner binary—he demonstrates the ways in which a sinner can find a home among the saints of the binary-structured black church. Thus, through writing the largely autobiographical Go Tell It on the Mountain, Baldwin voices his possibility and saves himself through using the language of the black church and never once discussing homosexual identity in the novel.

We must return, however, to a scene I highlighted earlier to comprehend the way in which John saves himself through his discovery of verbal irony as a means to voice the language of redemption. After rising form the threshing-floor, John declares—“I’m saved….and I know I’m saved…my witness is in Heaven and my record is on high” (208). As previously mentioned, John is not commenting here on his salvation in a Christian context. His words to his stepfather Gabriel and even the act of speaking in tongues function as a veil of verbal irony. Like Paul Laurence Dunbar whose poem “We Wear the Mask” tells us the way in which blacks (as racialized Others) “wear the mask that grins and lies” (Dunbar 1) to save themselves from the limiting perceptions of white, patriarchal America, John is having a grin-and-lie moment here. In this moment of
deception wherein John uses his stepfather’s Christian-ese and the testimonial language his black church celebrates to express himself as existing in a space outside of their language of binary opposition, John is saved. John is saved because through the power of his voice, he has told his family and community who he is—even though the language through which he makes this affirmation is veiled. John finally knows and expresses a part of who he is. He articulates himself as a black man with homosexual desires in a space wherein such desires are disallowed, as May reveals:

Through John’s watching…Elisha…though homoerotic imagery, homoeroticism…underscores how, for John, (homo)sexuality and the church are inextricably intertwined. The church indirectly allows John access to homosexual desire at the same time that (homo)sexuality is proscribed (120).

Thus, through John’s voicing of the language of redemption in his moment of salvation, Baldwin disrupts the saint/sinner, secular/sacred binary. Baldwin demonstrates the way in which John’s use of verbal irony enables him to subtly express “(homo)sexuality and the church [as] inextricably intertwined.” For our purposes, this moment is significant because John’s exploration of and self-affirmation through the veil of verbal irony demonstrates the way in which the language of redemption can be used to save black men from the limiting language(s) of American culture. It suggests that black male possibility and survivability exist through redefining our understanding and application of voice and language in culture.
Salvation of Black Male Identities through Voicing Redefined Languages

In an exploration of Baldwin’s understanding of voice, language, and redemption, Clarence E. Hardy states, “By using his own marginal status as a bastard, Baldwin works within the tension between tepid liberalism and a rigid black nationalism…to embrace the familial pain at the heart of the relationships of blacks and whites in America” (100). As I think about Hardy’s comment in connection with the way in which John moves between the languages of ambivalence, possibility and redemption in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, I am assured that using black male voice to express these deconstructive languages is key to the salvation of black male identities. As Hardy notes, “familial pain”—and familial joy not unlike that we see at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*—has the power to capture anyone’s attention. Voicing the pain or joy that characterize the marginalized, as Baldwin does in writing his novel, or as John does in his double-speak “I’m saved,” offers larger society an opportunity to hear what they never could understand, or wanted to understand.

Thus, I argue that John saves the face of black masculinity every time we take the time to read him. Every time he uses the language of his culture—however limiting—to redefine our understanding of his identity, and our own, he liberates us. He sings to us. He moves us out of the stuffy, steeple-house binaries that seek to tell us and him who he is, or who he is not. In that moment in which we hear his voice, we can leap for joy. In that moment, we are collectively saved.
Works Cited


CHAPTER 3

“YOU THINK A MAN CAN’T KNEEL AND STAND?”:
Voicing Black Male Possibility through Communal Exchange and the Languages of
Ambivalence, Possibility, and Redemption in Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*
“Gaines postulates that only a politicized community can successfully resist hostile acts of misrepresentation, [thus]…the quest in [A Lesson Before Dying] is not personal but communal.”

—Herman Beavers, “Allegory and Voice in A Lesson Before Dying”

I don’t think I’ll ever understand “church people.” That’s what my mother calls those folks who greet you with a “Praise God” when you enter the sanctuary and tell you what you need to do “for the Lord” in the next breath. It doesn’t matter what church I go to—it seems that by the time I’ve reached my seat on any given Sunday, I’ve been “chosen by God” to sing in the choir, revamp the youth ministry, teach Sunday School, re-instate the annual men’s retreat, or all of the above. Of course, the harvest is plenty and the laborers are few, but why does it seem like I’ve been set apart to do everything before I know anything about a church? Why me?

Whenever I threaten to leave a church on account of this overabundance of so-called callings, my mother reminds me that “church people” are no different from anyone else—they want to be heard. Essentially, they need help, but many of them don’t know how to ask for it. Therefore, neither wordless agreement, nor wordy rationalizations, nor brazen refusals represent constructive responses to unexpected confrontations with their to-do lists (which are, of course, cloaked in Christian-ese). Rather, open, honest exchange leads to the mutual understanding that can transform the perspectives of both the well-meaning petitioner and the reluctant volunteer. For instance, when I explained to my home church’s welcoming board that I would not chair the courtesy committee because I was too busy and did not agree with their established traditions, the board of white-haired black women unanimously agreed to let me organize the committee
however I saw fit. I was speechless. With their support, I spiced up our turn-to-yourneighbor-and-say-hi routine by involving my teenage peers in a travel-around-the-world welcome. I knew from experience that I couldn’t stand sitting still in church, and also got sick of turning to my neighbor throughout service—so the opportunity for a young person to move around and handle official church business (welcoming visitors) would kill two birds with one stone.

Thus, through the willingness of the women to hear my voice, and my own willingness to hear theirs by agreeing to serve, we arrived at a mutual understanding through a process I call communal exchange. I define communal exchange as the achievement of communal uplift through listening to and speaking with one another. In my situation, the results of communal exchange were fulfilling for both parties: I was not busy since I had my peers helping me welcome visitors, and the coalition of matriarchs had a sizeable committee of individuals who actually enjoyed their weekly welcoming responsibilities. Thus, through the process of communal exchange—by achieving mutual understanding through open, honest conversation—our church community voiced possibilities that ultimately empowered the collective whole.

As I return to my exploration of black masculine identity in literature and culture, I believe that voicing possibility through communal exchange is essential to dismantling the language of binary opposition in which black male identities are frequently inscribed. In the previous chapter, I argue that through John—a black man who, through verbal irony, expresses himself outside of the language of binary opposition—the voice of black male possibility triumphs. However, I would also argue that through John, Baldwin asks
us: what does voicing possibility ultimately mean if this voice cannot interact and be understood within and across communities and cultures?

Perhaps situating this question in the context of the well-meaning petitioner/reluctant volunteer scenario I described earlier may help to clarify my point. Like the desire for mutual understanding that the women of the church welcome board and I shared, for John’s expression of his identity to aid in personal and communal uplift, a mutual understanding of his complex identity must take place between him and his church family. I would argue that one way to achieve this mutual understanding is through the process of communal exchange—through listening to one another’s perceptions of possibility. For if in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* John Pearson’s communal saving power is limited because he does not voice possibilities (as I argued in Chapter 1), John Grimes’s use of verbal irony limits his communal saving power because its ambiguity prevents his community from fully understanding him.

Thus, I argue that two fundamental steps toward reconstructing black masculine identity are speaking and listening—which are actions that also characterize communal exchange. For how can the re-visioning power behind the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, or the language of redemption alter myopic perceptions of black male identities without first being voiced and understood within and across communities and cultures? Further, how can these languages of black male possibility aid in personal and communal uplift without the willingness of groups and individuals to engage in communal exchange? Perhaps exploring these questions through the work of Ernest J. Gaines, whose 1993 novel *A Lesson Before Dying* depicts a variety of approaches toward
achieving communal uplift, can help us better understand the function of communal exchange in re-visioning black male identity in culture.

II

Deconstructing Institutional Practices through Politicizing the Black Community: The Function of Communal Exchange in A Lesson Before Dying

As we think about the function of communal exchange in relation to A Lesson Before Dying, I would argue that black male possibility is reified through the verbal interactions that emerge between black men of different backgrounds, classes, and belief systems. In other words, by Gaines creating spaces for open, honest conversation in his novel between Grant Wiggins, Reverend Mose Ambrose, and Jefferson—three black men with different life experiences, social statuses, and sets of values—the languages of ambivalence, possibility, and redemption can finally be voiced and understood, and therefore aid in the personal and communal uplift that they and other black men in their community ultimately desire. Thus, the collective efforts of these men to understand one another through communal exchange brings them to a site of mutual understanding whose power can deconstruct the limiting language of binary opposition in which their identities are inscribed.

Perhaps Herman Beavers’s affirmation regarding A Lesson Before Dying best explains the power of communal exchange in connection with voicing black male possibility: “Gaines postulates that only a politicized community can successfully resist hostile acts of misrepresentation, [thus]…the quest in [A Lesson Before Dying] is not personal but communal” (136-37, italics added). Here, Beavers reveals that in Gaines’s
novel, the notion of “a politicized community” is essential to the (black) community’s unified resistance against the “misrepresentation” the court produces regarding the identity of Jefferson, a young black man who is falsely accused and convicted of armed robbery and murder. In the opening chapter of the novel, we are introduced to Jefferson through the court’s racially-inflammatory language:

*Do you see a man sitting here?* […] Do you see anyone here who could plan a murder, robbery, can plan—can plan—can plan anything? *A cornered animal* to strike quickly out of fear, *a trait inherited from his ancestors in the deepest jungle of blackest Africa*—yes, yes, that he can do—but to plan? […] I would just as soon as put a *hog* in the electric chair as this (7-8, italics added).

Here, Jefferson’s attorney’s use of the word “hog” not only places Jefferson in the blatantly dehumanizing language of binary opposition (if Jefferson is found guilty, he is the stereotypically conniving black thug; if proven innocent, he is a mindless animal/hog), it also functions as the kind of “misrepresentation” that devalues the complex identity politics of the social institutions that inform Jefferson’s identity (the church, the family, education, etc.). Essentially, then, this verbal attack on Jefferson’s manhood (“Do you see a man sitting here?”) is also an attack the black community feels. Thus, communal exchange necessarily comes into play because the black community seeks to arrive at a site of mutual understanding on how best to achieve “the restoration of Jefferson’s human dignity” (Folks 260), for the condition of Jefferson’s identity is now closely connected to the condition of their own.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the two key figures in the process of reconstructing Jefferson’s manhood are Grant Wiggins and Reverend Mose Ambrose—both having been requested by Jefferson’s grandmother Miss Emma for this purpose. Ambrose is an elderly, conservative Christian black minister at the small Cajun plantation community’s
church. Grant is a college-educated black schoolteacher who is critical of the church and Christianity. As two men whose jobs involve empowering the (black) community, one might expect that they would explore “the possibility of a meaningful collaboration” (Nash 347) when considering approaches for helping Jefferson constructively re-vision his identity in light of his impending execution. Nonetheless, their differences frequently get the best of them. Ambrose believes that for Jefferson to effectively reconstruct his identity he should reflect the submissive action of kneeling—that he must pray and trust that God will get him through his circumstances (thus pleasing Miss Emma and the black church). Grant, on the other hand, holds that Jefferson’s strategy for re-visioning his identity should reflect standing—that he must demonstrate the power of his own will by showing pride in his (black) masculinity until death (thus pleasing himself). However, Reverend Ambrose eventually recognizes the triviality of their dispute: if both men are committed to helping Jefferson “walk to [the electric] chair like a man—not like a hog” (214), then fighting over whose method is right or wrong fails to resolve this issue. It only reinforces the language of binary opposition that already frames Jefferson’s identity.

Thus, the power of communal exchange shines through Ambrose’s challenge to Grant: “You think a man can’t kneel and stand?” (216, italics added). Perhaps when we consider again Beavers’s assertion that “only a politicized community can successfully resist hostile acts of misrepresentation,” then Reverend Ambrose’s affirmation reveals the possibility that comes from deconstructing institutional practices in an effort to arrive at a site of mutual understanding and unified resistance. That is, by hearing and responding to Grant’s call for the church to let go of its secular/sacred categorizing of every human
action in order to combat the language that seeks to emasculate and dehumanize one of its own (Jefferson), Ambrose realizes the power of communal exchange. In fact, Ambrose acknowledges that Grant’s way of interacting with Jefferson through what black church culture defines as “sinning music” (171) actually enables Grant to positively connect with Jefferson—a black man who desperately needs to hear voices of possibility to free him from the prison of his mind. Thus, “the minister’s willingness to share power and to loosen his rigid sense of propriety in the service of a greater good points to a possibility for community” (Nash 347) and ultimately demonstrates his recognition of the politicizing power of communal exchange.

Further, when he thinks about Grant as one possible teacher of manhood because of his ability to positively reconstruct Jefferson’s self-image, Reverend Ambrose willingly concedes his voice of assistance to Grant, declaring, “He listen to you” (213). Because of Ambrose’s willingness to understand Grant’s way of teaching manhood, Grant, in turn, seeks to understand Ambrose’s. For instance, on the day of Jefferson’s execution, Grant demands that his class “get down on their knees [and pray]” (246). Thus, while Reverend Ambrose and Grant disagree on Christian ideology and the politics of the church, their mutual desire to understand black male possibility through Jefferson demonstrates their effective application of communal exchange.

As we move this discussion of communal exchange from literature to culture, I raise the following questions: if we can, like Reverend Ambrose and Grant, discover nuanced approaches to reconstructing black male identity through open, honest conversation, then how can arriving at sites of mutual understanding aid in personal and
communal uplift in black culture and American culture at large? Further, if communal exchange involves a transformation of individual perspectives, as I suggested in the well-meaning petitioner/reluctant volunteer scenario, how does this dialogic re-visioning function through the language of ambivalence, the language of possibility, and the language of redemption to give voice to black male possibility? In the following pages, I seek to answer these questions by exploring the ways in which Gaines uses the verbal interactions between his black male characters to voice possibilities that deconstruct the language of binary opposition that typifies the social institutions (the law, church, family, and education) that seek to tell them who they are.

III

Thinking Inside the Box: The Language of Ambivalence and Gaines’s Black Men

First, we must realize that in A Lesson Before Dying, the language of ambivalence does not function in the constructive manner I described with the example of John Grimes’s verbal irony in Chapter 2. Rather, the language of ambivalence frequently limits Gaines’s black men because their comfort in using it as a means of self-deprecation causes them to think about themselves and, in turn, converse about their identities in binary-structured boxes (they see themselves as being either one thing or another). As I mentioned with John Pearson and Ned Crittenden in Chapter 1, the language of ambivalence is most commonly characterized by the use of contradictory names as a means to place one individual in opposition to another. Thus, unless one disidentifies with this system of placing oneself in an either/or box, then the language of ambivalence
functions as a verbal weapon. In Gaines’s novel, we witness self-deprecating uses of the language of ambivalence through Jefferson’s and Grant’s private thoughts, voiced affirmations, and interactions with others. Nevertheless, in the following pages, I will focus on the ways in which communal exchange functions to deconstruct their use of the language of ambivalence even as they attempt to use it against themselves.

First, we must consider Jefferson’s use of the language of ambivalence. After being reduced to a “hog” (8) by his own attorney in the novel’s first chapter, how can Jefferson constructively redefine his identity? To a courtroom and community of individuals who never wanted to know him, the attorney’s dehumanizing description of Jefferson makes him fit into a limiting guilty/innocent binary that seeks to minimize the complexity of his identity. As I briefly discussed earlier, if Jefferson is found guilty he merely fits the conniving black thug stereotype that already fills the minds of the white jury. If proven innocent, however, the language through which Jefferson’s attorney constructs his identity will also prove that he is less than human—that he is “a cornered animal” (7), “a boy” (7), “a fool [who] is not aware of right and wrong” (7), a “hog.” Thus, in the eyes of the white jury and the surrounding Louisiana community, Jefferson’s behavior reduces him to being either the stereotypical black brute or an animalistic fool. The use of the language of binary opposition in the courtroom, then, demonstrates to many individuals (and Jefferson himself) that Jefferson is not a man.

After hearing his identity get tarnished through the language of binary opposition, Jefferson feels powerless. So like many black men desiring to be understood outside of the imprisoning language of American culture (the language of binary opposition),
Jefferson seeks power and attention through victimizing himself. On one of Grant’s first visits to the prison, Grant offers Jefferson some corn, chicken, and biscuits that Miss Emma has prepared for him. Disgusted to the point of bitterness about having been reduced to a “hog” in the courtroom, Jefferson declares: “That’s what hogs eat” (82). Despite Grant’s efforts to move Jefferson away from using the degrading names that the courtroom has used to define him, Jefferson continues their discussion by calling himself the names his attorney used. Specifically, Jefferson refers to himself as a hog at several points in their conversation. Jefferson also self-mockingly declares: “Hogs don’t eat candy” (83), “I’m an old hog they fattening up to kill” (83), and “Old hog don’t care what people say” (83). Perhaps the most disturbing moment of Grant’s visit occurs when Jefferson “knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating without using his hands” (83). Jefferson does this, of course, to mimic the eating style of a hog, and later repeats this behavior when Miss Emma visits him, again mocking himself: “Corn for a hog…th’ow something” (122). On this occasion, Miss Emma slaps him because she is disgusted by the performance of this false identity, as well as by the bitterness and self-pity that cry out from such behavior. Moments later, Miss Emma cries, for she knows that Jefferson is only acting out how he feels—despite how terrible it appears.

While Jefferson doesn’t honestly believe that he represents the names that he has been called by his own defense attorney, his “hog” behavior implies that he believes the only way that he can acquire attention from anyone (and be heard at all) is through behaving in the manner that fits this image. Thus, through the guise of self-deprecation,
Jefferson reinforces the language of ambivalence used against him by using it against himself. Like black men who act out media-perpetuated stereotypes surrounding black male athleticism, thug mentality, and (hyper)sexuality (among others), Jefferson’s actions only hurt those who desire to help him. In fact, at this point in the novel, Jefferson’s voice and complex identity are meaningless because he seeks to attract the attention of his family and community by displacing his pain on them, rather than by asking them for help. Sadly, Jefferson’s bitter refusal to ask for help mirrors the behavior of many black men who feel framed by the language of binary opposition in American culture.

Nevertheless, Gaines includes some uplifting moments to shine through Jefferson’s pain by way of the communal exchange between Grant and Jefferson. When Jefferson first calls himself a “hog,” for instance, Grant rejects this degrading terminology by offering Jefferson names for his identity that move outside of the conniving thug/mindless hog binary I discussed earlier. Here and elsewhere in the novel, Grant asserts: “You’re not a hog” (83), “You’re a man” (83), “You’re a human being, Jefferson” (83). In each of these places in the text, Grant’s positive affirmations of Jefferson’s manhood come off as especially powerful because when Tante Lou and Miss Emma initially request that Grant visit Jefferson, he declines, insisting that “Jefferson is dead…and I can’t raise the dead” (14). By witnessing the degree to which John has been hurt by the court’s language of binary opposition, Grant moves from a position of selfish nonchalance to genuine concern for Jefferson.

In other words, communal exchange becomes possible between these two black men—despite the fact that one is a bitter, “non-educated black laborer who has been
sentenced to death for a murder he didn’t commit” (Auger 75), and the other, a cynical, “black college-educated school teacher” (Auger 75)—because they both desire to arrive at a site of mutual understanding. I would argue that this mutual understanding takes the form of Grant’s and Jefferson’s desire to reconstruct their (black) manhood. Grant reveals this desire in one of his visits with Jefferson, and Jefferson later reveals it in his notebook. Grant, who William R. Nash describes as “embittered and disillusioned by his own experiences of racial injustice” (348), thinks about reconstructing (black) manhood by moving outside of the white/black binary that frames his perception of black male identity:

The last thing [white people] ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all…[that’s why] I need you more than you could ever need me. I need to know what to do with my life. I want to run away, but go where and do what? (193).

Here, by sharing with Jefferson his desire “to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all,” Grant puts into conversation an image of black male possibility that Jefferson also comes to desire. In a notebook in which Grant urges Jefferson to document his thoughts and feelings, Jefferson asserts, “when i was a litle boy i was a waterboy and rode the cart but now i got to be a man an set in a cher…good by mr wigin tell them im strong tell them im a man” (234). Here, when Jefferson says, “now i got to be a man an set in a cher,” he indicates that his previous conceptions of black manhood have been altered through his exchanges with Grant. His “hog” behavior in the scenes I previously outlined acts out his earlier belief that he couldn’t be a man (because within the limiting language of binary opposition, he is either the conniving thug or the mindless hog), nor possessed the desire to be one. However, by hearing Grant voice his
possibility throughout the text (“You’re not a hog,” “You’re a man,” “[I] want to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all”) and then responding to the voicing of that possibility in his notebook, Jefferson engages in communal exchange with Grant. Grant, who frequently desires “to run away” to avoid the issue of reconstructing black manhood, can appreciate the product of this communal exchange with Jefferson when Paul—the sheriff’s deputy—hands him Jefferson’s notebook. Through articulating the way in which he prepares to go to the electric chair in his notebook, then, Jefferson has voiced that he cares about reconstructing black manhood as much as Grant.

Thus, when Grant initially responds to Jefferson’s remark that no one cares about him because he is an “old hog” (83) with “[Miss Emma] cares…and I do, too, Jefferson” (83), he deconstructs the language of ambivalence that seeks to narrowly define Jefferson’s complex identity. By verbalizing that he cares, Grants words function as an invitation to the communal exchange that empowers Jefferson, Grant, and the entire community regarding perceptions of black manhood. Thus, because Grant voices that he cares—that he will do anything to help Jefferson and others think about him outside of the conniving thug/mindless hog binary—Grant and Jefferson are able to later deconstruct this language of ambivalence and aid in communal uplift. Thus, by communal exchange—by arriving at a site of mutual understanding through listening and responding to an individual whose experiences and background are different than their own—Grant and Jefferson collectively re-vision black male possibility.
Another example of the way in which Gaines uses communal exchange to deconstruct the language of ambivalence occurs when Reverend Ambrose challenges Grant’s understanding of his role as teacher. Early on in the novel we learn that Grant “had told [Tante] Lou that he was no teacher” (15). Like Jefferson’s self-deprecating way of declaring that he is not a man, Grant repeats this affirmation throughout the novel to reinforce the way in which he feels that the community sees him. Further, Grant, like Jefferson, denies that he is a “teacher” because it is easier for him to take on the role of the victimized black male than actually voice that he can be a teacher in a context other than the “high [moral] standard set by the community” (Folks 263).

Of course, thinking of “teacher” in the terms established by a largely conservative Christian community creates limitations in the first place. For from this community’s perspective, in addition to evaluating a teacher’s ability to foster learning in an academic sense, “the teacher’s lifestyle and demeanor [must be] examined for imperfections” (Folks 263). Thus, the community limits Grant’s understanding of who he is by narrowly defining who a “teacher” should be. If Grant’s lifestyle and behaviors do not suit their fancy, then he is not a “teacher” to them. Thus, Grant, who discovers by novel’s end that he is much more than a “teacher,” is initially trapped in the language of binary opposition. Like John Grimes who is valued by his church family only when he fits their perception of “preacher,” in this plantation community, Grant is either a teacher or an individual of no importance. As a result of struggling with this limiting conception of his identity, Grant begins to believe that he fails at being a teacher on two accounts. First, his church-less, carefree lifestyle rejects the moral prudence that would make him worthy
of being called “teacher,” and second, his lack of academic resources (up-to-date
textbooks, etc.) and his inability to ignite the critical energies of his students make him
and them apathetic to the pursuit of knowledge. Grant even questions himself at one
point: “What am I doing? Am I reaching them at all? They are acting exactly as the old
men did…who never attended school a day in their lives” (62).

Grant’s bitter assertions that he is not a teacher throughout the novel, then, push
him deeper into the wounding language of ambivalence. In Grant’s mind, he is either not
a teacher because he does not satisfy the expectations of the community and himself, or a
teacher “in a purely mechanical way as he teaches reading, writing, and arithmetic”
(Folks 262, italics added). Because he repeatedly beats himself up by accepting the
language of ambivalence, then, Grant cannot initially appreciate what Reverend Ambrose
sees and shares with him regarding his role as teacher. As Beavers notes, “Ambrose’s
view [of] Grant’s role as schoolteacher makes him the community’s potential leader”
(147). When Grant and Reverend Ambrose debate how best to help Jefferson re-
conceptualize his tarnished identity, perhaps for the first time in the novel, Ambrose
actually listens to what Grant has to say. He realizes that Grant’s ability to connect with
Jefferson can help “save” him, both in a spiritual sense and from a psychological
perspective, since the conversations that Grant has with Jefferson help to move him away
from thinking of himself as a “hog.” Thus, Reverend Ambrose identifies Grant as a
special kind of teacher—“the community’s potential leader”—because he possess the
ability to use his knowledge and experiences “to relieve pain, to relieve hurt” (218).
At the time, Grant misses the significance of Reverend Ambrose’s revelation, but later he comes to realize that regardless of whether he desires the title, he is a teacher and so much more—“the community’s potential leader”—because he has learned to follow the example of an individual we may perceive to be his student. As Jeffery J. Folks reveals, “[Grant] must look to Jefferson as a model of learning that is based on more than ‘book knowledge’” (Folks 263). In fact, by listening to the bitterness and insecurity that Jefferson feels, and offering possible solutions, Grant learns about himself and many other black men. He comes to humble himself, and yet hold his head high—as he watches Jefferson do the same in prison. Thus, by becoming the student in his relationship with Jefferson, Grant becomes comfortable in doing the same with Ambrose. By novel’s end, “by embracing his role within his own history, Grant finally becomes a teacher in the fullest sense” (Folks 263). By learning to think of himself as an individual whose words can help “to relieve pain,” Grant reaps the benefits of communal exchange. Thus, the participation of Grant and Ambrose in communal exchange ultimately enables Grant to deconstruct the language of binary opposition through which his community sees him.

IV

“You think a man can’t stand and kneel?”:

The Role of Communal Exchange in the Language of Possibility

In Chapter 1, I define the language of possibility as words or ideas that challenge systems of thinking about oneself by creating an alternative discourse through which to
perceive one’s identity. I would argue that one of the more powerful scenes in *A Lesson Before Dying* occurs when Reverend Ambrose engages in communal exchange with Grant through his use of the language of possibility. As he debates with Grant about how best to help Jefferson, Reverend Ambrose questions, “You think a man can’t kneel and stand?” (216, italics added). Ambrose poses this question after Grant assures the minister that he will not tell Jefferson to kneel before going to electric chair. By telling Ambrose “I will try to help him stand” (216), Grant places Jefferson’s options for reconstructing his black manhood in binary opposition. In other words, for Grant, Jefferson’s options are *either to kneel* (to submissively yield to God in his final months of life, and appear weak in the face of the court and community) *or to stand* (to hold his head high and demonstrate by his demeanor his self-assurance and strength). Reverend Ambrose, however, creates an alternative discourse through which to think about Jefferson’s manhood. His question implies that “religious humility and secular self-respect need not be mutually exclusive” (Nash 352).

First, we must consider the significance of the fact that Ambrose *poses a question*. This action itself demonstrates the way in which the language of possibility functions through communal exchange—which I’ve defined as listening and responding to one another for the purpose of communal uplift. To ask a question implies both listening and responding to a person or group in order to arrive at a new site of mutual understanding. It implies the most active participation in verbalizing possibility because asking a question involves proposing another perspective that contests previously articulated perspectives. Thus, asking a question demonstrates the language of possibility as I
defined it in Chapter 1—as a form of speaking that challenges the structure inherent in systems of thinking.

In Gaines’s novel, by asking a question—rather than making an assertion—Ambrose deconstructs Grant’s language of binary opposition (his perception of Jefferson as *either* kneeling *or* standing). By selecting this form of speech through which to exchange with Grant, Ambrose voices the language of possibility in a way that Grant can understand and appreciate. Regardless of whether Grant accepts that Jefferson’s identity can move beyond the oppositional dichotomy of kneeling *or* standing (initially, he doesn’t), Ambrose’s use of the question demonstrates to Grant that such a conception of Jefferson’s identity is possible. If Reverend Ambrose had chosen to speak in the declarative—“Jefferson can kneel and stand”—then he would have limited the possibility of communal exchange to take place between Grant and himself because in the act of making an assertion, an individual assigns a truth value to what is said. In other words, if Ambrose had made this assertion, he and Grant would likely have gone back to squabbling over whose approach to reconstructing manhood was right (and thus revisit the language of binary opposition), rather than considering what approaches were possible. Nonetheless, by asking “You think a man can’t stand and kneel?” Ambrose challenges himself and Grant to view kneeling-and-standing as a metaphor for reconstructing Jefferson’s (black) manhood. Thus, by proposing that Jefferson can empower himself through “[an] abundance of communal affirmation” (Auger 79), Ambrose presents kneeling-and-standing as a concept with which both he and Grant must wrestle in order to arrive at a site of mutual understanding about black male possibility.
As we learn later in the novel, the fruit of communal exchange that comes from this kneeling-and-standing conception of black male possibility helps Grant counsel Jefferson and the community. Aside from the fact that Grant has his students kneel and pray on the day of Jefferson’s execution, Grant urges Jefferson to talk to Reverend Ambrose. For Grant, this move is especially noteworthy because it comes the day after his heated debate with Ambrose about what methods to pursue to reconstruct Jefferson’s manhood. It suggests his understanding that perhaps neither he nor Reverend Ambrose are right or wrong regarding how to conceive of black male possibility. Rather, his endorsing of Ambrose’s understanding of black male possibility demonstrates his valuing of communal exchange rather than self-aggrandizing power, and “some softening on his…part towards the church as an institution” (Nash 350). As Nash reveals, by the Christianity-critical Grant encouraging Jefferson (who believes “the lord just work for wite folks”) to consider what Reverend Ambrose has to say regarding his manhood, “Grant willingly suggests [the church] as a possible option for Jefferson as a means of affecting the transformation of the convict from hog to human” (350).

In other words, while Grant may not personally agree with Ambrose’s religious beliefs, he comes to understand the minister as representing much more than his Christian values. For Grant, Ambrose becomes “a valued part of the communal heritage” (Nash 352) whose knowledge and experience with relieving communal pain can aid in Jefferson’s struggle for inner peace and a positive sense of identity. Thus, Ambrose’s question “You think a man can’t kneel and stand?” empowers Grant, and in turn, Jefferson, and the community at large. It enables Jefferson to consider going to the
electric chair as a black man who can stand strong in the self-respecting, secular sense while also embracing the humility of Christ (“He never said a mumbling word…that’s how I want to go”). Further, Ambrose’s question enables Grant to appreciate the unity that comes from believing in something (even if that something does not line up with his personal belief system)—as demonstrated in his insisting that his students “get down on their knees [and pray]” during Jefferson’s execution. Thus, Ambrose’s use of the language of possibility through communal exchange enables Grant, Jefferson, and the community to move beyond limited perceptions of how to reconstruct black male identity.

V

Writing the Language of Redemption: Jefferson and the Creation of Communal Uplift through the Voice of the Communal Hero

As we consider again the power of communal exchange in *A Lesson Before Dying*, the language of redemption also functions to facilitate personal and communal uplift among Gaines’s characters. In Chapter 1, I defined the language of redemption as words or ideas that expand an individual’s self-perception through the processes of self-exploration and self-affirmation while simultaneously inspiring and saving others. By sharing his journal with Grant, (and essentially, the community), Jefferson uses the language of redemption to save himself and others from limiting perceptions of black male possibility.

When Grant initially urges Jefferson to keep a journal, he says, “You could write your thoughts down, and we could talk about it” (185). I would argue that Grant’s
statement here represents one of the most revolutionary moments in the novel because by Grant encouraging Jefferson to document his thoughts, he leads him to the language of redemption. In other words, by inviting Jefferson to the power of writing (“you could write your thoughts down”) and the power of communal exchange (“we could talk about it”), Grant leads Jefferson to a sanctuary of self-exploration and self-affirmation that can deconstruct the language of binary opposition that frames his identity. With a notebook, pencil, his mind, and a set of eyes and ears that seeks to understand him, Jefferson can reconstruct his manhood through the power of language. Like John Grimes in Baldwin’s _Go Tell It on the Mountain_, Jefferson can be “saved” through his re-contextualizing of salvation—through his own active participation in the power of the word.

Further, for Jefferson, the notebook represents a way that he can redeem himself outside of the limiting perspective of black male possibility initially proposed by Reverend Ambrose and the community. In Chapter 29, constituted solely of Jefferson’s writing, Jefferson’s voice interacts with Grant, the community, and his readers in a way that both challenges and celebrates their contributions to his own individuality—his complex identity. Here, his writing is a means through which to voice a black male possibility that he can call his own, as Beavers notes:

> Though the only way Ambrose can access redemption is via the Christ narrative, [Gaines]…suggests that the question of what Jefferson’s death means to him need not conform to the community’s interpretation…it is here that we come to understand the value of Jefferson’s diary…the novel needs Jefferson’s writing in order to move toward closure (148).

Here, Beavers suggests that writing affords Jefferson not only the opportunity to express his own black male possibility, but also the chance “to move toward closure.” While Beavers is referring to the novel itself, I would argue that this notion of “closure” can
also be discussed in terms of understanding black male possibility. For if we can agree that John Grimes’s inability to be fully understood when he declares “I’m saved” at the end of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* leaves the novel with “a discord is never harmonized” (May 97), then Gaines demonstrates that writing provides Jefferson and his community a means of communal exchange that can provide one possible resolution to the problem of voicing black male possibility.

First, as Phillip Auger reveals, “Jefferson’s writing must be recognized as a radical act in itself” (83). Jefferson’s writing represents both an unexpected and an unexplored response to reconstructing black manhood—a response that even Grant assures Jefferson he could not do: “You could give something to [Vivian], to me, to those children in the quarter. You could give them something I never could” (191). Here, Grant’s words not only reinforce the heroic potential of Jefferson’s voice, they also hit home with Jefferson—he cries after he hears them. This scene reveals the most emotional moment between Grant and Jefferson in the novel. It suggests that even by discussing the communal saving power of the language of redemption (in the case of Gaines’s novel, the voicing of Jefferson’s possibility in culture via the notebook), a meaningful connection can take place between anyone. This connection is reflective of communal exchange, for even as Grant suggests culture’s unexpectedness of Jefferson’s possibility (“What can a hog do with a pencil and paper?”), he implies that he longs to hear his voice. He longs to know that there is a way out of the imprisoning language of binary opposition through which his identity has been inscribed. As Auger notes, Grant,
too, longs to be redeemed through the power of language, and Jefferson’s words will function to achieve this redemption:

Grant realizes that the powerlessness of Jefferson is, in fact, not so different from the powerlessness he himself feels. While Jefferson is imprisoned in a literally confining structure of white law, Grant is also imprisoned within the structures of white discourse...Gaines emphasizes [that]...the...discursive structures of ideology, law, and ultimately language itself are literally and figuratively, structures designed to preserve white forms of power (76).

Clearly, Grant’s faith in Jefferson’s heroic potential comes from a shared feeling of cultural imprisonment. Grant, who initially cannot find any reason for why he should be the one to visit Jefferson, realizes that “he is imprisoned within the structures of white discourse” in the same way that Jefferson is. In other words, in their quest to voice their black male possibility, both men need each other, because “ultimately language [is]...designed to preserve white forms of power.” Ultimately, culture wishes to suppress their redemption from its limiting perceptions through its (mis)use of the power of language (via the language of binary opposition).

Thus, I would argue that Grant’s realization and attitude of hope would not be possible without the communal exchange that first takes place between him and Jefferson. By taking the time to understand Jefferson—by listening to his pain, and understanding his struggle to be understood as complex black man—Grant can re-vision his own perception of black male possibility. His intimate involvement in Jefferson’s life, then, teaches Jefferson to explore the language of redemption (through writing and then sharing this writing with Grant and others) while simultaneously teaching Grant to understand and respond to Jefferson’s voice (which emerges through the language of redemption). Thus, “like Christ, [Jefferson] is both God and man” (Auger 80). With the
help of Grant and others, Jefferson imagines and discusses a possible reconstruction of black manhood and in the process of teaching others to understand it, takes on the form of his reconstruction.

Perhaps a brief exploration of Jefferson’s words can demonstrate the power inherent in this language of redemption that is shaped by interaction—or communal exchange. In Chapter 29 of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson tells us: “i tol [Miss Emma] i lover her i tol her i was strong an she jus look ole and tied an pull me to her an kis me an it was the firs she never done that it felt good an I let her long is she want” (231). Here, Jefferson’s decision to tell Miss Emma that he is “strong” demonstrates his interaction with her reconstruction of his manhood. While he does not feel that he must meet all of her expectations for his identity, by calling himself “strong” (as opposed to engaging in “hog” behavior, as he did with Miss Emma previously) Jefferson demonstrates a reconstruction of black manhood that connects to some degree with the desires of the old woman’s heart (“I just want to see him die like a man”). Further, while Jefferson never claims to be spiritual, he comes to appreciate Reverend Ambrose’s role in reconstructing his manhood. He writes, “i dont know if they got a heven cause samson say they cant be an boo say they aint non for no niger but reven ambros say they is one for all men” (233). Here, we know that even though Jefferson may not agree with Ambrose’s beliefs, he still values Ambrose’s voice and presence in his life (especially on the day of his execution). First, he includes Ambrose’s name in his articulation of black male possibility, and second, he discusses the possibility of “heven,” or an afterlife, in the reconstruction of his manhood. Finally, Jefferson’s confession that “i cry cause you been
so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me to make me think im somebody…tell them im strong tell them im a man” (232) demonstrates the way in which communal exchange has ultimately functioned through the language of redemption to save Jefferson. Jefferson has discovered that someone other than himself cares about the condition of his complex identity—someone other than himself thinks that he’s “somebody” (not a “hog”). Thus, Jefferson’s conversations with Grant lead him to self-reflect and ultimately affirm himself through the language of redemption. By the end of the chapter, Jefferson can declare to Grant who he is (“im a man”), but he also voices his desire for Grant and the community to keep the conversation of black male possibility alive through the language of redemption (“tell them im strong tell them im a man”).

VI

Redemption Revisited: Communal Exchange and Black Masculinity in Culture

In his essay, “Writing A Lesson Before Dying,” Gaines declares: “The story is not whether Jefferson is innocent or guilty, but rather how he feels about himself at the end” (776, italics added). I would argue that this statement not only emphasizes the author’s desire to move away from binary constructions of black men (innocent/guilty), but also his belief that communal exchange can empower black men in this process of deconstructing language. In fact, later in the essay, Gaines asserts, “I had to find some way to make [Jefferson] talk.” Here, Gaines reveals that through talking with others in a manner in which his identity can be understood (through writing) Jefferson reconstructs his manhood.
Thus, if talking and feeling are essential to reconstructing black male identity, then I would argue that like Grant, Reverend Ambrose, and Jefferson, we must use the language of possibility and the language of redemption to create spaces for open, honest, conversation among black men and between black men and others in culture. If we wish to save ourselves from the black male stereotypes and fetishizations that emerge in rap videos, the 6 o’clock news, police reports, or our favorite sitcoms (all examples of the language of binary opposition), we must consider the importance of communal exchange. We must learn that black male possibility is contained not only by the language of binary opposition, but also by the thoughts and emotions we don’t express to others or choose not to hear. We must learn that until we view black male possibility as possible through communal exchange, we will be vainly hopeful “church people.”
Works Cited


EPILOGUE

WILL YOU READ?:
The Power of Choice in Reading Possibilities for Black Male Identity
“A willful blindness protects the bemused from ever having to know [black men].”
—Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine*

When I began writing this thesis, I asked myself: where have America’s black men gone? I searched high and low for examples of black men whose life stories deconstructed the limiting languages that inscribe them in American culture, including television, newspapers, film, magazines, and the Internet. I searched for unsung heroes and unheard voices. And I found black men like Barack Obama, the only black senator currently in the U.S. Senate, whose acknowledgment that “my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely” (1) voices black male possibility everyday at a national level. As I poured over the pages of three twentieth-century writers, however, I found a world of black men and celebrated their meticulous creation.

First, I celebrated Zora Neale Hurston’s construction of John Pearson through the language of possibility in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. I found joy in her ability to use language to help us see a black man who could be situated outside of the language of binary opposition. I witnessed a man who was saint and sinner, a man who could “jump at de sun” when seen as more than a promiscuous preacher-man. I applauded Hurston’s use of the black female voice (Lucy Potts) to encourage John to speak to the possibilities that many black men fail to see and articulate regarding their identities in culture.

I was also amazed to find a black man as creative in his thinking about the possibilities of his identity as John Grimes. In James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, I found a black man whose ability to hear, reflect on, and respond to a multiplicity of voices in his family, church, and school ultimately enabled him to articulate his own sense of identity. John Grimes, who uses verbal irony and the
language of redemption to redefine what it means to be saved, comes to believe that a fluid male identity can emerge in the rigid structure of the Pentecostal church through tapping into the identity-transforming power of language.

Lastly, I celebrated the possibilities that Jefferson, Grant, and Reverend Ambrose envision and exchange in Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*. The questions that came out of their conversations, including, “You think a man can’t kneel *and* stand?” (216, italics added), challenged their own preconceived notions about black manhood while challenging their community to redefine their perceptions about black male possibility. In Gaines’s novel, then, I found three black men whose desire to be freed from the limiting languages of American culture created the kinds of conversations that later freed a community from its cultural myopia.

It would seem, then, that finding where black men have gone is not as hard as understanding *why* it is so difficult to find them. Yes, social institutions (law, education, church, family, etc.) and the media have constructed black men in binary-structured boxes that contain our understanding of their complex identities. However, I would pose the following question: are we, as a nation, willfully ignorant? Do we not know black men because we would rather not know them? Taking a visit to our local cultural library—those persons who are different from us who we encounter everyday—may be the first step to understanding and moving away from this willful ignorance.

As I think about my initial ignorance of Hurston’s novel, I believe this point can be made clearer. Until last year, I had no idea what *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was. I certainly did not think that it would be beneficial to my study on black masculinity in
contemporary American culture. After all, the book was written by a pre-feminist black woman in the 1930s. As I thought about the ways in which Hurston’s acclaimed novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* focuses primarily on the development of the black female voice, I doubted that *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (published earlier) would add much to the ideas and arguments ruminating in my head about black male identity.

Then, after talking to one of my professors, I made a visit to the library. I sat down and read the novel almost in one sitting. I was amazed. The arguments Hurston rose about black men and her playful depiction of their quest for identity in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* raised my eyebrows again and again. Before I went home, I had about a shelf’s worth of Hurston’s writing. I remember smiling, feeling as if I could almost hear Hurston’s voice. I remember smiling because I had found a female voice of possibility, a voice that I had never thought of as capable of re-visioning and reconstructing black male identity.

In other words, by going to an unlikely source, I found a black man—John Pearson. By choosing to move outside of my comfort zone by reading an author I would have never thought to read, I learned that black men live in the stories we choose not to read. Thus, I would argue that our greatest problem as a culture is not not knowing that complex black male identities exist, but rather, as Maurice O. Wallace suggests, “a willful blindness [that] protects the bemused from ever having to know [black men]” (31). Perhaps if we think about reading and re-reading black men in culture, we can understand the complexity of their identities. Perhaps, by challenging ourselves to read
the stories of black masculinity we’d rather not know, we can better appreciate the black 
men we do.
Works Cited


Bibliography


