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The black aesthetic was birthed by artists during the Black Arts movement. The black aesthetic was a psychological breakaway from the dismissive Western ideologies that represented African Americans as an opposition. At the heart of the Black Arts movement was black love. Self-love and love for the community was essential. There was also an emphasis on African American artists’ ability to interpret their individual value. These artists were encouraged to find their worth and importance within themselves. During this time many artists believed black art should be both political and express the African American lived experience. This was a time for racial political radicalism and retaliation. Many artists used their platform to speak out against police brutality, demand voting rights for African Americans, and champion the upward mobility of African Americans. Leading member of the Black Arts movement, Larry Neal stated that the “Black Arts movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community” (1). He explored the idea of community and self-acknowledgement. He and other artists pushed the Black aesthetic in opposition to Western culture. According to Neal, the Black Arts movement “proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic” (1). He believed the only way to eliminate Western ideologies was to inherently radicalize or destroy western history, which is impossible. It was the job of the Black artist to create politically engaged content that expressed the new anger and discontentment regarding police brutality in the 1960s. The Black Arts movement provided an outlet for African Americans to express their blackness and to go against societal norms. Black Arts essentially became an artistic and political statement. As part of this movement, radical novelist and African American activist James Baldwin wrote “Going to Meet the Man” in 1965. Baldwin used his
literature as a way to combat White supremacy during the 1960s. He demonstrated what transpires in white minds when roles of power between whites and African American’s are interchangeable. Baldwin illustrated the literal emasculation of the African American by figuratively unmasking racial tensions and social constructions of racism practiced by United States law enforcement.

In “Going to Meet the Man” protagonist Jesse is introduced lying in bed next to his wife after a long day at the courthouse. As Jesse lies next to his wife, he has difficulty obtaining an erection due to the powerlessness he experienced earlier that day with African American protesters. The courthouse scene displays African Americans fighting for their right to vote; this is an example of where Jesse feels threatened as an authority figure. Essentially, these protestors are showing a form of equality. This disturbs Jesse because his hate for African Americans has become engraved in his mind. This goes against everything he knows to be true. As a White supremacist, he believes African Americans do not deserve rights as humans. In reference to the protestors outside the courthouse Jesse repeatedly states, “Goddamn the niggers ... you’d think they’d learn” (454). He suggests that African Americans deserved to learn a lesson for fighting for their right to vote. A lesson only a White supremacist, such as himself, could teach an African American. Jesse reveals that his authentic sexuality and authority are deeply rooted in racism and white supremacy. The only way he can obtain a sense of power is through his ability to strip away power from African Americans. He demonstrates his toxic masculinity through his sexuality and authority.

Jesse displays characteristics and habits of a white supremacist through the enactment of racist and misogynist ideologies. Baldwin’s audience discovers Jesse is a white forty-two-year-old sheriff who is married to a younger, beautiful white woman. He intentionally refrains from
sexually objectifying his wife but fanaticizes about raping African American women. As he lies next to his wife, Jesse’s inner thoughts are revealed, “he could not ask her to do just a little thing for him… the way he could ask a nigger girl to do it” (453). He views African American women as sexual objects he can use whenever he pleases. Through Jesse’s disturbing thoughts, Baldwin unmasks Jesse’s deeply rooted hatred for African Americans and his misogynistic mentality. His frustration due to lack of power manifests and follows him home where he begins to sexualize African American women in the privacy of his mind. Jesse’s thoughts of raping African American women are an example of Jesse reaching into his past in hopes to gain power and achieve an erection. This power-exchange of stripping African American women from their womanhood is what Jesse initially resorts to when he cannot achieve an erection. His erection and masculinity are tied to his power over African American women.

But Baldwin also takes his readers to three distinctive destinations within Jesse’s memory where he emasculates African American men and in return achieves an erection. Jesse’s first memory is also at the courthouse, and in it a young African American man appears to be “one of the ringleaders” (455). Jesse states, “Some of the boys really had to whip that nigger’s ass today” (455). Here, Jesse is referring to white supremacists’ attempts to discourage African Americans by taking out their leaders (i.e. former African American activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Huey Newton). As Jesse’s wife is trying to sleep, he says, “Big Jim C. figured that the others would move if this nigger would move, him being the ring leader” (455). African Americans’ desire for the equal right to vote led to police brutality. Jesse believes African Americans must learn that White supremacists are in charge of their communities and essentially their lives. As the memory progresses, Jesse ends up in the cell with the young African American protestor. Jesse was assigned to convince the young African American man to
quiet the other protestors. When he fails at this attempt, Jesse begins to brutalize the young man. Baldwin exposes Jesse’s inner thoughts as he attacks the young man, “Jesus, he thought, this ain’t no nigger, this a goddamn bull” (456). Significantly, this young man was connected to Jesse’s past life. As the young African American man laid on the cell floor, in a pile of his own blood, he states “You remember Old Julia ... My grandmother’s name was Mrs. Julia Blossom ... You going to call our women by their right names…” (456). After this Jesse beats the young African American man to a pulp.

Jesse next remembers his previous job which consisted of house visits to lower-income African Americans to collect money in which he essentially took advantage of the families and sold them high interest deals. In this second flashback, he visits Mrs. Julia Blossom’s house. The young boy outside of Mrs. Julia Blossom’s house is the same young man in the jail cell. He asks the young boy if Old Julia lives there and his response is “Don’t no Old Julia live here” (456). This is the first time Jesse is disrespected by an African American, a young one at that. His initial response is a desire to “go over to him and pick him up and pistol whip him until the boy’s head burst open like a melon” like he later does in the jail cell (456). But instead, Jesse yells at the young boy and ejaculates in his direction, “You lucky we pump some white blood into you every once in a while, - your women!” (456). When Jesse returns in his mind to the moment of the jailhouse beating, “He felt himself violently stiffen” which is an erection from the flashback of emasculating the young Black boy (456). In the jail cell the memory of this brutalization leads to Jesse’s erection. Through brutalization of the young African American man, Jesse is again able to satisfy his need for power and sexual gratification.

Jesse’s final flashback is his first lynching experience as a young boy. Baldwin illustrates the brutalization of an African American man by a community of racist Whites. Jesse describes
the lynching as “…a Fourth of July picnic” (460). This horrific event is treated as if it were a sacred ceremony. His father makes sure his wife looks more attractive than the rest of the women. Jesse’s father objectifies and sexualizes his younger wife leading up to the lynching, and during the lynching, he states “Now don’t you go trying to turn yourself into no movie star. You just come on” and laughed as he said this and winked at the other men (461). Jesse later practices the treatment and sexualization of women he observed in his father. This is why Jesse finds his masculinity through objectifying women and African Americans. While the lynching experience is extremely traumatic for the young boy, unfortunately, Jesse perceives this as an initiation into manhood. And this is why he connects his masculinity to the emasculation of African American men. Baldwin illustrates younger Jesse’s first glimpse of the lynching; he writes “beyond the shifting curtain of fire and smoke, he made out first only a length of gleaming chain, attached to a great limb of the tree; then he saw that this chain bound two black hands together at the wrist…” (463). The chain is symbolic; Jesse’s family’s dog is tied to a tree during the lynching. The lynching is a literal and figurative illustration of the emasculation of an African American. The chain that tied this man’s body to the tree symbolizes the literal and figurative bondage in which White supremacists have kept African American lives. Younger Jesse knows the lynched man “wanted death to come quickly. They want to make death wait and it was they who held death, now, on a leash which they lengthened little by little” (463). Literally, Baldwin illustrates how an African American man is unjustifiably lynched, pulled up and down by a chain controlled by a White supremacist. The chain that controls this man’s life is also a symbol of how United States law enforcement controls and regulates the lives of African Americans. Figuratively, the chain around his wrists represents the grip the United States has on the upward mobility of African Americans due to deeply rooted hate and racist ideologies. When the White
man raises and lowers the lynched man, Baldwin reveals how little control racist Whites allow African Americans to have over their own lives. But Baldwin also ties that power directly to White masculinity. Jesse describes his father’s colleague removing the African American’s testicle, “… in the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier… Jesse felt his scrotum tighten” (464). In response to the emasculation of the lynched African American man, Jesse is able to obtain his first erection as a child.

Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” illustrates the literal emasculation of African Americans by figuratively revealing the racial tensions and social constructions of racism. United States’ law enforcement today, like Jesse in Baldwin’s text, continues to brutalize African Americans in the 21st century. Trayvone Martin, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, and Eric Garner must be remembered for their deaths at the hands of police. The NAACP and other African American organizations must continue to educate the world on police brutality in the United States because the white supremacy and humiliation practiced by Jesse in “Going to Meet the Man” continues today. According to Jabari Asim, in response to Martin’s death, White young males posed “as dead Trayvon [with] skittles and cans of iced tea” (21). He also describes how in South Carolina the Republican party created a slogan “Will karma find me as quick as it did Trayvon?” (Asim 21). These examples are proof of racist Whites’ views of police brutality practiced on African Americans. White supremacists find amusement in the deaths of African Americans. Police brutality is normalized and America becomes desensitized to the injustice inflicted upon African Americans. Between 1965 and 2019 African Americans have gained more rights, but equality is still missing. Accordingly, African Americans must continue to fight
against racial inequality and police brutality, telling stories that will forever live through African American art and culture.

Works Cited

