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Hemingway, Race, and Art

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“Well it’s a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific and stuff; it’s been proved.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

The specter of race can be a wondrously terrifying thing. Ernest Hemingway certainly thought so, as did his friend F. Scott Fitzgerald. But you would not know that judging by the dearth of related critical material on each artist. Like a ghost, that dark specter played on their minds for years, and for Hemingway, especially, it was a lifelong psychic possession. The preceding excerpt from The Great Gatsby, in all its glorious brevity, captures that growing anxiety plaguing the American imagination in the twentieth century’s dawning years. While the segment clearly mocks the irrationality of America’s consciously hyper-nationalist Tom Buchanans, Fitzgerald simultaneously echoes W. E. B. Du Bois’s 1903 proclamation that the “problem of the twentieth century” would most assuredly be that of the “color line.” This single statement could not have been any truer had it been made just ten years ago, let alone a hundred. These assertions maintain their resonance and power a century later because of both the messengers and the message. Du Bois made his observations as a sociologist, and as a historian, but most importantly as a black man living in white America. Hemingway, as a student of history himself and a
man reflective of his times, certainly heard Du Bois’s declaration. As an artist, Hemingway recorded what he saw and heard and made mental notes for future reference.

These mental notes would prove instrumental as Hemingway reconstructed both the American and African landscapes in his fiction. Through these reconstructions, he exposes the color line and concepts of racial essentiality for what they are: products of racial mythmaking. This is a grand truth revealed time and again in his writings. Of American writers he tells us through Papa’s voice in *Green Hills of Africa* that “we have had writers of rhetoric who had the good fortune to find a little, in a chronicle of another man and from voyaging, of how things, actual things, can be . . . and this knowledge is wrapped in the rhetoric like plums in a pudding. Occasionally it is there, alone, unwrapped in pudding, and it is good” (20). We do not find anything valuable in the rhetoric, Hemingway assures us; we find it in the conveyed reality. These valued plums are bits and pieces of truth—unvarnished, raw, and real.

In several of his American stories, Hemingway tells tales about the “other” America, allowing our nation’s marginal figures, its racial phantoms, to speak—even if indirectly—on the true state of things in America. There is always an almost hyper-cognizance of the color line as fallacy. In the writings spawned by his final African safari, Hemingway demonstrates yet more possibilities inherent in identity’s construction. In Africa, Hemingway makes race’s malleability quite apparent, first in fortifying the color line (we see this in those first Africa-inspired texts), then (in the works springing from his last safari) in erasing and raising it at will, and seemingly always in the back of his mind was Du Bois’s early twentieth-century admonition.

In his seminal essay collection of 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois explores the ideas of blackness, specifically what it means to be black in America at the beginning of what was then a new century. Looking at himself through the lens of Du Bois’s “double consciousness,” the African American stands as a torn and tortured entity striving to craft himself in the mold of both his new and his old homelands, yet seeming to belong wholly to neither. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1862 left a people physically free but bereft of home, of livelihood, of the privileges of (political) voice and education; it also left them stripped of personal pride and, to a great degree, of hope. What to do became the quandary for both the white and the black, and the white man proclaimed it his burden. This also became the burgeoning century’s greater problem of the color line, and this problem refused to be bound by the strictures of formal politics, forcing its way into both the science and art of the day.
Yet, relatively speaking, the white literary academy’s members during Du Bois’s day who addressed, let alone immersed themselves in, the politics and sociology of race were few. As an artist, Fitzgerald makes mention of race in *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* and *The Great Gatsby*, but he certainly does not make its exploration his central mission. Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century canonical representative, William Faulkner immerses himself in the issues of biology and ethnicity. *Light in August*, for example, is an attempt to exorcise the demons and defeatist sensibilities haunting an entire region generations after the actual sectional strife ceased, generations after its unconditional surrender. In fact, Faulkner’s 1932 novel shows a remarkably heightened awareness of both racial epistemology and miscegenation’s attendant horrors in the 1930s American South. Notions of race, power, and authority are foregrounded in Joe Christmas’s own story and, arguably, the story of an entire region.¹

But what of the rest of America? Surely the South was not alone in its angst. Tom Buchanan’s imaginative ramblings—or, more correctly, Fitzgerald’s—suggest otherwise. In fact, race consciousness and the ever-present color line even pervade the texts of the unlikeliest of America’s so-called moderns, Ernest Hemingway. Not only was Hemingway aware of Du Bois’s declaration that the defining problem of the twentieth century was that of the color line, but his lifelong engagement with race suggests that he believed it to be true.

Some of Hemingway’s earliest writings are racially bound, and the author was never able to shake free of those tethers. We see this in Hemingway’s fascination with and eventual push toward the African continent. Several of his later texts born of his safaris are a grand experiment meant to both placate and comfort his own psyche, and to challenge and unsettle it, too. Hemingway visited East Africa two times. His African travels, especially his first, were on one level a means of escaping the challenges to white privilege being mounted at home and, on another level, a way, he hoped, to clarify for himself increasingly muddied notions of racial identity and authority. With its clearly delineated social hierarchy, 1930s Africa became the white artist’s true land of opportunity and, in some respects, the last good country. Yet the African safaris, especially his last, also stand as socio-aesthetic experiments that ultimately challenge notions of racial essentiality and what I will call absolute identity.² In fact, Hemingway’s greater body of work, when examined in its totality, is a career-long experiment exploring a variety of identity issues, of which race is an integral part. Such is the legacy of a modern, but Hemingway’s true modernity has, until now, been only partially recognized.
Suffice it to say that Hemingway talked about new things or, if not new things, new ideas in a burgeoning new century. And he certainly explored these ideas in a vernacular new to the scene. His contributions to this way of writing form the foundations of Hemingway critical scholarship. While mimicking the great artists of his day and before—the Cézannes, Matisses, and Picassos—Hemingway crafted a writing style whose syntax expanded the literary landscape and whose diction drew from imagination. Often he would work this magic without saying much.3

Hemingway’s modernity, though, is equally present in his subject matter. Critics typically point to his skewed reflection of a nation bent on progress, yet still both visibly and invisibly reeling from the realities of war.4 Hemingway was indeed very much the existentialist, and we get glimpses of this in the early stories of In Our Time, in Frederic Henry’s soul searching in A Farewell to Arms, and in the wanderings of Jake Barnes and his not-so-merry band of wayward souls in The Sun Also Rises. In more recent years, just as Hemingway scholarship seemed to be running out of fuel, we experienced another marked critical shift, with gender explorations marking a return and resurgence for the author. But as we forge ahead into a new century, a new millennium even, a critical lack persists. Even as this new century seems to usher in a new day—with a black man acting as leader of the free world—the racial divide in America remains that untapped resource for scholars of both Hemingway and the American cultural scene.5

My interest in Hemingway and race actually arose years ago as I explored the texts produced from his first African sojourn, particularly his fictional memoir, Green Hills of Africa. My examination of Green Hills initially sprang from Toni Morrison’s suggestion that much of America’s literary canon necessarily depends on an unnamed, often unspecified, “marginal element” to forge and maintain its own sense of American-ness. She specifically names that site the “Africanist presence,” but her template works with an expanded racial circle as well. In the years since Hemingway’s latest critical resurgence, Morrison’s Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination has become a staple point of reference for scholars intent on engaging the canonical (read: white) text for its racial investment, although such critical readings are relatively few, and those prescriptively reading Hemingway even fewer.6

My own investigation is no different, insofar as it acknowledges a debt to Morrison’s book, a work that spawned what surely were then not wholly new ideas, but certainly boldly ventured and impeccably timed ones. In the post-colonial era, Morrison’s work clearly pays homage to Edward Said’s orientalist
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textual prescription, but, I would argue, Morrison’s work goes a step further. It contextualizes such a reading for an American audience still haunted by its own racial ghosts.

What better time to exorcise and interrogate this presence than in the years immediately following the last of Hemingway’s posthumous publications—the substantially abridged *True at First Light* or its more complete iteration, *Under Kilimanjaro*, works inspired by his final African safari in 1953–54? When placed alongside his other race-centered texts, Hemingway’s later African stories, particularly his safari books, become an answer to the earlier Nick Adams–centered American tales. This juxtaposition prompts several questions: Can we connect Hemingway’s African stories to the American tales that precede them? More appropriately, should we? What function does race play in the early tales? What role does it play in any of the texts, for that matter? Put another way, what is race’s purpose for Hemingway, someone with seemingly little to no real investment in the game of acculturation?

But American culture was very much Hemingway’s concern. Hemingway is a product of his times, and his interest in race, outside any personal connection to the Native American community or Africa as that grand abstraction he had chased since boyhood, is tied to a national anxiety over a changing American racial landscape. That being said, each of his individual works becomes a treatment and expression of that collective (white) American angst. Hemingway’s modernity is thus in his recognition of race as the pervasive issue for a progressive nation defining itself in a burgeoning century. While his works may lack the apparent complexity of William Faulkner’s, they share Faulkner’s concerns with race and take them well beyond the bounds of the South and extend them to the rest of the nation. Hemingway’s treatment is an American treatment, his body of work a lifelong exploration of national (racial) identity, in letters.

Hemingway stepped onto the literary scene and spoke to his country, his generation, with provocative narratives. In *The Sun Also Rises* (published in 1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (published in 1929), Hemingway asks, among other things, what it means to be a man and, more specifically, what it means to be an American man. World war prompted the existentialist scramble for meaning as old values were obliterated; similarly, warring racial realities and ideals prompted a comparable scramble for meaning. Why not then transfer this inquiry to the realm of race? Is race of the blood, essential? What necessarily is blackness? What is whiteness? Does anything separate one from the other? Further, what would a blurring of that all-important color line do to an understanding of racial identity, if anything at all? Hemingway’s modernity
lies in his early recognition of race's flexibility, its malleability, and ultimately its artificiality.

Hemingway’s body of work suggests that as we shift the dividing line between the races, between (white) self and racial “other,” difference disappears. Moreover, imagined difference must be amplified to maintain any sense of “true” selfhood. Hemingway demonstrates early on that racial configuration is just that: a configuration, a construct, an idea whose days seemingly are numbered. Today, several generations later, the essentialist-constructivist argument regarding racial definition rages on unabated.8 Hemingway’s real modernity thus lies in his recognition of racial “truths” at a time when few other canonical artists were expressly addressing them. And such a cognizance empowers the artist bent on experimentation.

At first glance, Hemingway’s racial investment seems specious at best. Epithets color the text more than do actual people of color. In some instances, the minority presence is seemingly nonexistent. However, it is there; one just has to be willing to see it. And entangled with the phantom racial presence is that love for Africa. The key to seeing, if not understanding Hemingway’s strategy, is in a more comprehensive recognition and appreciation of his work’s collective. When joined together, the race-centered texts—those texts, both long and short, featuring an important minority presence—stridently push toward Africa, a space that occupied the author’s mind even in his youth. Hemingway’s landing on the “dark continent,” his repeated literal and metaphoric return to it, and his profound fascination and love for it then should come as no surprise.9 But one question remains: why Africa?

Like the man himself, the answer to that question is complex, Hemingway’s fervor complicated by fear. Fear of a lost dominion drove many to the green hills of Africa during the new century’s dawning years. Although even in his most conservative moments Hemingway pushed the aesthetic envelope, in truth, (self-)preservation was the first order of business in his trek to the African continent. The African sojourn was as much a flight of fear as it was a flight of fancy. Truthfully, his recollected forays into the African wilderness (in 1933 and again in 1953) were in part an attempt to stave off impending change. On a very basic level, the collected safari fiction becomes an attempt to preserve some semblance of the known (white) order; it is a means of negotiating—as only an artist can—racial issues that would dog the writer throughout much of his career. With a once-clearly delineated color line blurring on the home front, with the old racial power differential in a state of constant flux, Africa ultimately provided the perfect locus within which to both reflect and reaf-
firm; there, with added distance, the white man could properly reflect upon this inconstancy. There too he could reaffirm those once-reliable racial tenets entrenched in the mythos of white superiority.

Yet however entrenched the author was in this mythology, one fact remains: this very act of (white) reaffirmation also becomes the ultimate aesthetic experiment for a writer bold enough to try it. White reconstitution, Hemingway shows us, is itself an active, deliberate, and grand exercise in identity construction. However, raising whiteness was only part of the exercise; razing the color line was the other. The African space also provided for the writer a sanctum of uninhibited creation. Here, again with the benefit of distance, the white male idol could transcend the strictures and expectations of celebrity (and race) binding him at home and transgress the color line with all the fervor that artistic license would allow. And noting the quickly changing cultural landscape around him, a young and impressionable Hemingway had been engaged in the grand experiment from an early age.

Young Hemingway’s America, most especially in the first decades of the new century, shook with the rumblings of a nation not only at war with others abroad but at war with itself domestically; “foreign” elements at home ensured this. And writhing under the dominant culture’s boot, struggling for some semblance of agency, that nebulous racial other threatened to destroy the bedrock of difference upon which much of white American identity rested; it threatened to expose the mythological behind so-called established truth and thereby undermine Anglo claims to power. Early twentieth-century America was still clearly attempting to fashion a future for itself from a past steeped in lore, loss, and lies.

We see that bedrock’s bricks laid bare in the era’s Native American trading cards, in its fascination with Wild West shows, and in a resurgent Ku Klux Klan. For years, the racial propaganda of Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, transcended the literary realm and held sway over much of popular culture. Dixon’s novels inspired the emerging cinema; his romantic spirit inhabits the body of W. D. Griffith’s 1915 landmark film *Birth of a Nation*, a film that captivated a country by openly playing on racial stereotype and its attendant fears. So visceral was its initial cultural impact that President Woodrow Wilson declared admiringly that *Birth* was “history writ with lightning.” More importantly, it was a film and a history with which Hemingway was very familiar.

Recall also that, particularly in the South, in the waning decades of the nineteenth century, writers like Thomas N. Page, the author of *In Ole Virginia*, sold many a book touting the virtues of the plantation tradition, a tradition
glorifying the Old South and defending established racial order and white privilege. Turn-of-the-century America experienced great growing pains and the dominant culture made frantic attempts to make necessary adjustments. It was an era of reconstruction, reevaluation, and redefinition. What exactly was the “authentic American self” of which Ralph Waldo Emerson and others had spoken just a generation or two before? Often the easy answer lay in the negative; aptly, in the new century’s dawning years, many Americans answered in terms of what America was not or what it did not wish to become.

Throughout this mutable era, white America actively engaged in a campaign of differentiation, seeking to recraft itself in light of the other, and this meant accentuating the interracial divide wherever and whenever possible. That negative space became the “un-American” home to a myriad of racist ideological varieties perpetuated well into the new century. Conversely, the dominant culture assured itself of its promised progress, seizing upon Darwinian principles to define it; this often meant using so-called science to explain societal and, more specifically, racial difference. Race and genetics, then, accounted for a shared—whether ascending or descending—cultural trajectory.

Science would certainly explain much to mainstream America during those formative years. However, artists were not exempt from such racial cognizance and wholesale propagandist strategies. Extending this line of thought to the literature of the day, a few of Hemingway’s earliest short stories point to the prospects of a blurred color line and to the inherent horrors of a destiny shared by whites and racial others. Carl Eby rightly posits that Hemingway, as an artist, came to represent the “psychosocial dilemmas of his age—an age in which many of his white male compatriots felt challenged by the rising power of racial and sexual ‘others’” (166). For many whites then, the mere prospect of a shared moral depravity made pure definition and clear dividing lines all the more critical to maintaining a valid claim to ultimate social authority. Simply put, the racial totem depended upon difference for its very survival. And Hemingway’s recognition of this fact was unparalleled.

Hemingway’s acclaim as modern thus stems from his very unapologetic exploitation of this racial dynamic. Upon closer examination, an apparent device quickly becomes an equally important part of Hemingway’s overall narrative strategy. While the Fitzgerald example at the beginning of this chapter clearly pokes fun at Tom Buchanan for his markedly unsophisticated world reading, many of Fitzgerald’s contemporaries were clearly disturbed by what they saw as a trend toward social devolution. Hemingway too noted this anxiety, and he
seized upon it in his own storytelling. Clearly, for the artist, life and art spoke in tandem. The “Goddard” of Tom’s verbal misstep is a very real person. In actuality, he is Lothrop Stoddard, whose work *The Rising Tide of Color*, along with several other similar works, was sanctioned by academics and laymen alike as scholarly. In it, Stoddard rails against a perceived encroachment by the rapidly multiplying colored peoples from Asia and Africa. The raw numbers did not lie, and the fears, on a very fundamental level, were steeped in quantifiable fact.

A marked immigrant influx during the new century’s first decade helped foster a strong and (un)healthy hysteria and xenophobia; between 1900 and the end of the First World War, over seventeen million foreigners (mostly of European descent) immigrated to the United States, and in the years following the Great War, various acts of legislation seeking to limit and control immigration became the establishment’s response (see Divine, Breen, Fredrickson, and Williams). These sentiments become haunts of sorts, echoes of utterances from a previous decade when the works of social spokesmen like B. L. Putnam Weale held sway. Weale’s 1910 work *The Conflict of Colour* was one of several early twentieth-century sociological works promoted by critics as scientific scholarship. It was also one of many to engage the notion of a shrinking white dominion. Within this worldview, whites were quickly losing ground in an increasingly hostile world.

Additional works like Madison Grant’s *The Passing of the Great Race*, reprinted several times in the years following its original 1916 publication, demonstrate the issue’s pervasiveness and its continued resonance with the reading public.12 Such books were read widely and sold well. These publications surely were part of Hemingway’s consciousness—much in the same way a young Ernest drank in the skewed spectacle of Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* as a teen. Such early influences would play on his imagination for years and would play themselves out in his early fictionalized interactions with both Native and African Americans, and later in the works born of his first African safari in 1933–34.13 These works in particular show us a young writer very much at the top of his aesthetic game; more importantly, they show us a man very much informed by history, both past and in the making.

By the end of the nineteenth century, America had witnessed a westward expansion that seemed without bounds. With the subsequent closing of the great frontier, enthusiasm for international expansion grew exponentially, extending America’s Manifest Destiny and its romance with the quest in perpetuity.14 All the while, the dominant culture actively engaged a racial mythology, one
entrenched in crafted difference and notions of white superiority. Appropriately, Indian captivity narratives, a staple of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century American historical documentation, saw a revival in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, Wild West shows re-created scenes of a dying white American glory, strategically pitting white sacrifice and valor against Native American savagery and cruelty. This was not simply happenstance; local historians fought hard to preserve and redefine their part in America’s glorious development (see Derounian-Stodola and Levernier).

Still, American racial politics could also show a subtler hand. The day’s consciously racial politics assumed more innocuous forms in the less incendiary but equally powerful consumer marketplace. Marketing campaigns became ways of further dealing with the second of the so-called white man’s burdens. For example, manufacturers strategically planted in bread packages and rice boxes trading cards revisiting yesteryear’s cowboy-and-Indian motif or else romancing the red man in commune with nature. These proved subtle ways to re-create and reclaim as American images of a not-so-distant past. Contemporary magazine advertisements also “innocently” played on the age-old Janus typology inherent in the word “Indian”: to a culture craving myth, he was both the noble savage and the beastly degenerate. No matter what the product, the propagandist agenda was unmistakable: reclaim history, or altogether recast it in the crafting of a national mythology. As S. Elizabeth Bird posits in her *Dressing in Feathers*, re-created mythology became a way to “explain to whites their right to be here and help deal with lingering guilt about the displacement of the Native inhabitants—after all, the ‘good’ Indians helped us out and recognized the inevitability of white conquest” (2). Most important here is the correct assertion that white hands ultimately retain conceptual power. Furthermore, that power, we must remember, is a crafted power. Hemingway recognized this truth, and his early tales reflect his cognizance.

Hemingway’s Native American stories, the subject of the first two chapters, represent the author’s earliest explorations of and confrontations with America’s racial demons. In these tales, we witness a doe-eyed Nick Adams’s initiation into the world of “otherness.” To be sure, Nick’s baptism occurs during a pivotal time in our nation’s evolution, a time when the very social foundations upon which the Adams family and so many others rested increasingly showed their cracks and fissures. Each of Hemingway’s Indian stories works as a complement to the others in exposing these fallibilities and in showing national and cultural identities for what they are: constructs.
The collected Indian stories are, on the one hand, an author’s conscious recon-
struction of a seemingly shattered essential bedrock. Joel Williamson calls
this primal push “the rage to order”; when juxtaposed with red decadence,
white, in one sense, reads as “right.” On the other hand, though, these tales are
an expression of collective (white) American guilt for past wrongs. They are
also an inquisition of whiteness itself and the notion of racial essentiality. We
see Williamson’s ordering process in the dominant culture’s mythmaking, in its
deliberate attempts to reestablish and sustain at least some semblance of white
authoritarian control. In the end, though, Hemingway recognizes the folly in-
herent in such mythmaking. He also quite deftly suggests that racial difference
and therefore the authority and agency predicated on such difference is the
ture myth here. His crafted American reality bears this out wonderfully.

Hemingway begins razing the American race mythology in his early story-
telling. In “Indian Camp” and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” two works
from his first acclaimed story collection, In Our Time (published in 1924), and
the focus of the first chapter, he crafts a diametric diorama, taking us along
with young Nick Adams and his father into the woods, where the wild things
are, or where we expect them to be. But Hemingway subverts reader expecta-
tion and gives us a white protagonist who is expressly labeled a “great man,” but
whose greatness is questionable.

In “Indian Camp,” Dr. Adams is masterful with fishing twine but arguably
socially inept as he proudly performs an impromptu cesarean section on an
ailing Native American woman, all the while deaf to the woman’s cries, be-
cause, he assures young Nick, they are “not important.” In “The Doctor and
the Doctor’s Wife,” Hemingway revisits the “great man” as he tangles with
Dick Boulton, a Native American man who occasionally does cleanup work
for the Adams clan. Rumored to be part white, Boulton’s true racial makeup
is a bit nebulous, and so, much to the chagrin of the doctor, is the color line
separating the two men. Unwilling to play the part assigned to him by (white)
society, Boulton shrewdly sees through the doctor’s apparent thievery (he lays
claim to wood washed onto his beach from an upstream company), deftly
parses his words, and boldly calls him on his malfeasance. Once more, Hem-
ingway turns conventional knowledge on its ear as he transposes the civilized
and the savage and skillfully shifts the color line.

In the stories that move beyond the Indian camp, Hemingway seemingly high-
lights native debauchery at every turn in telling the tale of a community’s decline.
I examine three such stories in the second chapter: “Ten Indians,” “Fathers and
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Sons,” and “The Indians Went Away.” In “Fathers and Sons,” sex is Hemingway’s vice of choice as a mature Nick Adams recounts his childhood encounters with Trudy, a young and apparently less-than-pure Native American girl instrumental in Nick’s own sexual awakening. Fittingly, in this tale Hemingway also explores miscegenation’s horrific prospects.

Published in 1933, “Fathers and Sons,” a story not typically labeled one of Hemingway’s Indian stories, is perhaps the author’s most forceful expression of this latent racial anxiety. In it, Hemingway’s literary imagination violently confronts the prospects of miscegenation, the ultimate blurring of racial lines in actual, real terms. Here, an older Nick Adams, his son in tow, remembers his own father. Metaphorically, Dr. Adams becomes the great (white) father to both his son and the inhabitants of the nearby Native American camps. His own personal history and hunting prowess are nearly legendary. Channeling his past ghosts, Nick conjures images of his first sexual exploits: the nearby camp, a Native American girl, and lessons passed down by his father. The warm memories, however, belie an anxiety both pervasive and potent.

Hemingway’s purpose is clear as he deliberately juxtaposes Nick’s sexual “taking” of young Trudy Gilby (in the memories of experimental play) with his later, quite violent defense of his own sister’s maidenhood from Eddie Gilby (Trudy’s half-brother). Implication alone draws from young Nick the most extreme of racial epithets and the starkest, most violent of images, including threats of scalping. The key issue again is (white) control and the threat of its loss; circumstances force Nick into the role of spectator from that of actor, defender from that of offender, savage from that of civilized. In each instance, Hemingway suggests, the line separating white from red is illusory at best. Once more the phantom presence (here it is racialized memory) speaks from the darkness (the recesses of Nick’s mind); Nick’s memory and conscience are a national memory and conscience wrestling with its racial demons.

In the other two stories, drink saturates the narrative as both a commonplace Native diversion and apparently the root cause of a community’s decline. “Ten Indians” is an enumeration of (ethnic) debauchery. In it, a young Nick Adams makes his way through both memories of his first sexual experiences—again with a young Indian girl (Prudy here)—and a sea of prostrate and inebriated dark bodies. “The Indians Went Away,” a fragmentary but equally salient piece, emphatically marks the end of the Indian’s downward slide in the Nick Adams collective. In this piece, the Native American community is a shell of its former self, more spooky than organic. Alcohol has reduced its people to
pandering and recollected smells, sights, and haunting memories. The story’s closing words, “Now no good,” are a marked exclamation point ending the sad tale of a people’s demise, and this becomes an important subtext to the life and times of Nick Adams, American ascendant.

Alcohol’s decimation of Native American tribal communities is well documented and real; Hemingway’s historical record is accurate. Where the writer takes artistic license is in the hyperactive system of binary oppositions he crafts with his narrative. Perpetually, he enlists the aid of a panoply of separators to divide white from nonwhite, civilized from savage. In doing so, he gives us a narrative that emphatically and very deliberately underscores difference, and difference here serves a very definite purpose: to underscore and make natural ideas of essentiality and the racial totem. Exaggerated dividing lines reify preconceptions. Hemingway’s differential narrative strategy is to remind a contemporary audience of the coexistence of two worlds torn apart by an artificial totem, one world doomed to dwell in the shadows. And like Gilbert and Gubar’s madwoman in the attic, Hemingway’s phantoms lurk in and eventually speak from that profound darkness.

Tapping into an American psyche laden with all the guilt inherent in a complex and conflicted national history, Hemingway writes his own American Gothic. The author borrows freely from the Gothic tradition in exploring an American conscience wrestling with itself. While not steeped in the supernatural, the author’s racial narratives are instead appropriately grotesque at times and cast in both literal and metaphoric darkness. These narratives and their grotesques belie a shocking new truth suggesting, among other things, the possibility of white culpability in Native decadence and a very real fallibility. In turn, a fallible, imperfect whiteness suggests an impermanent, if not mutable, color line. Thus, Hemingway seems to suggest, a race-based (read: red) natural proclivity toward self-destruction may in fact not be an exclusively Indian problem. Hemingway’s white subject aptly asks, “What if he and I aren’t so different after all?”

Surprisingly, this question also sits at the heart of Hemingway’s satirical send-up of Sherwood Anderson’s Chicago school of literature, The Torrents of Spring. I say surprisingly because one would hardly expect to find profundity in a work written intentionally to be bad, written, by the author’s own account, in a matter of days. Because of spatial constraints, my treatment of the parody is brief. I merely wish to underscore Hemingway’s deliberateness in crafting his earliest professional writing. This often overlooked but potent little text anticipates quite nicely his career-long racial inquiry. Published in 1926, partly as a means
to escape his contractual obligations to Boni and Liveright, the novella lampoons the Chicago school of literature in its heavy-handed, hyper-expressive, introspective style. But it does something more: it mocks both contemporary (white) xenophobia and the essentialist racial argument being levied in professional and lay circles alike.16

Not simply just another example of style over substance, his small compendium of laughs succinctly encapsulates, in its roughly ninety pages, one of the primary working theses of Hemingway’s career: much of American identity is inherently racial. In *Torrents*, we find the same drunken Indian trope he makes good use of in “Ten Indians” as Yogi Johnson, a war veteran and pump-factory worker and one of the story’s two principal (white) players (the other being Scripps O’Neil), waxes philosophic to two strangers he meets on the street on such topics as war. The two men listen, as a captive audience is apt to do. For their time, they each receive, appropriately, cigarettes and alcohol (as per their requests). The two strangers are Indian. Instinctively, the two look to Yogi Johnson for direction and he becomes their sage, their “white chief.” After all, as one of the Indians aptly asserts in stereotypically broken English, “White chief nature’s nobleman” and “educated like hell” (75).

*Torrents* also gives us Bruce, an African American cook who says very little and appears to be even less. He is an uncomplicated Bugs from “The Battler”: he is all acquiescence, all service, all smiles, with a laugh that echoes throughout the text from beginning to end. But even Bruce, the quintessential “happy darky,” has a smile that belies, like Bugs’s smile, a secret knowledge. Like Bruce, the other stock types that people the landscape also, invariably, lead our protagonists to a secret knowledge.

The two Indians with Yogi Johnson—one appropriately missing both arms and wearing prosthetics—unwittingly lead the white man to a form of self-revelation. Herein, we once more see Hemingway’s enduring homage to Gothic convention. The grotesque becomes instrumental here and on more than one occasion in Hemingway’s racial storytelling and truth-seeking. Ultimately, the author gives us the essentialist’s story only to subvert it in the end. He too conveys a coveted knowledge, and while it may offer no real prescription for an ailing national psyche, at the very least, *Torrents of Spring* underscores the author’s cognizance of the ailment. It also demonstrates the potency and place in Hemingway’s imagination that race would hold for years.

To be sure, Hemingway’s racial cognizance and America’s channeled angst were not confined to the Indian camp. While Hemingway’s inclusion of Native Americans in several of his earliest stories is, arguably, an homage of sorts to his own experiences with the Ojibwa of Michigan, simply explaining away his
ardent interest in blackness and his persistent employment of African American figures in his work becomes much more of a challenge. To be sure, blackness figured prominently in his imagination for good reason. In the third and fourth chapters, I demonstrate how a national anxiety manifested itself in Hemingway’s depiction of his countrymen’s negotiation with their black brethren. All three stories discussed in these chapters expose a newly awakened national discomfort. More specifically, they become metaphors for an early twentieth-century white American male reacting adversely to a shifting social climate.

The new century’s first two decades bore witness to the Great Migration of African Americans from small southern towns to the cities of the North. Almost two million blacks would make the trip northward during those years, for various reasons, including the promise of economic and educational opportunities not afforded them in the South. Chicago alone, a city Hemingway knew all too well, saw its numbers begin to swell by the tens of thousands in 1916. Whatever their reasons, for most, the migration became in and of itself a grand act of self-assertion, something reenacted time and again in towns and cities across America, and black self-assertion becomes that “unspeakable thing unspoken,” the latent specter in several of Hemingway’s stories.

White America’s fear of its vocal black brethren and its consequent grappling for authority are most pronounced in what I will call Hemingway’s black-and-white stories. The racial prism through which we view his Native American stories becomes an equally viable tool here as well. Three tales in particular prove most useful as we examine Hemingway’s negotiation of race and authority: “The Battler,” the more obscure “The Light of the World,” and the all-but-unknown fragmentary tale “The Porter.” In these black-and-white stories, Hemingway expands the bounds of the inquiry he established early on in the Indian stories. In those works, he pointed to difference and its effectiveness as a tool in maintaining the color line; here, he does something similar but complicates the equation a bit with an additional component. In the black-and-white stories, he suggests that violence is the unspoken component necessary for both the color line’s maintenance and its erasure. In the Indian stories, Dick Boulton in “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” and young Nick Adams in “Fathers and Sons” are the closest expressions of this new truth, and Boulton’s insolence as red man is exceptional. Also new to the equation, says Hemingway, is a black cognizance of this very fact.

In the third chapter, I purposefully conjoin the first two of the black-and-white stories, “The Battler” and “The Light of the World,” because of a commonly employed trope. In both, boxing serves as the key subtext. In the former tale, Hemingway explores the unconventional relationship between two
road comrades, a white champion fighter turned convict turned vagabond and his former prison-mate turned caretaker. The former fighter is white; his companion is African American. The black man is also, most importantly, the story’s ultimate authority figure.

In the latter story, the action centers on an argument between two white prostitutes over a boxer’s heart. This fighter is a complex amalgam of sorts: great lover that he is, he is the object of both their affections, but he is also notorious for dirty tricks in the ring. Most importantly, though, he is white. We discern from their disagreement that this former heavyweight contender loses to Jack Johnson, the first black man to hold the championship belt. My interest in this story lies not in the featured relationships but in Hemingway’s deliberate manipulation of contemporary history. With it, Hemingway does more than craft effect here; he challenges conventional thinking. The prostitutes’ shared reverence for all things white in this tale becomes an absurdity; here, the Anglo figures themselves become grotesques, each with his or her own version of a shared racial truth. And Hemingway embodies that truth in the heavyweight champion, the black man, whose absence from the fictional landscape is very pronounced and very deliberate.

Each story’s revelatory kernel has, at its heart, the truth about whiteness’s imperfection, if not its fallibility, and Hemingway knows full well that this is a truth, in an age of progress and eugenics, that runs counter to much of the day’s scholarship and popular thinking. Quite notably, in both stories, the white figure’s glory is a past glory as he stands in the shadow of the other, defeated. Also, in both stories, Hemingway weds a tempered violence with both that shadowed self and white defeat. Hemingway crafts defiant minority characters and a world that openly challenges stereotype, whiteness, and the racial totem. In this world, notions of civilization and the primitive conflate, and labels become just that: labels.

Hemingway steps outside the boxing ring’s confines altogether to continue his exploration of America’s racial mythos and the great (white) man in the third of the black-and-white tales. Juxtaposed with his pugilistic stories is the fragment “The Porter.” This text, incomplete as it may seem, warrants thorough examination and thus is the entire subject of the fourth chapter. It is a provocative text whose import cannot be overstated. In this narrative, Hemingway chronicles the growth of a young boy but steps outside the Nick Adams saga to do so. “The Porter” follows young Jimmy Breen’s initiation into a treacherous world imbued with new racial realities. In this narrative in particular, Hemingway perpetuates stereotype and racial mythos—as he has
done in each of the other race tales—and again ups the ante in his inquiry. “The Porter” is a direct questioning of white authority’s validity, but also the totem’s strength and stability. In this piece, through George the porter, Hemingway not only questions the color line but also expressly questions the right of white America to draw it. For this reason alone, I include “The Porter” as a centerpiece of sorts in my examination. This work stands as Hemingway’s most deliberate expression of black America’s own self-awareness and its (self-)consciously stifled volition standing in the shadows of whiteness.

Jimmy’s experience is early twentieth-century white America’s experience. From the outset, the young boy’s narrative is unconsciously lined with racial epithets; typology constricts and skews our conception of the African American, particularly George the porter, whose name already aligns him with the “happy darky” type. Hemingway initially paints him as lackey content with drink, cards, and an unquestioning service to whites. In Hemingway’s deft hands, George is seemingly a Tom-like caretaker, something Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark calls a “nurse” figure and critic Kenneth Lynn in Hemingway labels the “dark mother” character. He is the great paradox, both childlike and subject to vice, and an entrusted manservant who, like Bugs in “The Battler,” takes the narrative’s protagonist under his wing to teach him a life lesson. However, trust notwithstanding, Hemingway’s man-child actually has an agenda all his own; as he does with his dark mother’s lessons in “The Battler,” Hemingway heavily invests his porter’s pedagogy with a streetwise savvy and violence.

Unlike the boxing stories, particularly “The Light of the World,” where the ring becomes the site of a sanctioned square-off between the races, “The Porter” pushes the possibility of a race war beyond the confines of rope and canvas and out into the streets. In “The Battler,” Hemingway places Bugs in the privileged position as he looms literally and figuratively over his white confidant; however, George’s lesson in “The Porter” on the nuances of razor fighting goes a step beyond Bugs’s cognizance in demonstrating black awareness and self-actualization. Hemingway gives us a black man who recognizes the color line’s illusory nature, and once more history informs the author’s narrative.

Race riots were a prominent new reality for many in Wilmington, North Carolina; Tulsa, Oklahoma; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois, and other cities all across America during the new century’s first decades. The worst of it played out in Hemingway’s own backyard—Chicago’s 1919 riot was among the most disastrous, claiming almost forty lives and leaving a great metropolis shaken to the core. When coupled with New York City’s silent soldier march (protesting rampant racism greeting black servicemen returning home after...
the First World War) of the same year, and the insistence by “radicals” Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. Du Bois that American blacks were entitled to so much more, the viral unrest of these events suggests a people struggling to emancipate themselves from the cultural yoke of type. Images of the dark predatory beast, the incompetent fool, the petulant coward, the apolitical and antisocial underling dominated the contemporary white imagination and suggested a template for reading the nonwhite. While acceptable to the majority, this protocol invited open challenge by the minority—and challenge they did. Again we return to the notion of reconstituting definition and reassigning ultimate authority; again, we return to Hemingway.

The lessons of “The Porter” seem to wager that violence of the strategic and controlled variety could easily undo the knot in the black man’s noose, and this fear played on the white imagination. As George Fredrickson asserts in The Black Image in the White Mind, “Like so many other elements in the racist rhetoric and imagery of 1900, [the image of the Negro] had its origins in the proslavery imagination, which had conceived of the black man as having a dual nature—he was docile and amiable when enslaved, ferocious and murderous when free” (276). Hemingway uses this imagined duality to great effect in crafting George’s public and private personas; his porter is a wonderful amalgam of all things (conceptualized as) black. Our author relishes the ambiguity and seems to suggest that, like the Wilmington riot of 1898, Jimmy’s momentary fear watching the black man wield his razor may be no aberration. The new century brought with it new questions that simply refused to go away: Where do authoritarian lines begin and end? What do historical events suggest about the racial totem? How much deeper than the epidermis does the blood of race truly flow? Clearly, such great questions warrant answers, and these questions haunted Hemingway for years. No longer a young boy in 1933, he carried these questions with him to the African continent, his imagination clearly wrestling with much more than big game while on safari, and this is the object of my inquiry in chapter 5.

Real-world issues, both social and political, took precedence over aesthetics for the author in the months and years leading up to and immediately following his safari of 1933–34. During those years, the dark politics of the Third Reich began to cast a long shadow well beyond German borders. The crippling ripples of racial politics and a growing eugenics movement were felt across the ocean as ideology took both a national and international stage. Franklin Roosevelt may have brought with him to the White House all the hope and promise of the New Deal, but the special amalgam of science and
politics ushered in a new day for age-old prejudices both at home and abroad. The cauldron had, however, been boiling already for decades.

As an introduction of things to come, London had played host to scholars the world over at the first of the International Eugenics Conferences in 1912. New York would do the honors for both the second and third in the series in each of the following decades (in 1921 and 1932, respectively). Meanwhile, closer to home for Hemingway, the Race Betterment Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan, hosted three national conferences (1914, 1915, and 1928) promoting eugenics as the new era’s defining ideology. Even little Oak Park, Illinois, was not immune to the fever; like so many other communities in small-town America trying to connect with something larger than themselves, Hemingway’s hometown hosted lectures and banged the eugenics drum as part of local celebrations.

As the ideology’s popularity grew, so did its proponents’ credibility. Supporters along the way included renowned eugenicist Lothrop Stoddard and respected psychologist Henry H. Goddard. Early on, the movement’s growing list of proponents also included one of America’s true captains of industry, steel magnate Andrew Carnegie, who would also add philanthropist and idealist to a growing list of descriptive titles; his financial contributions to the eugenics movement have been well documented. However, his investment in the movement went beyond the financial; the Carnegie Institution of Washington acted as an official think tank of sorts and played host to the Eugenics Record Office (see Daniel Kevles, In the Name of Eugenics, 55). Even Hemingway’s boyhood hero, Theodore Roosevelt, waved the eugenics flag for white America.

 Appropriately, at its apex in the 1920s, the movement’s biggest advocate was government. So, as jazz music triumphed and American optimism flowered, in its blatant and warped attempt to “preserve a more perfect union,” Congress passed the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, initiating a set of constrictions to limit immigration and (as many saw it) stay the flood of foreign blood tainting American purity. New and newly enforced state laws forbidding interracial marriage—laws particular to the South—further pushed the eugenics agenda, an agenda propelled by so-called science and fear.

What we see unfolding during the 1930s in America is the culmination of scholarship and policy making that had been in the works for decades. Moreover, the phenomenon of racial “passing”—blacks actively passing themselves off as white, infiltrating and encroaching upon white circles—did little to assuage white fears.19

Those fears manifested themselves most prominently in the laws of the land. As the critic Robert Farnsworth suggests of turn-of-the-century American
social justice—both legal and illegal—and the color line, “Jim Crow laws had been entered on the books in many states, and rigid social segregation was turning the dreams and ambitions of Reconstruction into bitter gall for those ‘tainted’ by black blood. Lynch law was bearing an increasing harvest of strange fruit.” Strictly enforced marriage codes in Virginia and South Carolina had particular bite as whites sought to preserve Anglo stock by stamping out miscegenation altogether; state statutes also pushed for genealogical searches in the hopes of more fully defining whiteness. Louisiana had struck preemptively years before (1911) with its own set of race codes bent on halting incursions across the color line. Such was the day’s political agenda.

This prompted the code’s critics to ask the ultimate question, which became an actual newspaper headline: “When is a Caucasian not a Caucasian?” Conversely, one may ask, then, when is a Caucasian a Caucasian? Hemingway certainly had these questions in mind as he ventured to Africa’s green hills in the winter of 1933. His sojourn to the African continent allowed him—at least for the moment—to leave behind Eddie Gilby, threats to white maidenhood, and young Nicky’s angst explored in “Fathers and Sons” earlier that year. Answering the din of the drum with the African material engendered from this trip, Hemingway shows himself to be a man at least half-believing the rhetoric of the day. Following the lead of local and national politics, he appears to be a man with a renewed commitment to reconfiguring whiteness and a fast-fading color line; however, he does all this with the license and fervor of an artist, so to the sharp aesthetic eye, his sins are forgivable. In one sense, the path traveled was familiar. Hemingway had explored the complexities of identity in *A Farewell to Arms* just a few years before in 1929: Frederic Henry’s quest is in part one of national investment as he struggles with his American-ness. Before that, and more germane to our inquiry, Robert Cohn, as character and conceit, had, in *The Sun Also Rises*, allowed Hemingway to examine the racial totem’s intricacies and its potency (for example, Hemingway emphasizes Cohn’s Jewishness as yet another space of otherness and as a liability) in 1926. But these were the dark days of Hitler’s Aryan superman; the world had changed, and as a man of his times, Hemingway had changed with it, and the day’s politics were palpably mean. However, while the social climate was perhaps a bit different in 1933, Hemingway, as public figure and as artist, remained unchanged in one sense: as a middle-aged man, he was still very much an ardent believer in the crafting of individuality and the art(fullness) of identity; he continued to push the same aesthetic boundaries with which he had wrangled years before. His own racial politics and ideo-
logical designs while on safari, his insistence on rhetorically reassembling that shattered white body made small by “alien” inroads, tells us so.

In “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and Green Hills of Africa especially—the works born of his first African safari—Hemingway re-entrenches himself in white mythos, fully intent on crafting his own brand of it. I explore this re-entrenchment and the works documenting it in chapter 5. To be sure, he expressly tells us that these works are narrative experiments that explore new imaginative territory, and they are. But in them, Hemingway treads familiar ground. In these first African works, he walks in the shadows of familiar literary and historical luminaries, stalwart figures of safari fiction. Green Hills perhaps best exemplifies Hemingway’s engagement with the genre. In it, we see a writer perpetuating the same typologies and employing the same literary strategies crafted and exploited by Lord Stanley years before him. Closer to home, and closer to his heart, Theodore Roosevelt—rough rider, slayer of beasts, childhood hero—spoke with a contemporary voice, and he demonstrates Hemingway’s place within this long-standing tradition of the great white hunter on safari.21

Hemingway’s own library demonstrates more than a casual interest in Africa and the celebration of the white African hunting experience.22 The author knew well the path trod by his predecessors. Those texts and their authors share a common agenda: within the safari text, beast, land, and ultimately people all fall prey to the colonial gaze. The most glaring of the tradition’s tropes is the self-reflective, almost narcissistic narrator whose self-aggrandizement aligns itself with an amalgam of whiteness and greatness. His is also a literary imagination actively engaging racial difference whenever and wherever possible. While Hemingway does promote aspects of social egalitarianism at times, and while he does temporarily mitigate difference, in the end, difference and a reconstituted color line dominate his early African texts, particularly Green Hills.

In these writings, Green Hills especially, Hemingway vacillates between embracing Africa’s countrymen as kindred spirits and surveying the country as Occidental tourist; to be sure, his surveillance time in this narrative far outweighs that spent in active embrace. The short fiction engendered from that first safari is no different. Ultimately, Harry’s story in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” Francis Macomber’s story in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and Papa’s story in Green Hills are, on one level, the same story: they are the story of white competition, completion, and reconstitution; Harry is Macomber is Papa. And irrespective of the texts’ panoply of characters peopling the landscape, the African excursion ultimately becomes Hemingway’s
alone. By extension, Hemingway’s African experience becomes the white masculine experience, and in the process, it becomes Hemingway’s most express form of identity formation.

Unlike the boxing ring, or even America’s wilds, featured so prominently in Hemingway’s black-and-white stories, Africa, for a time, offered racial stasis to Americans feeling displaced at home in the twentieth century’s dawning years. Here the white could stave off, at least temporarily, the rising tide of colored people threatening stability at home. During the first decades of the new century, Africa, unlike America, was a space wherein the lines of racial demarcation were still clearly drawn, even as empire crumbled all around. In colonial Africa, white greatness, theoretically at least, went unquestioned. So while in America, Dr. Adams can only watch as the Native American freely and openly crosses all lines of formality in addressing his “superiors,” in colonial Africa, Harry, Macomber, and Papa all share the respected title of Bwana (“master” or “father” in Swahili). Thus, as something to be tamed and possessed, and as something particularly gendered, Africa expressly and fittingly becomes Hemingway’s woman of choice during these very tenuous years. Simultaneously offering him both novelty and excitement and familiarity and comfort, Africa was still very much his safe space.

But even in his unabashed reversion to things once known, Hemingway’s cognizance of race as artifice is clear. Most importantly, throughout this racial reconstruction, Hemingway is markedly aware of himself as an artist; in each instance, he shows us race’s malleable quality in the artist’s hands. We see this reflective experimentation played out to a much greater degree in the years following his second African safari as a more mature, more self-assured Hemingway embraces, more than ever, his own ambivalence about the color line.

In the final chapter, I explore this racial ambivalence in light of Hemingway’s loftier aesthetic goals and his grander vision going into his second African safari. By 1953, the year of his final visit to Africa, Nazi Germany’s prejudiced propaganda and the “science” of eugenics were a fading memory and Africa was a part of his very being, infusing his every thought and fully commanding his imagination. To that end, he spent the better part of his life’s last seven years writing about her and chasing the possibility she seemed to embody. As such, his relationship with the African continent could easily be labeled a full-blown love affair. As his mistress, Africa placed few constraints on him. Unlike a fickle reading public, she was understanding, open, and forgiving. She allowed him to be whatever he wished to be. In 1953, Hemingway wanted to be many things, it seems; and in Africa, Hemingway seems to suggest, all things could be true.
After all, even during the 1930s, Africa allowed Hemingway to assume—if only briefly—the role of brother to M’Cola (his personal tracker) and other local tribesmen. In 1953, he would relish that moment a bit longer, a bit more overtly. Here too, on his second trip to the motherland, he immersed himself in Wakamba culture and boasted a second wife in the form of a local tribeswoman. But the compulsions of self-reification and the expectation attached to celebrity were there too. Africa is also where Hemingway, on both occasions, all too easily donned the garb of great white hunter, of Bwana, an incarnation of the ruling white patriarchy. One could be a king in Africa, and celebrity culture expected a reappearance of the great white hero. Only in Africa, it seems, is it possible to be both, and as an artist, Hemingway relished both the ambiguity and the opportunity inherent in the creative process. One could make allowances for both in Africa.

In the twenty years since his first sojourn, Hemingway had learned much, and his last writings bear this out nicely. However, critics all too easily point to the author in his later years and suggest he had become a caricature of sorts. They label him an old man ensnared by his own celebrity, sapped of creative spirit, and wallowing in self-parody. To be sure, some of that criticism is certainly merited; however, the short fable “The Good Lion,” written before his final safari, and the sprawling fictionalized memoirs that spring from it, True at First Light and the more comprehensive Under Kilimanjaro (often called his “African journal”), perhaps Hemingway’s final posthumous gift to us, give us hints of brilliance. Both works show a writer almost gleefully exploiting those racial truths he exposed so long ago. They show us an artist bent on pushing the aesthetic envelope one last time, and that daring push began in the years before that final fated safari.

“The Good Lion” was spawned years before Hemingway set foot onto African soil again. Hemingway wrote it in anticipation of his 1953–54 trip, and although the short piece is light and whimsical, it fits nicely within our critical framework. The work’s terseness and apparent levity make it a deceptively easy read, and that may account for readers’ perceptions of it as generally innocuous and its relatively unheralded status through the years. However, perhaps more than any of his other published pieces, this work demonstrates both Hemingway’s lifelong ambivalence about race and his keen awareness of racial construction, and the author works the material deftly, without the slightest mention of race.

In “The Good Lion,” gone is the seemingly refined binary model; gone is the color line separating white from black, civilized from savage. Instead, Hemingway paints a complicated Manichean portrait of not black and white
but gray. A young lion is a cultural pariah in his own African community because of his unique genetic mixture (he is part eagle) and his ability to fly, and because of his very refined, very European sensibilities. Like Dick Boulton in “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” he is this tale’s cultural “half-breed,” both African and European yet fully neither, and this apparent difference ultimately drives him away from his community. In the end, though, Hemingway gives us a “good” lion not much different from that community and arguably no better than the ravenous, flesh-craving pride members he chooses to leave behind. In the end, Africa, it seems, is in his blood.

Through a fanciful tale about place, Hemingway pushes the aesthetic envelope and slyly explores racial construction and mythmaking. From its inception, Hemingway conflates good and evil, civilized and savage, and asks, “What if?” What if we blur the differential line? “The Good Lion” anticipates beautifully Hemingway’s personal exploration of his own savage holiday, his own immersion in Native culture, just a few years later. The author revisits and documents this transgressive watershed moment in the manuscript that would be published posthumously as True at First Light and Under Kilimanjaro. Hemingway proclaimed Green Hills his grand literary experiment in 1935, but we could just as easily apply that proclamation to his second safari book.

While much of the bravado of the great white hunter—seen so prominently in Green Hills a generation before—remains in that final safari book, some of it is fairly tempered by an egalitarianism that this time around seems truer than anything he gave us in the years following his 1933 trip. Back then, he simply, quite easily, proclaimed himself a brother to the Natives serving him, but the cultural melding seems to begin and end with the proclamation. This time around, Hemingway purportedly takes a black bride and even inhabits the skin, if only temporarily, of his darker brethren. During that final safari, he does not simply live among the Wakamba; he becomes Wakamba, briefly jettisoning his whiteness and his totemic privilege and erasing the color line.

Africa becomes, then, for Hemingway the nexus of possibility, where ideas regarding racial formation and authority are negotiable. There, racial lines can be transgressed freely, without stricture or reservation. Whereas in Green Hills, a young Hemingway worked hard to maintain the strictures of race, in True at First Light / Under Kilimanjaro, the elder statesman, perhaps wiser with experience and with tricks to spare, works hard to demonstrate race’s fluidity. In each instance, race is a construct. True at First Light / Under Kilimanjaro documents Hemingway’s grand experiment, and to be sure, on one level, it is grand. Largely working without the safety net of more purely fictionalized
tangential characters—there is no Bugs, no Dick Boulton, no George here—Hemingway himself freely assumes the role of racial transgressor in his final fictionalized memoir. We see this in the friendships he forges as he becomes brother-in-arms to local Natives. We see it too in his temporary but total assumption of Wakamba identity and in his African “wife.” Indeed, the possibilities appear endless as Hemingway becomes a racial shape-shifter of sorts in the green hills of Africa.

Always, though, Hemingway transgresses with the relative luxury and security provided by his own white skin. Well into the twentieth century, throughout most of Africa, erasure and reinscription of the color line remained almost exclusively a white prerogative, and that is where Hemingway’s literal and metaphorical sojourn ultimately ends: with a return to himself and a reconstructed whiteness. Like the fable, but unlike his previous African treatments, Hemingway’s second African book, at least at times, dares to erase divisional lines, blending black and white. Unlike the fable, though, the memoir ultimately corrects its transgressions and ends with a return to the boundaries set by the color line.

But why the apparent regression in the midst of such grand experimentation? To simply discount Hemingway’s conservative behavior as the product of old age alone would be facile; the author appears more steeped in conservatism as a middle-aged man of thirty-five in the wake of his first African trip than he does at fifty-five. If anything, in those early African writings, Hemingway bolsters the existing totem and transgresses few, if any, racial lines. In the later African writings, more specifically True at First Light / Under Kilimanjaro, and unlike those early episodes featuring Nick and his American encounters with men both red and black, moments of racial transgression in the African space are unilateral. In them, an older Hemingway tempers the experiment and reverts to old-world politics, ultimately choosing to maintain the racial totem without the accompanying doubts, anxieties, and prospective horror. Still, though, the true thrill is in the experiment itself. And experiment he did. In Africa, Hemingway could be what he wanted. As a man trapped by his own cult of personality, Hemingway needed the far-off foreign space of the African bush to try on new skin, free of criticism, to deconstruct and reconstruct the great (white) man.

The African safari thus becomes the best of both worlds, providing Hemingway with the perfect opportunity to don simultaneously the garb of brother-in-arms and great white father. Most importantly, Africa becomes the site within which he can control the color line’s placement, demarcation, and enforcement.
Simply put, he draws, places, and erases the color line at will. Unlike America, an Africa still steeped in colonial dictates provides the perfect nexus wherein the extent of racial interaction and ultimately questions of agency and authority remain unquestionably within the white purview. However, as Hemingway himself recounts in his final safari book, even the security inherent in this apparent white bastion was dissipating—former European colonial strongholds fast became sites of a fading color line, internal strife, and realized violence and revolution. In the end, then, for the author, the text becomes the ultimate means by which to both explore the space between the races and still preserve and perpetuate that long-sought-after racial order.

We saw Hemingway re-entrench and reinscribe himself within the white mythos some twenty years earlier in *Green Hills*, but even then, with relatively few lines being crossed, Hemingway’s cognizance of identity construction was keen. For even in the act of reinscribing marginal lines, Hemingway demonstrates race’s artifice; and in daring to cross those lines in his later years, even if that transgression is only temporary, he demonstrates race’s fluidity and identity’s tenuous nature. In this way, Hemingway’s grand experiment ultimately proves successful, and it is something the author seems to have known all along.