Sex, Violence, and the Southern Man in Lee Daniels' *The Paperboy*

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Abstract:
This essay examines the correlation between representations of sex, violence, and gender in Lee Daniels' Southern gothic 'mystery melodrama' *The Paperboy* (2012). Though the film has been derided by critics as smut hardly worth watching, this article argues that *The Paperboy* fits squarely into a tradition of Southern fiction in which sex and violence are not only strangely and problematically tangled up, but are furthermore inextricably linked to representations of gender and race. By contextualizing the South's historical preoccupation with associating sex and violence, this essay places *The Paperboy* within this narrative tradition to ultimately illuminate the ways in which the film directly confronts paradigms of Southern masculinity that are deeply entrenched in the region's cultural and racial mythologies.

1 Reviews of *The Paperboy*, the 2012 erotic thriller directed by Lee Daniels, are overwhelmingly negative. Many critics decry the film as one of the worst in cinematic history, denouncing it as tawdry, vile, campy, and outright weird.[1] Almost inarguably, it is all of these things; the film (based on the novel of the same name by Pete Dexter) is a bizarre and complicated noir mystery set in the late 1960s. The story centers on a young, aimless paperboy named Jack Jansen, whose older, journalist brother, Ward, returns to their small Florida town at the behest of Charlotte Bless, a 'nymphomaniac' who's developed a relationship with a prisoner currently held for the murder of the town's no-good sheriff. Charlotte insists that the man accused of the sheriff's murder, Hillary Van Wetter, is innocent, and Ward—along with his colleague, a black man named Yardley—is hoping to capitalize on the salacious story that may or may not have landed the wrong man in jail. The film is set in the 1960's South, and critics have therefore recognized its conspicuous racial and sexual tensions; however, most dismiss *The Paperboy* as nothing more than "a Southern Gothic sexploitation mystery melodrama so lurid and sticky it would make Tennessee Williams blush" (Schulman). But Daniels' film is more than simple Southern smut. *The Paperboy* fits squarely into a tradition of Southern fiction in which sex and violence are not only strangely and problematically tangled up, but are furthermore inextricably linked to representations of gender and race. *The Paperboy* is predominantly a (white) man's story (as the title suggests, it is the story of the titular paperboy, Jack), and

[1] See, for instance, Nathan Rabin's *A.V. Club* review, Anthony Quinn's review in *The Independent*, Peter Travers' review for *Rolling Stone*, *The Huffington Post*'s review by Christy Lemire, or Will Leitch's *Deadspin* review, titled "Watch Your Favorite Actors Humiliate Themselves in *The Paperboy*, the Worst Movie of the Year."

situating *The Paperboy* within this narrative tradition illuminates the ways in which the film, through its sexualization of acts of violence, directly confronts paradigms of Southern masculinity that are deeply entrenched in the region's cultural and racial mythologies.

2 Joel Williamson explains that most every culture possesses a tendency "to weave together sex and violence"; but in the South, he suggests, "because race came to be so thoroughly mixed with sex, and because slavery and race were themselves deeply and inextricably mixed with violence, sex has had a particular aura of violence" (389). Many scholars have described how the South's peculiar association of sex, race, and violence—born out of antebellum attempts to assuage fears of losing white patriarchal authority (Hodes 147)—carried over into the twentieth century. The sweeping social change ushered in during the 1960s—the time period that provides the setting for Daniels' film—brought about an especially profound (re)emphasis on maintaining the South's hierarchies of racial and gender power. The Civil Rights movement, a renewed interest in women's rights, and the sexual revolution in particular went against the grain of the South's white patriarchal culture, and to quell increasing terrors of "diminishing white supremacy," white Southerners again "fastened on the taboo of sex between black men and white women with newfound urgency" (147). Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward affirm the ways that racism in the South.

> is inextricably linked with sexual anxieties"; during the Civil Rights era, "the specter of any interracial sexual relations provoked anger and fear among many whites, and segregationist organizations like the Klan and the White Citizens' Councils played on this fear to galvanize support for Massive Resistance. (84)

Sex, violence, and race are nearly impossible to separate from the South's structures of white male supremacy, and the social landscape of the 1960s exacerbated existing anxities attached specifically to masculinty in the South. In *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South Since Reconstruction*, Craig Thompson Friend explains how the social changes of the mid-to-late twentieth century brought about the rise of multiple masculinities in the South, yet each mode of masculine expression almost invariably formed around two 'primary axes' that emerged out of antebellum ideals: honor and mastery (x). Honor and mastery—both central facets of men's 'civic identity' in the antebellum South—were typically realized through landownership and the successful management of an independent household that included a subservient wife, children, and (when possible) slaves. Regardless of whether or not Southern men adhered to paradigms of honor and mastery, "all shared a sense of the very public nature of their private

characters": as Friend describes, since before Reconstruction, Southern manhood has "required regular public performance" as a way of maintaining social, gender, and racial hierarchies (Friend x). Often these 'performances' in the antebellum South and on into the early part of the twentieth century took the form of institutionalized rituals of violence, such as lynching.[2] By the 1960s, the time period in which *The Paperboy* is set, Southern men were compelled to find new ways of exhibiting honor and mastery, yet more often than not, the means by which men did so still relied on elements of public performance, demonstrations of violence, and certain 'mastery' or dominance over women and blacks.

3 *The Paperboy*—which predominantly takes place in 1969—makes its regional and racial politics clear from the outset. In an establishing shot that occurs barely two minutes into the film, the camera pans over a sign scrawled on the side of a building that reads: "Moat County extends a welcome hand to Yankees and niggers!"[3] It also immediately identifies itself as a film that not only mixes sex with representations of violence, but that links those depictions to the region's racial politics. The Jansen's black maid, Anita (played by Macy Gray), provides the voiceover for the film and recalls the central narrative through one long, extended flashback. In the opening scene, Anita sits down at a table across from a man who is interviewing her about Jack Jansen's (Zac Efron) new book, which is based on the events that occur in the film. Jack and Anita share an unusual and close personal relationship, and she is the subject of the interview because Jack has dedicated his book to her. The man begins the interview by asking Anita to talk about the murder of Sheriff Thurmond Call (Danny Hanemann). Anita tells the interviewer that no one liked Call: "It was 1969," she says,

> Sheriff Call was this evil, nasty, disgusting son of a gun. Black people hated Sheriff Call because he killed so many of us during his two terms in service. Some of my family was included. White people feared him, too. So, somebody got fed up with his fat ass and killed him, that's what happened.

As Anita is describing what she knows about the night, the scene jumps to a black and white shot of Sheriff Call getting out of his patrol car to investigate an isolated vehicle parked in a field. Call shines his flashlight in the car, and the scope of light illuminates the occupants of the

[2] For an interesting analysis of the lynching ritual and masculine performance, see Kris DuRocher's "Violent Masculinity: Learning Ritual and Performance in Southern Lynchings."

[3] There is some debate among Southern scholars as to whether or not Florida—especially South Florida—can really be considered "the South." The sign that reads "Moat County extends a welcome hand to Yankees" in the aforementioned scene is the film's most obvious indication that this particular area of South Florida identifies itself as Southern.

vehicle and reveals a couple having sex. Presumably, Call orders the couple to go home, and as the car drives away, an unidentified man closes in on Call and stabs him repeatedly in the stomach. One of the ensuing shots is of Call's disemboweled body lying lifeless in the grass, and the camera lingers on this scene while Anita says, "They say he dragged his intestines for a mile before he died." Following Call's murder, Anita remembers, "Crazy white people even built a statue for him." This opening, in which an act of violence occurs right alongside a sexual one, conflates the two, combines that with issues of race, and thus sets the tone for the rest of the film.

4 Sex is everywhere in this film, and it appears in walking form in the character of Charlotte Bless (Nicole Kidman). Anita refers to her as an "oversexed Barbie doll," and indeed, that Charlotte exudes sexuality is evident in her appearance alone: she wears tight skirts and dresses so short they barely cover her nether regions, her face is caked with make-up, and she wears false eyelashes and a hairpiece for added sexual appeal. Charlotte also talks openly (and almost singularly) about her sexuality. When the film introduces Charlotte, she is reading through a recent letter from Van Wetter (John Cusack in easily his creepiest role to date). Hanging on the wall behind her are other letters, and Anita's voiceover explains that Charlotte has a penchant for writing/loving/obsessing over convicted criminals—both black and white. Charlotte's black friend and roommate asks her if the letter is from one of the black inmates that Charlotte has been writing, and Charlotte responds, "This is my white man." The letter from Van Wetter provides additional insight about Charlotte's sexuality: "If ever there was an angel in the world, my angel," Van Wetter writes, "it must be you. But no angel would do the things I dream that you want." Yardley (David Oyelowo) calls Charlotte "one nasty little nut job" after reading some of the 'evidence' she gives to him and Ward (Matthew McConaughey) that will confirm Van Wetter's innocence: it's a journal entry in which Charlotte writes that "[a]ll the killers who have written me want to press their mouths into my vagina, and some even the crack of my behind, except Hillary Van Wetter. He has no such desire. He wants to be sucked off himself. I consider this psychological proof of his innocence." Charlotte is excited by Van Wetter's desire to be pleasured and understands him as different than the other imprisoned men she has engaged with; unlike the other prisoners with whom Charlotte communicates, Van Wetter demands an active sexual role from her. Shortly after Yardley reads the excerpt from Charlotte's journal, Charlotte wants to go and look at the prison where Van Wetter is being held. Jack drives her there, and in the parking lot, Charlotte tells Jack, "I'm getting horny being this close to him." She

reclines in the car's front seat, one arm out the window with her feet propped up on the dashboard, flapping her legs open and closed as she talks flirtatiously with Jack. She playfully slaps his hand when he tells her about being a swimmer in college and she tells him of her own experiences swimming. She then leans back, closes her eyes, starts writhing provocatively, and begins moaning, "Oh, baby. I bet he's horny for me all the time." Charlotte is sex personified, and this scene is particularly erotically charged and most exemplifies the way that nearly every aspect of Charlotte's character oozes sensuality.

5 Charlotte is an object of desire for just about every male character in the film. She is in this way the center of the storyline, and the male characters' desires emanate from her like spokes on a wheel. As an object of their desire, Charlotte becomes a fantasy for each of them. The very nature of Charlotte's relationship with Van Wetter is based on fantasy. They begin their relationship while he is in jail, and their only means of communication is through the letters they send one another. Van Wetter places Charlotte, his 'angel,' on a pedestal and imagines doing to her the 'things' that he 'dreams' she wants. Though Charlotte sends Van Wetter pictures of herself, the two do not actually meet face-to-face until Ward, Yardley, Jack, and Charlotte go together to the prison to talk to Van Wetter about the night of Sheriff Call's murder. In this, one of the film's strangest sex scenes, Van Wetter's fantasy is so powerful that he and Charlotte simultaneously achieve orgasm—without ever touching—while Ward, Yardley, Jack, and any number of prison guards stand by watching. After the four arrive at the prison and are seated across from Van Wetter, one of the guards reminds them that any kind of physical contact is prohibited. Van Wetter's focus is only on Charlotte; he barely even looks at the men in the room, and when Ward and Yardley try to engage him in conversation, he cuts them off and hisses, "Shut up, can't you see I'm busy?" Van Wetter then whispers to Charlotte, "Will you do something for me right now? Spread your legs open a little bit." Charlotte complies, hiking her dress up and allowing Van Wetter and the viewer an extreme close-up of her crotch. While breathing heavily, Charlotte runs her hands seductively up and down her thighs. Van Wetter, too, begins breathing heavily, and he instructs her: "Now open up your mouth. Picture what you wrote me in your letters." Again, Charlotte complies, opens her mouth wide, and simulates fellatio, moaning the whole time. In this scene, Charlotte facilitates Van Wetter's fantasy of her as a hyper-feminine, hyper-sexual object that should always be available to providing him sexual pleasure.

6 Charlotte is also the object of desire for Jack. As Anita explains: “Jack was in love with Charlotte Bless. I could tell that horny little boy wanted to jump her on first sight.” While Van Wetter dreams of violating Charlotte, Jack fantasizes about marrying her. He daydreams about picking Charlotte up from her house and whisking her away. In this fantasy, Charlotte wears a tea-length white wedding dress and veil, a symbol of purity and innocence. That Jack envisions Charlotte in a white wedding dress and in so doing bestows on her a kind of virtue is telling, for although he wants to ‘jump her,’ the idea of her being sexual is somehow also repulsive to him. Anita explains that upon witnessing the uncanny sexual encounter between Charlotte and Van Wetter at the prison, “Jack came home and threw up right after that. He couldn’t believe he still loved her after what he saw. But he did.” Jack is similarly put off by Charlotte’s casual talk of sex when the two spend an afternoon together at the beach. Charlotte teases Jack that he needs to get a girlfriend and encourages him to talk to a group of women a few feet down the beach. When Jack tells her that he is not interested, Charlotte says, “You want me to blow you, don’t you? You don’t have to answer, I know it’s true. I’m not gonna blow a friendship over a stupid little blow job.” She then points to one of the young women wearing a blue bikini and assures Jack, “See that one in blue? She’ll blow ya.” Jack, visibly tense and becoming increasingly hostile, asks Charlotte why she is talking to him that way and insists that he is not interested in being fellated by “someone like that.” Charlotte’s flippant response—“Well it’s a good thing you’re not in prison cause you wouldn’t have a choice there”—sends Jack over the edge. He leans down close to her, angrily tells her “Fuck you,” then gets up from their blanket, storms off, and dives into the ocean.

7 Importantly, though Jack is seemingly disgusted by Charlotte’s frank and casual treatment of sexuality in this scene, it is at the same time one in which he exercises a particular fantasy of Charlotte as the two share an especially personal and strangely erotic experience. Once in the water, Jack is violently attacked by a swarm of jellyfish. Dizzy and disoriented from an allergic reaction to the stings, Jack is barely able to drag himself out of the water and onto the beach. The group of women that he and Charlotte had been previously discussing sees Jack struggling and rushes to his aid. One of the women knows that they can alleviate Jack’s pain by urinating on the stings. When Charlotte overhears the women telling Jack that what they are about to do might be embarrassing, she rushes over to Jack’s side and begins yelling, pushing, and swearing at the women to leave Jack alone. In an oddly protective (or possessive) moment,

Charlotte shouts, “If anyone’s gonna piss on him it’s gonna be me! He don’t like strangers peeing on him!” Charlotte straddles Jack, pulls the crotch of her bikini bottom to the side, and urinates on his chest. While this is happening, the camera cuts to a shot of her from a distance. As she urinates on Jack, she leans her head back and lets out a sensual moan. The camera cuts away again to a close up of Charlotte’s crotch, then jumps to a blurred point-of-view shot of her face taken from Jack’s perspective. Her head is tilted back, her eyes are closed, and her mouth is open; her facial expressions and erotic moaning suggest that Charlotte is experiencing a kind of ecstasy. The blurred, dreamlike image of Charlotte’s face seen from Jack’s point of view is very sexual in nature, intimating that this encounter for the two of them is similarly sexual. The odd, heightened eroticism of what is otherwise a non-sexual encounter in this scene mirrors the prison sex scene that earlier occurs between Charlotte and Van Wetter. In this instance, however, Charlotte assumes the active position previously assumed by Van Wetter, while Jack inhabits a passive role.

8 Charlotte is overtly sexual, and as such, draws both the attention and the ire of the men around her. The ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s allowed room for women like Charlotte to express themselves sexually, yet Jack’s fantasies of restoring to Charlotte a sense of purity—along with his unease at seeing or hearing evidence of Charlotte’s sexuality—and Van Wetter’s desire for Charlotte to be an ‘angel’ who is simultaneously and perpetually an available receptacle for his own gratification speak to the continuing presence of ideas regarding appropriate gendered expression for women in the South. For centuries, the South has maintained strict rules about how women are supposed to behave. Beginning before the outbreak of the Civil War, Southern women were invested with all the ideal goodness and purity of the South itself. White and aristocratic, the Southern Lady was required to be a paragon of chastity and virtue and the center of the domestic sphere. This ideal of the lady is “rigid in its prescriptions” (Scura 413); she was a static figure, placed on a pedestal and worshipped as “[t]he center and circumference, diameter and periphery, sine, tangent and secant of all…affections” (Cash 86f.). White Southern women, mythically worshipped as a symbol of the South’s virtue and honor, “represented a fragile, asexual purity” (Roberts 75). Charlotte flagrantly eschews convention and openly defies the rules of Southern womanhood by flaunting her sexuality. And yet because of this, as Anita and Yardley both make apparent, Charlotte’s excessive sexuality and her relationship with Van Wetter mark her as ‘white trash.’ Anita remarks on Charlotte’s

involvement with Van Wetter: "Everybody was confused why she was engaged to Hillary Van Wetter. Nasty white trash swamp." Ostensibly, it seems as though Anita uses the term 'nasty white trash' to refer to Van Wetter, yet her phrasing is peculiarly vague; based on the placement of the insult as a fragmentary afterthought to her observation that no one could understand Charlotte's attraction to Van Wetter, it is not entirely clear to whom 'nasty white trash' actually refers. Though Anita never states it outright, the implication is that Charlotte, by mere association with Van Wetter, is also 'nasty white trash.' In the South, where white women were invested with so much purity, they were expected to be "stainless expressions of the South's ideal" (Gray 189). The term 'white trash' is often used to characterize a woman who exhibits a "dangerous and excessive sexuality" (Wray and Newitz 171). Charlotte's sexual appetite for potentially violent men in jail is not only dangerous for the fact that she seems to derive a certain pleasure from danger, but for the fact that she defies convention in her open and excessive—and thereby threatening—sexuality. Yardley articulates as much when he insults Charlotte by calling her a "forty-year-old woman obsessed with prison cock." This is a loaded jibe; in one fell swoop, Yardley shames Charlotte for her failure to adhere to societal norms, for her age (and implicitly her unmarried status), and for her 'obsessive' and excessive (read: inappropriate) sexual fondness for dangerous or violent men. Though she is criticized for being 'obsessed with prison cock,' the men around her are eager for the opportunity to be with her. Charlotte, then, represents a type of sexuality that is at once demonized and fetishized; as 'white trash,' Charlotte is removed from the other, more respectable women of her community who have been made "too much the objectification of the combined mother-virgin land." Because she is openly sexual 'white trash,' men like Van Wetter—and even Jack, who has several erotic fantasies of her—feel free to "defile her with impunity" (Roberts 104).

9 Jack's and Van Wetter's fantasies about how Charlotte should or should not behave expose the ways in which the antebellum South's myths of womanhood lingered even in the twentieth century. Moreover, through Jack's and Van Wetter's respective expectations for Charlotte, *The Paperboy* also exposes the correlation between sex, violence, and white masculinity in the South. Jack, in many ways, seemingly rejects certain expectations of white Southern manhood, particularly those that require demonstrations of 'mastery' over women and blacks. Jack's ambitions of becoming a professional athlete are dashed when he gets kicked off the University of Florida's swimming team and out of school because, as he tells Charlotte, he

lost his temper one night when he was drunk and vandalized the university's swimming pool. Following his expulsion, Jack returns to his hometown of Lately, Florida, and works for his father's reputable newspaper business as the paperboy. Here he cultivates a close friendship with Anita, his family's maid. Unlike most of the men in the town of Lately who are unabashedly racist, Jack looks at Anita like a companion. And certainly, their relationship is highly and unusually familiar. The two joke openly about Jack's masturbation habits, for instance. Jack also offers to take care of some of the housework for Anita when she wants to leave the Jansen's house to attend a friend's baby shower. Jack's father, however, has the final say, and with one look insists that Anita can and should take of the work herself.[4] Anita eventually loses her job at the Jansen's and begins working at a restaurant. Jack visits her there on the day that his father remarries and witnesses Anita being denigrated by her white, male boss, who chastises her about the way she wears her hairnet: "I don't want your black hair in my food," he says to her. To make Anita feel better, Jack jokes, "You can put your black hair in my food."

10 Jack does not subscribe to the ideal of 'mastery' on which his father and other men of his Moat County community rely. Yet, Jack clings to 'honor,' the other defining trait of Southern manhood. One of the ways that men proved themselves as honorable was through the protection of white Southern womanhood, and Jack is most devoted to protecting Charlotte's honor. In the scene where Van Wetter calls Charlotte a bitch, Jack jumps up and furiously commands, "Don't talk to her like that!" Jack feels equally compelled to defend his own honor when it is at stake. After the jellyfish attack, Jack's father publishes a story in the paper titled "Fast Action Saves Lately Man at Beach." Jack's relationship with his father is tense at best. Jack's mother left their family when Jack was young, and Jack, who carries one of her rings as a keepsake, is far more attached to his mother than his father. Jack's father, who has more to do with his new girlfriend than with Jack, is disappointed by his son's athletic failures and general lack of ambition. The story Jack's father publishes about Jack's jellyfish stings deliberately casts Jack in the role of passive victim who is rescued and urinated on by a 'heroic' woman. That his father considers this story fodder for his newspaper—angles the story in such a way as to exploit his son's accident, describing in detail how Charlotte urinated on Jack's "arms, genitals, and face"—

[4] Jack's father also asks whether Anita has children, the answer to which is common knowledge for both Jack and Ward. Their father, however, knows next to nothing (and cannot be bothered to learn) about the woman who has worked for him for years. Jack and Ward's father is also sure to remark that Yardley is "mighty sure of himself for a colored."

causes Jack, the former champion swimmer, to feel embarrassed and emasculated: "What's Dad trying to do to me?" Jack asks Ward. Yardley adds further insult to injury when he makes a snide comment about the incident, at which point Jack attacks him, slapping him in the face with a copy of the newspaper and then grabbing Yardley in a chokehold. As Jennifer R. Green writes, "Aggressive physical displays and the refusal to accept, or at least a willingness to defend against, insult marked southern honor" (176). Jack resorts to violence in this instance because he feels he must defend his own honor. What is more, his brawl with Yardley is an attempt to reclaim a sense of manhood that is compromised by the humiliating newspaper article. And it is a racialized form of violence that Jack here reverts to: in order to further demonstrate the power of his white masculinity, Jack goes so far as to hurl a racial insult at Yardley, yelling at him, "Fuck you, nigger!" Try as he might, when his honor is threatened, Jack ultimately falls prey to the violent and racist tendencies of white Southern manhood that have been culturally inscribed in him. Earlier in the film, after hearing the story of how Jack was expelled from school, Charlotte asks Jack if he loses his temper often. Charlotte observes a pattern of violent male behavior in the South: "This place is full of boys just like you who lost their temper one day," she says, gesturing toward the prison where Van Wetter is incarcerated. Jack's aggression toward Yardley makes visible one of the ways that violence in the South (and particularly violence against blacks and women) is often evidence of manliness.

11 Van Wetter embodies a markedly different kind of white Southern masculinity than Jack. In her first appearance in the film, Charlotte designates Van Wetter as her 'white man.' Anita too identifies Van Wetter's place in Moat County's racial and social hierarchy when she refers to him as "nasty white trash." Sally Robinson writes that 'white trash' (or 'redneck' or 'hillbilly') masculinity defines "a primitive but still white male other" who embodies "a dangerous masculinity outside of the white male norm" (164). Before his imprisonment, Van Wetter, along with his Uncle Tyree (Ned Bellamy) and other members of his family, resides on the fringes of this small Florida town. Van Wetter lives in the swamp—outside the limits of the 'civilized' Lately, as Jack is sure to point out when he remarks to Ward that "no one lives out here…no one could live out here"—where he and Tyree barely make a living skinning alligators. This, at least, is their legal trade; on the side, Van Wetter and Tyree sell sod that they steal from golf courses. Whether or not Van Wetter is responsible for Sheriff Call's murder remains a mystery. The fact remains, however, that Van Wetter is most certainly a criminal who also happens to have a

proclivity for violence; at one point in the film, Ward and Jack go to the Department of Public Information and speak with an officer who informs them that Van Wetter once cut off a deputy's thumb over a traffic ticket. And violence, it should be reiterated, played a central role in both 'creating' and 'exhibiting' Southern masculinity. Charlotte becomes a victim of Van Wetter's violence in more ways than one. On her second visit to him in the prison, Van Wetter berates Charlotte for wearing pants: "Where's your dress?" he asks her. "Every goddamn man in here wears pants. How am I supposed to tell you apart from them?" When Charlotte looks down shamefully, Van Wetter shouts, "Turn around, bitch! You wear a dress in here next time or you don't bother coming." Ward and Yardley's article ultimately raises enough questions about Van Wetter's involvement in Call's murder, and Van Wetter is released from jail. His first act as a 'free' man is to go and find Charlotte, who has apparently ceased contact with him. He arrives at her house and begins making advances toward her. When Charlotte tells him not to touch her, Van Wetter grabs her by the wrists, slams her back against a wall, and then puts one hand around her neck. In what borders on sexual assault, Van Wetter begins kissing Charlotte, and eventually she returns his kisses and the two have sex. Like nearly every other sex scene in *The Paperboy*, the sex that takes place between Charlotte and Van Wetter is violent. Van Wetter handles Charlotte roughly, at several points putting his hand around her neck and choking her during intercourse. The scene is furthermore strangely intercut with a number of quick shots of dead animals, an extra visual cue that alerts viewers to the brutish, animalistic nature of the sexual act and that enhances Van Wetter's display of violent manhood. Van Wetter's violent behavior toward Charlotte eventually escalates to a fatal level when he takes Charlotte to his home in the swamp where he becomes angry when she defies his demand and insists on attending Jack's father's wedding. After this dispute between the two, Van Wetter kills her. Kris DuRocher posits that white Southern men's "ability to control those within their households and below them in the social hierarchy, primarily slaves and women, reflected their race and masculinity" (46). Van Wetter takes this to an extreme by killing Charlotte, an effort to assert control—his masculinity—over her. There is also something worth noting here about the fact that Charlotte, a promiscuous woman 'obsessed with prison cock,' is ultimately killed—in a sense, punished—because of her sexuality. It is quite literally her sexual fascination with dangerous, violent men in prison that leads to her death.

12 Charlotte is not the only victim of Van Wetter's homicidal rage. At the film's conclusion, when Jack, accompanied by Ward, journeys into the swamp in an 'honorable' yet late attempt to rescue Charlotte (or to again protect her white womanhood) from Van Wetter and return her to the safe confines of civilized society, Van Wetter grabs Ward and slits his throat as a horrified Jack stands witness. Through Ward, *The Paperboy* examines another mode of masculinity. One of the central mysteries of this already twisted story has to do with the nature of Ward's sexuality. At several points in the film, people wonder about the origin of the prominent scars around his mouth, but Ward offers no response. After Ward first arrives back in Lately, Anita asks him about his dating life and warns him to "stay away from those rough ones. Remember what happened the last time." The scars on Ward's face and the meaning behind Anita's cryptic advice become apparent when Jack, Charlotte, and Ward go to Ormond Beach together. While drinking at a club, Ward stares intently at a couple of black men; the camera alternates between close-up shots of Ward's face and of the black men's faces as the three make eye contact and exchange knowing nods. Ward walks across the club to talk to the men, then leaves the club. It turns out that he takes these men with him back to his motel room. Charlotte and Jack later go to Ward's room and discover him, handcuffed and hogtied, lying face down on a sheet of plastic, naked, in a pool of blood. He has been nearly beaten to death, and apparently, this is not the first time: Ward has a fetish for kinky, ultraviolent sex with black men. In the South, Friend notes, "homosexuality has always rubbed against the grain of masculinity," and in the early twentieth century the South offered "little public space for homosexuality" (xxi). Even with the rise of the Sunbelt South in the 1970s, "gay men seeking to live and love confronted the conservative sexual standards maintained by southern states" (xxi).[5] "Gay physicality" was considered 'emasculating' (xxi), and gay men were often "imaged as a threat not only to vulnerable young men but also to the larger community" (Woodland 290). It is for this reason, presumably, that Ward hides this aspect of his identity; in this way, it is worth noting, Daniels' film aligns him with Yardley. As Yardley discloses to Jack, after Yardley got drunk one night and agreed to let Ward fellate him, Ward apparently developed a particular "taste for niggers." Moreover, in the same scene with Jack, Yardley suddenly drops the British accent he affects throughout the film and informs Jack that he has been faking the accent all along because "ain't no negro gettin' a

[5] See John Howard's "Southern Sodomy; or, What the Coppers Saw" for a more detailed interrogation of the Sunbelt South.

job up in this spot unless he's a motherfuckin' James Bond, ya dig?" Both Ward and Yardley—Yardley simply by virtue of the fact that he is a black man—represent marginalized masculinities, each that stands against white heteronormative manhood in its association with a threatening, violent, even deviant sexuality.

13 That at the end of *The Paperboy* both the "slut" and the "queer" are killed is undeniably problematic, but this ending is not all for naught. Peter Bradshaw aptly reminds us, "A gentleman, they say, is someone who never gives offence unintentionally. A talented film-maker, by the same token, is someone who never outrages your sense of good taste by mistake. And Lee Daniels is a very talented film-maker" ("The Paperboy"). The film is campy, to be sure, and as camp *The Paperboy* offers an exaggerated take on the South's very own weird and problematic history of linking sex with violence, race, and gender. As a white man's story, *The Paperboy* interrogates paradigms of Southern masculinity that remain deeply rooted in the South's racial mythologies. And perhaps that is what we can ultimately take away from Daniels' film. By mixing representations of sex with violence*, The Paperboy* illuminates how sex and gender continue to be understood in the South, and it forces a consideration of the ways in which many of the South's cultural anxieties and fantasies about gender and race are indeed still operative. *The Paperboy* may be 'lurid' and 'weird,' but it is pointedly so, and it is therefore worthy of closer consideration.

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