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“THE YOUNG BLOOD HUNGERS”: MAPPING YOUNG BLACK MANHOOD IN
MARITA BONNER’S FRYE STREET FICTION

by

Rachel Leigh Smith

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Women’s and Gender Studies

The University of Memphis

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Dedication

To my parents, Mallory and Wesley, for their incredible and unwavering support

ABSTRACT

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Marita O. Bonner, early twentieth century African American public intellectual and creative writer, wrote particularly about the experiences of blacks in Chicago. Though most Bonner scholarship focuses primarily on her working class female characters, this study provides close readings of the young male figures in the short stories in "One Boy's Story," "The Makin's," "The Whipping," "There Were Three," "Tin Can," and "Nothing New." I analyze how these texts confront notions of family, personal identity, and violence, and how Bonner configures young life as a volatile liminal space of human development. As seen in Bonner's short stories and in her essay "The Young Blood Hungers," she continually promotes childhood and adolescence as compelling and complicated aspects of the American black experience. Youth is an integral category in investigating not only Bonner's works, but in examining the Harlem Renaissance era.

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Chapter One:

Introduction: Marita Bonner and the Violence of Youth

Eighty-five years after her “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored” essay was published in the December 1925 issue of *The Crisis*, scholarship about Marita Bonner remains relatively scant. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Bonner found success as a contributor to *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*; won several writing prizes, including the 1933 Opportunity Fiction Award; and participated in Georgia Douglas Johnson’s storied S Street writers’ salon (Flynn 222). But by the beginning of the 1940s, Bonner had returned to her teaching career and grew deeply involved with Christian Science, never publishing again. For several decades after analysis and acknowledgment of her work was minimal; it was not until 1987 when both a lengthy biographical essay (“Marita Bonner: In Search of Other Mothers’ Gardens”) and the full collection of her works (*Frye Street and Environs*) were published. This relative dearth of critical material can be attributed to Bonner not being involved with the Harlem literary circle of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman; rather, she had ties to two other centers of early-twentieth-century African American artistic creativity, Washington D.C. and Chicago. Also Bonner published during a relatively brief period and kept a low public profile as an artist. Additionally, as Katherine Capshaw Smith argues in *Children’s Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, many black female writers of the New Negro Era were at a disadvantage with major publishing opportunities due to social and geographical constraints (xxii).

However, these explanations do not reduce the need for further academic exploration of her works. Lorraine E. Roses and Ruth E. Randolph argue that Bonner is a “sophisticated artist and intellectual who should be placed in the company of...Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston” and that it is the lack of a collected volume of her work published during her lifetime that contributed to a delay in the later rediscovery of her works (166). Doris E. Abramson links Bonner to Angelina Weld Grimke and Mary T. Burill as these contemporary African American female artists all served as teachers at Dunbar High School in Washington DC (9). And in an entry in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: 51*, Joyce Flynn posits Bonner’s influence on upcoming writers of the period, singling out her effects on Richard Wright’s work, noting Bonner’s and Wright’s similar explorations of “the effects of an environment of poverty, low expectations, and peer pressure” on inner city youths (225). Wilks argues that this “discrepancy between [her] prolific and prizewinning career and the uneven critical attention” relates to “narrowly drawn literary parameters” that do not invite concentrated studies of her work (70). However, Bonner’s personal and artistic achievements—her successful publications and her unique mapping of Frye Street—insist upon additional readings of her works. In “*Tell It To Us Easy*” *And Other Stories*, Judith Musser posits that the Opportunity literacy prizes and award dinners “were probably the most influential and effective events which stimulated and empowered Black writers” (2), and as she points out in *Engendering the Harlem Renaissance: The Short Stories of Marita Bonner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Other African American Women*, Bonner was not only a multi-award winner of *Crisis* and *Opportunity* contests but she was the most prolific female short story writer in *Opportunity* (80).

Although the majority of Bonner's protagonists are adult black women, young black males also emerge as compelling figures. This thesis will focus on the central young male characters from six of her twenty short stories.¹ Bonner highlights the complexity of young African American males by exploring similar characters' experiences of family, personal identity, and violence. In doing so, Bonner provides a concentrated look at young adulthood and the male gender, as well as a concerted discussion of social issues like crime and poverty. I will examine what I characterize as the "youthful male experience," including both childhood and adolescence—noting Bonner's particular characterizations and comparing it to contemporary postulations of black male childhood/adolescence. Countless youthful male characters populate these stories, but this analysis will focus on six central characters: Denny from "Nothing New" (1926), Donald from "One Boy's Story" (1927), Robbie from "A Possible Triad on Black Notes: There Were Three" (1933), Jimmie Joe from "Tin Can" (1934), Little David from "The Makin's" (1939) and Little Benny from "The Whipping"(1939).² The aforementioned six "central characters" range in age from six (Little Benny) to seventeen in (Jimmie Joe).³ Noting the considerable range in age between these six "significant" young male characters, it feels natural to divide the characters between the child-to-adolescent and the adolescent-to-manhood groupings. The second chapter will explore

¹ Bonner published fifteen short stories in the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* journals; an additional five stories were found in a "worn notebook" and were published posthumously in 1987 upon the release of the collected edition of her work. See Frye Street and Environs (xxix)

² By "countless" I am referring to the unnamed and unnumbered male friends in stories such as "Tin Can" as well as minor characters such as Luke in "Light in Dark Places."

³ Denny's age (from "Nothing New") is not specified, but he is in high school at the end of the story; one presumes he is also in the 17-18 age range.

these stories' shared themes (family, identity, violence) in greater detail. Chapter three will provide close readings of "One Boy's Story," "The Makin's" and "The Whipping" and analyze the boy characters of Donald, David, and Benny. Chapter four will look at "There Were Three," "Tin Can," and "Nothing New" and examine the teenage characters of Robbie, Jimmie Joe, and Denny. Chapter five will conclude the thesis with a summation of Bonner's overall young male character mapping project.

Fictional representations of adolescence record common markers of cultural, racial, and national identity. If one lives to be an adult, one passes through this developmental age (childhood, adolescence, etc.) like other humans. Adolescence is a lens that can be used to generalize or "essentialize" human experience. For example, black bildungsromans add to the overall canon of literature as well as challenging the dominance of "mainstream" works focusing on white adolescents. Upon reading Bonner's entire works, I noticed a recurring pattern in terms of gender and age of protagonists. In her short stories in particular, I noticed a variety of compelling *male* emerging adult characters, both as protagonists and secondary characters. I am analyzing closely her "opposite" gendered figures, particularly to the exclusion of other characters, because it is a seemingly heretofore unexamined element of her work. Bonner is often analyzed in her relationship to other African American women writers and in her deft portrayals of black female working class identities. Young male characters are analyzed in the context of how they interact with adult female characters, as opposed to being linked to each other. I will explore how youth (both as a metaphorical device and a sociological subject) is an essential component of Bonner's work as an artistic and public intellectual, and I want to investigate how male youth is described in particular.

Bonner provides crucial elements of analysis for the African American, feminist, and American literary scholar, not only for the rich complexities in her fiction but because her life is such an important lens from which to explore the New Negro Renaissance.⁴ Evincing a lifelong commitment to education and children in particular, Bonner's biography reads as an exemplar of a principled, accomplished African American woman of the early twentieth century. As Wilks argues, the facts of Bonner's life "rea[d] as a virtual primer of New Negro success" (68). Bonner's early life was spent in Boston, where she was born June 16, 1898, and this was where she received a thorough education in literature and German, which was capped off with her studies at Radcliffe College.⁵ Bonner's early artistic network included her spot in the exclusive writing seminar taught by Charles Townsend Copeland, and her participation in creative outlets continued after Bonner moved to Washington D.C. with her "membership" in Georgia Douglas Johnson's S Street salon. This creative outlet was a forum that Bonner occasionally attended "with her quiet dignity" according to fellow member Gwendolyn Bennett (Johnson 496). A prestigious literary society, this organization included other writers such as "Angelina Weld Grimke, Clarissa Scott Delany, Jessie Fauset, Mary Burill, and Alice Dunbar Nelson" (Balshaw 129). In 1930, Bonner moved to Chicago after her marriage to William Almy Occomy, where they lived with their three children, "William Almy Jr., Warwick Gale, and Marita Joyce" (Flynn 223). After retreating from

⁴ This term seems particularly appropriate to use with regards to Bonner, as she lacks the close Harlem connection, as her creative center is in Chicago and the majority of her publications were in the 1930s.

⁵ Debate exists as to Bonner's birth year (with some arguing 1898 or 1899) but I am going with 1898, as Lorraine Elena Roses and Elizabeth Randolph argue this designation is "according to her birth certificate." See Roses and Randolph 1990, 18.

fiction writing by the 1940s, she spent the last decades of her life in Chicago, dying from complications in an apartment fire in 1971. Considering the whole of Bonner's contributions, clearly one of the great gifts of her life was in working with children. Although professional writing involved approximately twenty years of Bonner's life, her work as a high school teacher crossed several states, including stints in West Virginia, Washington DC, and Chicago, and spanned multiple eras of her life (although she did not teach concurrently, she worked as a teacher in both her early twenties and her mid-sixties) (Snow).⁶ Bonner's first teaching position was during her time at Radcliffe, where she worked a local Cambridge school. Joyce Flynn suggests that this job was likely taken "for financial reasons," but regardless it became a field which Bonner returned to in every phase of her working life (223). Her next teaching position was at West Virginia's Bluefield Colored Institute (1922-1924) and Bonner worked at DC's Armstrong High School from 1924-1930 when she was writing and publishing her early works, such as "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored" (1925) (Snow). In Chicago, Bonner is known to have worked in positions at two school districts, one at Phillips High School (1944-1949) and another at the Doolittle School "for educationally and mentally handicapped children" (1950-1963) (Hodges 227). In "Collective Visions of Women: Representations of Gender and Race in the Writings of Women of Color, 1900-1940," Anita Poluga Hodges argues that although Bonner lived a fairly privileged middle class existence throughout her life, her teaching experiences, particularly those had when working in inner-city schools, helped her write about working class youths with such

⁶ Twenty years is estimated from the publishing dates of her first published work "The Hands" (1925) to "One True Love" (1941), the last published short story. This figure does not include her high school or college writing.

specificity and poignancy, and no doubt her activist principles motivated her teaching (247). Discussions of the public education system inhabit her works, particularly in “The Makin’s” in which a young boy is motivated by a teacher’s lecture to buy seeds for a home garden, and in “Tin Can’s” critique of a black high school administrator’s lack of concern for his teachers. Though Bonner wrote about characters from a disparate class, she used her professional experience as a teacher to record keen insights about youth and reflect on the complex benefits of education.

Youth is a historically situated category, one that has been defined in different ways and including (and excluding) diverse groups throughout history. In *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*, historian Jeffrey Moran argues that adolescence was “invented” at the turn of the twentieth century (1). By the 1900s, due to changing attitudes toward young adulthood, teenagers enjoyed a more specific and specialized social life, in which more individuals regularly attended school and spent more years as an adult-in-progress, engaging in stereotypical extracurricular activities and courting rituals. This liminal space for human development allowed governmental and community agencies—worried about the futures of these adults in training—to offer up prescriptions or restrictions for future success.⁷ Considering that the youth discussed

⁷ Notions of sexual propriety seem particularly important in thinking about socio-political rhetoric directed toward urban black youths; whether it was ‘well-meaning’ suggestions made by middle class blacks (to improve the race or its reputation among mainstream culture) or whites’ fear-based rhetoric about the sexual and mental health of the young black ghetto residents, I imagine that, perhaps for the first time, black adolescents were perceived as both a “dangerous” group as well as more “moldable” people whose behavior might be curtailed through literature or legislation. There are just a few marginal references to an African American shaped definition of adolescence (and teen sexual identity) in Moran’s text but chapter 4 (“Life and Death in the Inner City”) of Florette Henri’s *Black Migrations* intimates my above supposition in her discussion of ghetto residents’ experience with venereal disease and vice. See Henri 109, 123.

in Bonner's works are part of the earliest cohorts to have an adolescence, I argue that Bonner scholarship should pay more attention to her child and teen characters.⁸ Additionally, early 20th century black youths (1920s-1940s) have another historical tie to adolescence and literacy. As Katherine Capshaw Smith contends in *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*, this period has a particularly important relationship to children and teenagers as work directed to or written about young people truly "breached the divide between the progressive black child and unschooled adults" (274). Children's literature of this period included *The Crisis* publications--exemplified by Effie Newsome's "The Little Page," whom Smith declares the "most prolific children's writer" of the time (43)—and black history pageants held at local high schools, in addition to poetry and prose written by more well-known artists such as Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (1, 53, 229). Due to the Great Migration and somewhat improved educational opportunities, American black children were educated more regularly than before, and this youth-focused literature "played a crucial role in the reinvention of black childhood," helped "build a black national identity," and "change[d] class dynamics," affording more opportunities to the black middle and working classes (xiii, xvi.)

Bonner's work fits into this children's literature paradigm in several respects. Her depictions of the dangerous, complicated experiences of growing up dominate her writing. Her short stories were published in two of the leading journals of the day, *The*

⁸ Consider the female character-focus of the following works: Roses and Randolph 1990, Musser 1996, Hodges 1998, Allen 1998, Osaki 2000, and Wilks 2008, to name but some of the most substantive analyses of her work. Though these scholars comment deftly on these stories and might mention Jimmie Joe from *Tin Can*, for example, these pieces are concerned with the mother and/or female figures in the works. This paper, then, will consider the young male character first and foremost.

Crisis and the *Opportunity*; both publications reached wide audiences, doubtlessly including young people and parents.⁹ To illustrate the correlations between Bonner and *The Crisis*'s focus on education for and conversation about young adults, I will point to a *literal connection* between the children's literature movement and her writing. In the January 1928 *Crisis*, Bonner's "first prize play" *The Purple Flower*—an allegorical work about the costs of racial freedom that features among its age-diverse cast, characters named "Youth," "Young Us," and "Young Man"—is positioned directly opposite Newsome's "The Little Page" (8-9).¹⁰ One can imagine the reader of "The Little Page" also perusing Bonner's play; perhaps a family read the children's poetry section and then discussed this adjacent work. Later in the same year, Bonner's "prize" essay "The Young Blood Hungers" was published alongside Aaron Douglas's front-cover "illustration" presumably inspired by the text. This essay was subtitled "Growing Pains," connoting childhood imagery (*Crisis* 11). However, Marita Bonner, is not mentioned, neither in terms of work or legacy, in *Children's Literature of the Harlem Renaissance*. I hope to connect Bonner's child-centric focus to Smith's impressive research in this area.

Though I am exploring characters that are diverse in age, this conflation is not to suggest that childhood and adolescence are not (somewhat) distinct categories. Rather, this is an attempt to look at the liminal stages of human development; specifically, those years in an individual's life in he attempts autonomy while experiencing a volley of

⁹ For specific figures about the *Crisis*'s and *Opportunity*'s circulation and composition, see Wilson's *The Crisis Reader*, xix-xxv and *The Opportunity Reader*, xv-xxi.

¹⁰ As Smith points out, considering the political nature of the *Crisis*, "The Little Page" was by definition in the midst of violent adult themes, and its overall "romantic" perspective of childhood "provided a separate sphere...[in which] child[ren] [could] take pride in African American ethnicity," and was a column that parents could read to their children especially. See Smith 45.

complex and disorienting sensations. For this thesis, however, I will often use the term “emerging adults” to more accurately (and broadly) describe the ages of these protagonists. Emerging adults will refer to an individual that is not seen as a typical adult (i.e., one who is married or in a committed relationship and/or supporting oneself), thus including both children and teenagers.

This chapter will conclude by examining a work that frames my analysis, Bonner’s essay “The Young Blood Hungers.” This short piece arguably contains Bonner’s own fundamental beliefs on the relationships between youths and social change and thus is particularly useful to note before stepping out into less direct *fictional* waters. Though Bonner’s most well-known work is her piece that focuses on the complexities of African American female identity, “On Being Young—A Woman—and Colored,” her second essay, “The Young Blood Hungers” explores the category of age in greater focus. One can see in this short work the articulation of specific social and political issues facing contemporary young adults that Bonner examines in her previous and subsequent fiction. This piece can be read as a distillation of key themes and preoccupations of Bonner’s writing and, by linking her essays to her short stories, highlights the recurring themes in her oeuvre as well as proclaims (or reclaims) Bonner’s status as a politically conscious public intellectual.

The speaker (one might interpret her to be “Bonner” or a similar female voice) acts as a spokesperson for the young women and men of her generation, the youth of the Roaring 1920s (and 1930s). The power of this essay is derived from the speaker’s passionate and savvy argumentation, as she smartly employs typical symbols of the Jazz

Age— “curls and rouge,” “enchantment” and “drunken mazes”—to upend typical opinions of contemporary youth (Bonner 12.) In examining emerging adulthood rites of passage—such as becoming financially and mentally independent—the speaker charges that what seems to be instability on the part of young people is actually reflective of the complex processes involved in personal maturation. The speaker’s argument is organized around answering the question implied in the title: articulating exactly what the young blood hungers *for*. Ultimately, the speaker finds that youths “hung[er] for righteousness” and she explores the avenues through which they work toward finding ultimate satisfaction in their lives (9). This Hunger is all-consuming and incredibly bewildering: it is an ancient and violent feeling whose “gnawing pains make you toss your body around” (12). Young Bloods experience the Hunger when they try to figure out where to live and how to spend their lives. A young blood would confront the hunger when choosing his vocation, on deciding whether to play it safe or to take a chance on achieving his American dream. Denny Jackson of “Nothing New” faces precisely this question when he enrolls in art school instead of pursuing an expected blue collar job like his father expects. Inevitably, an Old Blood may point out that these decisions are poorly planned, impractical, and self destructive. After all, Denny’s attendance at the predominately white art school eventually leads to his early demise. But the speaker argues that it is important for others to understand the complex decisions made in emerging adulthood. Her articulation of how The Young Blood Hungers contains two underlying points: she argues for a fuller recognition of these processes (how they are enacted in daily life) and for understanding the importance of young adults engaging in this type of decision making , why it is important that young people try to fill this “hunger.”

She argues that young people react by “daz[ing]”, moving around (mentally and physically) to remove the Hunger’s hold from their lives:

Some Young Blood feels it—and then they see if they can out-strip it—if they can get rid of the gnawing—try to dance it off as a man smokes off a trouble—try to float it off on a drunken sea—try to cast a spell on it. Daze it off. (9)

“Dazing” is repeatedly found in Bonner’s youth-centric works; these young characters are constantly dancing, drinking, and dreaming, trying to escape their current surroundings. Bonner argues for older adults to understand why these seemingly wasteful practices recur in younger adults’ lives. While not often good choices for these protagonists, these temporary escapes provide characters relief from their turbulent lives or allow them to imagine distant futures. Further, the speaker explores what is specific about the youth’s present moment. Though the speaker argues that this experimentation is a rite of passage, she also believes that her generation is importantly situated in time, intimating the importance of the Harlem/New Negro Renaissance. This generation uses both the past and present to make meaning in their lives, with “hands full of the things ancestry has given” and “thriving on the things today can give” (9).

“The Young Blood Hungers” addresses a major theme that runs throughout Bonner’s writing, particularly in her exploration of emerging adults: she traces how young characters *experiment* with diverse identities to find ultimate *meaning*. These types of experimentation run the gamut from trying out new personalities and relationships, meaning is sought to find order in one’s personal, professional, and spiritual lives. The

young blood's hunger for life and experience demands the observer to consider the significance of emerging adulthood. Reviewing *Autumn Love Cycle* in *Opportunity* almost a year after this essay's publication, Bonner explores Georgia Douglas Johnson's work from similar contexts of desire and young age, stating that, "in Youth, love is a flame mad and consuming, licking out to eat up Ideas and Ideals, true and false alike" (130).

Chapter Two:

Young Manhood and Frye Street

Recently Marita Bonner's works have been examined in contexts such as Lisa Wooley's *American Voices of the Chicago Renaissance*, where she analyzes Bonner's Frye Street stories to explore creative breakthroughs in the early 20th century Chicago-based arts movement. Though the Harlem Renaissance tableau shines more brightly in the contemporary popular imagination, the concurrent Chicago Renaissance is an equally important paradigm through which to consider Bonner's work. Frye Street, Bonner's fictional world, provides the scholar with material from which to categorize her overarching body of work as well as a way to arrive at a vivid conception of Great Depression era Chicagoan life. As Joyce Flynn notes: "the Frye Street that anchored a fictional universe in Chicago functioned as a daring symbol of the diversity, novelty, and opportunity available in cities like Chicago and Detroit, meccas for black migration from the South in the decades surrounding World War I" (*Frye Street and Environs* xi). What is particularly interesting about her relationship to Chicagoan fiction is that many of her short stories set on Frye Street were written before she moved there.

Situated in Chicago's Black Belt, "run[ning] from the Grand Avenue to the L," Frye Street is a singular location (69). This neighborhood balks at "safe" and "honorable" living but instead contains "all of the amazing varieties of harlotry;" it is both "heaven and hell" (102). Though this neighborhood is multi-ethnic, as it counts Chinese, Swedish,

Danish and Russian people among its residents, the majority of the protagonists in these stories are African American (69). Positioning her stories in this vivid space allows Bonner a platform from which to articulate political realities for working class Americans. Jude R. Meche notes that instead of accepting the dominant racial assimilation paradigm, Frye Street was an anti-melting pot, as this “is a place where the residents’ race, ethnicity, and otherness are never to be forgotten” (36). As Kim Jenice Dillion points out, this configuration of “Chicago’s Black Belt...communicates the tensions and entanglements of racial intermixture...and depict[s] the corrosive effects of the urban environment on children” (40-41). Charting out Frye Street was a definite goal for Bonner, as she planned (but never completed) a “Black Map” that would articulate African American concerns, “comparable to...James Joyce’s *Dubliners*” (Flynn xx).

Critical attention has been focused on her female characters as Bonner’s perceptive analyses of race, class, and gender—particularly in her depictions of the double and triple binds found in black, working class women’s lives—and these characters deserve critical treatment. However, Bonner also created complex, sympathetic young male characters worthy of analysis. This chapter will concentrate on the commonalities shared by the young male characters in Bonner’s Frye Street stories. Bonner’s male characters share similar traits; most pointedly, most of her male protagonists have absent fathers and meet violent ends. More broadly, three major elements that Bonner continually examines are an investigation of a character’s family structure, an exploration of his personal identity, and a study of how he combats bodily danger.

Bonner depicts the young males' experiences of family relationships and home life frequently. As Bonner profiles young men, legally under the care of older adults, biological family bonds form the foundation of the protagonists' lives. The stories reflect primarily on the character's father and mother; siblings and extended family members are marginally commented on in the texts. Of the stories analyzed in this study, only "Nothing New" has a concerned (but ineffectual) father. "The Makins" and "Tin Can" have physically present but disinterested fathers. Little Bennie's father in "The Whipping" abandons his wife and son. In "One Boy's Story," Donald has a relationship with his father, albeit a twisted one. In "There Were Three" neither Robbie nor the reader knows his father. In fact, the only possible "father figure" found in the text is the white client that Robbie finds his mom with and who is responsible for his death.

In contrast, the mother has a more direct, intense relationship with her son; in all six stories, the maternal figure takes care of her child's daily needs, food, clothing, shelter, education, etc. These mothers fit into one of two categories; either she appears to be a "good" or a "bad" mother. The key word in establishing her "good/badness" relates to her amount of suffering. Louise in "One Boy's Story," Lizabeth in "The Whipping," Ma in "Tin Can" and Bessie in "Nothing New" are all pitiable, hard-working, struggling mothers. Goodness is not established in terms of perfection; importantly, even the "good" mothers are not "innocent" but are experienced and world-weary. Goodness comes from the mother's sacrifice, in terms of her backbreaking hard-work (Lizabeth and Ma in "Tin Can"), sheltering her child from harsh reality (Louise), or in her general anxiety about her child's well-being (Bessie). In five of the six stories, excluding "The Makin's," the ultimate moment of suffering occurs when the mother realizes that she was not able to

protect her son from the more violent elements of the world, as her son is killed or kills another. This portrayal of the mother as long-suffering not only recognizes the thankless, complex job of being a mother to an African American black youth, but it illustrates the difficult social constructs in which black families (particularly black mothers) must work to survive. The “bad moms” of these stories include Ma in “The Makin’s” and Lucille in “There Were Three,” though Lucille’s character is more complexly represented. Ma (from “The Makin’s”) has little direction in life and provides little guidance to her son; she smokes marijuana and does not spend much time engaged in any type of work (either in terms of outside paid employment or in homemaking pursuits.) Bonner highlights Ma’s interactions with her son as proof that David is directionless, and she intimates the likelihood of him growing up to be amoral. Arguably, Lucille is Bonner’s most interestingly drawn mother. Though she works as a prostitute, spending her earnings on luxury items like “silk sheets...perfumes and toilet waters” to the effect that the family often does not have food on the table (103), she clearly loves her children and wants them to be safe, even if she cannot control their fates. For example, when Lucille leaves for work on the night of Robbie’s death, she orders Robbie and Lou to stay home, but she is not there to watch them. Thus these “bad mothers” showcase dangers of the lack of parental guidance, whether it comes in the form of self-centered disinterestedness or in an atypical approach to mothering that ultimately proves incomplete.

Depictions of extended family members are found in two of the stories, “The Makin’s” and “The Whipping.” “The Makin’s” explores the variety of David’s potential role models, including his grandmother in particular. The story focuses on the family’s generational differences, and the exchange between David and Marm highlights her

inability to understand David or assist him in growing up; her southern, heavily religious background contrasts to his urban sensibilities. Another story concerned with multiple family generations, “The Whipping” utilizes Lizabeth’s birth family as foreshadowing of how husbands leave and mothers have to bear the burden of the home: when Lizabeth grows up and her siblings “leave” (either because of death or desertion), she must take care of her adult mother as well as her infant son, emphasizing the struggles faced by single mothers (and noting the detrimental effects this has on their children.) In the other four stories, this lack of description of aunts, grandparents, or cousins either highlights the characters’ familial/geographical isolation (“One Boy’s Story”) or places more emphasis on the primary caregivers (“Nothing New”).

Four of the stories feature “only child” households; in “One Boy’s Story,” “The Makin’s,” “The Whipping,” and “Nothing New,” the young male protagonist’s status as the sole child emphasizes his importance to the text, also allowing the character to stand as a representative figure for all young black males. In the remaining stories “There Were Three” and “Tin Can,” the central young male figure has one younger sibling, and both of those stories explore the effects of the older brother’s violent death on the remaining, more innocent child. To emphasize the older child’s influence, Robbie and Jimmie Joe’s siblings are referred to only as Little Lou and Little Brother, respectively.

Another crucial textual link between the works is found in their emphasis on confronting gender and race. In particular, these characters observe, consider, daydream, or act on what they consider to be “manly” or proper masculine behavior. “One Boy’s Story” and “The Makin’s” follows the characters’ interactions with possible male role

models. “There Were Three” examines how Robbie must act as man of the home. “Tin Can” finds Jimmie Joe trying to be a grown up by joining a gang; to be well-liked and respected, he is sexually active, drinks heavily—he lives Adult, with dangerous consequences. “Nothing New” represents Bonner’s most compact exploration of these themes, as this text follows Denny’s experimentation with masculinity when he is a child, pre-teen, and teenager. He tries to act like a tough boy, confronts a bully, and defends his honor at different times in his life. “The Whipping” explores masculinity mostly in the absence of male role models. Black men in this story are deserters; they are a scare commodity, the lack of them contributes to Benny’s early death.

Race is another shared concern of these works. These concerns take the form of two patterns: either race serves as a marker for certain economic, physical, or emotional dangers or the text looks at a boy’s experience of being multi-ethnic or bi-racial. Though the effects of race are “obvious,” it bears repeating that the particular confines in which the characters find themselves are due to their marginalized positions in a racist society. Due to racial identities, these characters experience growing up in particular ways. “One Boy’s Story” and “There Were Three” highlight dangers of “race-mixing.” The aggression Donald’s feels at finding out the identity of his biological father, as well as his outrage at not being able to protect his mother, lead him to kill his father. Robbie is a more literal victim of miscegenation. He is killed by his mother’s white male client; the man harms Robbie upon finding out that his sexual partner is black. As his mother can “pass” for white, the man only finds out about her racial identity when Robbie calls her mother.

How these young individuals combat, comprehend, and/or fall prey to violence is another thematic concern. Gangs, weapons, and fights populate these works. Characters commit violent acts to be like a “real man” or fall victim to violence and are killed before reaching adulthood. Bonner exploits these traditional male symbols to show their dangerous aspects and she uses masculine scenarios to point to the complex and dangerous tenor of young black males’ lives. Another type of violence alluded to in “There Were Three” is sexual violence, specifically sexual objectification and possible harassment. The women of Frye Street gaze at Robbie’s “lithe slenderness” with “measuring, waiting, stalking look[s]” (103).¹ Thus the use of violence serves a realistic purpose in these narratives (recording actual dangers that affect this social demographic) as well as proving to be an effective way to frame these boys’ stories.

Although I have divided my examination of these stories by the age of their protagonists (childhood vs. adolescence tales), I want to point out other ways of analyzing these texts. Other contexts in which discussions of these stories could be organized include by chronology (written before/after 1930) or by journal of publication (*The Crisis* or *Opportunity*). First, these stories could be sorted in terms of year in which they were written. I demarcate 1930 as the turning point since this is when Bonner moved to Chicago and began writing short stories exclusively. Before 1930, Bonner lived on the East coast (Washington D.C. in particular) and published three plays, two essays (including 1928’s “The Young Blood Hungers,”) and five of her twenty short stories

¹ Little Lou (Robbie’s sister) is also “examined” by her neighbors in this way and Bonner explores sexual violence on female bodies elsewhere in her work, particularly in “One Boy’s Story” in the relationship between Louise Gage and Swyburne, as their sexual relationship does not appear consensual.

(including “Nothing New” and “One Boy’s Story.”) Thus, the post-1930 years (1933-1941) saw the publication of twelve stories and the creation of five more, as well as a more concerted focus on Chicago (i.e. Frye Street), her new home.²

Additionally, these works could be classified based in which journal they were published. *The Crisis*, a publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, possesses a more politically charged tone than the National Urban League’s *Opportunity*, which features more sociological and artistic focused work (Musser 1996 32-34). Of the six stories analyzed here, three were published in the *Crisis* and three in *Opportunity*.

Within the three *Crisis* pieces, two (“Nothing New” and “One Boy’s Story”) were among the earliest published works and, including the later “The Whipping,” all three are concise and more political in tone, fitting within the magazine’s mission and typical editorials and other works. The three works from *Opportunity* are more sprawling or otherwise exploratory pieces: “There Were Three” is part of the “A Possible Triad on Black Notes” series, the relatively lengthy “Tin Can” was published in two parts, and “The Makin’s” is one of Bonner’s lightest and comical stories, as it focuses on humorous exchanges and features the most “happy” ending.³ For this thesis, however, the stories are organized by age of the protagonist, as characterization and thematic focuses were

² In this context, I am counting “A Possible Triad on Black Notes” as three separate stories since each of its three pieces were *published* separately, though otherwise I will use the calculation of 20 in terms of short stories in Bonner’s complete body of work (with only 15 of those being published.)

³ “There Were Three” was published in July 1933; the subsequent stories of the “Triad” were published in the following two months. “Tin Can” was published in *Opportunity* in July and August 1934. I argue that “The Makin’s” is the “happiest/lightest” story in terms of its focus on humor and overall tone, and that there are no deaths or violent occurrences in the story. For a complete listing of publication dates, see Berg 42.

especially similar in the three “childhood” works (“One Boy’s Story,” “The Makin’s,” “The Whipping”) and three “adolescence” pieces (“There Were Three,” “Tin Can,” “Nothing New”).

Chapter Three

“Frye” Boyhood: Donald, David, Benny

In *Black Migrations* (1976), Florette Henri illustrates early twentieth century Northern ghettos, highlighting how inadequate living spaces, exorbitant rents, scarcity of job opportunities, insufficient health care, and lack of security led to a lower quality of life for inhabitants. Honing in on young people’s likelihood to experience family instability and exposure to racism and poverty, Henri draws a depressing portrait of working class black childhood. Recounting the typical ghetto’s appalling living conditions, Henri summarizes evocatively that “a staggering number of black children died” before the ages of “ten, five, or even one” (113). By definition, the ghetto was a limiting place; it was a cordoned off section of a city in which (primarily) African Americans were up against dangerous conditions. In mapping out Frye Street, Bonner explores how childhood is played out in a Chicago ghetto. While never straying from her sharp analysis of working class concerns, Bonner also explores moments of resistance and insight for her young male characters. By grounding “mature” issues within stories of young boys’ lives, Bonner connects childhood to adult experiences, pointing out how children are affected by racism and poverty. She also imbues these children with complexity and records their lives with poignancy; these characters are important in their own right and are neither monolithic nor static.

Bonner explores childhood not as a relatively safe part of human development but as a complex and dangerous age. Children are inexperienced in most matters and, even more dramatically than their adult counterparts, are without money or other materials needed to leave volatile situations. Donald’s, David’s, and Benny’s stories highlight the complexities of young

males' experiences in family and community life. The underlying element uniting their stories is that youth does not prevent altercations with danger. These characters experience aggression, bodily violence and death, alongside other issues. By mapping the lives of these often voiceless characters, Bonner connects their experiences to topics more commonly perceived as affecting only adults. For example, "The Makins" ties eight year old David's daydreams about a being a successful grown-up to what he sees daily from available adult male models.

It is important to note that each of the three stories differ significantly in its focus on the male youth character. The central character of "The Whipping" is Benny's mother, Lizabeth, and previous scholarship on this story focuses on her motivations and characterization.¹ Benny is the baby who she kills after a mental breakdown; he is the result of her bad lot in life, one in which she is deserted by father and husband and oppressed by multiple avenues of discrimination. From this viewing of the story, Lizabeth is the overworked single mother and Benny is the symbolic representation of Lizabeth's suffering. In the context of *this* study, Benny as his own character will be analyzed, particularly considering his unrealized potential. The other two works have a more direct focus on the youth figure: "One Boy's Story" recalls Donald's story in his own words, via first person narration, and while David does not narrate "The Makins," he is definitely the central character, as it is he whom the reader follows throughout the entirety of the story. Regardless, these three characters were chosen for this analysis because they are complexly realized characters from stories that explore pressing, realistic topics affecting black male childhood.

¹ See Judith Musser 'The Blood will Flow Back to You': the Reactionary Proletarian Fiction of Marita Bonner' 55-79.

I will begin by examining the “odd one out,” Donald from “One Boy’s Story.” Out of the twenty short stories that total the *Frye Street and Environs* collection, “One Boy’s Story”, set in Somerset, New York, is the only text that does not “depict urban tenement living” (Allen 86). The other five stories involved in this analysis are set on Frye Street, so Donald’s geographical difference bears notice. Although Donald technically is not a Frye Street resident, his similarities to his Chicagoan compatriots as well as his differences make Donald’s story a useful place in which to begin.

Donald Gage is Bonner’s only male youth first person narrator, and arguably the only truly “youthful” narrator of any gender in her work. Written in 1927, “One Boy’s Story” forms part of her earliest writing, the fourth published short story overall and the second oldest of the six stories analyzed specifically in this paper. Though “Nothing New” was published one year prior, this story explores more centrally the perceptions of male youth, as Donald is the narrator of his story and not just its primary subject. As the text discusses miscegenation, while also referencing Oedipal themes (from the perspective of a child no less), “One Boy’s Story” was published in the November 1927 issue of *The Crisis* with a male pseudonym, Joseph Maree Andrew.² “One Boy’s Story” explores two major aspects of masculinity, analyzing diametrically opposed modes of white and black manhood and examining the complex mother/son bond.

Donald Gage begins his story by recounting his daily activities in rural Somerset: recalling his close relationship to his mother Louise and routine visits from his white neighbors, Mrs. Ragland, Mrs. Gregg, and Mrs. Swyburne and recalling a favorite pastime, reading heroic

² Flynn points out that this pseudonym “is an amalgam of her own nickname and the first names of her brothers” and that a male name was chosen not only because of story’s sensitive subject matter but to present a male authorial voice for this boy-narrated text (xxvi).

myths and Biblical stories. But his story is neither rote nor idyllic, as the opening lines establish the ominous mood: “I’m glad they got me shut up in here. Gee, I’m glad! I used to be afraid to walk in the dark and to stay by myself” (Bonner 78). As if to contradict the reader suspicious of his maturity, Donald declares: “That was when I was ten years old. Now I am eleven”(78). Immediately, readers are cued in that some portentous event has forced Donald to be irrevocably “adult,” so the rest of the story recaptures his steps to adulthood. Readers discover that his trauma results from Donald learning the identity of his biological father and his subsequent violent retaliation against him. Donald kills his father, Mr. Swyburne, after seeing him grab his mother’s wrists. Donald becomes enraged by both the paternity revelation as well as infuriated at being unable to shield his mother, crystallizing the two major themes of his story—his unconscious desire to usurp his father’s authority to become a self-sufficient man.

Bonner focuses primarily on developing Donald’s concept of home to establish his character. Donald states he is from upstate, hilly Somerset, a small town of few inhabitants besides “a few rich people in big houses” (78). The geographical isolation extends to Donald’s familial experience, as he lives only with his mother, without a father, siblings, or extended family members in the home. This seclusion strengthens Donald’s relationship with his mother and it complicates his transformation from black boyhood to black manhood, as his surroundings provide him with few appropriate male role models. Somerset’s rural setting contrasts starkly to Bonner’s traditional locations. Donald is the only character in this analysis to be situated with a sparsely populated area; even those characters that are not written as living in Frye Street are still positioned within an urban space. Although David Brown (“The Makins”) and Jimmie Joe (“Tin Can”) are not given a specific Frye Street address (in contrast to Denny Jackson’s given address of 13 Frye Street), there is little to contradict that David or Jimmie do not live on Frye or a

similar neighborhood. Also in contrast to Bonner's other protagonists, Donald is mostly around white people, and thus the black community—a vital source of identity for her characters, however ambiguously or bleakly depicted elsewhere in her fiction—is not available for Donald's benefit. Besides his mother, most of the people Donald interacts with are white woman from the town, customers of Louise's seamstress work.

Two men, differing in racial and class identities, profoundly affect Donald's life: Shev Swyburne: a white wealthy townsman, and Mr. Frazier, a black visitor from New York City. Out of the two, Swyburne has a more fixed (though unexplained) place in the Gages' lives. As described by Donald, Swyburne has a "nice voice," "happy" and "smiling" eyes, and "soft and gentle" hands comparable to Louise's, stereotypically feminine characteristics denoting his privileged life (81). The activities they do together are less masculine and more passive, like reading books or talking after dinner. Mr. Frazier, arriving in town as a wealthy white woman's chauffeur, transforms quickly into a presumed love interest for Louise and possible father figure for Donald. Donald first thinks that this new man would be a Gage, suggesting not just his naiveté but importantly, an indication of his desire for a more traditional family. Frazier's friendliness toward Donald dissolves quickly, however, after he discovers the Gages' relationship to Mr. Swyburne.

Frazier's discovery brings out the hidden aspects of Donald's life, leading to "moments" of violence with both of his male role models beginning with Frazier and then culminating with Swyburne. During a fishing trip Donald divulges that Swyburne often visits them. After learning this—and realizing that Donald *idolizes* the man—Frazier breaks a fishing pole across his knee and mutters a racist epithet at Louise. Although Donald initially resists a violent reaction –

reminding himself that “even a savage will treat you right in his house”—he later retaliates: “I grabbed my pole right out the water and slammed it across his face. I never thought of the hook until I hit him but it did not stick in him” (85). While Frazier does not physically injure Donald, in fact, he eventually recovers and says: “Sorry, son! Sorry! Not your fault!,” he psychically wounds the Gages, deserting them immediately, not even saying goodbye to Louise (85). His occupation as driver reinforces the missed opportunity for a traditional black nuclear family and escape from Somerset; Frazier represents a chance for security and distance from Swyburne. This incident leads to more dramatic disclosures. After Donald confesses about the fight, Louise orders Swyburne to stay away from the house. The following day, Donald secretly follows Louise, with a rifle and slingshot in tow. After setting out on this quest, Donald operates with the education derived from his adventure books and his growing masculine intuition. Donald’s narration becomes more in control: “I crept behind her in the bushes beside the road. I cut across the fields and came out behind the willow patch the way I always do when I am tracking Indians and wild animals” (87). Overhearing that Swyburne is his biological father, Donald watches his parents fight; he sees his father berate his mother. He strikes his father dead from one “blow on the temple” (89). Donald is punished first by physically imposed silence and later by being institutionalized. Upon returning home, he seeks comfort in his mother’s lap but her “big breast-pin...sticks in [his] tongue” (89), effectively silencing him for life. He cannot even verbalize his crime; he can only nod “yes” (and produce his slingshot as proof) when asked if he did it. This final confrontation with Swyburne solidifies the strong bond between Louise and Donald. He kills his father to save his mother; he confesses to her (and the sympathetic local doctor Somerset) to preserve her innocence. Louise perceives Donald’s silence positively, as she “—hollers ‘Thank God! He will not talk! Never!’—” after realizing that he committed the crime and

that he also cannot communicate about it (90). This ambivalence toward Donald's fate is perhaps the most revealing aspect of the text; Louise imagines her son will be safer this way, now that he has removed his controlling father and is "safely" locked away, and in some respects, she is correct.

The conclusion of Donald's story finds him comprehending his choices; to progress he needs to understand the troubling aspects of his existence. Though readers are cued in (from the beginning) that Donald ends up in some kind of institution, they are not given specific details about this place, how long he will be there, or any similar practical questions. What is significant for the protagonist is in admitting his complicated heritage and his murderous past:

I killed my own father. But I didn't know it was my father. I was freeing Ma....My father said I was a Swyburne and that was why I liked people to be brave and courageous. Ma says I am a Gage and that is why I am brave and courageous. But I am both, so I am a whole lot brave, a whole lot courageous. And I am bearing my Furies and my clipped tongue like a Swyburne and a Gage—'cause I am both of them (91)

The text explores race and gender from realistic and metaphorical perspectives. It records contemporary racist, sexist, unequal relationships as illustrated in the links between the Swyburnes and the Gages. It also examines larger, symbolic ramifications of challenging white male authority; though Donald's actions appear justified, the story suggests that challenging this racial and patriarchal influence makes one pay in silence and solitude.³ Though Donald's actions take an atypical form—killing his father with a slingshot—he is incarcerated for committing

³ Beyond his unappealing characterization, Swyburne's death is additionally justified in the text as, upon finding out that Donald killed his father, a white male representative/character, Dr. Somerset responds "God isn't dead yet" (88).

black on white violence.⁴ Likely drawing from her Radcliffe education in comparative literature and her high school teaching experiences, Bonner re-frames these complex identity themes from the affecting, disturbing perspective of a young male. She explores “surface” problems like single parenting and young male isolation, alongside more conceptual explorations of race, family, and desire. Bonner’s expressionistic explorations of race and social unrest are similarly explored a year later in *The Purple Flower* (1928) and “The Young Blood Hungers” (1928).

Due to its unique narration and setting, Donald’s story connects to the other male youth-centric works in interesting ways. Though his confrontation with violence results in devastating consequences, at least he retains his life (if not his voice), in contrast to Benny, Robbie, Jimmie Joe, and Denny, all of whom die at the end of their stories.⁵ Donald’s experience with the black and white parts of his identity—as well as “One Boy’s Story’s” focus on the consequences of “race mixing”—continued similar dialogue begun in “Nothing New” (1926) and later explored in “There Were Three” (1933). Its greatest strength, particularly to this study, is found in its first person perspective, as it provides an introspection that the more “distant” pieces cannot.

In contrast to the epic undertones of “One Boy’s Story,” “The Makins” (1939) examines the routine peril that surrounds eight year old David Brown. By analyzing parenting, priorities, and generational gaps in a working class black community, it explores how a child’s physical surroundings and emotional environment affect his identity. “The Makin’s” comic tone initially makes the text feel less weighty compared to the other stories but its lighter tenor allows Bonner

⁴ Contrast this response to the unlikelihood of prosecution of black on black or white on black crimes. For a discussion of contemporary arrest and prosecution rates based on race, see Henri 118.

⁵ The only other central character explored here is David Brown from “The Makins,” a story that possesses a much lighter tone than the other works.

to focus on characterization, including more realistic dialogue between children. Also, the representation of David Brown, as a decent boy who strives to plant a home garden, adds a specific, mature characterization to a member of a social group that would likely be represented in terms of the (future) danger they could unleash on society. Importantly, this “at-risk” black male youth’s life is written as complex and valuable; the reader follows his specific fears and desires.

Though “The Makin’s” is concerned with the Brown family, the story’s gaze extends particularly to all of the older people in David’s life. The reader watches as David wanders through daily life in Frye Street. His primary goal is to get a dime to buy some seeds to grow in his yard. David arrives at this course of action after he spies his next door neighbor throwing “an empty tomato can out of her kitchen window” (Bonner 177). This apparently routine act prompts David to recall something he learned at school: “Teacher, she say not to throw cans and mess in the yard! She say we oughta plant grass and flowers instead! I forgot to ast Ma for my dime to git me some seeds like she said!” (177)

Being without his own income, David must appeal to older people, in particular his parents and grandparents, for a donation. In positioning these encounters, Bonner remarks on how adults affect children’s lives, and she looks at generational differences in parent-child relations. Through this simple exchange—asking for a small sum of money—Bonner explores urban life’s propensity for less focused parenting and obsession with consumption.

David’s mother is characterized as one of the “bad moms” in Bonner’s fiction, as apparently, she spends her day smoking “reefer” and reading gossip magazines (182). Her inattentiveness to David leads her to unceremoniously deny his request. Instead she gives him

money to play the “numbers” and instructs him to take it to Mr. Ed’s in the neighborhood. Later David catches his father coming home from work and asks him for gardening money—Jack rebuffs him gruffly, cursing at him and handing him change to buy him “two good packages of cigarettes” (181). Though Jack also displays disinterested parenting, the story softens his image by portraying him as a Depression-era black breadwinner. In an exchange with a next door neighbor, Jack reveals he was not able to work that day as he “spent [his] carfare to go way out to that damn place” to discover that the expected rain forecast precludes his weeding services (181). As a child, David likely does not understand the full implications of this adult conversation, and he asks his dad for money at an inopportune time. Though readers may fault Jack for his curt response or his inability to understand David’s wish, they are also reminded how the larger socio-economic climate would make parenting hard for Jack.

Bonner also critiques how older generations interact with children by recording David’s attempts with his grandparents. David interrupts a neighborhood prayer meeting in his grandmother Marm’s bedroom. Though these older adults are engrossed in a traditionally more worthwhile activity (praying, worshipping) they are no more able to understand David’s request. After he asks Marm for a dime, she does not allow him to explain why he needs it; instead she rants about contemporary city youth: “Well, God knows I ain’t got no money. You don’t need none nohow. When I was your size if I had a penny I thought I had sumtin. Y’all children in the city git so rich you wants a dime” (180).

Bonner highlights major differences between the youth of the Great Depression and the older adults born at the end of the nineteenth century. The younger people have a different regional identity (David is from Chicago in contrast to his grandparents who are Southern

migrants), a differing relationship to money (David has an immediacy with disposable income as opposed to his elders' experience with a sharecropping economy system), and a changing relationship to society (less deference to the church). These older adults have a specific approach to life that their younger generations do not appreciate, while they "believed everything heard and knew that everything they saw was real," their children are disinterested in finding higher meaning (179). Ultimately, these elders cannot help David; he is simply a boy who does not know how to deal with a "room full of people shouting amen about [him]" (180).

Since his family interactions are unsuccessful, David branches out to others, particularly his older neighbor Bennie. In "The Makins," Bonner again broaches the topics of male initiation and gang behavior that she more thoroughly explored years earlier in "Tin Can." Bennie belongs to a "gang" of boys who "stop[ped] little children on their way to the stores and took their money from them" (182). He convinces David to spend some of his parents' money on treats at the bake shop. David gives up his quest and "gobble[s] and gulp[s]" up strawberry soda, yellow and pink cake, and an ice cream cone with some of the money his mom gave him to play the numbers (182). David proves an eager student, and Benny is flattered by David's deference. Benny "swagger[s]" and announces that he will guide him: "Come on boy! Let me show de way!" (182). Bennie exposes David to a range of possibilities and experiences. He points out David's current state of independence; he is away from his parents and in control of a sizable amount of money. Bennie argues that David will not be caught spending the money on himself, since it is unlikely that David's mother would win the numbers. Bennie introduces David to Mr. Ed, the neighborhood hustler. Clearly he is one of the most successful people in the neighborhood, as David notes the "thousand lights on the diamond of [his] stickpin" (183). Bennie recalls how his father considers that "old Mr. Ed got a couple of million" in the bank, and money is linked

directed to manhood as Bennie tells David that “[he] wants to be rich like him when [he’s] a *man*” (183, emphasis added.) Mr. Ed is “genial,” sharp, and intimidating; he has a wealth of knowledge about the neighborhood and its inhabitants (182). Presented first with distant family members, David’s “outside” male role models are appealing role model substitutes.

These interactions with Bennie and Mr. Ed affect David greatly. He reflects on Bennie’s “taunts” of not being “tough enough” to swear out loud or spend his mother’s money, and decides that it bothers him (184). On arriving home, he acts like a new “man”: he informs his mother that he is going to grow up to be a “number writer” and he speaks to his father with less respect, calling him a “dirty ole son of a gun” under his breath (184). His visible confidence and enthusiasm for material gain encourages his mother to shout: “Boy, you all right!...You *all right*” (184). Ma’s cry is the final line of the story, reinforcing the importance of family (particularly mothers) in influencing child development. The ending also supports the idea that being like a Bennie or a Mr. Ed provides an easier road to success than one that emphasizes “good” living. As the title suggests, this piece explores the process of “making” it: whether the “it” refers to creating one’s self (David), trying to provide for one’s family (Jack), or becoming successful (Mr. Ed.)

Thematically, the seeds have deep importance; it is the one common thread that runs throughout the story. This nature motif presents important considerations that touch on the practical and the symbolic levels. Literally, planting a garden could teach David responsibility (to spend spare money in a productive manner, rather than on cigarettes or the lottery); provide healthy foods for his family (in contrast to the sugary cakes from the bake shop); and even beautify his neighborhood (exchanging the current refuse for attractive greenery). Symbolically,

David searching for seeds intimates a desire for growth and adventure. The denial of this item connotes thwarted possibilities. This motif fits neatly within the context of Bonner's exploration of the complexity of emerging adulthood, as it is a time that is pregnant with possibility but also fraught with denial of opportunities. David is best characterized as an innocent, not just because of his physical age but specifically because of his general lack of awareness. Out of the younger characters surveyed in this analysis, he serves as an effective representation of a naïve character at the crossroads. Unlike the grandly tragic circumstances of Donald in "One's Boy Story," David stands as a prototypical working class African American youth. His family is disinterested or unable to guide him toward "proper" adolescence, so older males from the community become his consistent role models. Bonner not only presents a sociological examination of life for a segment of her young male readership, but imbues these often-castigated individuals with intelligence and agency.

The youngest of the six characters that are analyzed closely in this thesis, Little Benny, is a figure who speaks only once in his story. But examining his short life adds another dimension to the Frye Street tableau, as his life is also affected by violence and poverty. "The Whipping" is concerned centrally with finding out why Lizabeth kills her son Benny. Little Benny (not to be confused with older Benny, the wayward father) is certainly not the only character to be killed in Bonner's fiction, yet his death is arguably one of the greatest tragedies on Frye Street. Benny's life is even more compounded by racism, poverty, and an unbalanced family structure than the other boys as he does not live long enough to go to art school ("Nothing New") or even get involved in gang life ("Tin Can").

At its core, “The Whipping” is a condemnation of welfare and socio-political policies. Benny is killed by his mother not through his own fault but because Lizabeth, a single parent, does not have sufficient assistance to protect Benny from the world, and, without proper resources, she lashes out against her son. Significantly, the climax of the story is set in 1929. When Lizabeth could get work to support her family, she went “without enough to eat and wear” to purchase “good” clothing and toys for her son (Bonner 190). Echoing the Frye Street gossip mill mentality found in “There Were Three” and “A Sealed Pod,” Lizabeth’s doting on Benny is perceived by her hypocritical neighbors as proof she is “living wrong,” not that she is sacrificing for her child (191). After the Depression hits, Lizabeth cannot get even menial work. Exhausted at the relief station, Lizabeth is jailed for suspected public drunkenness and starting a fight. After being released from jail three days later, with no money to bring her family, she reaches her breaking point. Benny, hungry, questions his mother:

Benny began to scream and jumped out of bed. “You stay with me! He cried as he ran to his mother. “I want my dinner! I—”
“Heish!” Lizabeth outscramed everyone in the room.
Frightened , Benny cowed away a little. Then he began again. “I want to eat! The lady downstairs, she say my mother ought to get me somethin’ ’stead of stayin’ out all night with men!”
Lizabeth stared wildly at her mother.
Hostile accusation bristled in her eyes, too.
“That’s what the lady say. She say--” Benny repeated.
And Lizabeth who had never struck Benny in her life, stood up and slapped him to the floor. (192)

In addition to physical exhaustion, Lizabeth’s mental collapse is linked to the assumptions made about herself and her parenting. Though Lizabeth batters her child, he is just the vessel through which the violence interacts with Benny’s life. Bonner is often “hard” on her characters—punishing the sinners and righting the wronged—but this story reminds one that a larger critique of social and racial inequalities is fundamental to Bonner’s analyses. In “The

Whipping” Lizabeth and little Benny represent the vulnerable mother and defensiveness child: the working parent unable to support her offspring amidst an unconcerned mainstream society.

“The Whipping” is not simply concerned with exploring the family of Lizabeth and little Benny in solitude; the story examines two other familial groups: Lizabeth’s birth family and an unrelated white (female headed) family. Lizabeth’s early life in Mississippi is recounted: she, her mother, and her two siblings (Bella and John) are abandoned by their father, foreshadowing how her own husband will leave her with their child. Searching for their father, the family leaves their shackling sharecropping existence in Mississippi for Chicago, eventually giving up their investigation and turning to new outlets (religion, romance, or materialism) for release. Eventually Lizabeth is required to be the head of two households: on one hand, her sister deserts the family and her brother dies, so she must take responsibility for her elderly mother; also her husband Benny abandons her after the birth of their son. Overall the African American male characters in this story are either unhelpful deserters (Lizabeth’s dad and husband) or innocent casualties (Lizabeth’s brother and son.)

Interestingly, “The Whipping” begins from the perspective of a white immigrant, an unnamed matron at the Women’s Reformatory; the reader follows the perspective of this woman before being introduced to Lizabeth. The matron represents a link between the (black) working class and a more comfortable position in the immigrant middle class. Bonner carefully establishes the contrast between the matron’s impoverished background in Denmark and her more improved life in the United States. Her ascension to a secure lifestyle—especially as it is later contrasted to Lizabeth’s life—highlights the power of race in economic and social opportunities. She wears leather driving gloves upon her manicured hands, but she thinks about

her mother's "grey [hands] with blackened nails" back in Denmark (185). The matron, apparently a single mother, gives daughter Helga a life of material comfort and financial stability. Bonner compares differing opportunities available to European-Americans and African-Americans; although Lizabeth and Benny are native born Americans, they will not be allowed the resources to improve their lives. In analyzing the particular discrimination faced by black single mothers, Bonner deftly compares Lizabeth's situation to this contrasting "success story," further deepening her analysis of how race, gender, and class affect people's life experiences.

In contrast to the vividly depicted characters Donald Gage and David Brown, Benny as a singular character appears broadly sketched. But his lack of specificity points to two of Bonner's artistic purposes: characters in many of her works (particularly in her expressionistic plays) are symbolic representations: here Benny stands in for the innumerable real-life at-risk black male youths.⁶ Additionally, that Benny did not grow up to become a clearly defined individual character underscores the ultimate missed opportunities in Benny's (and Lizabeth's) life. He did not get to go on fishing trips with Mr. Frazier like Donald or go to Kronen's Bake Shop to splurge on cakes like David.

⁶ For more on Bonner's use of expressionism, see Wilks 79-84.

Chapter Four:

Frye Adolescence

Male adolescence in Bonner's fiction is a site of increased risk for mental stress and bodily harm. Though the younger characters experience trauma, as one dies (Benny), another is institutionalized (Donald), while the "luckiest" character will likely continue on a dangerous path to adulthood (David); the older characters' fates are more dramatically bleak and violent. All three profiled adolescent characters are killed; in two cases, the individuals are executed by the state in retaliation for their murder of other male teenagers. The remaining character's demise is also horrific as he is pushed off a balcony. Like in the boys' stories, these teenage characters' lives are deeply intertwined with their experiences of family and home; similar to Donald, Benny, and David, two of the three characters have absent fathers and, in all three stories, the mother's suffering is particularly examined. Just like the children, they are exposed to danger—economic, physical, and psychological—and they are mostly without proper resources to stay safe. Unlike children, these older characters are more likely to be at the forefront of crises; for these Frye street characters in particular, they may start working outside of the home, join a gang for social acceptance and protection, or begin to associate with different racial and class groups outside of their community. These individuals are more connected with the adult world: they are completing educational programs and choosing career paths. They experience changing relationships with the opposite sex and have more contentious interactions with their male peers. Sexuality, mostly a dormant issue in the "younger" stories, is brought to the forefront in these works. The next three characters I will examine are older than Donald, David, or Benny; these

three young men are in their middle-to-late teens. The adolescents that will be profiled in this section include: Robbie from “There Were Three,” Jimmie Joe in “Tin Can,” and Denny from “Nothing New.”

Bonner’s experimentation with short story structure fits a few recognizable patterns. Several of her stories employ multiple narrators or juxtapose diverse characters’ perspectives. For example, Bonner’s two vignettes in “Black Fronts” approach the same situation from distinct points of view: “Front B—Top of the Design” features a working class black maid speaker who criticizes her middle class black female employer’s extravagant ways while “Front B—Bottom of the Design” records the middle class black woman’s frustration with the housekeeper, whom she perceives as nosy and a thief of household items. Bonner explores the multiplicity of voices to highlight the specific experiences of differently situated characters. Arguably Bonner’s most inventive and sprawling piece is “A Possible Triad on Black Notes” (1933). This title contains three independent short stories that, unlike “Black Fronts,” do not record versions of the same story; rather it is a work whose parts attempt to explore similar themes. None of the characters appear in more than one of the stories, and the central figures do not share a common narrative bond. Simply, they depict complicated, grueling life on Frye Street. The first story, “There Were Three,” focuses on a poor African American family of three, a mother and her two adolescent children. “Of Jimmy Harris” recounts Jimmy’s final moments on his deathbed as he watches his uncaring wife flirt with his doctor. “Corner Store” features Frye Street’s only non-black protagonist, Jewish Ester Steinberg, discovering her husband’s infidelity with “colored” neighbor Ella and her daughter Meta’s interest in Ella’s son, Abe (Bonner 117). “There Were Three”

contains the most interest to this study, as the central character focused on is teenaged Robbie.¹ This story analyzes concepts of family, sexuality, violence, and race, thematically exploring human adaptation and fragmentation, survival and loss. The “three” in the title refers to the size of the family of mother Lucille, son Robbie, and daughter Little Lou. The full meaning of “There Were Three” is not clear until the story’s concludes; two of the three are no longer on Frye Street, as the only one remaining “alive” is Little Lou. The family living at number 12 Frye Street includes no father:

“Moreover, you continually ran the possibility of sitting down on anybody’s hat.
A father?
Nobody gave a thought to such a person.
“You’re all mine the both of you!” Lucille had told them once, and neither one of
[Robbie and Little Lou] had ever pushed in behind this for more” (103)

More pointedly than in other stories, “There Were Three” explores the perils of single parenthood (importantly, with the mother as sole guardian). Likely, the “absent father” trope recurs throughout the Frye Street stories as Bonner wanted to explore criticism about black women’s parenting choices, from both within the racial community and by “mainstream” society. That so much attention is given in these six stories to the lack of adequate father figures points to Bonner’s interest in investigating how young males struggle without proper masculine guidance.

Sexuality and violence, two large concerns found throughout Bonner’s work, are displayed dramatically in Robbie’s death. Without clear guidance from a parent—particularly a father—Robbie disobeys Lucille’s command to “keep in the house and off the streets” and

¹ Though a teen male character is referenced in “Corner Store,” Meta’s love interest, he is not “seen” in the story.

sneaks out to work as a hotel bellboy after his mother leaves to work as a prostitute (104). It is here at Sumner Hotel that “happy Robbie” (105) meets an inexplicable but terrible fate. Robbie is sent to deliver “two silver sprays for [Room] 110” and he is primed by an older co-worker to adopt a titillated mindset toward his new set of customers:

“Where you going boy!” the elevator man queried as he closed the doors behind Robbie.
740!

Aw, that’s a regular souser, that dame! She always gets her sweetie to start the evening by letting her swim in liquor! That’s about the sixth bottle of Silver Spray I see go up there tonight!

Hot night! Observed Robbie as he stepped off.” (106)

Robbie is primed (unknowingly) to see his mother as a sex object. When he enters room 740, the narrative focuses on Robbie’s objectification of what he sees: a body lying on the bed, clothed in black lingerie with “a pair of plump bare legs” and “a broad creamy thigh” (106). While Robbie begins the business transaction with the male guest who emerges from the bathroom, he again confronts the female figure on the bed:

Her movements among the covers drew the boy’s eyes once more. A pair of violet eyes peering sleepily through tangled blond hair, met his. Perspiration prickled out all over Robbie. “Mama!” he whispered hoarsely. “Mama.” “Oh! Jesus!” cried the women in the bed loudly. (107)

This collusion of shock and disgust also affects the white male client; finding out that the black bell boy is the son of his “violet-eyed” guest means something that cannot deal with, and Robbie has to die (107).

Similar to Jimmie Joe and Little Brother in “Tin Can,” “There Were Three” focuses on the lives of two siblings, the elder of which is killed during the story and the younger one who is left to survive to adulthood without him. “Tin Can,” published in *Opportunity* in two parts, in July 1934 and August 1934, contains Bonner’s clearest condemnation of teenage hyper-

masculine street culture. Winner of the 1933 *Opportunity* fiction prize, the story was described by one of the critics on the judging panel, Royal Davis, as follows:

[It] is an example of simple, straightforward realism. Yet it is not stark realism—it is realism touched with the magic called art, without which realism falls short of being literature. Everybody has seen Jimmie Joe dancing in the street. Everybody has seen Little Brother. Everybody has known the Mother. But it is not enough to have beheld these characters in the flesh. The author of “Tin Can” saw beneath the surface into their significance. She sympathized with their problem. And she was able to make her readers see what she saw. This is art. (*Opportunity*, August 1934, 231)

The story focuses particularly on adolescent Jimmie Joe’s life—how he knifes teenaged Dan Grey and then is sentenced to death by electric shock—but Bonner also outlines his peer network of inner city African American teens. Although the Wild Cats Social Club is a Chicago gang, Bonner universalizes this group: “you have seen Jimmie Joe’s gang in every Negro section of every city of any size in the world. They range from sixteen to nineteen—they range from coal black to it-takes-a-second-glance-to-tell light” (Bonner 125). These varieties of skin color, age, and geographical location intimate an ubiquitous young male experience. Bonner does not ascribe a stereotypical look to this gang. The group is neither socially disconnected nor shabbily dressed. In contrast, the boys, who intimate social respectability to adults, are “neat and well dressed...[in]...heel-plated oxfords, wide trousers, foppish overcoats, gay sweaters, and lumberjackets and pastel-toned felt hats” (126). Bonner returns to the dichotomy of their literal age compared to their experimentation with alcohol and sex, that this maturity “mask[s] the youth in their faces” (126). A sense of “boredom” mixes with their “scraping” and “cursing,” paradoxically characterizing them as both weary and young (126).

The story opens on Jimmie Joe dancing; the beauty created by Jimmie Joe’s movement is impossible for the narrator to describe as “there are no words in any language” that can

accurately depict what one sees when his “slim seventeen year old” body dances (119). Early one morning, “slid[ing] a neat step...between his own bed and the bureau,” performing the “falling-off-the-log” for his younger brother, Jimmie is roused back to reality by his mother’s call for them to breakfast. Jimmie Joe’s complete being is shaped by this creativity: he is clever, charming, and burning with plans for the future. Unfortunately, his energies are directed into unsound and dangerous goals. Jimmie Joe’s main goal is in securing the affections of the flirtatious Caroline. He steals money from his mother and cuts classes; specifically, at breakfast we see Jimmie ask for money for a school book but in reality he wants cash to impress ‘his’ girl. Ma denies his request; Jimmie simply steals from her purse. The quest of this Caroline “commodity” leads to his early demise, as he is sentenced to death after killing Dan Grey, an older neighborhood boy and fellow Caroline suitor, during a ballroom brawl.

“Tin Can” is not just the story of a solitary juvenile delinquent or negligent parents; it implicates a larger cast of characters responsible for deaths of Dan Grey and Jimmie Joe. Instead the narrator charges the existing power structure, peer pressure, and the overall community as complicit. While Bonner critiques mothers elsewhere in her fiction—“There Were Three,” “Reap It As You Sow It”—in “Tin Can” the father figures bear the brunt of criticism. Though Ma is away from her sons for most of the day cleaning white people’s houses, she is characterized as overworked and concerned. To illustrate her goodness and sacrifice, after the reader follows the morning ritual of the family, the narrative first traces Ma’s steps before returning to Jimmie Joe. On her way to work, Ma enters Kronen’s Swedish Bakery to buy a cake for lunch. Bonner makes clear that Ma is a penny saver (unlike Lucille from “There Were Three,” she does not waste money on lavish linens and bath soaps), as simply the decision to entertain this idea is “simply reckless” for her (124). When Ma realizes that she cannot buy a treat as Jimmie stole the money

from her purse, her shock mirrors the later grander sense of failure she feels after her son is arrested for murder. But even in her public humiliation, Ma desires to help correct and assist her sons. In contrast, Pa is so disconnected from his sons that he rarely comes down to breakfast with the rest of the family or attends church with his wife. He also argues with Ma about the importance of his sons attending school:

Pa maintained a colored boy did not need high school—like Jimmie Joe was getting—nor even junior high school—where Little Brother was—to do the kind of work a colored man could get to do. All you needed was a little reading so you could find a “Helped Wanted” sign and get on the right street cars and a little numbering “so’s these sheenies” could not cheat you in the stores! And you could get that much—while you had your diapers on! (122)

Although this opinion is rooted in practical realities, Pa’s attitude does not seem to be rooted in specific concern for his sons. Pa never speaks any dialogue or even appears in the forefront of the action, reinforcing his distance from the interests of his family.

The heads of traditionally male institutions—the black school and church—do not appear much better. Although Bonner critiques educational and spiritual organizations elsewhere in her fiction, “Tin Can” provides the most sustained and stinging analysis in all of the short stories, particularly in its scrutiny of Jimmie Joe’s principal, “The Black Bass Drum,” and the family’s preacher, Reverend Brown. Bonner juxtaposes Jimmy’s thievery to his arrival at school, leading discussion toward the education system which “—everything in it [in the Black Belt] from top to bottom, from janitor to principal was some one of the varieties of Negro” (125), this description speaking to the importance of the school and how many students it serves. In the midst of this black-identified space—where a contemporary reader would likely assume a sense of racial unity—the authority of the institution is questioned.

Importantly, the “Big Bass Drum” is not simply an ineffective principal; he is *unconcerned* with the fates of his students. This administrator is described as a class and colorist snob, one who revels in the light skin of his daughters and prides himself on the uniqueness of his “famous college” degree among his associates (127). He is described evocatively as “the fool ostrich, sticking his head into a hollow hole...while an...ocean full of a million new conditions were sweeping up on him” (127). Instead of reducing incidents of vandalism or contractions of “social diseases” between his pupils, the principal passes the buck, delivering pompous addresses with “empty embroidered phrases” and blaming teachers for students’ poor performances (127). The principal cannot and will not consider the needs of the school’s Young Blood and thus teens like Jimmie Joe wonder around “restless” among the school halls (127).

The next hope for Jimmie Joe’s salvation is, quite appropriately, a man of the cloth. To teach her son a lesson, Ma smartly traps him into attending a rare morning service, waiting until the perfect moment for this retort: “I want you to go especial, Jimmie Joe! I ast the Reverend to speak on young liars and thieves!” (130). The narrative turns to a scathing discussion of the local church environment. After imparting the history of Reverend Brown—how he broke off from Reverend Shinn’s congregation because he was not receiving his “fair part of the profits”—the story implies that Caroline (who is also, surprisingly, in attendance) has an illicit relationship with Brown, since his “good talk” suggests to her that she will get a sizable portion to spend at the shops (130, 132).

The final act of “Tin Can” occurs at the Wild Cats Social Club “semi-annual formal” on a “pleasant Sunday evening” (133). After observing how Caroline interacts with other partygoers, Jimmie Joe slowly becomes aware of the artifice of her attentions. Earlier at the Sunday service,

he “watched her eyes lingering” on Reverend Brown and he “knew what it all meant” (133) and he “sneer[s]” at Caroline’s blatant, preening affectations toward Dan. But this knowledge does not alter his actions: seeing how Caroline looks at Dan Grey at the party, “scratche[s]” Jimmie Joe (133). In fact, his actions, as well as those of his peers, are shaped and constrained by outside forces: although Jimmie Joe decries Caroline’s “twinkl[ing]” and “dimpl[ing]” as “movie stuff,” he “unconsciously...puffs up in the role of the offended, jealous sweetheart” (134). The narrator notes that the media provides Jimmie Joe’s cohorts with the most powerful (and persistent) examples of acceptable behavior; “the movies” are “the only examples of the niceties of living that any of them ever saw.” Undoubtedly popular culture shows limited depictions, only how to be an alluring young woman or an intimidating young man. Bonner constructs the final confrontation scene of to imply the “everyman” quality of the eventual murder of Dan by Jimmie. Other males are complicit in this struggle, not just Jimmie, and the roles played by the characters within this circle seem largely random:

And [George and Sammy] reached that far corner just when Jimmie snatched Caroline by the shoulders and wrenched her away from Dan’s arms.

It was George who saw Dan’s hand drawing back toward his hip.

It was George who knocked a couple down, hurdled over them as they kicked on the floor—and *it was George* who snatched at his own hook-shaped knife and thrust it into Jimmie Joe’s right hand (136, emphasis added)

Though Jimmie Joe is not a model citizen, as he lies and steals from his mother, slacks off in school and hangs around dangerous boys, he is just a boy, an inexperienced adolescent enticed by the adult aspects of life. When he kills Dan for “dancing” with his girl Caroline, it is a tragic but logical step on his path of dangerous experimentation; his actions are the results of inflamed passion and uncensored aggression. Jimmie Joe confronts Dan only after “drain[ing]

George's flask of gin," and the murder weapon is given to him by George after the scuffle begins. The reader, following George's and Sammy's gaze, tracks Jimmie's slow path across the dance floor toward Caroline and Dan. His movement seems almost dream-like; his actions seem almost out-of-body:

And Jimmie Joe, the gin scorching his brain, broiling his brain, broiling with a desire for revenge, *consumed with the lust to hurt, to bleed, to bruise and cut as he himself had been hurt, bled and cut*—brought the knife down with this full behind it, into Dan's side. (emphasis added, 136)

The murder trial that follows does not provide justice to this complex case.

Unsurprisingly, George does not admit that he gave Jimmie the knife nor does he clarify the unplanned nature of Jimmie's attack. The Wild Cats cover up Dan's personal predilections—the gang leader who “totes a gun and a knife even when he's in bed” is instead remembered as an example of “superb manhood” (136). Though the coroner reports that Dan has been “stabbed a dozen times,” Jimmie tells his mother that “he had only brought the knife down once,” while gang member/club treasurer Gene Terry and cop Jack Sullivan both testify that “no gun nor knife had been on Dan's body” (137), intimating that other peoples' involvement was covered up. The inexplicability of the case is not explored by the court: there are no provisions made by the community school system or church to reach out to these at-risk youths. Though this specific situation might be settled —one dead boy punished for another—this act of random and brutal violence between African American teens will undoubtedly reoccur. Jimmie Joe is *a* guilty party; however, he serves as a scapegoat-villain; the community lacks a larger concern for understanding or preventing future violent incidents. Before exiting the courtroom, the judge rages at the youths that they “must be blotted out for the good of humanity” (137), hardly a helpful or specific summation. Reverend Brown and some of the Holy Christian Saints

Congregation pray and sing hymns, but “God could not hear” them and the death sentence is promptly carried out (138). Ultimately, this “helpless” situation can only be resolved by questioning Jimmie’s “normal[cy]” and reasoning that his life had to be “given” since he had “taken a life himself” (138).

Bonner opens the text with the titular “Tin Can” metaphor and returns to it at the end of the story. At first it works on a more general level, as the “shaken and knocked down” tin can containing “hard, jagged” pebbles mentioned in the epigraph provides a tone of bland desolation, as well as precipitating Jimmie Joe’s dance for Little Brother (119). However the repetition of this theme in the final paragraph suggests a more specific symbol: the narrator instructs the reader to think about how life forces “hard stones” upon “tin cans” that “only rattle with a hollow sound” when they are knocked over by “the winds of living” (139). This vivid description of a physical act recalls how Jimmie Joe’s body is desecrated by electrocution. The adjective “hollow”—used in the introductory and concluding invocations of the metaphor—reflects his lack of life preparedness, as well the emptiness of his bodily experience, its impermanence and unreliability. Additionally, the story begins with an epigraph from Jeremiah 2.13, the warning that humankind has “committed two evils: they have forsaken...the fountain of living waters—and hewed broken...cisterns, that can hold no water” (119). As the verse begins with “for my people,” the allusion critiques urban black society and it appears to highlight the community’s failure to instill morality in young people (119). This specific metaphor recalls Bonner’s play *The Potmaker* (1927) in which a young man, Elias Jackson, deciding to join the ministry, practices a sermon to an audience of his parents, his Caroline-esque wife Lucinda, and her lover Lew. The sermon, utilizing the metaphor of pots representing people, tells a story of human disciples standing strong (straight up) and allowing God’s correction (to “fix the pots”) for

ultimate salvation. But since this message is delivered by a fallible human to flawed humans, the moral does not stick, and Elias finishes his sermon only to follow his wife and her lover to their death. The application of this metaphor was a useful approach for Bonner in describing Young Bloods' relationships to growth, meaning, and community.

Ultimately, "Tin Can" is as concerned about Little Brother's future as it is with Jimmie Joe's trajectory. After all, the narrative began by Jimmie dancing *for* his younger sibling, Little Brother, who was "hunched up on his own cot watching," and it concludes with Little Brother's concerns (119). Just like Little Lou from "There Were Three," Little Brother finds himself alone. An overworked and utterly devastated Ma faints on the street near the bakery and is picked up by the police under suspicion of public intoxication. Pa, who has neither work nor religion in which to escape, remains distant and absent from the family (139). Little Brother must now go through adolescence with the "dead empty silence" in the house, without his "dancing, jigging, joking" older brother (139). Both stories, "There Were Three" and "Tin Can," explore how the elder brother serves as an example for the younger sibling. Although in this story, other people remain with Little Brother (Ma and Pa, though distraught, still live at home with him) the reader is left with the image of this boy "crawl[ing] into bed every night before right...with a scared look on his face all the time" (139).

Published in the *Crisis* in November 1926, "Nothing New" is Bonner's most skillful use of Frye Street as a microcosm of urban African American life, and by extension, the most effective examination of the black emerging adult experience. Frye Street is a prominent character here, from the opening line to conclusion. The earliest written of the pieces examined

in this study, the tight structure and thematic unity of “Nothing New” (1926) make this story a blueprint for Bonner’s repeated investigation into the perspectives of her young male characters.

Described by Nancy Chick as “fairy tale of racism, violence, and injustice,” “Nothing New” critiques systematic societal negligence through three violent exchanges Denny Jackson experiences growing up to manhood (23). Unlike some of the other young men that populate Bonner’s stories, Denny is clearly “good”; he is gifted, hard-working, and focused. Though he focuses on the creative rather than the practical like Robbie from “Tin Can,” he does not steal from his mother or slack off in school. Bonner’s critique of racial interactions and educational disparities is almost wholly focused on the system, outside of the young male protagonist’s or his family’s faults.² Chick notes how Bonner uses the purple flower in her fiction, tracing incidents found in the short stories “Nothing New,” “There Were Three” and “A Sealed Pod” and, most obviously, in the play *The Purple Flower*. Chick contends that Bonner utilized a combination of potent symbols to re-write depictions of the African American experience (the flower representing proper white womanhood and purple connoting valor). Historically, flowers have been used in literature to represent ideal beauty and Chick articulates the “revolutionary” way Bonner uses the purple flower in two contexts: unsurprisingly it “represents the white woman” though the “floral imagery...works as the conventional symbol for a white woman, but also as an unconventional symbol for a black man” (22). In contrast to its traditional uses by Edmund Spenser or William Shakespeare, Bonner used this image to describe a black, male body: “her earliest experiment with the symbol...blurs the lines of race and gender, thus boldly challenging

² Elsewhere Denny has been viewed as a ‘bad’ character (as seen in his abuse of the pet cat) but my reading is that Denny is a character constrained by his racial/gender circumstances and I feel that Denny is used as both Everyman and as an overall sympathetic character. In other words, I do not view the character as one who is *innately* dangerous or violent. See Wilks 99.

the images in the lyrics of those earlier English poets” (22). Denny embodies complex and conflicting interests and desires: with a promising future and a temperamental personality, he is the perfect vessel for Bonner to explore crucial points of growing up. And, as Chick argues, Bonner once again subverts stereotypes in fashioning her protagonist: “Bonner explores the boundaries of the seemingly apparent “facts” of whiteness, blackness, masculinity, and femininity through Denny, who embodies ambiguities of both race and gender” (24).

Denny faces three moments of violence, one taking place when he is a young boy, a young teen, and as a young adult. To echo the mounting severity of these violent encounters, the sites of these confrontations become increasingly communal, from the home to the neighborhood park to the public school. Importantly the story analyzes not just what Denny does to be a strong black person, but what it means for him to be a black *male*. The first of the three violent encounters, almost wholly situated around gender constraints, relates how Denny, a young boy, should behave. Preternaturally bright, young Denny is described as a child who:

...knew lots of things. He knew that when the sun shone across the room a cobwebby shaft appeared that you could not walk up. And when the water dripped on pans in the sink it sang a tune: “Hear the time! Feel the time! Beat with me! Tap-ty tap! T-ta-tap! Ta-ty-tap!” The water sang a tune that made your feet move. (Bonner 70)

Denny’s dancing makes his parents nervous, however. His vibrant movements make his mom Bessie worry that he will grow up to be a “dancing man” and she prays fervently against this possibility (70). Denny’s graceful movements make his father nervous about his masculinity, as he yells “you must be a girl. Boys play rough and fight!” (70) To prove to his dad that he “ain’t a girl,” Denny looks for “something to fight to prove his assertion” and harasses a pet cat (70). Denny’s violent expression lasts only temporarily however, as he lets the cat go (after his mother’s concerned interference) and resumes daydreaming. To highlight the shaping force of

masculinity, the narrative skips ahead to Denny's next brush with manhood. Now a pre-adolescent, Denny's struggles to discover himself now include his interactions with others. Denny wants to pick a flower for his friend Margaret but a white boy challenges him, telling him to get off of the "white side" of the park area. Denny is unable to resist the temptation to fight this boy, though the most lasting repercussions include the neighborhood kids getting riled up and Bessie being called to take Denny home. The logical conclusion to this scene comes years later after Denny goes to art school. The public relationship between Denny and a white female student sends white male student Allen Carter into rage and Denny gets pushed into a public brawl. Something inside Denny snaps—he fights "to move [Allen] and get the flower! (76)—and he kills Allen. "Nothing New" is not just concerned with teenage male race relations, however, and, like in "Tin Can," the story concludes by implicating numerous groups in Denny's fate, including the school system and the local media.

Youth remains an essential communal identifier Bonner explores throughout her short stories. As envisioned in "Nothing New," young Frye Street, "mixed as usual," plays together; though Frye Street consists of predominately African American residents, its inhabitants' racial and ethnic diversity hints that this is a place where different peoples *can* share space pleasantly (70). Although Frye Street possesses its share of unhealthy and unhelpful conditions, in this instance Frye Street's unique composition allows for young people to feel a sense of community and connection. The power of contemporary youth (at least on Frye Street) recalls the potent, unifying power of emerging adults found in "The Young Blood Hungers." The tragedy is that this unity cannot go past certain boundaries, both geographical and generational.

Chapter Five:

Conclusion

As Judith Musser argues in “The Blood Will Flow Back to You: The Reactionary Proletarian Fiction of Marita Bonner,” Bonner uses violent metaphors to explore particular urban concerns with poverty and racism. Quite simply, blood stains the pages of these works. Giving one’s blood is the likeliest way to racial freedom in the play *The Purple Flower*, the word “blood” stands in for the complicated experience of coming of age in the essay “The Young Blood Hungers,” and Jimmie Joe fights Dan Grey with a desire “to bleed” (Bonner 136) in the story “Tin Can.” Frye Street witnesses the spilled blood of countless characters, from boy Benny (“The Whipping”) to young adult Violette Davis (“A Sealed Pod.”)

Bonner was committed to recording the often unseen and under-articulated experiences of working class African Americans. With a realist’s attention to brutal detail and an expressionist’s skill with conceptual imagery, she deftly explored the difficulties of existence. In creating Frye Street’s diverse portrayals of age, race, and gender, Bonner points as much to universal human commonalities as she does to an individual’s specific lived experience. Importantly, Bonner resisted the idea of a monolithic agenda for a black (female) writer; unlike Alain Locke’s “New Negro,” Bonner’s conception was one that never neglected a gender, class, and racial critique (Wilks 78). In *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*, Kathy A. Perkins argues for the radical quality of Bonner’s expressionistic plays—as she “diverted from the realistic pattern expected” (189)—and this point extends to her short stories as well. Her Frye Street

stories are a blend of brutal reality and mesmerizing fantasy. This neighborhood believable yet carefully organized, the stories relatable yet epic, the characters recognizable and yet unfamiliar. And constantly meditating our experience of the texts is Bonner's unique narrative voice: that omniscient speaker that knows all and probes the reader to consider not just our feelings about her fictional world but forces us to consider how we interact with these situations in real-life. How would we think about Jimmie Joe's death if we simply read about it in the newspaper? How often does the "unaffected" (middle class) reader consider specific issues of poverty in daily life, such as Lizabeth's relentless struggles in raising Benny?

I envision this analysis as only an additional step in framing Bonner's Frye Street project. The limited focus in this thesis makes room for countless related investigations: one could examine her young female characters or adult male characters within this "mapping" framework. Her explorations of adolescent identity make her work a natural pairing with other writers that also focus on depictions of adolescence in childhood, whether one wanted to look at contemporary American writers or fellow women and/or African American artists. For example, examining Bonner's work alongside Wallace Thurman's multiple examinations of female young adulthood would make for an interesting pairing. Bonner's work should also be more carefully analyzed with other texts that consciously build a physical African American community, such as later, more well-known novels Ann Petry's *The Street* or Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Ultimately, looking at Frye Street's complex young male cast encourages readers to consider the depth of Bonner's project. Though her illustrations of Frye Street record "bleak[ness]," she also allows for character (and perhaps reader) transcendence, as Roses and Randolph note in *Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* that "she also seems to sustain the possibility that men and women can find their voices and achieve wholeness" (119).

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