

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MAN?”:¹ CODES OF BLACK MASCULINITY IN TONI MORRISON’S *PARADISE* AND *LOVE*

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ABSTRACT

Within the debate over the representation of contemporary Black masculinity, Morrison has played a pioneering role, especially in two of her novels –*Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003)– where her intervention in this debate has become deeply influential due to not only her incisive portrayal of the figure of the patriarch and the devastating effects of the institution of patriarchy on the African American family and community, but also because she has shaped “alternative masculinities,” or diverse embodiments of what it actually means to be a Black man nowadays. Morrison is bent on changing their representation by providing plural models of masculinity, which necessarily take into account other identity markers such as sexuality, class, politics, etc, in an attempt at deconstructing a monolithic or essentialist view of African American masculinity.

KEYWORDS: Black masculinity-Patriarchy-Alternative and plural masculinities-African American community

RESUMEN

Dentro del debate sobre la representación de la masculinidad negra contemporánea, Morrison ha jugado un papel pionero, especialmente en dos de sus novelas –*Paraiso* (1998) y *Amor* (2003)– en las que su intervención en este debate ha resultado muy influyente debido no sólo a su retrato incisivo de la figura del patriarca y de los devastadores efectos de la institución del patriarcado en la familia y comunidad

¹ The title refers to a key question that is posed by Gloria Naylor in her seminal reflection on Black masculinity entitled *The Men of Brewster Place* (28). Indeed, Naylor’s novel initiated me into Black masculinity studies as I acknowledged in “Otro modo de ser hombre: *The Men of Brewster Place* de Gloria Naylor” (2009).

afro-americanas; sino también porque ha diseñado “masculinidades alternativas,” o diversas formas de lo que significa ser un hombre negro en la actualidad. La intención de Morrison es cambiar esa representación ofreciendo modelos plurales de masculinidad, que tomen en cuenta otras señas de identidad como son la sexualidad, la clase, la política, etc, en un intento por deconstruir una visión monolítica o esencialista de la masculinidad afro-americana

PALABRAS CLAVE: Masculinidad negra-Patriarcado-Masculinidades alternativas y plurales-Comunidad afro-americana

The debate over the representation of contemporary Black masculinity is, without any doubt, one of the most interesting developments in critical theory in recent decades. Stemming from a profound critique of patriarchal codes, both male and female writers have engaged in an investigation into the impact of Western notions of masculinity on the configuration of functional identities for African American men. In this line, Morrison has played a pioneering role from her first novel *The Bluest Eye* to her latest to date, *A Mercy*. However, I would like to argue that in two of her novels—*Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003)—her intervention in this debate has become deeply influential due to not only her incisive portrayal of the figure of the patriarch and the devastating effects of the institution of patriarchy on the African American family and community, but also because she has shaped “alternative masculinities,” or diverse embodiments of what it actually means to be a Black man nowadays.

Indeed, Morrison—alongside many other women writers such as Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, etc.—has been repeatedly accused of “airing the dirty laundry” of the African American community by bringing to the forefront the sexist attitudes of Black men. Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* seems to set a precedent for the depiction of Black men as predatory and deeply contemptuous of Black women. His role of unforgiving and unforgiveable raping father of little Pecola is read by Sabine Sielke as “a form of self-mutilation” (38), which is actually damaging not only—and obviously—for his own daughter, but also for himself and ultimately for the entire community. But readers like myself continue to be haunted by another male character who appears in Morrison’s masterpiece *Beloved*: Paul D. The man with the “tobacco tin buried in his chest” (72) is a fragmented and lost human being who has been utterly shaken by the inhumanity of slavery. But he is also the only humane character in the novel who is willing to support Sethe as she tries to make sense of her life by offering her the possibility to reach back into her traumatic past. Although scared away by the ghost Beloved, he is also among those who believe in the regenerative power of love and dignity as the novel ends. Moreover, he is

the one who shows Sethe her “best thing” (273) which lies within herself, in a way echoing Baby Suggs’ teachings in the Clearing.²

If Cholly is set beside Paul D., what clearly emerges from this contrast negates the hard censure to which Morrison’s work has been subjected for her depiction of male characters. Moreover, Morrison’s serious exploration of more recent male figures in her fiction substantiates a reading of Black masculinity that overcomes both racist and sexist stereotypical formulations in order to denounce “the malign effects of patriarchy on African American society”, as Andrew Read puts it (535). I would argue then that Morrison’s main target is clearly not Black males, but their appropriation and internalization of Western patriarchal codes, which prevent healthy relationships between Black men and women, and sever familial and communal ties.

In many a way, I think Morrison is trying to respond to the ongoing debate and reflection on the nature of Black manhood. Philip Weinstein also points out Morrison’s engagement with the question: “How can a Black man achieve masculinity outside a White model of manhood?” (112-3). By showing extensively the negative effects of patriarchy for his Black characters, Morrison is bent on changing their representation by providing alternative and plural models of masculinity, which necessarily take into account other identity markers such as sexuality, class, politics, etc. In her attempt at deconstructing a monolithic or essentialist view of black masculinity, I contend that Morrison paves the way for a new understanding of the nature of Black masculinity that grounds and facilitates an innovative vision of more gratifying and harmonious gender relationships within the African American community.

PARADISE ON EARTH?: THE DOOM OF BLACK PATRIARCHY AND INTIMATION OF NEW BEGINNINGS IN *PARADISE*

The publication of *Paradise* in 1998 marked a significant shift in Morrison’s production, precisely because the novel evolves around the advantages or disadvantages of a community exclusively headed by Black patriarchy. Ruby is presented as a paradise on earth for several reasons, but mainly because it is seemingly isolated from racial prejudice. Allegedly founded on “eight rock” families that first moved to Haven, and then to Ruby, the community is a self-contained universe. However, as Justine Tally aptly describes in her insightful study of the novel *Paradise Reconsidered* (1999), the novel shows “a black utopia on the verge of becoming a dystopia” (16), and Katrine Dalsgard offers a very explicit picture: “Ruby ends up as a conservative, patriarchal, thoroughly racialized, and violent community” (233). The core of the problem lies then, as Read puts it, in the fact that Ruby’s patriarchy

² Thus, it is even intimated that there is a chance at communal recreation propitiated by Paul D and Sethe’s reconciliation at the end of the novel.

“reproduces ideologies and practices of racist white men” (538). I would add to this assertion that it also mirrors the sexist ideologies and practices that are responsible for the “gender war” that is enacted in Ruby.

As many critics have already shown, the episode known as the Disallowing seems to be the main motivation for the racial strictures that conform Ruby as an all-black town.³ When the founding fathers (and mothers, although they are not mentioned in the episode as protagonists) were originally travelling West in order to settle, they were denied entrance in Fairly, thereby humiliating them to unbearable levels:

It was the shame of seeing one’s pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones. (*Paradise* 95-6)

Shame, humiliation and subsequent trauma were so intense that led them to build a settlement where no outside forces could interfere anymore. Its after-effects are transmitted from generation to generation till the present time of the story. In spite of all their pain and suffering, I agree with Read when he affirms that the fundamental reason for humiliation has to do with their inability to exert “‘masculine’ control over their situation” (530), thus revealing their absolute adherence to a patriarchal notion of what makes a man, that is, control.⁴ I would highlight that this notion of control also implies self-control.⁵

³ Rob Davidson comments on the way in which the Disallowing has become “political dogma” in Ruby (360); while for Patricia Storage it becomes a “sacred experience” (65), and for Philip Page it “justified the exclusionary dogma of Ruby” (643).

⁴ Control and possession are key elements in the configuration of a male dominating subject, especially exerted through an absolute control over the “other,” this being nature or other allegedly “inferior” beings (women, children, Black men, etc.). Mastery over others is thus a determining trait in the hegemonic concept of masculinity and the loss of it leads to the loss of one’s dominant position and therefore the loss of one’s own identity. Athena Mutua insists on this when she claims that “domination over others is one of the central understandings and practices of masculinity . . . Normative masculinity is predicated on the domination of others . . . It not only requires domination over others but also is defined in relationship to and in opposition to others” (17).

⁵ If control over the others is crucial, self-control is an element *sine qua non* in the patriarchal ideal, as the sociologist Jonathan Rutherford explains: “Flesh, sexuality, emotionality, these become seen as uncontrollable forces and a source of anxiety . . . We learn to repress them because they are the antithesis of what it means to be masculine . . . Our struggle for self control is acted out as mastery over others.” (26)

Josep Armengol also refers to this notion of self-control tying it up to the idea of adulthood, by detailing the way in which manhood became quickly associated to being an adult male: “Being a man also meant not being a boy, since an adult male was responsible, independent, and self-controlled” (64). Control over others runs parallel to control over oneself as the first requirement to qualify as a “real” man.

But going further, I would like to suggest that the Disallowing undeniably shares many similarities with what Black men may have experienced in slavery when they were not allowed to control anything at all, not even themselves, or their own bodies regarded as “property” by some White man. Much has been written about the dehumanizing and traumatic effects of slavery in Black men’s configuration of their identity and social role.⁶ But I deem it necessary to acknowledge the enormous influence in the building of new identities that was generated by the gender tension that erupted after the Civil War was over. As hooks reminds us, “after slavery ended, enormous tension and conflict emerged between Black women and men as folks struggled to be self-determining” (92). In *We Are Your Sisters*, Dorothy Sterling chronicles the way in which Black men prized their masculinity as soon as they acquired freedom.⁷

What Morrison reflects in *Paradise* bears a certain resemblance to the historical situation that occurred when a new concept of Black community had to be forged out of the ashes of slavery’s traumatic legacy. And the same mistakes are made in both cases, because the foundations for the Black community rely heavily on a White model markedly flawed by racist and sexist prejudice. Many critical voices have argued that the need for integration called for a thorough adaptation to the White standards of the time, being the only script available back then. However, other critics emphasize the diversity of gender roles that was a reality for Black men and women in slavery and afterwards.⁸ And also the existence of other traditions like that of the folk hero John, summarized by Byrd as follows:

Motherwit, the power of laughter and song, self-assertion, self-examination, self-knowledge, a belief that life is process grounded in the fertile field of improvisation, hope, and most importantly, love. (cited in hooks, *We Real Cool* 5)

The list of attributes assigned to this mythopoetic hero are painfully missing in the description of both the founding fathers of Ruby’s community and their

⁶ In his classic study *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson places the origin for the historical justification of the crisis of Black masculinity in slavery which literally meant “social death” for Black men. Due to racist discrimination, Black men were treated literally like boys, not adults, and systematically denied their manhood, thus feminized or even castrated—physically but also psychologically. Clyde W. Franklin II has written that until the 1960s Black men were regarded as boys in American society (cited in Mutua 13), perpetuating the racist image of children in need of paternal guidance on the part of the “White father” held in pro-slavery ideology.

⁷ In the words of Laura Towne: “it is too funny to see how much more jealous the men are of one kind of liberty they have achieved than of the other! Political freedom they are rather shy of, and ignorant of, but domestic freedom—the right, just found, to have their own way with their families and rule their wives—that is an inestimable privilege!” (318).

⁸ hooks acknowledges this fact and even declares that praise is due to Black men and women for having created a great variety of gender roles (*We Real Cool* 9).

more contemporary heirs who subscribe to a definition of manhood which is both psychologically and emotionally crippling and self-denying, and therefore harmful for themselves and for the other members of the community.

In order to overcome their trauma, the founding fathers resort to utter alienation. As a parody of the American founding fathers,⁹ they recreate an all-male myth of origins, even invoking a *male* divinity, “walking man,” that would lead the way to the new settlement, and who finally signals the place by setting a trap where a *male* guinea fowl is captured (98; my emphasis). Once there, they make every conceivable effort in order to found a self-sufficient community in every sense of the word. The men are so intent on their town-building as their glorified purpose, that they forget both themselves and the families they are supposed to protect in the first place. But it is interesting to notice the way in which they measure their success: “They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white man’s kitchen or nursed a white child” (99). Clearly, here Morrison criticizes an erroneous way of constructing masculinity that responds to the patriarchal role of the protector, but also in control of the situation, especially when women’s sexuality is concerned.¹⁰

The lingering effects of the traumatic experience of the Disallowing are keenly felt by the heirs of the founding fathers like Steward, as late as 1973: “the thought of that level of helplessness made him want to shoot somebody” (96). But more than the episode itself, the result is an entrenched patriarchy which chokes both men and women within Ruby’s barriers. As Read aptly expresses it, “the men are so focused on preserving their forefathers’ achievements that they have no personal accomplishments through which to define their masculinity” (532). Poignantly, the issue of the legacy is crucial for patriarchy, as Read himself has well contended (528).¹¹ But what is also at stake here is the fact that these contemporary men are unable to overcome the shame and humiliation of the Disallowing many generations afterwards, and this feeling of impotence poisons their current lives. Patterson’s sense of “social death” permeates their lives too, despite the fact that they have been playing the role of supposedly “benign” patriarchs, even identified to a certain extent with the image of the Genteel Patriarch.¹²

⁹ Peter Widowson’s contribution illustrates the way in which *Paradise* offers a “specifically black history,” while simultaneously detailing “a history of the whole American experience” (325).

¹⁰ Tally also alerts us about the long history of patriarchal assumption of “woman as a disruptive agent” (22, 73-83).

¹¹ As Alsina et alii affirm, the “crisis of no identity” results in “incapacity for affective relationships” and “for transmitting a positive model for the next generations” (14). This crisis is felt by the contemporary men in Ruby who tend to appropriate the paradigm of Western masculinity without revising or altering it.

¹² In his groundbreaking book *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Michael Kimmel delineates three models of masculinity in American history: The “Genteel Patriarch” or the “Heroic Artisan” from late eighteenth to the nineteenth century; and the “Self-Made Man”

The question still remains unanswered as it were: why do not these men feel safe within the limits of the microcosm they have created? Or rather why do they always need to be in control? And the answer targets the very notion of patriarchy: men never feel safe in a patriarchal context because their need for control is largely supported by the concept of domination over the “weak” others, namely women. This is Deek’s depiction of a satisfactory view of the community:

Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting. (111)

This image reflects Deacon Morgan’s, and by extension, all Ruby’s men’s adherence to the traditional gender division, which keeps “good” women at home, depriving them of any agency or voice in the community. But even more than that, the men hold on to a concept of conventional masculinity and resort to violence in order to reestablish their control. The massacre of the women at the Convent is thus justified as cleaning “female malice,” or “detritus” (4). However, other explanations are offered in the first chapter: hatred as in “shooting the first woman [. . .] has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below” (4); but once more the Disallowing comes up when it is said: “That is why they are here in this Convent. To make sure it never happens again. That nothing inside or out rots the one all-black town worth the pain” (5). It is highly significant that at this precise moment these men who have become killers affirm their manhood and fatherhood: “As new fathers, who had fought the world, they could not (would not) be less than the Old Fathers who had outfoxed it” (6). The killing of the Convent women invests them with a newly acquired power, indeed a phallic power derived from the guns they carry, but also from the ultimate form of male domination encapsulated in violence.

As Carme Manuel rightly suggests, “African American masculinity is upheld at the cost of black women” (133), which is to say, that Black masculinity considers violence against Black (but also white) women as a necessary or “benign” form of oppression. In a way, the “new fathers” of Ruby enact the script of patriarchal masculinity to perfection, by using racism (in this case intracaste racism too) as the typical justification for Black male violence against women. The thesis of racial victimism is once more revived by these men,¹³ together with sexism to explain

from the beginning of the nineteenth century, probably the best-known one. While the Genteel Patriarch or the Heroic Artisan value virtues such as honesty, morality, kindness or compassion, the Self-Made Man would incarnate economic success in the public sphere and these self-made men “came to dominate much sooner than in Europe” (17).

¹³ Many critics have questioned racial victimism as justification for Black masculinity (Manuel 141), and have denounced sexism within the African American community. A pioneering voice was Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, who

away the causes for the murder of women who would not fit their model of “elegant women at their tasks,” as commented previously.

But Morrison’s indictment on Black patriarchy is even more evident in the cathartic effects it has on the men who participated in it, who

[. . .] four months later [. . .] were still chewing the problem, asking God for guidance if they were wrong: if white law should, contrary to everything they knew and believed, be permitted to deal with matters heretofore handled among and by them. (298)

The fact that the men are not able to forget their horrific killing, nor to actually dismiss it as a rightful act opens up some possibility of redemption. As Susan Mayberry says, “Morrison always acknowledges reality as she affirms possibility” (574). This sense of possibility is embodied by the way the Morgan brothers distance one from the other: while Steward “took K.D. under his wing, concentrating on making the newphew and the sixteen-month-old grandnephew rich” (299-300), thus buying once more the doctrine of material possession propagated by White American society, Deacon starts a quite promising voyage of self-investigation when he feels “an incompleteness, a muffled solitude, which took away appetite, sleep and sound” (300-1). Not enough critical attention has been devoted to this sense of fragmentation and loneliness keenly felt by Deacon. Meaningfully, Deacon’s acute lack of wholeness and his subsequent transformation effectively expose the damaging effects of the internalization of White patriarchal codes without deconstructing its sexist and racist bias, which leads to outrageous gender violence.

Thus, he feels prompted to try to talk firstly to his wife about the deep love he actually feels for her, but is prevented by his brother Steward, who “stopped them dead lest they know another realm” (301). Here Morrison signals a very timid attempt on Deacon’s part to bridge the enormous gap with his wife, but Steward effectively prevents this from materializing as it would reveal the inner workings of patriarchy severely questioned by that “other realm” evoked in the last quote. Afterwards, Deacon turns to Misner, a long-time enemy, for consultation and, again tellingly, he goes to see him barefoot (showing the way in which he throws away his obsession with money and status):

Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother or brandishing

examined the way in which manhood was “the carrot the white man had held just beyond the black man’s nose for many generations” (33). She even dared to critique the way in which the Black movement of the sixties upheld a notion of Black masculinity that was “a pose,” which could not work “without the full involvement of women” (81), thus discarding the construction of Black masculinity as a monolithic “cool pose.”

ones with male companions. He spoke to his wife in the opaque manner he thought appropriate. (301)

Here Morrison purposefully unveils the way in which conventional notions of patriarchy strangle Black men, as they are utterly unable to express themselves either to other males or to the important women of their lives. Morrison hints at dialogue and male bonding as one of the crucial instruments to overcome the dearth to which Black men are condemned when they follow harmful codes of masculinity.

But what is really at the core of Deacon’s transformation is the fact that he manages to confess he has mistreated a woman (Consolata), and the remorse he feels “at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different” (302). This is precisely what has eroded Ruby’s Black men, according to Deacon, they have not lived up to their fathers’ expectations of having fathered just men. On the opposite, Deacon’s final confession actually reveals these men as emotionally crippled figures who are completely lost as to how to construct a healthy version of their manhood away from constraining definitions favored by White patriarchy. Despite Deacon’s testimony, I do not fully agree with his recreation of the Old Fathers within the framework of the so-called “protector” ideology (that could also be interpreted as paternalistic, by the way). Indeed, what Deacon’s confession makes clear is the way in which patriarchal masculinity falls short of its own promises, which Misner aptly summarizes in “lack of words [. . .] Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love” (303). This tripartite lack is then the ultimate cause for the failure of Black patriarchy to effectively challenge the racist and sexist bias a Western code of masculinity fosters. Therefore, Morrison seems to be suggesting that dialogue, forgiveness, and love are the keys for a satisfying nurturing of men, and by extension, of the entire community. Going back to the origins, that is, to more positive and self-fulfilling male identities will ease the way for a sorely needed reconstruction of gender relations too.

“ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE”?: BLACK PATRIARCHY AND ALTERNATIVE MANHOOD IN *LOVE*

As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁴ the figure of the patriarch is unflinchingly examined in Morrison’s novel *Love* (2003). The similarities with *Paradise* are striking from the onset: both are set in the context of an exclusively Black community, in the latter case a segregated resort that only caters for upper class blacks. Again Morrison’s intentional rewriting of a key historical moment previous to the Civil Rights era tests the limits of that era and the presumed benefits of segregated enclaves like the one portrayed in the novel. Thus, racial politics are the backbone on which the

¹⁴ I first tackled this issue in “*Love and the Survival of the Black Community*” (2007).

whole novel is structured, being segregation (and not the Disallowing) the invisible text that counteracts the “visibility” of the resort:

Cosey’s resort was more than a playground; it was a school and a haven where people debated death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it other than grieve and stare at their children. Then the music started, convincing them they could manage it all and last. (*Love* 35)

But the differences are also worth noting: here racial discrimination and intracaste racism hover at the back but are not brought to the forefront as in *Paradise*. Instead, class and sexual politics are rather the essential factors that rule the workings of the Black community that inhabits the resort that continue to greatly affect the lives of all the characters many years afterwards.

However, I would contend that the analysis of Black patriarchy in this novel goes along the same lines as in the previous example. Indeed, Morrison’s indictment on the negative impact of Black patriarchy on the African American family and community is even harsher and more direct in *Love*. In this case, we have just one patriarch but he is reiteratively identified in his role of founding father by all those around him. For the clients of Cosey’s hotel he is seen as the embodiment of “the best good times” (34) that are definitively over when his heirs fight over his coffin at Cosey’s funeral. For Vida, Cosey’s employee, he is the perfect gentleman that beams in her memories: “His pleasure was in pleasing” (33). His widow Heed shares Vida’s vision entirely. For her, Cosey was her savior that gave her the chance of her life: “Only Papa knew her better, had picked her out of all he could have chosen” (72). As an Up Beach girl,¹⁵ she cherishes Cosey’s protection despite the critique directed against her by both local women (75-6) and the other female members of the family, especially Cosey’s daughter, Christine, and her mother May.

The other women in Cosey’s life seem to endorse a similar view about his patriarch’s “perfect” role. For his granddaughter Christine he remains a favorite, despite her permanent feeling of being “a displaced woman” (83), and the possibility that their father-daughter relationship could even imply an intimation of incest. Notwithstanding, Christine continues to adore him almost to the end of the novel, and accuses Heed of taking him away from her: “That’s been her whole life . . . replacing me, getting rid of me” (95). Even her physical description connotes the fact that Christine does not own herself, not her eyes which “looking out, never inward, seemed to belong to somebody else” (93). I would contend that she feels that her inner self belongs to Cosey. In fact, both Heed and Christine seem to mirror each other in their respective claims on Cosey’s affection:

¹⁵ Heed originally comes from a poor family, but also rather importantly, Heed is used as an excuse for Cosey to undermine class barriers, that is, it is the only time in the whole novel that Cosey ignores class barriers, but again only for his own convenience,

The argument that followed was a refined version of the ones that had been seething among the women since the beginning: each had been displaced by another; each had a unique claim on Cosey’s affection; each had either “saved” him from some disaster or relieved him of an impending one. (99)

Their lifelong rivalry thus seems to corroborate the patriarchal view of warring women who would compete for the same man, thus precluding any possibility for female bonding.¹⁶ However, it is important to notice in the last quote these women’s roles as Cosey’s saviors which somehow unsettles the patriarchal logic.

So, several questions are posed: who actually saves whom? And who is actually to blame? As Sandler, Vida’s husband, declares: “They [women] forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man’s interest” (147). But we need to add one more question: who belongs to whom? Because according to L, Heed and Christine belong to each other: “she [Heed] belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her” (105). But this notion of belonging is not related at all to the sense of domination and possession required in a patriarchal family. Moreover, in many ways the kind of patriarch Cosey embodies is questioned throughout the whole book in spite of the praise that is bestowed upon his figure. Especially by Sandler, who reflects about Cosey’s attitude in quite different terms: “Vida, like so many others, had looked on him with adoring eyes, spoke of him with forgiving smiles [. . .] But Sandler had fished with him [. . .] he knew his habits” (40). His class alliances admitted no discussion: “Cosey didn’t mix with local people publicly, which is to say he employed them” (41). In fact, his resort was carefully reserved only for upper class clients. This exclusionary practice also resembles that described in *Paradise* quite closely. His troubled personality is revealed early on in the narrative, when Sandler indicates what seems to actually motivate Cosey: “Childish yearnings that could thrive only in a meadow of girlish dreams: adoration, obedience, and full-time fun” (45). This portrait of Black masculinity does not fit in the conventional depiction of patriarchal manhood we have been discussing in the previous section. Yet, it is also part of the script of the dominating patriarch that, like a parasite, feeds on others for his own contentment and benefit.

His problematic relationship with the other men of his family attests to his failure as a functioning “benign” patriarch too. His relationship with his son Billy Boy is summarized in the telling quote: “More like pals than father and son [. . .] Maybe he was somebody else and I made him my [. . .] shadow” (43). The notion of legacy which plays such a fundamental role in the patriarchal worldview portrayed in *Paradise* seems everpresent in the case of Cosey and his son. He repeatedly admits throughout the narration that he could not pass his knowledge and

¹⁶ Jean Wyatt writes that the novel subverts the very notion of love propitiated by patriarchy that commands that “the key to female happiness is captivating the man’s desire, that women are naturally rivals for the only love worth having—the love of a man” (214).

authority onto his son. He also mentions the fact that he did not understand him, nor his choices: “I used to wonder why he picked up a woman like May to marry” (43). And the legacy is never to be transmitted when Billy Boy dies. Moreover, if Romen is prefigured as a reincarnated Billy Boy, Cosey also fails him: “I hate that picture [Cosey’s]. Like screwing in front of your father” (179). But Cosey’s troubled relationship to his father explains much of his erratic behavior because of the deep hatred and contempt he manifests toward him: “his [father’s] funeral was like a gift to the world” (111). J. Brooks Bouson remarks that Morrison’s explanations of Cosey’s behavior is rooted “in his troubled boyhood relationship with his hated father, who worked as a police informant and whose initials, DRC, gave rise to the name given to him by blacks, Dark” (361). The fact that Cosey helped his father to catch a Black man and laughed at that man’s daughter when she tripped in horse dung and fell marks him so deeply, that he strives to make up for his father’s dark legacy for the rest of his life.

But together with a failed patriarch like Cosey, Morrison also presents other models of Black masculinity in this novel. As in the case of Deacon Morgan, Romen seems to personify an alternative identity starting from the significant scene in which he protects a girl that is being gang-raped and acknowledges that “it was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled, dangerous one” (49). At the very beginning he actually tries to pose (I would say to “pass”) as the “cool” man, but his sense of protection overcomes him, as a result he feels his manhood heavily questioned by his friends, who firstly ignore him and then beat him up three days after the incident. Again there is a strong connection between the definition of masculinity, brute sexuality and male violence. The test for manhood consists of a rite of passage in which he has to force a girl together with his six friends, and the blame is again placed on the girl, who is viewed as a “slut” (46). As he fails this test, he sees himself as a weak girl, “a weakness the others recognized and pinpointed” (46), and is called so by his friends and even by the girl’s friends when he helps her. Then, sexuality is a requirement *sine qua non* he may qualify as an “authentic” man, as Patricia Hill Collins has phrased it.¹⁷ Moreover, his failure to pass the test makes him the target of group violence when the six friends hit him, clearly hammering into him the notion of not belonging to the group anymore. For the other six young men the only possible outlet for the anger and frustration he has caused them is violence, because it is how “authentic” men react when their manhood is threatened.¹⁸

¹⁷ In that line, Patricia Hill Collins criticizes the historical legacy of the stereotypes of the buck, the brute and the rapist, but also the more recent ones of the Black sidekick and sissy to confirm the construction of “authentic” black men as hypersexualized and inherently violent (158), because the opposite types—sidekick and sissy—are not real “men.” That is, sexual prowess and violence are seen as definitory traits to define Black men.

¹⁸ bell hooks denounces the notion of Black men as “‘failures’ who are psychologically ‘fucked up,’ dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to

The change or transformation takes place when Romen meets Junior, so again his affirmation as a man needs to be channelled through his sex-life: “Her craving was equal to his and his was bottomless” (113). Very soon, though, it is proved that she is the one in control: “The plan (hers) was to make it everywhere” (115). For Junior, Romen is either a present for her (119) or a substitute for her “Good Man,” which is how she names Cosey. Nevertheless, their sexual affair acquires a radically new nature when sadomasochism is welcome by both and he finally assumes the control:

Now with the tender mixed with the rough, the trite language of desire smithereneed by obscenities, he was the one in charge. He could beat her up if he wanted to and she would still go down. She was like a gorgeous pet. Feed it or whip it-it lapped you anyway. (155)

This view of sexuality seems to endorse the image of Black men as violent, even sexually violent, who enjoy taking over and subjecting women to their wills. However, one last episode seems to deny it all when they are later making love and Romen kisses Junior’s misshapen foot, as if Morrison had second thoughts on the rough side of their relationship and allowed for some form of redemption.¹⁹

But it is undoubtedly the character of Sandler the one who actually provides a clearer picture of what alternative masculinity may actually entail and be defined by. Not by sexual prowess, indeed he is not willing to share his sexual life with anybody: “uneasy with other men’s sexual confidences (he certainly wasn’t providing any of his own” (148). He also recollects his own sexual initiation in a very telling way: “he remembered his own maiden voyage [. . .] as a ferocity that had never mellowed into routine pleasure” (109). And he shows himself quite uncertain as to whether he should talk to his grandson Romen, because of his unwillingness to introduce the notion of shame (109) into Romen’s own sexual initiation. But he is also quite aware of his role as Romen’s protector (148) and has a direct and honest conversation with Romen, showing once more that dialogue and not violence can lead to

fulfill their phallogentric masculine destiny in a racist context” (*Black Looks* 89), but she also deconstructs the normative vision of Black masculinity which considers patriarchy and male domination as “a ‘natural’ fact of life” (97). hooks even goes a step further revealing the way in which what she calls “patriarchal manhood” endangers Black men: “As long as Black males see no alternatives to patriarchal manhood they will nurture the beast within; they will be poised to strike” (*We Real Cool* 63). She delves into the nature of Black male violence and its undeniable connection to “plantation patriarchy” and “gangsta culture” in order to claim for “mass education for critical consciousness” (64) as the only way to counteract the negative impact of the racist and sexist stereotypes around Black men.

¹⁹ J. Brooks Bouson makes the same point when he states: “Yet if Romen feels empowered in his abusive relationship with Junior as he adopts a masculine identity sanctioned by his peer group, he also comes to repudiate that identity in the final scenes of the novel” (369-70).

male bonding. In the dialogue, Romen hesitates to tell his grandfather about their “rough” ways and the way in which Sandler encourages him to talk reaffirms their link: “Romen, we men or not?” (152). Sandler is the one whose view of women is obviously not condemned in the novel because it complies with an unconventional view of gender relations:

A woman is an important somebody and sometimes you win the triple crown: good food, good sex, and good talk [. . .] A good man is a good thing, but there is nothing in the world better than a good good woman. (154)

By acknowledging not only the equality of women but even their superiority, Sandler offers new parameters in order to understand sexual relationships that completely overturn the clearcut separation of women and men under patriarchy. He certainly embodies the type of “a good man,” as his tender and still passionate relationship with his wife demonstrates. He does not want to fail her or Romen in any way, opposing Cosey, who fails everybody related to him in one way or another.

Besides, he carefully unveils the deceitful contours of class and sexually biased allegiances in men like Cosey, who make him feel out of place. This is how he describes the only time that Cosey invited him to one of his famous boat parties:

It was the talk, its tone, its lie that he couldn't take. Talk as fuel to feed the main delusion: the counterfeit world invented on the boat; the real one set aside for a few hours so women could dominate, men would crawl, blacks could insult whites. Then they docked [. . .] Then the sheriff could put his badge back on and call the colored physician a boy. Then the women took their shoes off because they had to walk home alone. (111)

He clearly denounces not only the class and sexual discrimination that men like Cosey help to promote within the African American community, but also the racist structure they are accomplices of. The boat party is a striking example of the way in which wealthy Black men like Cosey would provide an outlet for all that social and racial tension by creating an invented and temporary world that would facilitate an overturn of hierarchies, just to consolidate them more firmly.

As Toni Morrison asserts in these novels, there is neither a monolithic nor a homogeneous standard of Black masculinity. In that sense, hooks calls for the collective creation of “life sustaining visions of a reconstructed Black masculinity” (*Black Looks* 113). Moreover, Athena Mutua warns against losing sight of the close interaction of racism and other systems of domination like sexism, classism and heterosexism, and claims for a project of progressive masculinities that “eschew and actively stand against social structures of domination and [. . .] value, validate,

and empower black humanity in all its variety” (7).²⁰ Therefore, an alternative understanding of Black manhood should be by definition antiracist and antisexist, and not predicated on the subordination of others in order to effectively challenge and subvert normative definitions of masculinity. The variety of roles that the Black male characters play in these two novels by Morrison demonstrate the way in which it is liberating and nurturing to problematize and break away from the patriarchal imposition of limiting and castrating roles in the search for a more meaningful pattern for Black men to follow. To advance in new notions of Black masculinity also entails a direct and explicit involvement in the disruption of the sexist and racist interlocking systems of domination that still constrain Black men, and by extension, the entire African American community.

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²⁰ In a way, Mutua’s formulation of progressive masculinities echoes that of womanism popularized by Alice Walker.

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