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“LIKE MEN THEY STOOD”:

BLACK MALE VULNERABILITY AS RESISTANCE TO STEREOTYPES
IN FICTION WRITTEN BY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Tuula Kolehmainen

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the themes of Black male vulnerability and stereotypes in the works of Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor. The dates of publications of the selected works span from the 1960s up until the 1990s. This was a period when African American women were quite often criticized for negative representations of African American men in their fictional works. It is true that the male characters seem—at first glance—quite negatively represented: many of them are prone to physical, emotional, and sexual violence. I contend, however, that while the male characters in the selected works are, at times, apparently represented in stereotypical terms, these works in fact deconstruct and resist those very same stereotypes through representations of Black male vulnerability.

Through their prose, Bambara, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor took part in the political discussion of race and gender during a time when the African American canon was dominated by male authors. Moreover, all of them have been involved with Black feminism (see Christian 1985 & 2007; Holmes 2014) and womanism (see Eaton 2004; S. A. Williams 1994), and their works have most often been studied from the viewpoint of the female experience. According to Black feminist thought, the experience of African American women lies in the intersections of oppression according to both gender and race. My analysis shows the male characters, too, are victims of discrimination based on various kinds of social stratification. Thus, I have chosen an intersectional approach and consider other forms of oppression, such as ableism, classism, and homophobia to analyze how Black male vulnerability is also produced at the intersections of social identity.

I explore the themes of Black male vulnerability and stereotyping through the following questions:

- How are African American men represented in the selected works?
- How are seemingly negative and stereotypical representations in fact deconstructed and resisted in each author's work?
- How are representations of vulnerability involved in the process of deconstructing and resisting the stereotypes?
- What functions did such representations of Black masculinity and expositions of vulnerability have in the African American community?

In order to answer these questions, I view vulnerability as having two overlapping connotations. First, I understand the concept in its basic form, as expressed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: being vulnerable in general

means being open to either physical or emotional attack or injury, as well as being dependent on others due to life situation, disability, age, etc. Second, I examine a specific kind of vulnerability, discussed by Tommy J. Curry (2017). Curry contends that Black male vulnerability refers to “the material disadvantages Black males face due to incarceration, unemployment, police brutality, homicide, domestic and sexual abuse throughout society, or their victimhood” (29). Of course, the present-day abuses, primarily produced by racism, bias, and White supremacy, result from the historical racist brutalization and disenfranchisement. Stereotypes that date back to colonial times and to American slavery deem Black men threats, which Curry calls “the vulnerable condition” (29) of Black men. While some of these abuses are experienced by members of other groups as well, I focus on the positions that are both race-specific and gender-specific to African American men.

My main finding is that the stereotypes in the selected works are resisted through representations of Black male vulnerability, which function as education, context, persuasion, and atonement. I have identified key stereotypes in each author’s work(s). In Chapter 3, I argue that in Bambara’s short stories, “The Hammer Man” and “Raymond’s Run,” the image of the “perpetual boy” is resisted through the representation of two Black male characters with disabilities. I believe these representations of vulnerable men are fabricated to teach readers lessons on race, gender, and the body. In Chapter 4, I contend that while the male protagonist in Walker’s *The Color Purple* might initially seem like a stereotypically violent “bad Black man” who is humanized only by the end of the novel, the narrative offers many ways of understanding the contexts for his behavior through expositions of vulnerability. In Chapter 5 on *Tar Baby*, I show how Morrison plays with readers’ sympathies with representations of Black male vulnerability and attempts to persuade them to take part in the process of deconstructing and resisting the stereotype of the “primitive beast.” Lastly, while Naylor’s *Brewster Place* novels can be read as separate works of fiction, in my view, when *Women* is read side by side with *Men*, Naylor can be seen as working to resist the “Black macho” stereotype. By exposing the vulnerability of the central male character in the later novel, Naylor makes amends not only to those readers who found the earlier representations of men offensive, but also to the characters who are now able to tell their stories.

Briefly stated, my dissertation makes three significant contributions to literary studies. First, it exposes an under-researched topic: Black male vulnerability in fiction written by African American women. Furthermore, it focuses on texts in which the male characters are marginalized, both on the narrative level, and—to some extent—in research. The thesis is also interdisciplinary: it combines gender studies and sociology with literary theories and views the literary texts in the context of their cultural history. In

academia, Black masculinity is often understood as a form of patriarchy (see Curry 2017, 238–239; hooks 1992, 89; hooks 2004, and hooks 2005), but my research reveals how Black male vulnerability is constructed through a racialized form of gender oppression. This shows the importance of including Black male vulnerability in the study of Black masculinity.

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Tuula Kolehmainen

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1 INTRODUCTION: LIKE MEN?

They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood.

Toni Morrison, *Home* (2012, 3; emphasis in original)

In the opening lines of Toni Morrison's novel *Home*, the protagonist recalls having seen what he thought was a horse fight as a child. In reality, he and his little sister witnessed two unknown African American men, father and son, forced to take part in a "men-treated-like-dog fight" (138). But "perceptions alter" (142), the narrator points out, and it becomes clear by the end of the novel that what young Frank Money had thought were horses rising up like men were, in fact, men. The children had witnessed the murder of a man forced to be committed by his own son. I wanted to use this quote as the title of my dissertation because it captures some of the main points and themes of my research. First, it echoes the animalistic, dehumanizing stereotypes on which much of American anti-Black racism is based. Secondly, the phrase "like men" carries a connotation of being almost like men but not quite. Thirdly, the quote can be understood as "(a)like," ignoring the multiplicity of experiences of Black men in reality.

Lastly, "Like men they stood" is in the past tense, implying the strong historicity of this theme; the phrase thus also reminds us of the destruction of Black men. As Tommy J. Curry points out, "This America makes corpses of Black males. It is simply the reality of our day that Black males die" (2017, 1). Media, film, television, and literature often portray the Black man as something that *was*. During the years of conducting this research, I have witnessed from afar the devastating number of deaths of African American men (and women) at the hands of American police officers and White community watch members,¹ as well as the disproportionate death toll due to COVID-19 that Black communities suffer from.² Tragic history repeats itself today in the United States; Black men put down and murdered is history that is in the present. But what are the lives of Black men like? What is it like to be

¹ Trayvon Martin 2012, Eric Garner 2014, Michael Brown 2014, Javier Ambler II 2019, Manuel Ellis 2020, George Floyd 2020, Breonna Taylor 2020, Rayshard Brooks 2020, and Daunte Wright 2021, to name but a few.

² See The COVID Racial Data Tracker, which is "a collaboration between the COVID Tracking Project and the Boston University Center for Antiracist Research" (The COVID Tracking Project, 2021). For more information on the relation between vulnerability, racism, and the coronavirus pandemic, see "The Virocane Epoch: The Vulnerability Nexus of Viruses, Capitalism and Racism" (Fernando 2020).

a man, but to be stereotyped as not quite a man? What is Black male vulnerability?

These are the kinds of questions that I think are in urgent need of being answered. My contribution to the scholarly discussion in this dissertation is analyzing the multiplicities and vulnerabilities of the lives of Black men as represented by four African American women authors of the post-civil rights movement era. In addition to Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* ([1981] 2004), I explore two short stories by Toni Cade Bambara, "The Hammer Man" ([1966] 1981b) and "Raymond's Run" ([1971] 1981c), *The Color Purple* ([1982] 1983a) by Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* ([1982] 1983) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Even though their works have been researched widely, according to some critics, many African American women writers of this era would have deserved more critical attention. Linda Holmes notes that

when considering the historical significance and influence of the black women writers who emerged in the 1970s, greater recognition of this chapter in American literature is long overdue. Even during the Harlem Renaissance, the reach of black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen did not have the national and international impact of the emancipatory black women writers of the 1970s. (2014, xvii)

The dates of publications of the selected works span from the 1960s to 1990s. This was a period when African American women were quite often criticized for negative representations of African American men in their fictional works (see, e.g., McDowell 1995 and Wahlström 2009). It is true that at first glance the depiction of their male characters seems quite negative—many of them are prone to physical, emotional, and sexual violence. In this dissertation, however, I contend that while the male characters in the selected works are, at times, apparently represented in stereotypical terms, these works in fact deconstruct and resist those very same stereotypes through representations of Black male vulnerability. Most often, the representations of vulnerability interrupt binary narratives and juxtapositions on which racism, sexism, and even anti-Black misogyny are routinely based. My contribution is to help readers see beyond the stereotypes and then take part in that resistance both in literature and, ideally, in real-life discourses. My purpose is not only to show that the literary representations are more nuanced and central to the narratives than might initially seem, but also to help understand Black male vulnerability more widely.

One of the reasons I chose this theme for my research is that as a reader I noticed the stereotypical representations of African American men in these works. Having written my master's thesis on the ways that Toni Morrison's fiction challenges stereotypes, and having focused on female characters, I

wrote in the conclusion that valuable research could be conducted on Morrison's male characters, who "might primarily seem to be sinners but once studied carefully, . . . do awaken reader sympathy" (Kolehmainen 2011, 79).³ Beginning this PhD project, I wanted to find out whether a similar pattern can also be traced in works by other African American women writers. I did find male characters that seemed stereotypical, but after careful analysis of the texts, I also found that these stereotypes are deconstructed and resisted in these works, and that all of them portray Black male vulnerability.

In addition, during the course of my research, I have found that male experience in fiction written by African American women is clearly under-researched. In 2005, Jeffrey B. Leak suggested, "We should also in more systematic fashion explore black masculinity in the fiction of African American women" (136). There have been a wide range of literary studies which have focused on the female experience in the works of African American women writers (see, e.g., Washington 1987, Eaton 2004, T. Harris 2001, Muther 2002, Thorsson 2013a, 2013b), but with the exception of Susan Neal Mayberry (2007, 2013, 2017), Helena Wahlström (2009), and Aaron Ngozi Oforlea (2017), very few have paid particular attention to the representations of Black men. Following Leak, some research on male characters in fiction written by African American women has appeared, but it is very seldom that Black male vulnerability is mentioned in academic studies of these writers' works.

I chose to explore the works of these particular authors because through their writing, they took part in the political discussion of race and gender in post-civil rights movement America,⁴ when the African American canon was still largely dominated by male authors (see, for example, Watkins 1986). Crucial parts of the so-called renaissance of African American women authors of the 1970s and 1980s,⁵ these writers (among others) share a common cultural experience, thus constituting "an identifiable literary tradition" (B. Smith 1978, 22). Moreover, all of the selected authors were teachers of English

³ Some of the ideas expressed in my master's thesis (Kolehmainen 2011) are revisited in this dissertation (in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5).

⁴ In a 2003 article in *The New Yorker*, Morrison says that she saw her career as an editor as a way of joining in the civil rights movement activism that was taking place in the seventies: "I wanted to give back something. . . . I wasn't marching. I didn't go to anything. I didn't join anything. But I could make sure there was a published record of those who did march and did put themselves on the line" (Als 2003).

⁵ Jacqueline Bobo writes, "Mary Helen Washington has categorized the proliferation of artistic work by black women as 'the renaissance of Black women writers' of the 1970s and 1980s" (1989, 338). Moreover, Linda Holmes calls this phenomenon "the 1970s' renaissance of a new wave of black woman writers" (2014, 49) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay describe the success of African American authors in the 1980s and 1990s "a renaissance of quality and quantity" (1997, xxxiii).

and/or African American literature. All of them have received advanced degrees and many of them have worked in academia (see Walker 1994, 19–20; Fowler 1996, xii; T. Lewis 2012, xxvii–xxix; Roynon 2012, 4–5). As Courtney Thorsson points out, many academically educated Black women writers were “acutely aware of their role as theorists of identity in this literary tradition” (2013b, 4). As “theorists of identity,” these writers were all in their own way engaged in the mission of amplifying the voices of Black women through telling their unheard stories.

Moreover, all of the selected authors have been described as writers involved with Black feminism (see, e.g., Christian 1985 & 2007, Holmes 2014) and womanism (see, e.g., Eaton 2004; S. A Williams 1994). According to Black feminist thought, the experience of African American women lies in the intersections of oppression according to both gender and race, and often also class. My analysis shows the male characters, too, are victims of discrimination based on various kinds of social stratification. Thus, I have chosen an intersectional approach (discussed further in 2.1.1) and consider other forms of oppression, such as ableism, classism, and homophobia to analyze how Black male vulnerability is also produced at the intersections of social identity. I identify the characteristics and functions of Black male vulnerability depicted in these novels, and consider them as part of a larger sociopolitical conversation. Literature can help us gain knowledge of complex power relations, and fictional narratives are in constant debate with real life discourses.

Briefly stated, my dissertation makes three significant contributions to literary studies. First, it exposes an under-researched topic: Black male vulnerability in fiction written by African American women. Furthermore, it focuses on texts in which the male characters are marginalized, both on the narrative level, and—to some extent—in research. The thesis is also interdisciplinary: it combines gender studies and sociology with literary theories and views the literary texts in the context of their cultural history. In academia, Black masculinity is often understood as a form of patriarchy (see Curry 2017, 238–239; hooks 1992, 89; hooks 2004, and hooks 2005),⁶ but my research reveals how Black male vulnerability is constructed through a racialized form of gender oppression. This shows the importance of including Black male vulnerability in the study of Black masculinity.

⁶ hooks’ definition of patriarchy is: “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (2005, 18).

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The aim of this thesis is to explore the themes of Black male vulnerability and stereotyping through the following questions:

- How are African American men represented in the selected works?
- How are seemingly negative and stereotypical representations in fact deconstructed and resisted in each author's work?
- How are representations of vulnerability involved in the process of deconstructing and resisting the stereotypes?
- What functions did such representations of Black masculinity and expositions of vulnerability have in the African American community?

These questions entail terminology that requires some explication. First, I talk about racial myths and stereotypes quite interchangeably. Coined by Walter Lippmann in 1922 (1965), the term *stereotype* is currently used in a wide range of disciplines. As Rahilya Geybullayeva notes, the word has its roots in “the Greek stereos (solid) and tupos (impression, engraved mark)” and thus refers to “a solid impression” (2010, 80), which in itself gives the concept a rather positive echo. Indeed, stereotyping is not always negative or dangerous, because stereotypes are primarily tools for social categorization and explanation, which are standard functions of the brain. According to McGarty, Yzerbyt, and Spears, there are three principles of the stereotype in social psychology: They are “aids to explanation, . . . energy-saving devices, and . . . shared group beliefs” (2002, 2). Our brain explains our environment through ready-made schemas and matches what we encounter to what we already “know,” thus saving us the energy of having to start anew with every person we meet (or every literary character we encounter). Referring to Tajfel, the writers continue that “we cannot have an impression of a group unless we can tell the difference between that group and some other group” (2002, 3). It is only when stereotyping becomes a tool for othering that it becomes problematic.

While similar in function, stereotyping and othering are not the same, however. Michael Pickering notes that both of them are means of categorizing others from a superior perspective (2001, 47) and creating boundaries between “me” and “not-me” or “us” and “not-us.” Accordingly, the Other is constructed as the *outcome* of stereotyping (48). However, as the stereotypical object may have positive value as well, the Other is always subjugated as inferior to benefit the subject (71). Even though Pickering considers the concept of the Other more useful analytically (47, 71), for the purposes of this dissertation, stereotyping brings together more clearly the themes I want to

examine. Because of the relationality of the structures I analyze, however, it is important to also keep in mind the concept of the Other. The discussion of the fictional representations here will indeed focus on negative (racist) images concerning Black men, images which have been produced and sustained in order to strengthen White supremacy. Furthermore, it could be stated that the stereotypes I examine in the analysis chapters are different faces, or versions, of the Other.

When analyzing how stereotypes are *deconstructed* in the selected works, I explain the process by which stereotypes are decoded and dismantled. In my view, to deconstruct stereotypes includes interpreting and disassembling them, looking at how they are constructed, what they are made of, finding out who uses them, and dismantling them in the hope of perhaps reducing their power. Thus, while in many cases throughout the thesis a poststructuralist view might be productive in analyzing the texts, I do not use the word deconstruct(/ion) as implying a Derridean reading. I do think there is so much to consider outside the text,⁷ including hundreds of years of brutalization and prejudice that was largely left out of American history books, and which African American literature recaptures, work by work, word by word. There is also a political uprising of the Black population to gain civil and human rights. There is an immense amount of work by Black feminists attempting to solve the problematics of gender in the African American community. In other words, in the case of African American literature, it is often impossible to make a distinction between poetics and the political (see, e.g., Tyson 2006, 364–365).

Closely related to the meaning of the verb *to deconstruct*, I use the words *challenge* and *resist* in describing the processes through which literature seeks to question and destabilize the fixity of power structures. Resistance best describes the political effects literature can have on polarized public debates, and, in my view, happens between the (implied) author and society outside the literary realm. Challenging, in turn, is useful in expressing what happens between the text and its (implied) readers. One function of the resistance to stereotypes is that readers are forced to challenge those prejudices that they themselves hold (discussed in Chapter 5). This process, I argue, demands that through reading, readers become aware of their own stereotyping. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, representations of Black male vulnerability play a crucial role in the resistance to stereotypes in the selected works.

In order to start thinking about how representations of *vulnerability* are involved in this process of resistance, the term must be defined. In my thesis,

⁷ According to Simon Glendinning, “Derrida explicitly and notoriously claims that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (OG 158)” (2004, 5).

vulnerability has two overlapping connotations. First, I understand the concept in its basic form, as expressed in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: being vulnerable means being open to either physical or emotional attack or injury, as well as being dependent on others due to life situation, disability, age, etc. Second, I examine a specific kind of vulnerability, defined and discussed by Tommy J. Curry in *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (2017). Curry contends that Black male vulnerability refers to “the material disadvantages Black males face due to incarceration, unemployment, police brutality, homicide, domestic and sexual abuse throughout society, or their victimhood” (29). Black men are still vulnerable to violence, even from the police. Of course, the present-day abuses, primarily produced by racism, bias, and White supremacy, result from the historical racist brutalization and disenfranchisement. Racist stereotypes that date back to colonial times and to American slavery deem Black men threats, which Curry calls “the vulnerable condition” of Black men. Being seen as “a living terror,” they are liable to be “killed, raped, or dehumanized at any moment” (29). While some of these abuses are experienced by members of other groups as well, I will mostly focus on the positions that are both race-specific and gender-specific to African American men. In section 2.2.2, I will expand the discussion of these terms and talk about Black male vulnerability in more depth.

I use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably. While I acknowledge that both of these terms are potentially problematic, I find it necessary to use them in this research. A universally less problematic and more inclusive term, “people of color” (POC, or BIPOC, meaning Black, Indigenous, people of color) would dismiss the uniqueness of African American history and culture, and this is why I find it inappropriate in this particular context. Similarly, while African American literature is essentially American literature, its specific features and traditions call for studying and appreciating it as a separate entity (see, for example, Tyson 2006, 366).

As a White Finnish woman, my position as a reader and researcher is of course that of an outsider. I recognize that my own experience is far from those of African American men (or women) and I am aware that they have had experiences I myself cannot have nor fully understand. I have spent more than fifteen years studying and researching African American literature and culture and, as a literary scholar, I hope to provide a scholarly perspective on Black male vulnerability and racist mythologies, always trying to acknowledge my outsider status.

1.2 RACIAL MYTHS ABOUT “THE BLACK MAN”

A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence. Sin is Negro as virtue is white. All those white men in a group, guns in their hands, cannot be wrong. I am guilty. I do not know of what, but I know that I am no good.

Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008b, 106)

In this section, I will first examine what racist myths concerning Black men consist of and in what contexts they were and still are constructed. The West Indian philosopher and psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon wrote his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* in the context of the French Antilles. A Pan-Africanist concerned with issues of (de)colonization, he states that, “I am not unaware that the same behavior patterns obtain in every race that has been subjected to colonization” (2008b, 15). Fanon lists some of the negative connotations that the color black—and by implication, Black people—have in the western mind: “The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black—whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness” (146) and continues that “in the collective unconscious of homo *occidentalis*, the Negro—or, if one prefers, the color black—symbolizes evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine” (147; emphasis in original). As Fanon illustrates in the above quote, anti-Black racism originates, among other things, from binary oppositions, such as “sin is Negro as virtue is white.” Violently forcing those images on an oppressed people (“those white men in a group, guns in their hands”), as Fanon suggests, might lead to internalization of the idea of one’s inferiority (“I know that I am no good”).

The alleged inferiority of people of African descent is a racist idea on which American society is built, and with which structural/systemic racism and even slavery have been justified throughout the centuries. While slavery has taken and is taking place in other countries as well, a specific feature of American oppression of enslaved people is that it was based purely on race. Moreover, Frank Rudy Cooper states that he refers “to slavery in the United States as ‘United States black chattel bondage’ to highlight that this was a distinct form of slavery that was qualitatively harsher, both physically and ideologically, than pre-existing forms” (2006, 877). A feature of American slavery was the widespread dehumanization of people of African descent. As Michael Gellert notes, “In contrast to the African and European slavery that existed at the same time, Americans treated their slaves as if they were subhumans, crushing their dignity as human beings, destroying their families, and forcing them into submission through such legal punishments as whipping, burning, mutilation, and death” (2002, 241). African enslaved people and their descendants in the

United States, that is, were not only thought of as inhuman, but also treated as such with a set of brutalizing actions, that were, indeed, legal.

Of course, some racist ideas have been around longer than American slavery. Historicizing racist ideas in America, Ibram X. Kendi notes that it was already in the 16th century that Western Europeans were “tying African people to hypersexuality, to animals, and to the lack of reason” (2016, 29). Historically, there have even been various schools of thought concerning the origin of the alleged differences between African and Western peoples. Many racist views go under the umbrella of (pseudo)scientific (also: biological) racism that was popular in Europe from the 1600s up until the mid-20th century (see Pickering 2001 and Kendi 2016). Patricia Hill Collins defines scientific racism as “a specific body of knowledge about Blacks, Asians, Native Americans, Whites, and Latinos produced within biology, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and other academic disciplines [that] was designed to prove the inferiority of people of color” (2000, 300). Early purveyors of scientific racism include the so-called curse theorists and climate theorists, who were united by the idea that African people were inferior compared to White Europeans (Kendi 2016, 32). The curse theorists viewed Blackness as an inborn and permanent sign of inferiority while the climate theorists believed that Black people had fallen into temporal inferiority due to the hot weather of Africa (32). In other words, whether it was due to a “natural fact” or too much hot sun, being from a different race was considered inferior.

Scientific racism was a widespread phenomenon, one that was still popular in the beginning of the 20th century, and one that is unfortunately still very much present. Stereotypes of the cruel and childlike savage (and its binary opposite, the “civilized,” “rational,” western “adult”) are largely based on these views. In fact, the very idea of White supremacy rests on the negative images of non-Whites. For example, the former Secretary of the British Anthropological Society, T.A. Joyce, wrote in 1910–11 that people of African descent were behind in evolution compared to White people. According to Joyce, “an arrested mental development was caused by hyper-sexuality” and was thus also the reason for the childlike conduct of African peoples (Pickering 2001, 115). Whites, of course, then deemed themselves as civilized, rational, and mature (122). Dan Goodley also notes that “being white is historically contingent with being intelligent, civilised and able” (2014, 44; for more information of how Whiteness has been represented and theorized, see, for example, Dyer 1997). During the same period, social Darwinism and eugenics gained popularity both in Europe and in the United States (see, e.g., Pickering 2001).

Whether it was the imagery of “scientific” inferiority or simply everyday impressions, stereotypes concerning people of African descent have always been conflicting and ambiguous. According to David J. Schneider, toward the

end of the 20th century, studies still found contrasting stereotypes concerning Black men among White Americans. For example, Jackson, Lewandowski, Ingram, and Hodge (1997) found that “black males were described as being athletic, fun, easy to talk to, and charming, as well as violent, angry, and resentful” (2005, 457). Another study showed the fluid nature of stereotypes: “Devine and Elliot (1995) did find that while many of the original Katz-Braly traits (such as being superstitious, happy-go-lucky, ostentatious, naive, and materialistic) had essentially disappeared from whites’ stereotypes of blacks, other traits (such as being athletic, rhythmic, low in intelligence, poor, criminal, and loud) were endorsed by at least a third of the subjects” (456–457). The instability of racial stereotypes suggests that there was more to the stereotypes that Whites had of people of African descent than simply working as tools for categorization and explanation for the brain, as mentioned earlier. Many conflicting stereotypes were used as aids to control and abuse African and enslaved people.

Indeed, the European colonists and explorers of Africa viewed the “savages” as either “perpetual children, who needed to be paternally guided and ruled by ‘civilised whites’” or cruel primitive Others in need of taming (Pickering 2001, 122–124). The “savages” were controlled with violence, which was used to both show mastery and alleviate the fears of the Europeans:

The inconsistency between the “cruel” and “infantile” aspects of the stereotype was rationalised by white authority and rule, for it was such rule that rescued black people from their “barbarism” and turned them into deferential, compliant, childlike subjects, but the fear that they would conspire and revolt against their white masters always remained, breeding further fantasies of the grown blacks who white colonialists persisted in calling “boys.” (124)

In other words, a set of stereotypes was used to justify and explain another set of stereotypes. The function of infantilization was that the “childlike” Africans had to be either tamed or rescued, as long as they stayed “in their place” below the Europeans. Another side of the stereotype was always the fear that the Africans could start responding to violence with violence and thus the need for the image of the “cruel savage” prevailed. Considering that these images were unstable and even contradictory, Pickering continues, “the ‘negro’, for instance, was depicted as, among other things, lazy and capable of hard (manual) work, provident and profligate, sinner and patiently forbearing Christian, implacably merry and brutally vengeful” (2001, 125). The only stable belief, it would seem, was that of their inferiority.

As we learned from the writings of Kendi and Pickering, racial myths are historical, yet historically changing images. Joep Leerssen argues that “over time, as current stereotypes are found inadequate, they are not so much

canceled and forgotten as giving rise to their very opposite” (2000, 278). Unfortunately, as Leerssen notes, “these changes do not occur by way of falsification” (278), meaning that old stereotypes are not proven wrong when they are not used as much or even if their very opposite becomes the dominant image. Leerssen continues that “old images are not abrogated by new developments; they are merely relieved from their duties pro tem. They remain subliminally present in the social discourse and can always be reactivated should the occasion arise” (278). Thus, while stereotypes function as aids in explaining the behavior of individuals and groups of people (see Stangor and Schaller 1996, 21–23), old and new images are put into service whenever there is need to explain and rationalize the brutalization of entire groups of human beings.

In the American context, too, stereotypes of African people have always served a purpose and transformed along with the needs of those who employ the stereotypes. As Gellert suggests, in the United States the combination of childlikeness and barbarism have historically been contrasted with the alleged authority and maturity of White people:

The dynamic that is set in motion when primal youth is projected by one group onto another is infantilization. . . . The group in the authority position projects its own unconscious primitivity and spiritual darkness onto another group that serves as a hook for this projection, and then insists that this group needs to be tamed, civilized, and reared from its childhood condition. (2002, 244)

The enslaved Africans were made the cultural Other by means of infantilization that persists even today in the American racist slur of the “boy” (discussed in Chapter 3). Because of their “primitivity,” which was in fact only a reflection of the oppressors’ own “darkness” and fears, African people needed to be tamed and put under the rule of the “civilized” White man. In this way, the racist ideas of Black infantilism and savagery worked as a justification for slavery, and as Aline Helg suggests, “racial stereotypes and racial repression were aimed at teaching blacks a lesson: That they should remain in ‘their place’” (2000, 582). Stereotyping fostered an attitude that deemed African Americans as second-class citizens while at the same time strengthening the false sense of superiority for White Americans. Even though other kinds of stereotypes have also concerned African Americans throughout American history—such as antebellum stereotypes of reliability, faithfulness, and diligence,⁸ or the happy-go-lucky images of minstrel entertainment

⁸ As Helg notes, one of the more “positive” stereotypes in the South was “the stereotype of the ‘good black.’ The good black was joyful and childish, lazy but obedient, and faithful. In the South, the good black was personified in the desexualized characters of Rastus, Coon, Uncle, and Mammy” (2000, 596; see also Bogle 2016).

shows—in this dissertation I concentrate on the stereotypes that combine images of infantilism on the one hand and cruelty/beastliness/savagery on the other which were perhaps the most prevalent images in the late 19th century onwards.

After the abolition of slavery in 1865, the “taming” of the newly-freed African Americans continued through lynchings and Jim Crow segregation. To sustain these unimaginable brutalizations, the idea of Black inferiority created by White racists was still needed. As Fanon puts it, “Let us have the courage to say: *It is the racist who creates the inferiorized* (2008a, n.p.; emphasis in original). The continuance of both de jure and de facto racism and anti-Black brutalization was still rationalized by stereotyping. The popular narrative in the collective consciousness of many White Americans was that Black people were degenerate, inferior, and dangerous, and they were not to be given any power, and that there would be a “reversion to savagery” without White control (see Fredrickson 1971, 259). Indeed, a major reason for the othering, dehumanizing, and stereotyping that hovered behind all the abuse of the Black population in the United States was the real or imagined fear of them. One aspect of it was the fear that the newly-freed enslaved people would gain economic or social power.

But, according to Gellert, the fear lay even deeper than that:

The intense fear and hatred that many white Americans have had, and continue to have, of blacks seems to be charged with the terror of Thanatos [Death] and the night. At a very basic, preconscious level, the white American has mixed up African blackness with the blackness of Thanatos and night. (2002, 243)

In line with Fanon’s observations, Gellert notes that White American racism is also based on religion as, for example, the darker skin of African peoples was seen to imply the evil darkness of Lucifer (Gellert 2002, 244). Within this logic, the other pole of the binary, the White man, would therefore see himself as an image of God. Christianity was used to justify slavery in many ways (see, e.g., Kendi 2016, 17, 21), but as Kendi points out, categorizing groups of people according to their skin color predates Christianity (2016, 17). Gellert contends that in addition to the fear of “the evil darkness” or of losing power, racial stereotyping had to do with pure envy “which can be just as unsettling as fear. The instinctual life, being our root condition, is something most desirable” (2002, 242). The so-called White man has sometimes reflected his own inner “darkness” onto the African “and then [held] him in contempt for reminding him of it” (242). This darkness, “the natural, instinctive state out of which we evolved and from which we had to separate with the aid of taboos, laws, and moral codes” is still desirable for White people, Gellert argues (241). Indeed, racial myths and stereotypes are often combinations of fear and desire (see S.

Hall 1997; for information on the (homo)eroticism in slavery, see, e.g., Curry 2017, 147–152, 158–159).

While the African “savages” needed to be “tamed” due to paternalistic reasons as well as power, control, and economic need, there was always a fear of the savage beast involved. This beast was most often male. As Fredrickson notes, “the image of the Negro as (in Ben Tillman’s words) ‘a fiend, a wild beast, seeking whom he may devour’ . . . had its origins in the proslavery imagination, which had conceived of the black man as having a dual nature—he was docile and amiable when enslaved, ferocious and murderous when free” (1971, 276). This alleged nature of “the Black man”—and, thus, the nature of the “the White man” as the hero/God/savior of women and (western) society—was used not only to justify slavery and the racist practices that were adopted after emancipation, but also to soothe White people’s feelings of guilt (see Fredrickson 1971, 282). In short, if Black people were not human beings, it was not unethical to treat them cruelly.

These are exactly the racist mythologies that construct Black male vulnerability. Helg notes that because the stereotypical image of the “Black rapist” had been reinforced after emancipation in the U.S. South, the victims of lynchings were mostly

young black men in the cotton-producing rural areas—uprooted or migrant blacks with weak links to the local community were especially vulnerable. In fact, any black male who did not conform to the Sambo model of servility and contentment was perceived as a threat to white supremacy and could be lynched. (2000, 583)

It was men in particular who were vulnerable to being lynched, often in front of a violent and/or cheering mob. To sustain the sense of manhood of White men and sometimes to satisfy their homoerotic desires (see Curry 2017, 88–93, 147–152, 158–159), Black men needed to be emasculated and castrated, often literally.

According to Joseph Boskin, even the image of the humorous and childlike sambo was constructed to emasculate Black men. He states,

to make the black male into an object of laughter, and, conversely, to force him to devise laughter, was to strip him of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession. Sambo was, then, an illustration of humor as a device of oppression, and one of the most potent in American popular culture. The ultimate objective for whites was to effect mastery: to render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, as an economic adversary. (1988, 14)

In other words, humor was used as a further way of dehumanization and emasculation. However, this also meant that while the sambo seemed

innocuous, and his main function to entertain, the threat that there was a predator under the mask of humor prevailed.

The fear of Black enslaved men impregnating White women, of course, goes back at least to the earliest slave plantation days (and before). Hoch suggests that “the archetypal figure of the threatening super-sensual dark villain or black beast [is] perhaps as old as the Western family itself” (2004, 97). Angela Davis contends that the specific myth of the “Black rapist” was invented to justify lynching, however, only after the Civil War when lynching had become a more popular political weapon to fight the “vast numbers of ex-slaves [who] would not willingly discard their dreams of progress” (1981, 42–43). After the enslaved people in the United States had been emancipated and gained some rights in society, fear among White people fostered the myth of “the Black beast” reappearing. A reason for this seems to be that after emancipation, Black men were no longer physically separated in the same way—and, thus, they were more likely to actually encounter White women, which perhaps intensified the fear of “the Black brute/beast/rapist.”

However, after slavery and especially after the release of the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, the threat of Black men was reemphasized. In the early 20th century, the Ku Klux Klan—who appear as “saviors” of White women in *Birth of a Nation*—gave articulate focus to racist ideas that had been around for a long time. According to Linda Gordon, “local Klans showed and reshewed *Birth of a Nation* throughout the country . . . and used *Birth of a Nation*-type scare talk in speeches and publications: ‘The negro in whose blood flows the mad desire for race amalgamation is more dangerous than a maddened wild beast’” (2017, 40). It was not only the Ku Klux Klan that showed the film, however, but President Woodrow Wilson also screened it in the White House soon after the film was released (see Kendi 2016, 305–6). The wide popularity and acceptance of the film as a truthful representation of the Black male beast and the pure, even sacred, White woman contributed to the continued brutalization of Black men. Staples contends that prior to 1960, “the worst crime possible was the violation of a white woman’s body. To rape black women was tolerable; to sexually assault a white woman was an abomination and a sign of not knowing one’s place” (2004, 122). The stereotyped “purity” of the White woman stood as an explanation for further dehumanization of African American men:

The stereotype of the black rapist oversexualized black men and, by equating their sexuality with bestiality, stripped them of humanness. Simultaneously, the stereotype of the assaulted white woman elevated her to sanctity but also desexualized her and stressed her dependence on the white man, who was supposed to protect her purity. (Helg 2000, 588)

This stereotype was used to justify lynchings, which reached their peak around the 1900s. Since “rape was the central and most horrifying example of the Negro’s allegedly inherent criminality” (Fredrickson 1971, 281), the threat of being hanged or even more severely brutalized to death mostly affected Black men. As T. Hasan Johnson points out, “lynching by mob violence, almost exclusively used on Black men, was the punishment for the mere accusation of rape” (2018, 29). These accusations also concerned any misconducts against White womanhood by very young Black men and boys. The ruthless beating and murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, whose “crime” was that he had apparently wolf whistled a White woman in 1955, was a watershed moment in the struggle to fight these injustices. Till became a symbol for the civil rights movement, and images of him still circulate in contemporary posts on social media of the Black Lives Matter movement.

All the aforementioned matters considered, it becomes clear that stereotypes, constructed as early as the 16th century were, and still are, life-threatening to Black men. Both on the microlevel⁹ of everyday life’s racist encounters and the macrolevel of systemic racism, Black male vulnerability is based on these stereotypes. Indeed, stereotypes can be seen as Black male vulnerability. Concentrating on images concerning African American men, Curry argues that “the Black male is defined as a rapist, a primal beast, to mark him as unsuitable, permanently excluded from civilized society” (2017, 72). According to Curry, “the historical caricaturization(s)” concerning Black men in the United States historically and even—to some extent—today, “relegate him to the Macho, the criminal, the liar, the rapist, the murderer, the thug, the deadbeat father, the abuser, the misogynist, the beast, the beast cub, the super-predator, or the devil” (2017, 197). These images are based on scientific racism and have been used to justify racial oppression for centuries and continue to maintain systemic racism that still prevails.

Viewed in this way, the Black man in the popular imagination is a myth. When I refer to “the Black man” or “the Black male,” I refer to this caricature established within the realm of slavery and Jim Crow, on the one hand, and portrayed, reinforced, and resisted in literature on the other. In my analysis of the literary works of Bambara, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor, I will focus on key stereotypes in each author’s work(s). The stereotypes of the “perpetual boy,” the “bad Black man,” the “primitive beast,” and the “Black macho” are slightly different manifestations of the ambiguous images that were discussed above. What makes it interesting to explore them in these writers’ work is that the same stereotypes have been widely used in the White American canon.

⁹ The terms “macrolevel” and “microlevel” have been defined by Amy Allen (1996). While I find Allen’s definitions very useful, I might employ the terms in a somewhat simpler way, merely expressing the difference between policy-level and the level of everyday encounters.

1.2.1 STEREOTYPES AND THE (WHITE) AMERICAN CANON

As mentioned above, the racist stereotypes concerning African Americans have found their way not only into American film, advertising, and society in general, but into literature as well. In her theoretical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison considers works of fiction by Edgar Allan Poe, Willa Cather, and Ernest Hemingway. She examines the ways in which the White canon has incorporated Black people in works of fiction as what she calls the Africanist presence. According to Morrison, the presence of African Americans in White narratives serves a literary purpose: “This black population was available for meditations on terror—the terror of European outcasts, their dread of failure, powerlessness, Nature without limits, natal loneliness, internal aggression, evil, sin, greed” (1992, 37–38). Linking the literary figures tightly to American cultural history, Morrison contends that

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (52)

In this way, stereotypes were used to other the African self in order to define the White American population not only in reality but also in literature. As mentioned earlier, Fanon also wrote about how Black people are projected onto the western psyche. One of Fanon’s main arguments in *Black Skin, White Masks* is that the Black man internalizes this image of himself as “no good,” which produces an inferiority complex. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison focuses on how this superiority/inferiority binary is reflected in literature. In her own work, as we will see in Chapter 5, Morrison deconstructs these binaries as well as the stereotype of the primitive beast discussed in the previous section. Morrison concludes that the “images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self” (59; emphasis in original), thus emphasizing the ambiguity of racial myths which she also portrays in *Tar Baby* (see Chapter 5).

In addition to Cather, Poe, and Hemingway, many other works in the White American canon continued to reinforce these longstanding images. The most striking ones, such as *Red Rock* (1898) by Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), and *The Clansman* (1905), on which the film *Birth of a Nation* is based, usually introduce the “Black brute” character, who is portrayed as assaulting or trying to assault White women (Fredrickson 1971, 279–281). Other examples with stereotypical portrayals of Black people include, for example, Mark Twain’s classic novel, *The Adventures of*

Huckleberry Finn (1884), which has been criticized for its use of the N-word and minstrel-like characterization (see, e.g., Fikes 2011). Another example, *Gone with the Wind* (1936) by Margaret Mitchell, along with its film version from 1939, is often criticized for its stereotypical representations of Black people (see Goings 1994, 51–52, 64). Other canonical works have altogether left out Black history. For example, as Lois Tyson explains, while *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald has been characterized as an authentic picture of the Jazz Age, the Harlem Renaissance has been omitted from the narrative, and replaced merely by a few stereotypical Black characters (2006, 396–409). Even novels sympathetic to the plight of Black people, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), rely on familiar stereotypes (see Kendi 2016, 193–195).

As these examples perhaps make clear, reading literature can create new stereotypes or reinforce old ones in the reader’s subconscious. I believe, however, that literature can also help in resisting them by changing schemas. According to Stangor and Schaller, “people also possess stereotypes about groups of which they have had little or no direct contact (Hartley, 1946), suggesting that stereotyping occurs in the absence of exemplar-based processing” (1996, 9). Thus, while reading literature can produce stereotyping of unknown groups of people, I believe literature can also work to challenge readers’ stereotypes of people otherwise unfamiliar to them. Whether or not one believes literature is an effective tool in resisting stereotypes, African American literature, specifically, has been used in that function.

1.2.2 STEREOTYPES AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

As discussed in the previous section, literature has had an active role in sustaining racist views of Black people as illiterate, ignorant savages, and violent beasts. It was the racist ideas that originated already in the 16th and 17th centuries, as well as the mythologies and images that were discussed in section 1.2 that African American authors were often writing against. According to Fanon, “some Blacks want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man’s intellect and equal intelligence” (2008a, n.p.) and, it has been assumed that, through literary works, African American writers *must* work to prove the stereotypes wrong. Gates and McKay argue that

the social and political uses to which [African American] literature has been put have placed a tremendous burden on these writers, casting an author and her or his works in the role of synecdoche, a part standing for the ethnic whole, signifying who “the Negro” was, what his or her “inherent” intellectual potential might be, and whether or not the larger group was entitled to the full range of rights and responsibilities of American citizenship. (1997, xxxiv)

African American authors have always had a burden and, thus, a seeming responsibility to fight these racist images and depict “authentic” African American life in their fictional works (see also Price 2017, 56). While not all African American literature is specifically responding to racist stereotypes, it is one of the features found in the tradition. Tyson argues,

the political content of African American literature includes correcting stereotypes of African Americans; correcting the misrepresentation of African Americans in American history and the omission of African Americans from American history; celebrating African American culture, experience, and achievement; and exploring racial issues, including institutionalized racism, internalized racism, intra-racial racism, and the combined oppression of racism, classism, and sexism. (2006, 385)

Notwithstanding the incredibly rich tradition of literary works, Tyson explains, African American literature has been discriminated against in the American literary canon, which has “been used to maintain white cultural hegemony” (361). Moreover, the publishing industry has relied on a “*Eurocentric* definition of *universalism*” (361; emphasis in original). Eurocentrism, “the belief that European culture is vastly superior to all others” (361), has also affected the way African American works have been interpreted. My view, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 5, is that the works analyzed in this dissertation must be read from an Afrocentric perspective, which allows identifying and acknowledging the African roots of the tradition, the history and present of racism, as well as the artistic value African American literature possesses.¹⁰

The role of African American literature has, of course, been a topic of discussion in the Black community for a long time, and specifically the effect it creates in the (White) audience has been an area that has often provoked heated debates. In “Criteria for Negro Art” (1926), W.E.B. Du Bois contended that

all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (qtd. in Peters & Simonson 2004, 46)

¹⁰ While the term *Afrocentric* has slightly different meanings depending on the context and the form of the word (i.e., Afrocentrism/Afrocentricity), I use it here as it is explained in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Centred or focusing on Africa or on cultures of African origin, esp. North American black culture” (n.d.). For more information on Afrocentricity, see Collins 2000, xii, 21; Kendi 2016, 442–443; Kendi 2019, 166–168.

During the Harlem Renaissance, literature was openly used as a tool to fight stereotypes, a phenomenon David Levering Lewis articulated as “civil rights by copyright” (see D. L. Lewis 1979 and Gates 2019).

Many Black writers were also criticizing those stereotypes that were allegedly used in African American literature. Author Richard Wright, for example, “believed that literature should be used as a weapon, argued that amusing stories of folk life allow racists to be entertained by the oppression of black people[, and] thought that literature should instruct, not entertain” (D. L. Smith 2001, n.p.). A target of Wright’s critique was Zora Neale Hurston, who can be seen as a literary foremother of many contemporary African American female writers, most notably Alice Walker. In his review of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Wright criticized Hurston for providing the White audience with a minstrel show in her writing (see, e.g., Ward 2008, 37). The criticism was different, however, depending on the gender of the author in question. Leak notes that “in literary terms many of the novels by African American men are conscious responses to the virulent myths of black inferiority and white supremacy, as they construct black masculinity along a vast scale of psychological complexity” (2005, 3). For some critics, the novels of Black women writers failed to accomplish this, and instead they were accused of airing “dirty laundry” (see hooks 1994, 70; Simien 2006, 49). Moreover, as Biman Basu notes, “Toni Morrison’s novels have repeatedly been subjected to a type of sociological criticism which claims that her characters are not representative of the black community” (1996, 194). At the same time, as mentioned earlier, Black women writers were aware of their role as “theorists of identity” (Thorsson 2013b, 4) and supposedly also knew that their works would be looked at from the point of view of stereotypes. This kind of criticism continued at least until the 1980s and often focused on the representations of Black men.

1.3 BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

Tradition. Now there’s a word that nags the feminist critic. A word that has so often been used to exclude or mispresent women.

Mary Helen Washington (1987, xvii)

As can be seen in the above quote from Washington, and as noted by Tyson, “African American women . . . were excluded from or marginalized by the African American literary canon as defined both by black male writers and by the white literary establishment” (2006, 389). Notwithstanding this marginalization, in the United States, historically, the literature of Black women dates as far back as that of Black men. For example, Phillis Wheatley

is considered the first African American author to publish a book (*Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* 1773; see Gates and McKay 1997, 164–165), and Lucy Terry’s “Bars Fight,” which appeared in print in 1855 after having been transmitted orally for more than 100 years, is considered the first piece of literature by an African American writer (see Gates and McKay 1997, 137). “The Two Offers” by Frances Harper, the first known short story published by an African American woman, appeared in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859 (Andrews, Foster, and T. Harris 2001, 402) and two years later, the first slave narrative by an African American woman, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, was published (see Gates and McKay 1997, 207). Also during the Reconstruction era and the Harlem Renaissance, Black women writers were producing significant works of literature. From Pauline Hopkins and Nella Larsen to Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy West, African American women addressed issues of race, gender, and class by writing in magazines and publishing novels and short stories.

Although many Black women writers can be found among the pioneers of the tradition called African American literature, even after the mid-1900s the African American canon was still male-dominated, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin being perhaps the most famous authors of the era. On the other hand, Zora Neale Hurston, having been successful as an author and a very visible character in the Harlem Renaissance, had nevertheless died penniless and forgotten in 1960. The end of the 1960s was a turning point in the sense that Black women writers started creating a marketplace for their literary works. For instance, Toni Cade Bambara edited her revolutionary anthology, *The Black Woman* (Bambara 2005), in 1970 because, in her own words, her “attention at that time was on kicking the door open so that other Black women’s manuscripts could get a hearing *and they certainly did*” (qtd. in hooks 1999, 231; my emphasis). The same year, the up-and-coming author Alice Walker, published her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (Walker 1996). Within the very same year of 1970, Bambara’s copyeditor, Toni Morrison, wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison 2006), at the age of 39. Alice Walker showed respect for her literary foremother in 1973, when she searched for Hurston’s nameless grave and bought a new headstone that said:

Zora Neale Hurston
“A Genius of the South”
Novelist Folklorist
Anthropologist
1901 1960
(Walker 1983b, 107)¹¹

¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 but had lied about her age earlier (to be able to study), which is why it says 1901 on her gravestone.

Walker also worked to bring Hurston back to the literary market and, of course, became an award-winning author herself. In 1977, Gloria Naylor, a former Jehovah's witness, who had not even known that Black women wrote fiction, read Morrison's first novel and later found inspiration in Morrison's oeuvre (as well as those of Walker and Hurston) when she wrote her own award-winning pieces of literature and thus joined this tradition of Black women writers dedicated to amplifying the voices of African American women (see, for example, Fowler 1996, 13–14).

Not everybody liked the idea of this uprising of Black women writers, however. According to Deborah McDowell, at least by the 1980s, the literary and—to some extent—the popular media was filled with heated debates on the allegedly stereotypical representations of Black men in Black women's writing. McDowell notes,

critics leading the debate [about the representation of black men in black women's texts] have lumped all black women writers together and have focused on one tiny aspect—the image of black men—of their immensely complex and diverse project, despite the fact that if we can claim a center for these texts, it is located in the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience. In other words, though black women writers have made *black women* the subjects of their own family stories, these male readers/critics are attempting to usurp that place for themselves and place themselves at the center of critical inquiry. (McDowell 1995, 126; emphasis in original)

The criticism of the male characters, and generally from male writers, which will be discussed in the analysis chapters in more detail, was one-sided and perhaps even masked the real reason behind it: “An unacknowledged jostling for space in the literary marketplace” (McDowell 1995, 125), in which both Black male and Black female writers were marginalized. In addition to the interest from the reading public, many literary works by Black women started to attract critical interest as well. However, according to E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, Black studies was not free of misogyny either:

Black heterosexual male leadership in the black studies movement either ignored or relegated to secondary status the experiences and contributions of black women who most often were expected to ‘stand by their men’ in the academic struggle for race rights. Such blatant sexism and, in some cases, downright misogyny in the academy occluded the specificity of black women's experiences and contributions to and within black studies, at the level of both departmental formations and programs of study. (2005, 3)

As noted earlier, the selected authors also worked in academia and were among the ones working to amplify Black female voices as theorists and

teachers of Black studies: “Black feminist theorists, including Alice Walker, Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, and Angela Davis, among others, worked to fill in the lacunae created by the omission of black women from the historical narrative of black studies” (Jonson & Henderson 2005, 4). Thus, the selected works were published at a time when Black women started getting more voice in the literary marketplace, in feminist criticism, and in academia. In literary works that were specifically dedicated to bringing up female experiences and voices that had previously been silenced, as McDowell states in the above quote, male experience was never meant to be the focus.

In my view, though, considering the history described in this chapter, the criticism was partly justified. As Leak notes, “the corollary of black female strength, for some black men, is black male weakness. In a society fixated on their emasculation, black men have often felt, rightly or wrongly, that black women have been co-conspirators in this social assault” (2005, 82). My aim is to analyze closely a few of those literary Black male representations that, as noted earlier, do look stereotypical but are actually quite nuanced and have important roles when read through an intersectional lens.

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Leak contends that the predominant “myths associated with black male identity [include] myths of inferiority, sexual prowess, criminality, cultural depravity, and homosexual emasculation” (2005, xii). The racial myths I analyze—some of them overlapping and including those examined by Leak—may not be restricted to those concerning Black men in all possible situations, but my aim is to focus on the gender-specific racist ideas that pertain to African American men. This is important because, as Oforlea suggests, “ethnic identity is plotted on a complex grid of discourses. Thus, in order to discursively recover subjectivity, one must deconstruct the discourses that have historically constructed the identity of minorities” (2017, 216). In the earlier sections, I have given a brief outline of the discourses which have constructed these images in the United States. In this dissertation, I show how the selected texts resist those discourses through representations of vulnerability. More specifically, these texts resist the stereotypical narratives of the “perpetual boy,” the “bad Black man,” the “primitive beast,” and the “Black macho.”

1.4.1 TONI CADE BAMBARA: VULNERABILITY AS EDUCATION

In Chapter 3, I analyze a stereotype I call the “perpetual boy” and how representations of vulnerability work as education in two stories in Bambara’s short story collection *Gorilla, My Love* ([1972] 1981a). I argue that in “The

Hammer Man” and “Raymond’s Run,” manhood is represented as infantile, dependent, and vulnerable. Furthermore, applying disability studies as the theme-specific theory, I show that the Black male characters with unspecified disabilities serve as corporeal metaphors for the vulnerabilities of African American men and tools for social commentary crafted to educate readers. I view Bambara’s political and social commentary as embodied: the racist image of the “perpetual boy” is being resisted through the representation of extremely vulnerable bodies. Moreover, I show how possibly unreliable female narration works to first blur and then focus our vision of Black male vulnerability.

1.4.2 ALICE WALKER: VULNERABILITY AS CONTEXT

Chapter 4 builds on the themes started in the previous chapter. I look at how representation of Black male vulnerability works as context in Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple* ([1982] 1983a), by focusing on the political, historical, and social/interpersonal contexts of the male protagonist. Some early criticism argued that Walker represented African American families and especially their men stereotypically in this novel, and thus attacked African American men in general concerning sexism, misogyny, and bad fatherhood. I investigate the stereotype of the “bad Black man” in Walker’s novel through the notions of the “badman” (see, e.g., Bryant 2003) and internalized racism (see, e.g., Fanon 2008a, 2008b). I argue that the vulnerable side of the Black male character can be observed from the beginning of the story. Vulnerability in *The Color Purple* provides context for the male character’s behavior. Furthermore, I argue that it is namely the female focalization that enables readers to perceive and understand Black male vulnerability in this novel.

1.4.3 TONI MORRISON: VULNERABILITY AS PERSUASION

In Chapter 5, I examine the male protagonist of Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* ([1981] 2004) as a trickster figure and concentrate on the stereotype of the “primitive beast” as introduced by Pickering (2001) and Curry (2017). This chapter is based on an earlier article (Kolehmainen 2018), where I argue that the narrative persuades readers to both lean on racist stereotypes and feel sympathy for the male character, and, thus, forces readers to scrutinize their own prejudices. In this chapter, I also argue that the masking and unmasking of Black male vulnerability in the course of this novel is a form of persuasion and thus a type of authorial trick. I contend that Morrison plays with readers’ sympathies through multiple focalizations, constructing and deconstructing

stereotypes and representations of vulnerability in order to make a sociopolitical point.

1.4.4 GLORIA NAYLOR: VULNERABILITY AS ATONEMENT

In Chapter 6, I analyze the Black macho stereotype and representation of homosexuality focusing on one of the male characters in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* ([1982] 1983) and *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998). Also applying Black queer theory ("quare theory"), I explore how Black male vulnerability is exposed once the male character gains narrative voice. Building on what I have found in the earlier chapters of my thesis, I suggest that Naylor makes amends not only to those readers who found the focus on Black machismo in the first novel offensive, but also to the Black male characters who are now able to tell their stories. Thus, Naylor's second novel represents Black male vulnerability—resisted in her first novel—as atonement and serves to challenge the image of the Black macho.

After these analysis chapters, in Chapter 7, I summarize my main findings and arguments, as well as comment on both the significance and limitations of my research when considering present-day discourses. Next, however, I introduce the theoretical framework of the dissertation.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter offers a brief outline of the key theories I will apply in my analysis of the selected literary works. Starting with Black feminism and intersectionality, I then move on to defining vulnerability as a concept and explaining how it is viewed in this particular context.

2.1 BLACK FEMINISM AND MASCULINITIES

The major interest of this dissertation is the representation of male characters in the works of Bambara, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor, and the texts studied were carefully selected in keeping this objective in mind. In each of the works, there is a male character who is marginalized not only because of his race but also for some other reason (disability, gender, class, sexuality). In other words, even though particular stereotypes and vulnerabilities dominate each narrative, the identities examined can best be understood from an intersectional point of view. Briefly stated, intersectionality refers to a theoretical framework that views social categories (race, class, gender etc.) and systems of oppression (racism, classism, sexism etc.) as intersecting with (as opposed to adding to) each other and thus creating experiences of discrimination, especially for marginalized people (see, e.g., Crenshaw 1991, Collins 2000, and Bailey 2009). In the following sections, I will briefly explain the history and functions of intersectional approaches and how they can be applied to the study of Black male vulnerability.

2.1.1 INTERSECTIONAL PARADIGMS

Even though intersectionality has quite recently become a common concept in popular discourses, in academia the notion of intersectionality has been in use for decades. Moreover, ideas that could now be referred to as intersectional or Black feminist, were expressed even further back in history. Black feminism is a framework that bases itself on the fact that Black women are oppressed due to their gender *and* race, and sometimes class (“triple oppression;” see, for instance, Lynn 2014). The paradigm became popular in the era of the civil rights movement and the second wave of feminism, because both “traditional” (White) feminism and Black nationalism failed to include Black women (for more information, see Breines 2006 and Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, when the literary works analyzed in this dissertation were published, Black feminist thought was built on disappointment over racism in the Women’s movement and misogyny in the Black liberation movement.

There had been Black feminist thinkers, however, a long time before African American lawyer and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989. Early Black feminists include, for instance, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) who gave an impromptu speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” at a Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851. In addition, “the mother of Black feminism” (Simien 2006, 3), Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964), Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911), and Ida B. Wells (1862–1931, see Wells & Duster 2020) can all be seen as early Black feminist thinkers. In the 1940s, Pauli Murray coined the term “Jane Crow” to gather attention to the fact that Black women were also affected by sexism in addition the Jim Crow laws (see, e.g., Saxby 2020, 148–149). The Combahee River Collective, which included thinkers such as Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde, gave its Black feminist statement in 1977, mainly focusing on the Black lesbian experience (see Combahee 2000, 264–274; Taylor 2017). In the 1980s, Deborah K. King coined the term “multiple jeopardy,” yet another way to understand the subject position of Black women, in 1988. These and other Black feminist thinkers used intersectionality to “render visible assumptions of whiteness embedded in ideas about womanhood and feminism and to lay bare the androcentrism at work in ideas about race and civil rights” (May 2015, 7). Even though Black feminists of the post-civil rights era criticized the fact that both White feminism and Black nationalism had disregarded Black women, many of them spoke for solidarity with Black men. For example, the Combahee River Collective Statement includes the following account: “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism” (Combahee 2000, 267). They needed, however, theory with which to explain their specific experiences.

As mentioned above, the term intersectionality, which was primarily formed for the purposes of women of color, only entered the theoretical discussions in 1989. In one of her first articles on the concept, Crenshaw states that “because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (1991, 1244; emphasis in original). As noted in many books about intersectionality, and explained by Alison Bailey, “categories (e.g., race, gender) and systems of domination (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy) are neither separate nor competing frameworks” (2009, 17). Instead, each one shapes the other, constructing a very specific experience in each case and in different situations: “Race and gender should be conceptualized not as ‘race+gender,’ instead they should be thought of in terms of ‘gendered racism’ or how ‘gender is racialized’” (17).

In addition to Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory, Collins’ “matrix of domination” is another paradigm constructed to help illuminate identity-based oppression. Collins states that “race, gender, class, citizenship status,

sexuality, and age shape any group's social location in the transnational matrix of domination" (2000, 245). Moreover, according to Collins, "the term *matrix of domination* describes this overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained" (227–228; emphasis in original). These oppressions and privileges appear in structures of society and also on the interpersonal level of everyday life¹² and are thus highly relational. When it comes to access to "positions of authority, unearned benefits, and traditions of resistance," each group has its individual experience (247–248). Even though all social groups have some privileges and oppressions, Collins continues, our experiences are not equal. While intersectionality theory resists hierarchies between different social categories (for example, that gender would be more important than race), some groups and individuals do enjoy more privileges than others.

As mentioned earlier, the selected authors were also interested in the (de)construction of privilege and oppression and took part in discussions of Black feminism. In addition to their fictional works, some of them helped to create new theory and to anthologize Black feminist texts. *The Black Woman* anthology, which was edited by Bambara, "helped to create an intellectual climate where feminist theory focusing on black experience could emerge" (hooks 1999, 232) and was thus groundbreaking. "Without the publication of this anthology," hooks argues, "later feminist works focusing on black life might never have been written" (232). Another example is womanism, a term coined by Alice Walker originally in 1979, which refers to a broader category that includes feminism as a subtype. More specifically, Walker states, "womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (1983b, xii). In her 1983 essay collection, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker gives a four-point definition of womanism or a womanist. Walker notes that a womanist is "a black feminist or a feminist of color" (xi)¹³ and

a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (xi; emphasis in original)

¹² Collins states that "discriminatory practices of everyday lived experience" take place in what she calls the "*interpersonal domain of power*" (299; emphasis in original). In addition, because these practices "are so routine [they] typically go unnoticed or remain unidentified" (2000, 299).

¹³ Sheena C. Howard notes that "womanism emerged out of 'Black feminist thought,' but, the term 'Black feminism' was not defined until 1990 in Patricia Hill Collins's book, *Black Feminist Thought*" (2014, 31).

It is worthwhile to note that neither womanism nor feminism is restricted to only one kind: in addition to womanism and Black feminism, there are Africana womanism, womanist theology, African feminism, and Africana feminism, all of which are defined and interpreted in various ways (see, for example, Collins 2000; Eaton 2004). Womanism, as Walker defines it, stands as a good starting point for my analysis because of its inclusive approach.

Even though intersectionality is now an established part of academic discourse, and has even become a buzz word in more popular ones, it is by no means free from criticism. Vivian M. May, for instance, talks about some of the problems in using intersectionality, even referring to an “Intersectionality Backlash” (2015, 6). According to May, scholars often use intersectionality in ways that are merely nominal or descriptive (7, 15). This “epistemic misrecognition” (224) of intersectionality might lead to the reinforcement of “the kinds of single-axis, gender-first thinking (and thus erasures and hierarchies) that intersectionality opposes” (2). Scholars might, for example, depoliticize or flatten intersectionality (2). Referring to Champeau and Shaw, Sheena C. Howard notes that we often “assume that with the addition of each form of difference, oppression is worsened” and “do not realize that each oppression actually gives shape to the others and that the intersection of gender, race, and class is itself what structures each person’s relationships of domination and subordination” (2014, 5). These accounts do not criticize intersectionality as a theory per se, but the ways in which it is used by (often well-intentioned) scholars.

Curry’s commentary on intersectionality theory mostly concerns its failure to include Black men. He maintains that studying the lives of Black men and boys is considered by academics either irrelevant or antagonistic because it distracts from the focus on the experience of Black women (2017, 208–209). Even in the work of those scholars who apply intersectionality theory to heterosexual Black men, Curry argues, there is a general lack of focus on the multiplicities of Black men’s lived experiences and an emphasis on their alleged desire for power (211–213). Along the same lines, T. Hasan Johnson argues that

the rightness of intersectionality theory is not based on the merits of Black feminism per se, but on the predominant numbers of Black females who comprise Black academe, especially in gender studies where courses are mostly taught by women . . . to women . . . for women. For those who question Black feminism, particularly Black males who do so, there are no acceptable theoretical spaces in which to reside. (2018, 38)

While intersectionality can be applied to Black male experiences and identities in theory, in practice it might be seen as inappropriate because of the otherwise

significant popularity of Black feminist studies and focus on female experiences.

Curry argues that intersectionality as a method, while used in studying men as well, is essentializing in that it denounces all men as patriarchal and privileged due to their gender, even though Black men obviously suffer from gender-related oppression:

The exact disadvantages men of color—specifically, heterosexual Black males—confront seems largely absent in intersectionality theory. Some intersectionality thinkers assert that Black males have privilege and advantages over Black women because they are male; others suggest that while Black men are shown to be the greatest victims of incarceration and police brutality, the attention to their suffering excludes the suffering of Black women, as well as that of Black gay and lesbian groups. (2017, 208–209; see also Curry 2021a, 132–133)

The seeming consensus in gender studies is that men, as part of patriarchy, experience privilege rather than oppression, and thus cannot be viewed as experiencing gender-based discrimination and victimization.

It is true that there is a scarcity of attention paid to the experiences of men as intersectional. One reason for this, according to Charise L. Cheney, is in the history of feminist theorizing that I outlined above:

Not surprisingly, feminist theorists and social scientists, particularly women of color, forged new ground during the 1980's and '90s [*sic*] in exploring the interlocking forces of race and gender on the body politic. Despite these important inroads, studies of the impression of race and gender on the American political terrain continue to focus on the efforts and activism of women while its imagining and existence as a masculinist domain is comparatively underexplored. (2005, 31)

In a way, the urgency to study the experiences of Black women and their societal position in the post-civil rights era has led to the relative absence of (intersectional) studies on Black masculinities. While my aim is not to theorize intersectionality any further, I will use it because I believe it is a suitable tool in analyzing Black male vulnerability.

However, there are also clear tensions between intersectional theory and Black male studies. For example, some intersectional theories have fixated on the stereotypical characterizations of Black men as violent and sexually aggressive, seemingly unable to move beyond them and to view Black men as nuanced. Curry argues,

Black males lack structural power over Black women in American society (Johnson, 2018; Lemelle, 2010). Consequently, many of the analyses concerning Black male privilege and Black patriarchy focus on

the physical threats Black males are thought to pose to Black female, queer, and trans-bodies interpersonally rather than systemic advantages in employment, economic mobility, or wealth. (2021a, 133)

That is, lacking sociological evidence of Black male power within the structures of society, some scholars end up leaning on and, thus, possibly sustaining, the racist stereotypical images of Black men. In addition, some of the Black feminist analyses of Black men are based more on personal experience than scholarly evidence (for example, Wallace 2015). Curry also argues that many of these theories view Black masculinity as merely imitating the power of its White counterpart:

The last 30 years of intersectionality theory have shown remarkable continuity with the preexisting theories developed by racist criminologists and white feminists throughout the 1970s. Rooted primarily in the racist construct of Black manhood as imitative, a deviant mimetic imaginary of white masculinity, contemporary intersectional analyses of Black males posit their existence as primarily compensatory. (2021a, 148)

These analyses reduce Black masculinity into merely an attempt from Black men to gain power similar to that of White men to compensate for the oppression they have been subjected to. Acknowledging that what Curry argues is a real problematic in how some intersectional theories describe and analyze Black masculinity, and that many intersectional analyses do concentrate on Black men as pathological and deviant, my aim in this dissertation is not to use intersectionality in that manner. While the mimetic “theories frame Black masculinity as compensatory or defined by [Black men’s] lack of real manhood” (Curry 2022, 525), I use intersectionality as a lens to analyze Black male characters but, at the same time, attempt to distance myself from any of the deficit-based theories or analyses of Black men which Curry refers to in his work (2017, 2021a, 2022).

I use an intersectional approach to analyze Black male vulnerability because of both the subject positions represented in each literary text, and the authors’ dedication to Black feminist thought which is tightly related to intersectionality. Although accused of stereotypical and negative representations of Black men in their works (see T. Harris 1984; McDowell 1995; Wahlström 2009), African American women writers—staying loyal to womanist thought—aspired for the freedom of the whole community, men and women (see Eaton 2004; Walker 1983b). In my view, both the understanding of Black men as patriarchal in gender studies and the reading of the selected literary characters as stereotypical are incomplete interpretations. My dissertation provides a complementary reading with the focus on Black male vulnerability. I will analyze the Black male characters in these feminist works

as gendered beings, which is a perspective previously left understudied. With the help of intersectionality as another frame in addition to Black male studies, I will analyze how the male characters' race and gender intersect with each other and with other kinds of social stratification and construct identities that attach themselves to the concept of vulnerability in multiple ways.

2.1.2 MEN'S STUDIES

Even though my main focus is on intersectionality, it can be useful to make a few notes on men's studies, or masculinities studies, here, particularly because the formulation of the field occurred simultaneously with the renaissance of Black women writers. More specifically, research on masculinities took shape in the early 1980s but is still a considerably smaller field than feminist studies. One reason for that may be the fact that men, generally, are seen as the norm (see, for example, Kimmel 2012). The fact that all universalizing theories of humanity have been rooted in the normativity of masculinity, has often led to the omission of experiences of other subjectivities, but has also left some masculinities and groups of men under-researched and underacknowledged. For example, The American Psychology Association released its very first guidelines dealing with men and boys in August 2018, only then recognizing that "men—especially white, heterosexual men—were overrepresented in Western studies, and their psychological needs and habits were considered more universal than they actually were" (Fortin 2019).

Even in men's studies, certain assumptions of normative manhood can be perceived. Gary Kinsman argued in 1987 that "the literature of the men's movement has tended to produce an image of men that is white, middle-class, and heterosexual" (2004, 165). This has resulted, Kinsman continues, in that "socially organized power relations among and between men based on sexuality, race, class, or age have been neglected" (166). Sociologist Michael Kimmel's¹⁴ book, *Manhood in America*, even includes the following disclaimer from the author himself: "This book describes only one version of 'Manhood in America'—albeit the dominant version" (2012, 5). What Kimmel refers to, is a "singular 'hegemonic' masculinity that is prescribed as the norm" (4).

Hegemonic masculinity, as the sociologist behind the concept, R. W. Connell explains it, refers to a "masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations" (2005, 76) and always "presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities" (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 846). Along with Connell's theory of multiple masculinities, the notion of hegemonic masculinity is useful in shedding light

¹⁴ At this point I find it necessary to state that by mentioning Dr. Kimmel, I am by no means supporting his alleged behavior described, for instance, in *The Guardian* (see Ratcliffe 2018).

on the fact that not all groups of men occupy positions of power and enjoy privileges all the time. When it comes to Black masculinities, however, application of the concept becomes challenging. The “dominant version” of manhood in America still being the “straight, white, middle-class, native-born” man (Kimmel 2012, 4), non-White men fall under the category of “marginalization” in Connell’s theory (2005, 80). As Curry argues, “Connell’s theory excludes racialized males from the hegemonic masculinity paradigm, but in the United States the dominance of [Black feminist critic Michelle] Wallace’s assimilationist account of Black masculinity makes Black men de facto patriarchs” (2017, 17). Thus, the position of Black men in the US is problematic because they are seen only as marginalized in men’s studies, and as patriarchs in feminist discourses due to their gender.

In addition to Wallace’s book, feminist works of Black masculinities include bell hooks’ *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (2005). Similar to what was discussed in Chapter 1, hooks acknowledges that Black men are “seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers” in the United States (2004, xii). While hooks recognizes the historicity of the aforementioned stereotypes and how they still function in society (2004, 66, 86), she nevertheless at times relies on (and hence, possibly reinforces) those same stereotypes. According to Curry, hooks understands these stereotypical characteristics as originating from the fact that Black men are *men*: “While class status accounted for the different behaviors of various groups of Black males in white sociological and criminological theories, hooks suggests the origin of Black male sexual pathology and aggression is masculinity itself” (Curry 2021a, 138). Moreover, hooks stresses Black men’s own responsibility for their situation, arguing that the only way for them to avoid this life-threatening position is to embrace feminism. Indeed, hooks argues that Black men have agency in their own oppression because they do not resist but in fact conform to the stereotypes that concern them: “Taught to believe that a real male is fearless, insensitive, egocentric, and invulnerable . . . a black man blocks out all emotions that interfere with this ‘cool’ pose” (2004, 61, 80–82). As a proposed solution, hooks calls individual Black men into action to challenge these notions and reminds that “anyone who claims to be concerned with the fate of black males in the United States” should acknowledge and voice the importance of Black male resistance to patriarchy (2004, xiv). Of course, hooks persuades men to resist patriarchy because it hurts them, too.

Even though I do not agree with all of hooks’ arguments in these two theoretical books on men and masculinities, I will use them to the extent that they very insightfully address Black male (emotional) vulnerability. hooks states, for example, that “the unhappiness of men in relationships, the grief men feel about the failure of love, often goes unnoticed in our society precisely

because the patriarchal culture really does not care if men are unhappy” (2005, 5). In this way, patriarchy forces men to “engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation” (66) and yet, hooks maintains, “there has never been an ongoing effort made to address male pain” (110).

The reason for the shortage of consistent research on pain and oppression particular to Black men is, I believe, that while “Black men and boys lag behind on practically every population indicator, from education and income to health and mortality” (Curry 2019, 29; see also T. H. Johnson 2018, 35), they are still considered—as the benefactors of patriarchy—having privilege because of their maleness. However, one cannot simply compare the privileges White men enjoy to those of Black men and bundle them under the umbrella of male privilege (see, for instance, T. H. Johnson 2018, 37). According to Curry, even “academic discourse(s) of race/class/gender—presupposing the infinite power of all male bodies—prefigures a conceptual calculus dedicated to eradicating the vulnerability of Black men because they are men” (2017, 195). Black men are often seen as patriarchal, or trying to achieve (if not already holding) power similar to that possessed by White men because they are of the same gender. As shown in the previous sections, however, in reality the experiences of these groups of men differ drastically. Both Curry and Johnson also discuss the physical and sexual violence that Black men have been, and still are, subjected to. Issues like this cannot be dealt with the premise of Black men as essentially patriarchal. Instead of simply assuming that Black men accept and conform to stereotypes of invulnerability, it is important to acknowledge that they are also victimized, not despite, but *because* of their gender.

Notwithstanding the seemingly stereotypical representations of men in the literary works analyzed in this dissertation, I argue that the selected authors did reflect this aspect of manhood in their works. In fact, feminist scholar Beverly Guy-Sheftall expresses the need to analyze men “as gendered beings” in an article aptly entitled “African-American Studies: Legacies & Challenges: ‘What Would Black Studies Be If We’d Listened to Toni Cade?’”:

Men are as influenced by their gender as women. They have also actively participated in the project of gender construction and have been profoundly shaped by prevalent notions of what it means to be a man in American society. Since this is the case, scholars must examine men of African descent as gendered beings and continue to mark the ways in which their racial experiences have been shaped by gender. Men’s lives have been impacted by particular masculinity constructs as have women’s lives been shaped by specific femininity constructs. That is, scholars need to explore more fully and systematically how gender systems and gender constructs within particular African diasporic contexts, over time, and across class, have impacted the lived experiences of people of African descent. (2005, 23–24)

Intersectionality, I believe, offers a useful tool to analyze Black male experiences as Guy-Sheftall proposes, because it has worked effectively in analyzing how “women’s lives [have] been shaped by specific femininity constructs.” Being mindful of not tripping over the assumption of a singular “Black manhood/masculinity,” I agree with Oforlea, who suggests, “we need to continue to articulate, as historically and as carefully as we can, the cultural contexts that make black men different from one another” (2017, 217). Keeping that in mind, I unpack some of the aspects particular to Black male vulnerability in the next section, starting, however, with defining the concept of vulnerability.

2.2 VULNERABILITY

As seen in the earlier sections, my research is grounded in recent developments in sociology, gender studies, and philosophy. I examine works of art produced in a particular time and place, which to me means understanding the texts in the context of their cultural history. One could say that my research is data-driven because I have limited my methodologies to those which I have needed to analyze the particular themes that have arisen from the selected primary sources. The most important of these themes is the study of Black male vulnerability. In the following sections, I will briefly explain some the complex meanings of vulnerability, and how the term has been applied to the study of Black men and boys.

2.2.1 VULNERABILITY: DEFINITIONS

Before examining the gender- and race-specific subtype chosen to be the focus of this dissertation, Black male vulnerability, let us look at the more fundamental aspects of vulnerability a bit more closely. According to Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, the concept is rooted in, on the one hand, “philosophical ontological discussions, notably from the works of Hannah Arendt (1958) and Emmanuel Levinas (1969 [1961]; 2003 [1972])” (2019, 3), and, on the other hand “the sciences, notably ecology, geography, and later the studies of risk, disaster, natural hazards, and the insecurity of technological systems (see Burton et. al 1978; Bankoff 2007)” (2019, 4). Even though I am not focusing on philosophy or natural sciences, I believe that all these discussions mentioned could be related to the vulnerability of individual human beings or literary characters. What is most important here, briefly stated, is that the profoundness of general human vulnerability lies in its ontological nature.

As an ontological or inherent matter, vulnerability is, of course, common to all human beings. It is specifically the relations that we have with other people, societal systems, and nature, that makes us dependent and vulnerable, open

to be hurt, emotionally or physically. However, as is commonly misperceived, vulnerability is by no means a synonym for weakness. Even though emotional vulnerability can be seen as a sort of sensitivity, vulnerability refers more to the openness to receive and experience all kinds of feelings than to the ability to endure them. Quite the opposite: opening up to whatever life brings often requires and develops genuine strength in a human being. In this way, vulnerability can be seen as a source of possible harm and suffering, but also as a necessity in connecting with other human beings, and a source of true beauty and courage, as pointed out by, for instance, Martha Nussbaum (2001) and Brené Brown (2012). Moreover, as Judith Butler argues, “vulnerability is not a subjective disposition” (2016, 25): all of us are dependent on each other and simultaneously vulnerable to be hurt by each other.

This is why dependence and vulnerability—while not synonymous—are more often than not conceived as interrelated. For example, the very corporeal vulnerability of newborn children makes them dependent on their community in order to survive and, when people reach older age, they might become more dependent on others again. In addition to age, social categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, and class, also affect a subject’s scope of vulnerability (see, for example, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014). This means that vulnerability is also a social construct, engendered and reinforced by power relations between individuals and groups of people. What this all comes down to is the fundamental relationality of both human life and vulnerability (see, for example, Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016; Honkasalo 2019; and Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds 2014).

The connection between vulnerability and social relations has been investigated by Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016). They suggest that, instead of seeing vulnerability as purely ontological or socially-constructed, it could be argued that vulnerability is “part of social relations”:

So if we argue instead that vulnerability emerges as part of social relations, even as a feature of social relations, then we make (a) a general claim according to which vulnerability ought to be understood as relational and social, and (b) a very specific claim according to which it always appears in the context of specific social and historical relations that call to be analyzed concretely. (2016, 4)

I find the idea that vulnerability is social and relational and appears “in the context of social and historical relations” (4) very useful for my research. I believe that vulnerability cannot be studied in a vacuum, but the historical contexts and social relations within which the specific manifestations of vulnerability have evolved and exist must be considered. It is important to note that because vulnerability is a part of social relations, transforming these

relations might alter the degree of vulnerability on the level of either individuals or groups. Moreover, social relations affect and are affected by social categories, which are often constructed and maintained by stereotyping, as explained earlier. In addition to rethinking the relationship between vulnerability and resistance, Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay also hope to deconstruct the passive role of vulnerability: “The received definitions of vulnerability as passive (in need of active protection) and agency as active (based on a disavowal of the human creature as ‘affected’) requires a thoroughgoing critique” (2016, 3). In other words, vulnerability does not have to be something one has to overcome in order to be active (in resistance) (see also, Butler 2016, 12). In my view, vulnerability can be used as a source of resistance, particularly resisting set social categories and hence subverting the stereotypes that lean on and construct those categories.

While vulnerability involves all of us as social and relational beings, vulnerability is not always a fixed state, and even the sources of it can be variable. As taxonomized by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, there are three sources of vulnerability (2014, 7–18). *Inherent* vulnerabilities, as discussed above, “arise from our corporeality, our neediness, our dependence on others, and our affective and social natures” (7). This source of vulnerability concern all human beings, although there might be periods when our neediness and dependence on others is emphasized, such as when we are newborn. However, if vulnerability arises from a specific context, the authors state, it is called *situational*. In that case, vulnerabilities “may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic, or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (7). Lastly, “pathogenic vulnerabilities” refer to a “subset of situational vulnerabilities . . . [which] may be generated by . . . morally dysfunctional or abusive interpersonal and social relationships and sociopolitical oppression or injustice” (9). An example provided by the authors is people with cognitive disabilities who fall victim to sexual abuse by the very people that were supposed to take care of them (9). In addition to these three sources of vulnerability, Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds also name two states of vulnerability: “Dispositional [potential] and occurrent [actual]” (1). For example, while unvaccinated people are *dispositionally* vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease, people infected with the coronavirus are *occurrently* vulnerable to it and need immediate care.

As can be perceived from this brief overview, pointing out the scope of vulnerability of certain individuals or groups of people might be complicated. Honkasalo explains why vulnerability classifications can sometimes even be ethically problematic:

In biopolitics¹⁹ and neoliberal governmentality, vulnerability has been increasingly deployed in the classification and consequent management and control of people. Characteristic for the classification is that it is not

carried out by “vulnerable” people themselves but by the governmental institutions from the outside. (2019, 9)

In addition to the fact that “vulnerable people” (9) might have their “political agency. . . discount[ed]” (Butler 2016, 22) by having no voice in decision-making on a policy-level, assigning vulnerability to groups of people might be problematic because it may lead to exposure to paternalistic power and control (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016 2–3, 6; Butler 2016, 22–25). Moreover, as vulnerability has been stereotypically linked to both femininity and the lack of agency, its use has sometimes been resisted in order to not reinforce representations of women as lacking agency (see, Butler 2016, 22–23). In addition, while defining all humans as equally vulnerable has been criticized as inadequate and ill-informed (Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay 2016, 6), defining a person or a group as vulnerable in comparison with others, always contains a risk of discrimination against or patronization of the individual or group in question (6; see also Fineman 2008). Here, I believe, intersectionality becomes important. My intention in using intersectionality as a lens is not to calculate which group or individual is more vulnerable than others, but to help examine the different matrices in which vulnerability is constructed, whether they are universal, corporeal, social, racial, and/or cultural.

2.2.2 BLACK MALE VULNERABILITY

Examining the specific matrices in which Black male vulnerability is constructed and sustained takes us back to stereotyping. As discussed above, in the United States, many stereotypes and racist procedures concerning Black men have been justified by the alleged vulnerability of “the White woman.” In order to construct the Black male beast, that is, White women have been stereotyped as vulnerable to rape by Black men and, hence, in need of protection from White men, who were thus stereotyped as powerful and in control. Black women, for their part, have often been stereotyped as strong, a trait which, in some cases, is viewed as the antonym of vulnerability (see, e.g., Wallace 2015; on literary representation of strong Black women, see T. Harris 2001). Black men, then, despite their obvious vulnerability to being lynched or victimized by violent police officers, among other things, have been forced into a caricature that represents them as threats to other people. The main problematic seems to be that, in order to construct and maintain White supremacy, Black men are infantilized and feminized, but at the same time, they are constructed as violent brutes and sexual predators, and thus threats both to women and White men.

Hence, Black men experience a position that Curry calls the “*Man-Not*,” meaning that they are not seen as men like White men (in relation to whom

they are, thus, feminized) and feminized but not female (2017, 6; emphasis in original). Curry contends that, while Black men cannot achieve power or hegemonic masculinity because of this process of feminization, they are nevertheless categorized as hypermasculine in society and patriarchal in academic discourse. Even in the academy, the Black male “is thought of only as a perpetrator, never a victim” (9). Moreover, as discussed above, Black men are not generally seen as gendered: “Gender, *being synonymous with female*, is centered as the dominant theoretical voice of Black subjectivity and vulnerability” (5; emphasis in original). This has led, Curry continues, to the apparent “exclusion of Black men from the gender category” (132) and “a singular analysis that confines all of their disadvantages to racism” (132). In other words, while the oppression of Black women, for instance, is seen as stemming from two or more forms of social stratification simultaneously—of *intersectional* forms of oppression—the suffering of Black men is seen as merely the result of racism or even as a result of their own internalization of patriarchal roles. In brief, Curry uses the term “*Black male vulnerability*” to “capture the disadvantages that Black males endure compared with other groups; the erasure of Black males’ actual lived experience from theory; and the violence and death Black males suffer in society” (29; emphasis in original). This shows that, even though Black male vulnerability is a concept that refers to a specific group of people, it can be employed in discussions taking place on many levels of society.

Of course, many forms of Black male vulnerability also affect groups of people other than Black men. I will, however, scrutinize forms of vulnerability that are explicitly gender-specific and race-specific to African American men. Robert Reid-Pharr gives specific examples of these kinds of vulnerabilities:

“The Black Man,” as the rhetoric of both right and left would have it, is the most *unfree* of American citizens. As one-third of the black males in this country languish in prisons or under the stewardship of assorted probation and parole boards; as black men continue to be overrepresented in the drug trade, and among the legions of persons with chronic illness—HIV, cancer, heart disease, alcoholism; as we, give our lives over to violence or to a certain silent despair, we have become the very emblem of ugliness, bestiality, and barbarism by which the rest of America, particularly white America, can view itself as liberal and free. (1996, 48; emphasis in original)

Reid-Pharr describes here the way the historical images that were discussed in section 1.2 governed where Black men often ended up in the United States towards the end of the 20th century: prisons, hospitals, and the grave. It is important to note here that Reid-Pharr’s article was published around the same time as the latest of my selected works, Gloria Naylor’s *The Men of Brewster Place*, which portrays these problematics of Black masculinity.

However, these stereotypes and vulnerabilities have certainly not vanished from contemporary discourses. Basing his arguments on empirical data, T. Hasan Johnson contends that society is still, more than two decades later, organized so that “the plight of Black males, apparently, begins at conception, not when the public designates them as a threat in their early teens” (2018, 34). This means that, compared to Black women, White men, and White women, Black men are more likely to die from homicide, from “unintentional injury” in their childhood, and even before they are born (34). If they reach adolescence, then they are stereotyped as “perpetual boys,” “bad Black men,” “primitive beasts,” “Black machos,” and so on by systemic racism and popular narratives in film, TV, and literature. In the light of these notions, it is clear that anti-Black misandry is systemic, and Black male vulnerability is caused by racist mythologies, policies, and procedures.

Despite this, during the course of my research, I have noticed that Black male vulnerability is often taboo as a subject of any discussion. Not least because it may be a sign of anti-Black misandry in popular and academic discourses, this silence is one of the reasons why I think it is crucial to examine this theme more closely. However, as will become clear in my analysis chapters, Black male vulnerability was not a completely suppressed topic in the works of the selected African American women writers, even if they were criticized for providing stereotypical, negative representations of Black men.

2.2.3 MY TAKE ON VULNERABILITY

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will look at Black male vulnerability as the position in which African American men are put in a society that sees them as threats and leaves them open to being hurt, both physically and emotionally. Black male vulnerability is constructed in the intersections of race and gender, but also when race and gender intersect with other kinds of social stratification, such as ability, class, and sexuality. In my view, Black male vulnerability appears on the macrolevel of societal norms, social structures, and institutions as well as the microlevel of everyday communication and individual men’s experiences. May refers to “the *micropolitical* level of everyday life and . . . the *macropolitical* level of social structures, material practices, and cultural norms” (2015, 5; my emphasis). To highlight the fact that not everything I talk about is political, I use the term microlevel and macrolevel (see also Allen 1996, 267–268). The latter also entails vulnerability’s connection to emotions: the willingness to feel and show one’s own feelings, trusting and being dependent on others, even though it renders one open to be wounded emotionally. While vulnerabilities are often constructed by historically racist policies, vulnerability manifests itself in

everyday human relations, and can occasionally be, ironically, the prerequisite for survival.

Thus, according to the taxonomies offered by Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, I view Black male vulnerability in the United States as both inherent (linked to physical harm they are vulnerable to as human beings), situational (linked to the contexts of oppression in a racist society) and often also pathogenic (linked to sociopolitical injustice, police brutality) (2014, 7–9). While the vulnerabilities from these various sources are, no doubt, overlapping, I will consider some specific instances in my analysis of the literary works. In short, this dissertation shows that stereotypes concerning Black males are resisted in the selected fictional works through representations of vulnerability. In the following chapter, I begin my analysis with not only the first published works, but also works which to me best illustrate these binary discourses of male/female subjectivity and how intersectionality can be applied to an analysis of Black men and boys.

3 THE PERPETUAL BOY: VULNERABILITY AS EDUCATION IN TONI CADE BAMBARA'S "THE HAMMER MAN" AND "RAYMOND'S RUN"¹⁵

But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with the nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements.

Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015a, 71)

In the previous chapters, I described how stereotypes of Black men have been constructed historically and sustained in their many forms in both life and literature through different periods of time. In what follows, I analyze how representations of vulnerability resist those stereotypes. As the quote from Coates' letter to his son in *Between the World and Me* (2015a) demonstrates, Black (male) vulnerability often attaches itself to the inescapable destruction of the body. Coates even states that "in America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*" (2015a, 103; emphasis in original). As Fanon notes, this destruction of the Black body specifically concerns Black men: "But the black man is attacked in his corporeality. It is his tangible personality that is lynched. It is his actual being that is dangerous" (Fanon 2008a, n.p.). As discussed in Chapter 1 and 2, racist mythologies constructed the Black man's body as a threat and therefore placed it in danger of extermination. The literary works explored in this chapter, Toni Cade Bambara's "The Hammer Man" ([1966] 1981b) and "Raymond's Run" ([1971] 1981c), were first published just a few years after the 1964 Harlem Riots, which followed the police killing of 15-year-old James Powell. Bambara, who lived in Harlem for the first ten years of her life and got her master of arts degree from the City College New York, was surely aware of Black men's vulnerability (e.g., police brutality) in her community (see Holmes 2014, 44). As an activist in the civil rights movement, the Black arts movement, and Black feminism, Bambara specifically concerned herself with gendered and racist stereotypes. In her short stories, Bambara portrays and challenges these still-pervasive images. My focus will

¹⁵ This chapter is based on an earlier text, "Toni Cade Bambara's Vulnerable Men," published in a monograph called *Mediating Vulnerability: Comparative Approaches and Questions of Genre* by UCL Press (Kolehmainen 2021).

be on how, in Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's words, "stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation" (1997, 11). Concentrating on the type that I call "perpetual boy," I will show how, in the selected short stories, Bambara resists gendered racist stereotypes through representations of Black male vulnerability in the form of characters who are actual boys.

The phrase "perpetual boy" refers to a set of interrelated concerns: infantilization, American slavery, and conceptions of manhood in general. First, in colonial times, infantilizing people of African descent was a common way of exercising power (see Pickering 2001). For example, Michael Gellert states, "to be a slave in the South meant remaining a permanent child, dependent forever" (2002, 245), thus emphasizing the fact that the association of infantilization with dependence is connected to American slavery. An extension of this mode of action, the use of the term "boy," also dates back to American slavery and was still widely used during the Jim Crow and the civil rights movement era. Although we are accustomed to calling male children boys, and in some instances the word might also have positive or neutral connotations, calling somebody a boy in the specific historical contexts discussed in this chapter is an act of diminishing the humanity and manhood of the one being named. This is because the word has been used as a slur to infantilize the largest and strongest of Black men, and indeed derives some of its power precisely from the contrast between the person and the word. Moreover, the term breathes life into the stereotype of the sambo, who, according to Joseph Boskin, was an "overgrown child at heart" (1988, 13). Boskin notes that "assumptions of the childlike nature and/or dependent status of blacks emanated from the writings of American historians whose early treatment of slavery—coupled with their lack of understanding of Afro-American history and culture—immeasurably fostered the Sambo stigma" (1988, 117–18). The etymology of the term as infantilizing reflects racist ideas from centuries back in history. Even though it is used less often nowadays, the word "boy" still has racist echoes in today's language.¹⁶

Closer analysis of this image reveals the ambiguity of racist stereotypes concerning Black men (as discussed in Chapter 1). Curry argues that Black boys are perceived as "Black beast cub[s]" (2017, 131), a view that deems them allegedly dangerous but, in reality, even more vulnerable. For example, as we have seen with the recent killings by police of teenage Black males—even very young ones—there seems to be both an attempt to treat them like adults *and* to infantilize them by treating them as children. For the purposes of this

¹⁶ President Barack Obama has been called a boy by other politicians several times. Journalist Roland Martin explains in a 2008 *CNN* blog article why it is important to avoid such terms. Other recent discussions of the term include professor Sherrilyn A. Ifill's article in *The Root*, where she explains how two federal court judges claimed to be "unaware of the racial significance of the well-known use of the term *boy* to de-masculinize black men" (2010; emphasis in original; see also Jones 2020).

chapter, it is important to note that people with disabilities are also often infantilized: when they reach adulthood, they are treated as grown children (see, for example, R. Murphy 1990, 201). This “common form of symbolic violence” as Kari Krogh and Jon Johnson argue, “forces adults with disabilities to enact dependent roles” (2006, 166). Seen from the point of view of vulnerability, children with disabilities, as G. Thomas Couser suggests, are “doubly vulnerable subjects” or even “triply so if their impairment compromises their competence or diminishes their autonomy” (2004, 57). This intersectional position, of course, is also reality to many Black boys with disabilities, who are infantilized but, at the same time, pose a threat in the racist imagination, which deems them even more vulnerable. As both the slur “boy” and the subject position of those who have been infantilized seem permanent in nature, I call the stereotype “perpetual boy.”

Bambara plays with the stereotype in both stories by making her characters actual boys, and disabled ones at that. The selected stories introduce young, Black, male characters with unspecified, but apparently non-physical, disabilities. Agreeing with Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds, who state that “all vulnerability is experienced in the body, whether its source is inherent or situational” (2014, 8), I view these male characters’ vulnerability as embodied even though their disabilities seem to be cognitive. I use the term “cognitive disability” to describe both of the characters’ impairments to avoid making judgments of their disabilities that would transcend in specificity those provided by the narrative. Common to characters with disabilities in literature, these two male characters are seen less in their own right and more as supporting the apparently non-disabled female narrators’ growth even though the titles of the stories refer to males, Manny in “The Hammer Man” and Raymond in “Raymond’s Run.” In fact, the male characters are juxtaposed with the female narrators, who are gutsy, sassy, and bright, while manhood is represented as infantile, dependent, and vulnerable. Even though I agree with Elliott Butler-Evans, who notes that in many of Bambara’s short stories, Black males are marginalized, only to “appear in the narratives [as] dependent on women and girls” and “characterized by subordination, vulnerability, and demystification” (1989, 105), I believe that the role of Bambara’s male characters is more significant than has previously been given credit for.

My main argument is that in the selected stories Black male vulnerability is represented in order to resist racist and gendered stereotypical images. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay argue that resistance and vulnerability are closely linked, even that

vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependency and public action. These hold the promise of developing new modes of collective agency that do not deny

vulnerability as a resource and that aspire to equality, freedom, and justice as their political aims. (2016, 7)

Bambara's short stories are good examples of the aspiration for "collective agency" and desire for "equality, freedom, and justice," in that they encourage readers to take part in the resistance to stereotypes. I argue that the representations of vulnerable Black male characters in these stories are "embodied political interventions" fabricated to teach readers lessons of race, gender, and the body and, consequently, vulnerability as education. Furthermore, I view Bambara's political and social commentary as embodied: the racist image of the "perpetual boy" is being resisted through the representation of extremely vulnerable bodies.

The analysis of these characters calls for an intersectional perspective. As discussed in Chapter 2, intersectionality has been first and foremost used to explain oppression that has to do with both race and gender (and often also class) of Black women, but can also be applied to the experiences of other kinds of subject positions (see, e.g., Collins 2000, 227). Even so, in most discourses on intersectionality, race designates Black while the concept of gender is most often used to describe female experiences and, thus, gender-specific discussions on Black men and boys have been largely left out. And yet the subject position of Black boys—the focus of this chapter—is both race-specific and gender-specific and also shaped by the fact that they are still children. Curry contends,

the Black male is not born a patriarchal male. He is raced and sexed peculiarly, configured as barbaric and savage, imagined to be a violent animal, not a human being. His mere existence ignites the Negrophobia taken to be the agreed-on justification for his death. This fear, or cultural intuition, expressed toward Black males calls on this society to support the imposition of death on these bodies and offer consent for the rationalizations the police state presents to the public as its justification for killing the Black beast, the rapist, the criminal, and the thug. The young Black male's death, the death of Black boys, is merely an extension of this logic, the need to destroy the Black beast cub before it matures into full pathology. (2017, 131)

That is, Black boys are vulnerable to the same stereotyping as Black men. Importantly, what Curry describes here is a position specific to Black males. This life-threatening "cultural intuition" (131) that the Black boy is merely a "beast cub" seems to have contributed to the killings of Emmett Till (1941–1955), James Powell (1948/49–1964), Trayvon Martin (1995–2012), Michael Brown (1996–2014), and Tamir Rice (2002–2014), to name but a few, as well as the incarceration of innocent young men of color, such as the Central Park

Five.¹⁷ Curry states that “police often imagine the Black boy—a child—to be physically threatening, the manifestation of the savagery thought to be inherent in his Black maleness, a violent beast and predator” (2017, 134). That is, the age of the Black man seems insignificant. The persisting racist stereotypes that “configure . . .” the Black male “as barbaric and savage . . . a violent animal, not a human being” (Curry 2017, 131), I contend, are identified and resisted in Bambara’s stories. However, as the characters have disabilities, there is another layer of identity to be considered.

I will not only demonstrate how intersectionality can be applied to the analysis of the selected young Black male characters but I will also look at the benefits of “reframing ‘disability’ as another culture-bound, physically justified difference to consider along with race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality” (5), as suggested by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson in her 1997 book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Even though some research that focuses on “racialized experiences of disability” has been conducted, according to Sami Schalk, disability studies “generally still lacks substantive engagement with critical race theory and black feminist theory” (2020, 535), so there is still a wide range of opportunities for research in this area. In adding disability and ableism (i.e., discrimination against people with disabilities) to the discussion of Black boys, my intention is not to draw a parallel between these different kinds of social stratification, not to mention the individuals in different social groups. However, as the experiences of racialized people and individuals with disabilities intersect in many ways, it is important to see where the common ground between these groups can be found. Moreover, because similarities between resistance strategies to different forms of oppression, such as ableism, racism, homophobia, and sexism, exist (see Goodley 2014, 37), it is also important to see how these strategies intertwine in literary narratives.

In terms of disability, David T. Mitchell describes how the otherness of people with disabilities is constructed: “Within embodied scripts of normativity the disabled body is culturally positioned as a derivative identity, secondary and inferior to socially inscribed norms of ablebodiedness” (2020, 168). That is, questions of normativity are socially constructed but highly

¹⁷ In 1989, five young men of color were wrongly accused of the assault of a White female jogger in Central Park. They served in prison for years before they were exonerated in 2002 when the real perpetrator of the crime confessed. Before the truth came out, bell hooks (1990) referred to this crime as evidence of the effects of Black patriarchal manhood: “No one can truly believe that the young black males involved in the Central Park incident were not engaged in a suicidal ritual enactment of a dangerous masculinity that will ultimately threaten their lives, their well-being” (63). As was revealed in 2002, no Black males were, in fact, involved in this crime. While I find many parts of hooks’ theorizations useful for the study of Black masculinities, these kinds of comments, in my view, also reinforce the image of young Black men as “beast cubs” and are thus life-threatening to Black men and boys.

embodied. In ableist discourses, the disabled body is often seen as deviant from the illusionary norm, and thus as a lower category. As shown in the previous chapters, oppression based on race is often constructed in a similar manner: by ascribing superiority to one group of people and inferiority to another. In *Blackness and Disability*, Christopher M. Bell notes that "disability shares much in common with other maligned identities insofar as departures from the norm are seen as threats to the mainstream body politic" (2011a, 1). This means that even the threat this deviance poses to the status quo resembles the effect Black men have historically had in western societies, although the threats these two groups allegedly pose are justified differently. Black men are stereotyped as beasts, but, as Bell notes, the disabled body reminds able people of the fact that "disability is, arguably, the only identity that one can acquire in the course of an instant" (2011a, 1), that able-bodiedness is only temporary. Seeing people with disabilities triggers the fear of disability and is, thus, uncomfortable to some people who do not have disabilities (yet).

Bambara's short stories take readers straight into the intersection described above. As a social worker and a purveyor of various intersecting ideologies (such as Black feminism, socialism, pan-Africanism), Bambara was surely aware of the hardships experienced by different social groups, including Black men. However, hers was in her own words an "*Afrafemme* view of the world" (Traylor 2005, "Re Calling the Black Woman;" emphasis in original), that is, the author was specifically an advocate for women of color. She also understood very well the intersections that constructed her identity as well as her view of the world:

Suffice to say that I do not take lightly the fact that I am on the earth at this particular time in human history, and am here as a member of a particular soul group and of a particular sex, having this particular adventure as a Pan-Africanist-socialist-feminist in the United States. (qtd. in Holmes 2014, 57)¹⁸

In addition to being an activist and a cultural worker, Bambara was a teacher and a perceptive reader with an "acute listening ear" (Holmes 2014, 37). In an interview with Valerie Boyd, Toni Morrison says about her colleague and friend, "she read the world in the way I tend to do also, but she really read it—its symbols, you know, the things behind things. She was very, very, very adept at that" (2007, 97). As a writer, Bambara gave back to her audience what she had read, and thus, became our teacher. Even though her brilliant short stories might initially seem like uncomplicated descriptions of the daily life of

¹⁸ Bambara wrote this originally in an essay called "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyway," published in *The Writer on Her Work*, edited by Janet Sternburg (1980, 154).

children in urban communities, once examined carefully, the narratives reveal the author's knowledge of the depths of human relations and keen dedication to the well-being of the Black community as a whole.

3.1 "THE THINGS BEHIND THINGS": OUR TEACHER, TONI CADE BAMBARA

She taught me much about how to live as a black woman writer in this world. Even in the midst of her dying she was teaching me still.

bell hooks (1999, 237)

Born Milona Mirkin Cade in Harlem, New York, in 1939, Bambara was both a professor and a documentarist, and even worked briefly for the New York social services and a psychiatric hospital called Metro Hospital NYC (see T. Lewis 2020, 25). She was enthusiastic about art in various forms, and, in addition to her literary work, made a documentary about Zora Neale Hurston and W.E.B. Du Bois, as well as a screenplay of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*. Bambara published two short story collections—*Gorilla, My Love* ([1972] 1981a) and *Sea Birds are Still Alive* ([1977] 1982b)—and a novel, *The Salt Eaters* ([1980] 1982a), in which she explored the themes of healing and political activism. In addition, her novel *Those Bones Are Not My Child* (2013), was first published posthumously in 1999, after Toni Morrison had edited the manuscript. Bambara has stated many times that, before the early 1970s, she considered writing merely as “something you did because you didn't feel like doing any work” (Guy-Sheftall 2012, 4). Her views changed, however, as time passed. In an interview with Kay Bonetti in 1982, Bambara acknowledged having become rather serious with writing: “Previously I'd always thought of myself as a teacher who writes, a social worker who writes, a youth worker who writes, a mother who writes. Now I'm a writer” (Bonetti 2012, 42). Certainly taken seriously as a writer by not only her editor but critics such as Linda Holmes and Cheryl A. Wall, Bambara remains an “understudied figure” (T. Lewis 2020, 2), whose “artistic contributions have been somewhat undervalued” (193) and whose “immense impact has not been fully acknowledged” (2).

Most of all, Bambara wanted to create something “usable” (see, e.g., Guy-Sheftall 2012, 6, 8, 15; Bonetti 2012, 34; Tate 2012, 53) and she considered herself a cultural worker. One of her most well-known sayings, “As a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible” (Bonetti 2012, 35), was followed by the author's definitions of what making revolution irresistible meant for her:

One of the ways I attempt to do that is by celebrating those victories within the black community. And I think the mere fact that we're still breathing is a cause for celebration. Also my job is to critique the reactionary behavior within the community and to keep certain kinds of calls out there: the children, our responsibility of children, our responsibility to maintain some kind of continuity from the past. (Bonetti 2012, 35)

This aim to both celebrate Black lives and "keep certain calls out there" is shown particularly well in the stories analyzed in this chapter. Both were written originally for Black audiences, "The Hammer Man" in *Negro Digest* in 1966 and "Raymond's Run" in a collection Bambara edited, *Tales and Stories for Black Folk*, in 1971. In these stories, the call for the community to take responsibility for children is emphasized and it is also in these narratives where vulnerability becomes a means with which the call can be made. When I saw the question, "in what ways does [vulnerability] work as a cultural critique?" (Honkasalo 2019, 3), I immediately thought of these short stories in which the general vulnerability of children accompanied with representations of Black male vulnerability works as cultural critique. Most interestingly, calls for the community to take responsibility for children are being made through the voices of female children and the bodies of vulnerable Black boys. Having wanted to create something "usable," the author equipped her feisty young narrators with the lessons she perhaps wanted to teach her audience.

As an artist, Bambara was exceptional especially because of her untiring aspiration to amplify Black female voices. Linda Holmes states that "as an essayist, fiction writer, and editor, Bambara is groundbreaking as she brings to the fore in all of her writing, black female voices, young and old, who are independent, bold, and unwavering in the power within themselves to speak for themselves" (2014, xviii). In the 1960s and early 1970s, there were no similar portraits of young Black women, and when Bambara published her very first stories, not even *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2006) had been published. In a 1994 interview with Claudia Dreifus, Toni Morrison said she wrote her first novel because "there was just one thing that [she] wanted to write about, which was the true devastation of racism on the most vulnerable, the most helpless unit in the society—a black female and a child" (Dreifus 2008, 102). Bambara's female characters are very different from Morrison's Pecola Breedlove, however, because theirs is not the story of devastation but development. In 1972, with Morrison as her editor, Bambara published her first short story collection, *Gorilla, My Love*, filled with young Black female voices. "The Hammer Man" and "Raymond's Run" were published in *Gorilla, My Love* among thirteen other stories, of which perhaps the most well-known is "The Lesson." By the time of its publication, Cheryl A. Wall argues, "children, particularly black children in fiction, had more often been social victims rather

than the agents of social change that one finds in Bambara's stories" (2007, 28). The narrators, typically African American girls and women, are undoubtedly exceptional. They resist expectations of what a girl should be like, say what they think and, even if you cannot always trust what they say, seem to fight for what is best for the whole community. In this way, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay note, Bambara's stories "challenged the female victim role in which much of early 1970s feminist literature indulged" (1997, 2306).

Overall, the critical response to *Gorilla, My Love* has centered on these female narrators. Literary critic Elizabeth Muther argues that the girls "are not diminutive characters, to be outgrown with the coming of age of the movement. Rather, through their precocious insight they anticipate the resistance strategies and forms of collective self-affirmation that will be essential to the survival of community" (2002, 449). Even though the narrators are children, they express powerful visions that can benefit their whole community and thus serve as cultural workers and teachers. Wall maintains, "as many critics have observed, the girls who move through the pages of these stories are a new kind of female protagonist: fearless and bold, feisty and articulate" (2007, 28). More often than not, Bambara's stories describe a coming-of-age of the female narrator. I would not consider them to be examples of the Bildungsroman genre as such, because the stories end with the narrator still a child, but with a lesson learned. That is, they are more about an individual epiphany than a wholehearted character change.

These epiphanies, however, have the potential to create change in the community, even its liberation. Thabiti Lewis states that Bambara's "stories are liberation lessons, tutelage in how to go about the business of practicing liberation, cultivating consciousness. Political awareness leads to enhanced self-knowledge and confidence that leads to self-liberation—the first step toward liberation on a broader scale" (2020, 32). As the agents of change in these stories are children, there is a gesture toward the future (see Lewis 2020, 5–6). I agree with Lewis that one of Bambara's lessons for us is that (Black) women—even young ones—can be agents (or leaders) in cultural work. As he states, "Bambara's ability to position women doing the cultural work—leading or in collaboration with men—is an essential practice for successful Black nation-building" (2020, 5). At the same time, I argue, there is more than that to these representations, and we would do well to focus, too, on how depictions of Black male vulnerability function in these stories.

As supporting fictional characters that do not take part in any dialogue, Manny and Raymond are dependent on the female narrators to tell their stories. They are thus vulnerable to unreliable representation of themselves and can be seen as experiencing "linguistic vulnerability" (Butler 2016, 16). Butler explains the term thus: "Who we are, even our ability to survive,

depends on the language that sustains us" (16). Manny and Raymond's linguistic vulnerability lies in that they are silenced in the stories: Raymond is only described as "hollering" (Bambara "Raymond's Run" [RR], 30), while Manny apparently only speaks in his imaginary world, and what he says is of no importance to either the narrator or the other characters. If what Frantz Fanon argues is true and "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (2008b, 8), Manny and Raymond hardly exist in the stories and are dependent on others to speak for them.

Juxtaposing extremely vulnerable men with strong female character narrators could be seen as a feminist strategy. As Butler-Evans argues, most of the stories in *Gorilla, My Love* provide "a subversion of the paradigms of representation that generally characterize the fiction produced by Black males committed to the discourse of cultural nationalism. Their works usually construct a Black male figure who embodies self-sufficiency and heroism; in Bambara's stories, these traits are subjected to a radical deconstruction" (1989, 107). However, the question whether Bambara's intention was to advance the cause of feminism through these stories is problematic in many ways and, in her essay "On the Issue of Roles," the author quite distinctly writes, "perhaps we need to let go of all notions of manhood and femininity and concentrate on Blackhood" (2005). Bambara seems to have been more inclined to further the idea of Black unity and, as Thabiti Lewis notes, refused to commit herself to "an anti-male ideology that excluded Black men" (2020, 6). While there certainly is a feminist (or proto-womanist) perspective in these stories, I argue that the juxtapositions eventually work, among other things, to reveal the embodiedness of vulnerability.

3.2 JUXTAPOSING THE DEVIANT: EMBODIED VULNERABILITY

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Toni Morrison shows in *Playing in the Dark* that, in the works of the White canon prior to the 1990s, African Americans were constructed as stock characters, surrogate bodies through which it was easier for White people to discuss issues that were frightening to them and to define themselves as superior (1992). That is, Africanist bodies were typically portrayed in literature through polarities, thus constructing Americanness in relation to what it is not, i.e., "not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless but licensed and powerful" (52). Africanist characters had little further value than to stand for the "not-me," or the Other, for the White characters and readers.

Garland-Thomson has investigated a similar pattern found in the representations of people with disabilities in American literature, and she

claims that narrating disability has produced the subject position of the “normate.” Garland-Thomson argues that

the normate subject position emerges . . . only when we scrutinize the social processes and discourses that constitute physical and cultural otherness. Because figures of otherness are highly marked in power relations, even as they are marginalized, their cultural visibility as deviant obscures and neutralizes the normative figure that they legitimize. (1997, 8–9)

That is, paradoxically, the figures of otherness create and legitimize the normate subject position, i.e., the “cultural self” (8). The normate finds its counterparts in the figures of (cultural) otherness: women, people with disabilities, racialized people, and the Africanist personae, for example. Created by the figures of otherness, the normate subject position reproduces and reinforces the marginalized position of the Other. That is to say, the binary (op)positions are highly relational and dependent on each other. Similarly to the Africanist characters, then, the disabled body is used in literature to contemplate negative or otherwise troublesome or intimidating themes. Even in feminist theoretical writings, as suggested by Schalk (2013), metaphors of disability (for example, emotionally crippled men) have been used “to represent inability, loss, and lack,” something one needs to resist or heal from, “in a simplistic and uncritical way” (n.p.). Even though characters with disabilities might also evoke empathy in readers, as Garland-Thomson notes, “constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance, the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity” (1997, 6). Garland-Thomson’s focus is on representations of physical disabilities, but I believe that her views also relate to people with cognitive impairment, such as Manny and Raymond appear to be.

The perspectives provided by Morrison and Garland-Thomson are useful in scrutinizing Bambara’s stories because all the main characters in “The Hammer Man” and “Raymond’s Run” are relational, and they are represented through polarities such as male/female and strong/vulnerable. Alice Hall states, “social oppression is constructed through a complex web of these intersecting identities and cultural conditions” (2016, 39), meaning power relations and forms of social stratification such as gender, class, race, and sexuality. To better understand social oppression, my aim is to show how the intersectional subject positions of the characters are portrayed, especially in relation to each other. It is important to note here that these Black male characters are not shown in relation to their parents, teachers, or other children, only the female narrators, who at first seem to take on the position

of the "normate." At the same time, however, they remind readers of a stereotype related to Black womanhood.

The image of the strong Black woman is a common stereotype in literature and pervades other contemporary discourses as well. While it is associated with seemingly positive attributes such as resilience, independence, and self-sufficiency, the position is problematic. Melissa Harris-Perry states, for example, that, "the brash, independent, hostile black woman rarely shows vulnerability or empathy" (2011, 88). Tracing the roots of "the myth of black women's emasculating anger" in the image of the Sapphire, Harris-Perry claims that this stereotype has often been unacknowledged because it has been considered a natural trait of African American women (88–89). Moreover, Trudier Harris criticizes the tendency of African American fiction to reinforce this stereotype of "black women who are almost too strong for their own good, whether that strength is moral or physical, or both" (1995, 110; see also Harris 2001).¹⁹ This means that being strong might lead to the inability to share loving feelings with children, for example. Harris argues that strong female characters have been "praised . . . for exhibiting traits that Western culture has traditionally designated more masculine than feminine" (115), suggesting that strength is considered as a more masculine trait. I would also argue that in Bambara's stories, these stereotypical images appear in the way the girls perform character traits that are, quite generally, considered masculine. The male characters, by contrast, are represented as dependent and vulnerable, which are traits more often connected to femininity in western culture. Even though Bambara did not receive criticism of her representations of men like many other Black women writers did, the relation between her male and female characters resemble a phenomenon in American popular culture that Jean Carey Bond and Patricia Peery discuss in *The Black Woman*: "Movies and radio shows of the 1930's and 1940's invariably peddled the Sapphire image of the Black woman: she is depicted as iron-willed, effectual, treacherous toward and contemptuous of Black men, the latter being portrayed as simpering, ineffectual whipping boys" (2005, "Is the Black Male Castrated?").

We can see how this dynamic between the male and female characters operates by examining the plots of the two stories. In "The Hammer Man," the unnamed narrator is a young girl, probably from New York City,²⁰ who lives in

¹⁹ In a later book, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature* (2001), Trudier Harris discusses Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* but does not mention the female narrators of Bambara's short stories.

²⁰ In the story, the narrator says Manny is playing basketball at "Douglas Street park" (Bambara, "The Hammer Man," 39). Located on Amsterdam Avenue, Harlem, Frederick Douglass Playground is interestingly right where Squeaky practices running in "Raymond's Run" and where Toni Cade Bambara lived as a child. The reason why the narrator writes the name of the park with only one letter "s" might

a supposedly dysfunctional family. She struggles with the imbalance between the gender roles imposed on her by society and the kind of identity she herself wants to perform. The girl says, for example, that she was “playing pool when [she] should’ve been sewing” (Bambara “The Hammer Man” [HM], 39). She owns a BB gun (36) and wears dungarees (39). Prone to dishonesty, she is at least verbally abusive, “a big-mouth” (41), in her own words, and is known to “fight with” boys (35). She expresses her gutsiness by continuously fighting with Manny, an allegedly violent boy from the same neighborhood who is, according to the narrator, “supposed to be crazy” (35).

Manny likely has some kind of emotional or cognitive impairment, signaled by his problems in interacting with others, as well as his reputation in the neighborhood as an odd person. At the beginning of “The Hammer Man,” the narrator says that being crazy is “his story” (HM, 35) but, as becomes clear, Manny lives, at least partly, in his own imaginary world and the narrator merely shares her own interpretation of him and the events. The narrator seems to be fighting Manny in order to provoke him and to get him upset enough to fight her. She claims to be certain that Manny is “going to kill [her] first chance he got” (37), because Manny has allegedly said so to the narrator’s father earlier. After a fight, during which the girl verbally attacks Manny and his mother (35), Manny climbs onto the roof of the narrator’s house. The girl says Manny got mad because he does not have enough “sense of humor” (36) as to understand her game of dozens, which is “a verbal game based on negative talk about somebody’s mother” (Smitherman 1977, 82). She knows, however, that Manny is a “sucker for sick animals and things like that” (Bambara, HM, 36) and supposes that he has been tricked by other children to climb onto the roof in the first place. Nevertheless, she spreads the word that Manny has gotten mad at her and threatened to kill her. The adults of both of their families start fighting each other, but, after Manny falls off the roof, everything seems to return to normal in the neighborhood.

The final encounter between Manny and the narrator is different, taking place at a basketball court where the girl finds Manny focusing on an imaginary ball game and “talking with himself” about the game (Bambara, HM, 39). Two White police officers come to the court, asking the children questions. Since Manny does not answer, one of the police officers slaps him and calls him a “black boy” (40). Until this point, the racial identities of the characters have not been mentioned, but after the remark the narrator expresses a newfound feeling of fellowship with Manny in her own sassy manner: “Now, when somebody says that word like that, I gets warm. And

be because she is a child and does not necessarily know who Frederick Douglass was. More information about the real-life playground can be found here: <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/frederick-douglass-playground>.

crazy or no crazy, Manny was my brother at that moment and the cop was the enemy" (40). The fact that the police officer's slur carries a meaning that is recognized as heavily offensive even by a child can be deduced from the way the girl is more offended by what the police officer says (Black boy) than what he does (violence). It is also implied here that the girl is used to violence in her community, because she does not really react to it, and elsewhere in the story she describes the violent fights between the adults of the neighborhood with neutrality. For Manny, being hit is a "surprise," according to the narrator, merely because "he wasn't paying no mind to the cop" (40). When it comes to hearing racist slurs, however, even though she is familiar enough with them to know their meaning, she seems to think they are a phenomenon of the racist South, rather than her own neighborhood: "You must think you're in the South, mister," she exclaims to the officer (41).

The slur *Black boy* is twofold and ambiguous. First, a White person calling another person Black is an act of trying to put the other person "in their place," in this case, reminding Manny that he is of an "inferior" race. Second, as discussed earlier, calling somebody a "boy" infantilizes the other person, puts him into a vulnerable social category while stating that he is smaller, more dependent, and—most importantly—has less power than the one uttering the word. Even though Manny is an actual boy—a child—he is infantilized like an adult, emasculated like a man, and treated as a beast like a Black man. The slur implies an act of racial profiling, showing the authority and "superiority" of the policemen.

For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to note that Manny's vulnerable position here is specifically a (Black) male one. Although neither of the children had posed any real threat to the officers, only Manny becomes a victim of violence (Bambara, HM, 40–41). It should be clear to the officers that Manny has either a social, cognitive, or developmental disability as they watch his hyperfocused routine of doing lay-ups, "always from the same spot with his arms crooked in the same way, over and over" (39). At the same time, it is only the girl who talks back to the police officers "with [her] smart self" (40), to which one of the officers only responds with "one of them hard-day sighs" and calls her a "little girl" (41). Both of the children become deprecated by adults who should be providing them security and, when the officer calls Manny the girl's boyfriend, they both become gendered and sexualized. But only Manny becomes a target, because he is a Black male. Vincent T. Harris summarizes this phenomenon:

The racializing of hegemonic masculinity starts in childhood for Black males. As children Black boys are seen as deviant, confrontational, troublemakers, verbally abusive, and fighters (Ferguson, 2000). Ferguson, [sic] (2000) explains that Black boys are expected to fight and cause trouble resulting in larger number of Black males being sent to in-

school suspension as a consequence, which creates a pipeline for the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010). The concepts of fighting and trouble making soon becomes a brand, an identity label attached to Black men throughout adulthood, this identity is maintain [sic] by power via others, who are controllers of these deviant socially constructed images (Kivel, 1984; McCune, 2014). (2016, 120)

That is, Manny's situation compared to the girl's has to do with him being Black *and* male. He is automatically seen as a potential troublemaker while the girl is not.

Quite the contrary, however, Manny appears unable to defend himself and seems even more vulnerable when placed in juxtaposition with the girl, who is fully aware of the acuteness of the matter. Understanding the danger of a situation "with a big-mouth like [herself], a couple of wise cops, and a crazy boy too" (Bambara, HM, 41), she nevertheless loses her temper and tries to help Manny by saying: "You better give him back his ball . . . Manny don't take no mess from no cops. He ain't bothering nobody. He's gonna be Mister Basketball when he grows up" (40). I believe it is Manny's vulnerable position that makes his now former antagonist resist the police officers in order to save him and, thus, surrender herself to vulnerability, i.e., the risk of being hurt.

Manny, on the other hand, risks being hurt apparently because of his sports performance. The officer gives the ball back, and Manny continues playing and moves with the basketball "damn near like he was some kind of very beautiful bird" (Bambara, HM, 41). Using diction similar to Bambara's in "On the Issue of Roles" (2005), the narrator describes Manny's layup as being "about the most beautiful thing a man can do and not be a fag" (Bambara, HM, 42), thus echoing the gendered stereotyping in Black communities that Bambara discusses in her essay. Bambara states that "if a woman is tough, she's a rough mamma, a strident bitch, a ballbreaker, a castrator. And if a man is at all sensitive, tender, spiritual, he's a faggot" (2005, "On the Issue of Roles"). According to the narrator, there was something spiritual, indeed, in the way that Manny "swooshed that ball in" (Bambara, HM, 41), because, having seen it, "something happened to the bones in [her] chest. It was something" (41). It is this performance of power in a heterosexually beautiful way that suddenly makes one of the officers "hot for taking Manny to jail or court or somewhere" (41) and, ignoring the girl, the officers take Manny away with them. Through this intersection of his gender, race, and disability, Manny has become a victim of racist police officers, and liable to face violence, oppression, and imprisonment. As an African American male, he is more likely to be incarcerated than others (see, for example, Butler 2016, 20; Kendi 2019, 191).

The short story ends with the narrator telling that Manny had, indeed, been institutionalized, to "some kind of big house for people who lose their marbles" (Bambara, HM, 42), but not killed by the officers as she had feared. After the

incident, the narrator takes part in a fashion show in her “first corsage—yellow roses to match [her] shoes” instead of wearing her dungarees (43), thus suddenly yielding to her mother’s wish and performing a more “feminine” role. According to Thabiti Lewis, agreeing to take part in the fashion show is, instead of a betrayal to her self-identity, a personal choice: “She is whole and heroic in her negotiation of her femininity” (2020, 83). However, the girl’s newfound, more feminine role might, as Cristina Di Maio suggests, “be only temporarily performed, her tomboy self ready to resurface” (2020, 238). As she agrees both to temporarily move to the community center and take part in the fashion show to please her mother, she might, for the same reason, temporarily succumb to the institution of “femininity.” Whatever her future role in the community may be, at the end of the story, along with learning more about herself, she has learned about Black male vulnerability.

The narrator of “Raymond’s Run”²¹ confronts similar issues with performing allegedly appropriate gender roles. Called “Squeaky” for her squeaky voice, Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker does not get along with other girls and, even if her mother wishes she would “act like a girl for a change” (Bambara, RR, 27), she favors running over pole dancing. Squeaky is a good runner and reflects throughout the story on her competence in the sport compared to other girls. She is suspicious of and reacts quite aggressively to anyone but her father and her brother Raymond, who is, conversely, depicted as well-meaning in an extremely childish way. If confronted, Squeaky prefers “to just knock you down right from the jump and save everybody a lotta precious time” (26). Her behavior could be called masculine, for, as Trudier Harris suggests, “masculinity stereotypically connotes that one can take care of one’s self, or if attacked, is able to give violence for violence” (2001, 156).

However, Squeaky’s gutsiness also includes her willingness to stand by and protect her disabled older brother from bullies, even with physical violence. This is how she depicts the situation:

But a lot of people call him my little brother cause he needs looking after cause he’s not quite right. And a lot of smart mouths got lots to say about that too, especially when [their older brother] George was minding him. But now, if anybody has anything to say to Raymond, anything to say about his big head, they have to come by me. And I don’t play the dozens or believe in standing around with somebody in my face doing a lot of talking. I much rather just knock you down and take my chances even if I am a little girl with skinny arms and squeaky voice. (Bambara, RR, 23)

²¹ Some scholars argue that the narrator in “The Hammer Man” is Hazel—or at least the same “*persona*” (Di Maio 2020, 234; emphasis in original)—who also narrates “Raymond’s Run” and “Gorilla, My Love” (see, e.g., Butler-Evans 1989, 98). I view the narrators of these two selected stories as separate, however, because there is no explicit connection between them made in the narratives.

Here Squeaky appears gutsier than either of her brothers do and Raymond is represented through established images of disability: a big head, an inability to take care of himself, and not being “quite right.” The narrator “has been given nurturing responsibility,” to use Trudier Harris’ words, “like many African American girl/women [*sic*] historically” (2001, 156), but she carries it out in a stereotypically masculine way—using power. Raymond is called Squeaky’s little brother because, even though he must be a teenager and is bigger in size, he acts more like a child. For example, he is “subject to fits of fantasy,” sometimes thinks “he’s a circus performer” (Bambara, RR, 24), and likes to swing even though he is almost too big to fit in the swing (28).

The most important part of Squeaky’s description of her brother, however, is the essential dependence of Raymond: he is a child with a disability, who relies on the care of his little sister. People with disabilities are often viewed as vulnerable because of their dependence on others, and thus face infantilization. Examples of infantilization due to dependence in “Raymond’s Run” include the aforementioned comment, “a lot of people call him my little brother cause he needs looking after” (Bambara, RR, 23), and the fact that Squeaky takes care of Raymond because she believes that otherwise he will become a victim of robbery, bullying and violence (25).

Raymond’s happy, playful attitude and behavior is certainly childish, but as he is almost a grown-up, it reminds me of the sambo stereotype: “As children are given to impetuous play, humorous antics, docile energies, and uninhibited expressiveness, so too one could locate in Sambo identical traits” (Boskin 1988, 13). Raymond expresses all these traits mentioned by Boskin. He likes to play with water and might act impulsively: “Sometimes if you don’t watch him he’ll dash across traffic to the island in the middle of Broadway and give the pigeons a fit” (Bambara, RR, 24), thus putting them both in danger. For this reason, apparently, the narrator does not think that Raymond is actually capable of anything else than following her and playing.

The story’s climactic scene is the May Day race, where Squeaky competes with her new rival, Gretchen. She has asked Raymond to wait on the other side of a fence, but to her astonishment, sees him first “bending down with his fingers on the ground just like he knew what he was doing” (Bambara, RR, 30) and then running on the other side “in his very own style” (31). After the run, Raymond starts “rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage” and then climbs up the fence “like a dancer or something” (31). This association with animals, present in both “The Hammer Man” and “Raymond’s Run,” is common in the depiction of people with intellectual disabilities (see, for example, Halliwell 2016 and Sklar 2020). The gorilla-reference, in particular, is problematic because, as Bambara herself acknowledges in an interview, it can be interpreted as “pro-racist” (Tate 2012, 67) as it captures the idea of Black men as violent beasts. According to Curry, “the association of Black males with

animals—specifically, apes and monkeys—diminishes our sympathy for their humanity; they are caricatures that increase not only the propensity for, but also the acceptance of, greater levels of violence directed toward them" (2017, 134). Thus, this stereotype also reinforces the vulnerability of Black men.

Even though associating a Black man with a gorilla has racist connotations, I will read it as Bambara originally meant it, as a term "of endearment" (Tate 2012, 67). In an interview, the author comments on what happened after the publication of "Raymond's Run":

People get on my case about it—"What kind of thing is that to say about a young Blood?"—shades of King Kong and the nigger-as-ape and all. What kind of thing, indeed? They're right. I was wrong. I've some nerve expecting my personal idiolects to cancel out, supersede, or override the whole network of racist name-calling triggered by that term. (67)

Interestingly, however, Bambara has one of her female narrators in the later short story collection, Sweet Pea in "Medley," say, "Men are like that. Gorillas, if you know what I mean . . . I figure it ain't my place to try to develop them so they can make the leap from gorilla to human" (Bambara 1982b, 116). What Sweet Pea is referring to, is a performance of power, "a man-to-man ritual" (116) rather than the racist meaning of the word. While some people criticized Bambara for it, others did not find using the word gorilla in her stories offensive. *Gorilla, My Love* was named after one of the collection's stories with the same title, which was the editor's choice. Namely, in an interview with Valerie Boyd, Toni Morrison says "that first book we did, [Bambara] had some idiotic title for it. She always did. So I used the title of one of the stories, which captured her wit in an extraordinary way" (Boyd 2007, 89–90). Indeed, in "Raymond's Run," it is precisely the moment when Raymond is associated with the gorilla that he gains humanity and agency.

While Raymond transcends his role as the playful but incapable, dependent boy in the final scene of the story, Squeaky reaches a new level of understanding other people. Impressed by Raymond's first run and realizing that Raymond does not have anything "to call his own" (Bambara, RR, 32), Squeaky starts to view Raymond and other children more empathetically. Opening up to connection with others, instead of threatening them with violence, her own vulnerability is unveiled. Indeed, connecting with others makes one vulnerable to being hurt emotionally. The scene also marks the beginning of Squeaky's movement away from her strong and somewhat masculine role. Squeaky is now able to feel connection to her rival, Gretchen—she is even thinking about letting her help with Raymond's coaching (32). Similar to the narrator of "The Hammer Man," Squeaky suddenly breaks free from the stereotypical strong woman role.

Bambara's stories juxtapose strong, even aggressive, girls who perform traits that are more often thought of as "masculine" (independent, powerful, active), and vulnerable men who are infantilized and dependent. In the course of the stories, each girl goes through emotional growth while the male characters seem to remain static. It is common that literary narratives "objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency," leaving them "other to the reader—identifiably human but resolutely different" (Garland-Thomson 1997, 11). This is not entirely the case with Manny and Raymond, however, because they do achieve agency in these climactic moments when the narrators also view them in a new light. We do not know what exactly happens to them after the climactic moments (Manny's beautiful layups and Raymond's perfecting his own way of running), since the stories end soon after the male characters achieve this agency. I argue that even though the male characters first seem to merely support the plot of female development, they in fact serve in teaching the narrators about (comm)unity and us readers about Black male vulnerability.

3.3 NARRATING DISABILITY, NARRATING VULNERABILITY?

Digging a little deeper into disability studies, and applying a term originally coined by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, I show that these characters with disabilities seem initially to be serving as a "narrative prosthetic" (2000). In a more recent article, Mitchell further explains the term, saying that in order to portray certain issues and tell important stories, narratives use disabled characters as "crutches" (2002, 17), which refers to "the pervasive dependency of literary narratives on the trope of disability" (2002, 21). This dependency arises from the assumption that the able body, for its apparent normativity, cannot stand for non-normative experiences. In my view, Bambara's Black male characters with disabilities serve a narrative prosthetic function in the sense that they foreground the female narrators' strong characters and support their growth. Manny and Raymond can be seen as props, as assistants to the female characters, "who are independent, bold, and unwavering in the power within themselves to speak for themselves" (Holmes 2014, xviii). Without the male characters, it would be impossible to tell these stories.

However, as Manny and Raymond also make it possible to tell the story of Black male vulnerability, they are, in the end, more than crutches. The actual disability, its construction and functions in society in relation to the status quo is seldom the main theme in literature but, instead, characters with disabilities are used to discuss other issues. In Bambara's stories, too, the characters with disabilities stand for something else—or more than—the life experiences of the people they represent. In this context, Mitchell and Snyder's concept, the

"materiality of metaphor" (2000; see also Mitchell 2002), becomes useful. It means that characters with disabilities lend to the narrative something it cannot otherwise possess, materiality. In other words, characters with disabilities provide tangible metaphors and thus create a "symbolic effect" that "the healthy corporeal surface fails to achieve . . . without its disabled counterpart" (Mitchell 2002, 28). I claim that Manny and Raymond serve as corporeal metaphors and thus symbolize the "vulnerable condition" (Curry 2017, 29) of African American men. Bambara calls out to the community with her embodied political and social critique achieved through representations of Black male vulnerability.

As mentioned before, Manny and Raymond's relational vulnerability lies in that they are constructed as Others and stigmatized in a community inhabited by apparently able-bodied—or "able-minded"—people. Having little or no voice or agency in the stories, they are used similarly to how Morrison argues that African American characters were often used in works belonging to the White literary canon—as "surrogate selves" (1992, 37–38) through which to contemplate other issues, such as, in this case, deviance. I argue that these specific characters stand for the subject position of Black boys and men in society that sees them as deviant and as problems, while in reality they are vulnerable. Their experience as both Black men and people with disabilities intersect so that disability reinforces the materiality of Black male vulnerability. As "embodied political interventions" (Butler 2016, 7), these characters with disabilities persuade readers to pay attention to the body and its inherent and situational vulnerability. This effect is emphasized by the fact that they are male, because, as mentioned earlier, Black male vulnerability is inextricable from the potential destruction of the body.

The social, political, and historical vulnerabilities of African American men which I think Manny and Raymond stand for had, of course, been a topic of discussion long before Bambara's time. According to David J. Leonard, Richard Wright, the author of a memoir called *Black Boy* ([1945] 1993), believed that Black men

were emasculated and infantilized, both by whites' racism and by their own responses to it. Wright maintained that black men—relegated to "boy" status and forced to depend on their wives, mothers, and daughters for financial support—responded through regressive actions that only underscored and reinforced their boyishness, whether it be by killing their white father (literally or symbolically), embracing black nationalism, or remaining submissive. (Leonard 2003, 509)

To Wright, slavery and racism had caused African American men not only the social, economic, and political adversity, but also survival strategies that only reinforced their vulnerability. Infantilization, emasculation and submission—

all these factors are present in Bambara's short stories, including Manny's boy status, Raymond's infantile boyishness, and their dependence on the female characters, to name but a few. Robert F. Murphy states that "overdependency and nonreciprocity" (1990, 201) are some of the "childish traits" (201) that evoke in others the need to view people with disabilities as children. "Adults who have [these traits]—even if it's not their fault—suffer a reduction in status," Murphy continues (201). This powerlessness and "reduction in status" that are ramifications of disability in an ableist society, come to symbolize the often-impossible condition of Black men in a racist society.

The fact that Bambara's young male characters are portrayed as disabled, also emphasizes their feminization as Black men (in relation to White men). In the case of the disabled Black male subject, the process of feminization is twofold, because, to lend Garland-Thomson's words, "the non-normate status accorded disability feminizes all disabled figures" (1997, 9). This means that as figures of otherness, disabled characters are feminized in connection to the normate position. In this way, Manny and Raymond can be seen as being feminized (but not feminine) both due to their status as Black males and as people with disabilities, while the female protagonists perform more masculine character traits. Through representation of vulnerability we learn not only how interconnected racism and ableism are, but also how gendered oppression toward Black men is constructed.

3.4 CHALLENGING (IN)VULNERABILITY

I have always, I think, opposed the stereotypic definitions of "masculine" and "feminine," not only because I thought it was a lot of merchandising nonsense, but rather because I always found the either/or implicit in those definitions antithetical to what I was all about—and what revolution for self is all about—the whole person.

Toni Cade Bambara (2005, "On the Issue of Roles")

As was discussed in the two previous sections, Bambara has sketched a feminized vulnerable boy beside a strong girl who behaves in stereotypically masculine ways in both stories, even though it was not what she was "all about." She does, however, play with gendered stereotypes, perhaps to amplify her message of concentrating on the "whole person." The question could be raised, however, how much does the relationality of the characters impact presuppositions of the vulnerability and/or invulnerability of the characters? Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay argue,

when vulnerability is projected onto another, it seems as if the first subject is fully divested of vulnerability, having expelled it externally

onto the other. When vulnerability is owned as an exclusive predicate of one subject and invulnerability attributed to another, a different kind of disavowal takes place. Indeed, asymmetry and disavowal work together. (2016, 4)

In other words, as one subject projects their vulnerability onto another human being (and, in this case, is juxtaposed with them), it might seem that there is no vulnerability left for the first one. Then again, if a subject is deemed fully invulnerable (e.g., the stereotypical strong Black woman), it may lead to the denial of their vulnerability. Following Butler's argument, it could be stated that the representations of vulnerability in Bambara's stories are *asymmetrical*, meaning that the one subject's extreme vulnerability overshadows the other's vulnerability, whether it is projected elsewhere or not. The disavowal that takes place, then, concerns both genders: the strong girls seem to be denied vulnerability and the male characters remain as boys and are thus denied manhood, which is stereotypically linked to strength and power.

Even though the narrator represents Manny as a potentially violent person who threatens her safety, closer scrutiny reveals the opposite to be more likely. In fact, his emasculation starts long before the scene where he becomes a victim of police brutality. For instance, the narrator calls him a variety of condescending names, such as "old Hammer Head" (Bambara, HM, 38), "ole Manny" (39), "Crazy Manny" (36), and "a crazy boy" (41), but he is only referred to as a man in the title of the story, "The Hammer Man." Even though some of the nicknames might also imply endearment, by calling him names that he most likely did not choose the girl is constructing Manny's identity from the outside.

Historically, and somewhat also today, the naming of people other than newborns has to do with power (see, e.g., Benston 1982, 3). Sigrid King suggests that "the namer has power; the named is powerless. For the powerless, being named carries with it the threat of limitation, reduction, and destruction" (1990, 684). Thus, the narrator uses her power to rename Manny, and reduces his identity to the image of the "crazy boy" with a hammer. She herself is nameless in the story, which can be, in fact, a very powerful place to be, because it is apparently her choice. Unlike Squeaky, who bravely announces her full name along with her nickname and its history, this narrator never introduces herself to readers nor is she referred to by name in the narrative. Letting others know your name i.e., letting them know too much about yourself, might lead to a vulnerable position where others might take advantage of the knowledge. Butler also considers name-calling and how it relates to linguistic vulnerability: "One clear dimension of our vulnerability has to do with our exposure to name-calling and discursive categories in infancy and childhood—indeed, throughout the course of life" (2016, 16). The

“speech act” (16) from the racist officer, calling Manny a “black boy” (Bambara, HM, 40), is the one that has the most effect in “The Hammer Man,” however. Uttered by an adult who already holds power, the phrase creates a feeling of unity with Manny in the narrator’s mind, but also works as a catalyst for violence. It is probably where the girl finally learns that “speech acts also act on us” (Butler 2016, 16), that language has power and can be used as power.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to naming him, the narrator is in control of telling the story in which Manny appears. In fact, as the girl is both the narrator and the protagonist, she is also the more dynamic one as a character and, all in all, the one that readers and critics have mainly focused on. Thus, it is easy to conclude that “The Hammer Man” must be *her* story. However, it is also possible to read “The Hammer Man” as a framed tale, in the sense described by Robert Stepto in his theory on African American narratives.²² According to Stepto, “type B [of framed] tales are told by novice storytellers who have just recently achieved competency as listeners [and] the tale offered is basically an account of the storytelling event which occasioned the novice teller’s competency, [while] the master teller [in this case, Manny] *and* his or her tale fully dominate that account” (Stepto 1991, 208; emphasis in original). In this way, “The Hammer Man” is Manny’s (the master teller’s) story, which is told by the girl (novice teller), who also at the same time tells about the event that made her a competent listener and, thus, a storyteller. According to Stepto, in African American narratives, “*telling grows out of listening*” (211; emphasis in original). The narrator is now able to tell the story because the incident on the basketball court made her a better listener. If one considers “The Hammer Man” a framed tale, it becomes clearer why the story is named after Manny.

As mentioned earlier, the narrator stigmatizes Manny as violent and deviant from others by calling him crazy and claiming that he has threatened to kill her. At the same time, however, she is a bully and potentially violent herself. For example, she tells others that the reason why Manny “had his head all wound up like a mummy and his arm in a sling and his leg in a cast” (Bambara, HM, 37) was something she had done and not the fact that he had fallen off the roof. In front of other girls, she even threatens Manny with more violence, yelling at him from a distance: “Just bring your crummy self in this yard and I’ll pick up where I left off” (38). According to what she has told us readers at this point, Manny actually fell off the roof but, in order to gain a reputation as tough among other children or to perform an act because she thinks it is what Manny is doing, too, she pretends she had beaten up Manny.

²² This form of narratives was very popular in African American fiction between the 1850s and 1960s until there was a development towards unframed tales just around the time this story was first published (see Ashe 2002, 78–79).

After this encounter, as Howard Sklar contends, “the narrator says that she had not seen Manny ‘for a long time’ (13), which, following their confrontation at the end of this scene, leaves the impression that he was hiding from her” (2013, 95). Whether or not Manny got scared of the girl or not, the narrator’s behavior is unusual in its straightforward emasculation of Manny. As Thabiti Lewis notes, “the attack on wounded Manny is antithetical to the feminist-based liberation impulse Bambara champions in much of her fiction” (2020, 81).

In the story world, however, the girl’s violent and aggressive behavior is not unusual, because in this fictional community women’s violent behavior is normalized. Thabiti Lewis notes that the narrator’s hostile conduct toward Manny when he is at his most vulnerable serves to emphasize the author’s pedagogical aims about the importance of unity in Black communities: “Temporarily positioning her female protagonist in a less than positive light is a cautionary message from Bambara that it is important to be critical of *all* insane behavior that threatens or violates the larger covenant of healthy, wholesome community” (2020, 81; my emphasis). When Manny still sits on the roof, many of the adults in the neighborhood certainly act insanely. For example, the narrator recounts a scene that was activated by her accusations about Manny and shows that other women in the neighborhood are also violent: “Miss Rose came up with sticks and table legs and things, and Manny’s mother had her share of scissor blades and bicycle chains. They got to rolling in the streets and all you could see was pink drawers and fat legs” (Bambara, HM, 36). The men of the community act no differently. Having heard Manny had threatened his daughter, the narrator’s father “had a few words with Manny first” and then “jammed [Manny’s older brother] Bernard’s head into the mailbox” (37) only to get threatened by Bernard’s uncle himself. Even after these violent performances, using her power as the storyteller, the girl keeps insisting that Manny is different from others in the community. As it seems to me, Manny is different in that he, in fact, does *not* fight with anybody.

However, like Manny, the narrator is also institutionalized for a while as she is sent to a community center by her mother. There she finds out information about herself:

I looked into one of those not-quite-white folders and saw that I was from a deviant family in a deviant neighborhood. I showed my mother the word in the dictionary, but she didn’t pay me no mind. It was my favorite word after that. I ran it in the ground till one day my father got the strap just to show how deviant he could get. (Bambara, HM, 38)

In light of her mother’s disregard for her generally, and the beatings she receives from her “beer-drinking” (37) father, the narrator seems to be replicating the behavioral patterns of her family. In reality not only Manny is

“deviant”; the stigma is carried by the whole neighborhood. Garland-Thomson maintains that “in essence, stigmatization is an interactive social process in which particular human traits are deemed not only different, but deviant” (1997, 31). The question remains: If everybody is deviant, whom is Manny deviant from? The narrator’s mother says Manny is the “craziest one” of the boys (Bambara, HM, 35), but the narrator’s view is that “Miss Rose is nutty but Manny’s mother’s crazier than Manny” (36), which implies that it is common in this community to categorize people according to their level of “craziness.” Crazy, in this neighborhood, also has to do with reputation: “To say you were bad put some people off. But to say you were crazy, well, you were officially not to be messed with” (35). While the narrator is considered “deviant” in the community center, the stigma Manny carries inside the neighborhood is constructed due to the community’s inability to take care of him as a child with a disability. He is bullied not only by the racist police officers but other children, too, and ignored by adults. In this way, the author seems to be calling for communities to take care of children and educate them about the construction and functions of stigma.

In “Raymond’s Run,” Raymond is also stigmatized by other children. The bullies are thus childish, dependent, and vulnerable, too, but Raymond’s disability is one of those “human traits” (Garland-Thomson 1997, 31) that enables his stigmatization. In fact, all the children except for Raymond are rude and potentially violent toward other people. Squeaky, according to herself, has “a big rep as the baddest thing around” (Bambara, RR, 32), and she has a way of boasting about her previous violent behavior towards other girls: “I have whopped her behind many times for less salt than that” (26). When one of her school mates sarcastically asks if she is Raymond’s mother, the narrator indirectly threatens her with violence: “That’s right, Fatso. And the next word out of anybody and I’ll be *their* mother too” (27; emphasis in original). Importantly, she does not let anyone speak to Raymond and speaks for him: “You got anything to say to my brother, you say it to me” (27). Thus, Raymond is made linguistically vulnerable.

Raymond’s extreme vulnerability, on the other hand, makes us easily forget the fact that Squeaky is “a poor Black girl” (Bambara, RR, 27) who is beaten at home because Raymond had wet his clothes while playing (24). Not only is she vulnerable to the violent behavior of adults, she is also prone to acting as infantile as Raymond at times: “I’ll high-prance down 34th Street like a rodeo pony to keep my knees strong even if it does get my mother uptight so that she walks ahead like she’s not with me, don’t know me, is all by herself on a shopping trip, and I am somebody else’s crazy child” (25).

No real power is offered to Raymond either by the end of the story. Squeaky decides to start coaching him, which for her is an act of empathy, but in fact means that she is going to take control of Raymond’s style of running. Even

though she means well, she is paternalistically taking power over her brother's life, by speaking for him and deciding that he will become a runner with her as his coach even though whether Raymond wants to start competing is not made clear. After deciding to consider quitting running and starting to coach Raymond instead, Squeaky is able to give in to the expectations of being a girl who is a friend of other girls, even though she has been busy training running rather than building friendship with other girls:

We stand there with this big smile of respect between us. It's about as real a smile as girls can do for each other, considering we don't practice real smiling every day, you know, cause maybe we too busy being flowers or fairies or strawberries instead of something honest and worthy of respect . . . you know . . . like being people. (Bambara, RR, 32)

It is interesting how Squeaky still juxtaposes performing "feminine" roles with humanization by also juxtaposing "being flowers or fairies or strawberries" and "being people." Squeaky associates "being a strawberry" to her resentment over her parents' expectations of her performance, whether it is a play in nursery school where she had to actually play a strawberry, or any other "girlish" act expected of her. She quite frankly states: "I am not a strawberry" (28).

It is the sassy attitude of the narrators that affects the way vulnerability is shown in both of these stories. Because they seem so strong and self-reliant, it seems that the girls are divested of vulnerability. Historically, as Kenneth W. Goings notes, "the emasculation of African American males was part of a process that masculinized African American women" (1994, xxi). The relationality and persistence of these positions, the "perpetual boy" and the strong Black woman is one of the lessons that Bambara teaches us through these stories. I believe that the girls, too, are vulnerable, but their vulnerability is projected onto their male companions while they themselves hold a more "masculine" position. Butler, Gambetti, and Sabsay maintain that "psychoanalytic feminists have remarked that the masculine positions are effectively built through a denial of their own vulnerability. This denial or disavowal requires one to forget one's own vulnerability and project, displace, and localize it elsewhere" (2016, 4). For most of the story, the narrators seem to build masculine positions for themselves, only to let go some of their "boyish traits" by the end of the stories.

The narrators' epiphanic moments take place when the male characters break free from their infantilized positions for an instant and the girls open up to vulnerability. The male characters become humanized, but only in the eyes of the narrators, since society's dehumanizing (racist, ableist, anti-Black misandrist) systems are still operating. The humanization happens in the climactic scenes and involve what Mitchell (2020) calls "the capacities of

incapacity” (170), referring to a “surprise revelation of an unexpected alternative capacity at the foundation of disability” that “disconnect and re-operationalize the binary relationship between ability and disability into less oppositional modes of interaction” (170). These characters with disabilities interrupt the binary narrative of ability and disability by being (suddenly) capable of unpredicted actions that not many non-disabled people are. In my view, here this capacity operates “at the foundation of disability,” which I will explain next.

In Manny’s case, this happens when he is doing the layups. Whether his disability is because of a sort of mental illness or autism, for example, the apparent compulsion to keep playing makes him a very fine ball player. His inability to communicate with other people allows him to focus intensely on his imaginary game, and thus, “he never misse[s]” (Bambara, HM, 39). When the police officers finally give Manny back his ball after taking it from him to get his attention, he goes “right into his gliding thing clear up to the backboard, damn near like he was some kind of very beautiful bird” (41). Despite of the dehumanizing power of the animal simile, Manny gains the narrator’s respect through his sports performance. To the narrator’s astonishment, one of the officers does not see the performance as she does and, as mentioned earlier, starts shouting at Manny, wanting to take him into the squad car (41). Manny’s “capacity in incapacity,” as manifested in his athletic prowess, proves powerless in the face of racism. Eventually, Manny follows the police officers “real quiet-like right out of the park into the dark, then into the squad car with his head drooping and his arms in a crook” (42), as if still waiting for others to throw him the ball. His mental capacity to focus that enables him to perfect his skills in basketball, means nothing in a society constructed for the needs of the “able-bodied” and “able-minded,” and policed by White supremacists. This is something that Bambara was interested in also before her writing career. Holmes states that “while working at Metropolitan Hospital, Bambara became an advocate for community-based psychiatric services that recognized people in need of mental health treatment as deserving of services that also respected and recognized their talents” (2014, 40). “The Hammer Man” leaves readers uncertain whether this kind of services are available for Manny, and with the mere relief of the narrator that his life was spared.

Raymond’s moment of capacity takes place when he is performing the run, which has given this story its name, “Raymond’s Run.” According to Di Maio, Raymond “deliver[s] a dazzling performance of ‘himself as a runner’ which deconstructs all of his sister’s (and everyone else’s) assumptions on what he, as a disabled boy, is or should be capable of doing” (2020, 241). I contend that Raymond is capable of this “dazzling performance” precisely because of his vulnerability and apparent dependence on Squeaky. Because she has to take care of her brother, Squeaky takes Raymond everywhere with her. That means

constant running and breathing exercises: "You can see me any time of day practicing running. I never walk if I can trot" (Bambara, RR, 25). Raymond, in turn, imitates her: "He surely knows how to breathe in counts of seven cause he's always doing it at the dinner table" (32). Seven is Squeaky's lucky number and, hence, she does her breathing exercises "on counts of seven" (25).

While Manny is compared to a bird during his sports performance (Bambara, HM, 41), Raymond is also compared to an animal by the narrator, as mentioned earlier. After his run, namely, Raymond amazes his sister again by climbing over the fence that separated him from the other children. Squeaky describes Raymond first as "rattling the fence like a gorilla in a cage like in them gorilla movies, but then like a dancer or something he starts climbing up nice and easy but very fast" (RR, 31). The moment when Raymond is compared to a gorilla, which sounds like a racist stereotype, is also when he carries out his most outstanding performance of capacity. In his incapacity (he has been isolated from other children on the other side of the fence), he finds sudden capacity to climb to the other side, even though until this point the narrative has established him as not capable of doing much. At the same time, he might also symbolically climb over the structures that separate him from other children.

As we have seen, images of vulnerability and invulnerability are being questioned in these stories through seemingly polarized representations. However, the fact that the narrators' reliability is not clear functions to further subvert any strict notions of femininity and masculinity in these stories.

3.5 "IT LOOKED PHONY TO ME": ON UNRELIABLE NARRATION

Taking into account that the narrators of these short stories are children, I believe they cannot be taken as strictly reliable narrators in the first place. Due to their lack of life experience, they can be considered as fallible narrators (see, e.g., Pettersson 2016). Moreover, as novice tellers, they have only "recently achieved competency as listeners" (Stepito 1991, 208) and might, thus, make mistakes as storytellers. Importantly, they lack the proper knowledge to aptly inform readers about Manny and Raymond's impairments and their level of dependence. The narrator in "The Hammer Man" only refers to the tale that Manny is "crazy" (Bambara, HM, 35) and Squeaky seems to only know that Raymond "is not quite right" (RR, 23). However, I think there are also other reasons why they could be considered unreliable.

In my view, it is clear that the narrator of "The Hammer Man" makes Manny seem less vulnerable than he is. Lying may come naturally to her because it is a behavioral pattern of many of her community members. From the beginning of the story, the narrator refers to "tales" and "stories" that

people tell, not to facts. She doesn't believe Manny's "story" (Bambara, HM, 35) that he is "crazy" (even though it seems, it is *her* story), not to mention the fact that Manny has hurt himself falling off the roof. When she sees Manny in bandages (37), she says, "I figured Dirty Red had told me a tale just to get me out there so Manny could stomp me, and Manny was playing it up with costume and all till he could get me" (37). It all looks "phony" to her (37), and she decides to impress her friends (and succeeds) by pretending that she is the reason for Manny's condition, as mentioned earlier. Later she claims to have taken Manny's hammer away from him. This statement contradicts what the narrator says when she looks at the police and Manny: "I kept my cool mostly cause of that hammer in Manny's pocket" (41). Either she had not taken it away from Manny, or, as the hammer is never described, the hammer does not even exist.

Manny's hammer can thus be seen as a symbol of power and masculinity, which the narrator claims to have taken away from him (Bambara, HM, 38). Due to his inability or reluctance to use it—or the power it may symbolize—the hammer does not help Manny. Neither does it work as a threat to anyone's safety. It can be viewed as a tool for self-defense, intimidation, and protection. So, if the hammer that Manny carries "in his fatigues" (38) symbolizes power, masculinity, manhood, and, most of all, security for this Black male character, questions can be raised: What if it is taken away? What if it doesn't exist? Because of the fact that we never see Manny use this hammer, or even threaten to use it, a question from a song by H.E.R., "I Can't Breathe," might also be raised: "What is a gun to a man that surrenders?" (2020). In thinking about these questions and, thus, Black male vulnerability, it is clear that the hammer, indeed, has a significant role in this narrative.

If the hammer is seen as a symbol of violence, a symbol of masculine aggression, it may also symbolize the fear of those things that other people associate with Manny. According to Curry, in the core of "Man-Not-ness" is the fact that Black men and boys need to embody the fears of others (2017, 34). As discussed in Chapter 1, racist stereotypes are often constructed upon the fear of Black masculinity, and this fear, I believe, is the key to Manny's isolation and eventual institutionalization. It is clearly a misplaced fear because Manny is only represented as violent by the narrator, and perhaps stereotypically profiled as such by the White police officers. The Black boy is expected to be a troublemaker, while the Black girl is viewed as so strong (or worthless) that she—a child—can be left alone on a basketball court at night. In truth, Manny is submissive: he is taken away by the police without resistance. At the same time, the narrator's BB gun has been hidden by her father, which might signify that the parents do not want her to "use" her masculine aggression or that it must be at least hidden.

In addition to this fear of Black masculinity, Manny's disability adds another fear: race as a category of difference cannot be changed for an individual but disability is something that we can get at any time. Manny's deviance may remind the people in the community about their potential to "go crazy" (or already be crazy), and perhaps the narrator's aggression and fear of him stems from acknowledging the similarity of her and Manny. As the policemen take him with them, it is too late for Manny: he has lost his power altogether and become a metaphor for a lost sense of agency. Reading Manny's story is an opportunity to learn what lies behind the term "Black boy." It is being isolated, scapegoated. It is an openness to physical and non-physical harm. It is being "responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know" (Coates 2015a, 71).

While the narrator of "The Hammer Man" seems to represent Manny as less vulnerable than he is, Squeaky, on the other hand, represents Raymond as more vulnerable, perhaps in order to strengthen her own reputation as the "baddest" (Bambara, RR, 30). As a consequence, Raymond's extreme vulnerability conceals Squeaky's vulnerability. For example, the fact that she is "a poor Black girl" (27) who is vulnerable to the violent behavior of adults (24) is not as marked when juxtaposed with Raymond's vulnerability. Furthermore, placing a little girl in the "strong Black woman" role can be seen as a way of challenging the notion of African American women as heads of the family, and their almost "suprahuman" strength (T. Harris 1995, 111). In other words, one of the lessons of "Raymond's Run" is that women, too, may conceal their vulnerability with abusive language and aggressive behavior.

The fact that Raymond may not be as vulnerable and, thus, stereotypically passive and dependent, becomes, of course, more evident in the May Day running competition. Even though some critics argue that the fact that Raymond is "running in his very own style . . . with his arms down to his side and the palms tucked up behind him" (Bambara, RR, 31), represents his respect for Squeaky (see, e.g., Di Maio 2020, 241), to me it appears as if Raymond actually tries to mimic their father's running style. The father is not portrayed in relation to Raymond, but we get a glimpse of him when Squeaky depicts her running competitions with their father: "He can beat me to Amsterdam Avenue with me having a two fire-hydrant headstart and him running with his hands in his pockets and whistling" (Bambara, RR, 24). Even though Squeaky says that the fact that she cannot beat her father at running is "private information" (24), known by only her father and herself, Raymond must have been watching them. Not able to understand that their father put his hands in his pockets to make it easier for Squeaky to win, he puts his hands in a similar position. Perhaps copying his father's style instead of his sister's illustrates Raymond's awareness of his own masculinity.

It might be that Raymond is not as dependent as Squeaky makes him look because she also underrates Raymond's capacity to understand the meaning of words and actions. For example, Squeaky does not let Raymond speak for himself and thus implies that he is not intelligent enough to take part in a conversation. However, Raymond seems to understand even the man on the loudspeaker, although, according to Squeaky, "you can hardly make out what he's saying for the static" (Bambara, RR, 30). Now that she, as a "novice teller" (Stepo 1991), has learned to listen and realizes that "Raymond would make a very fine runner" (Bambara, RR, 31), she also realizes that she does not have to be the "the fastest thing on two feet" (23) anymore.

Instead of leaning on hypermasculinity as a way of coping with belittlement and infantilization, these men are dependent on strong females (see also Butler-Evans 1989, 105). Trudier Harris notes, "this strength we celebrate has sometimes crippled black men" (1995, 116), and it might at first seem that Bambara's pedagogy lies in portraying strong women beside weak men, whose only hope for survival is to count on the women. Nevertheless, these stories resist stereotypes concerning female strength and male vulnerability (and vice versa), and thus Bambara's agenda, rather than merely inverting the representations for the benefit of the female characters, is to intervene with essentialist discourses on race, gender, and the body, which she does at least in part through portraying Black male vulnerability.

3.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Toni Cade Bambara's vulnerable men and sassy women offer a juxtaposition through which various issues can be investigated. Manny and Raymond serve a narrative prosthetic function in that they support the growth of the female narrators, and also provide corporeal metaphors which enable critical discussion of gendered and racist stereotypes. In her short stories, Bambara takes notions such as femininity/masculinity and vulnerability/strength and dismantles them in order to perhaps steer the focus to other issues. Ideally, that would lead to challenging those images also in real life discourses. In her essay, she connects her insights of maleness and femaleness to politics and society at large: "What are we talking about when we speak of revolution if not a free society made up of whole individuals? I'm not arguing the denial of manhood or womanhood, but rather a shifting of priorities, a call for Selfhood, Blackhood" (2005, "On the Issue of Roles"). Toni Morrison says that Bambara knew her fictions' "pedagogy, its use . . . very well" (qtd. in hooks 1999, 236) which, I think, is made very clear in "The Hammer Man" and "Raymond's Run."

Weak is not a synonym for *vulnerability*, and invulnerability is only a fantasy. The resistance to gendered stereotypes can be seen as foregrounding

the importance of African American men to connect with African American women and how vulnerable the whole community is without that connection (see also T. Lewis 2020). In this sense, through writing these stories, Bambara would have joined the “wise progressive black women” who, according to bell hooks, “have understood that any coming together of free, whole, decolonized black males and females would constitute a formidable challenge to imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (2004, 134). For hooks, one of the causes for the adversities of African American men is their acceptance of patriarchy, and the only way to freedom would be to embrace feminism. Instead of feminist propaganda that would work against males generally, or trying to “win” them to support feminism, these stories challenge patriarchy and emphasize the importance of unity in African American communities.

This notion of unity is also characteristic to womanism, whose mother, Alice Walker, was nevertheless criticized for the representations of Black men in her fiction. Concentrating on Walker’s 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, the next chapter examines what happens when a young man turns into a “grown child” (Walker 1983a, 141–42) and how reading the “bad Black man” figure as more nuanced and vulnerable contributes to the resistance to stereotypes concerning Black men.

4 “THE BAD BLACK MAN”: VULNERABILITY AS CONTEXT IN ALICE WALKER’S *THE COLOR PURPLE*²³

“You must think you’re in the South, mister” (Bambara, HM, 41), the narrator of “The Hammer Man” exclaims when coming face to face with White racism and police brutality in 1960s New York. Defending her Black male neighbor, she sarcastically reminds the White officer that slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the most brutal racist actions were largely southern phenomena.²⁴ And so was the stereotype of the violent, “bad,” Black man. This chapter brings us to the southern United States with *The Color Purple*, a 1982 novel by Alice Walker, a child of Eatonton, Georgia. Set in rural Georgia and starting from the early years of the twentieth century, the novel opens at a time when rates of violence within African American communities were high and constantly rising (see Bryant 2003, 19–20). Even though the crime rate statistics “apply to blacks in both the North and the South,” Jerry H. Bryant argues, “it is the South that is most relevant to the early development of the image of the violent man, in part because ninety percent of the black population still lived in the South in these years and in part because it is the southern, not the northern, badman mostly memorialized in the ballads” (2003, 19). This violence found its way into folklore and folk music, as well as literary representations. The stereotype of the violent, criminal-prone, and altogether bad Black man is not just a regional phenomenon; it has its roots in the longstanding images of cruelty and bestiality linked to Black men that were discussed in the earlier chapters. Curry mentions “a premise that is rarely questioned and often is taken as truth,” that is, “Black men are violent because Black men *are* violent” (2017, 200; emphasis in original). This notion unquestionably deems Black men as threats, and also makes them vulnerable to violent reactions towards them, as we saw in the scene from “The Hammer Man.”

Thus, the stereotype of Black male violence strongly interrelates with Black male vulnerability. To analyze this dynamic more closely, I have chosen perhaps the most notoriously violent man in the fiction by African American

²³ I think it is important to note that I am aware of the problematic comments Alice Walker has recently given regarding an anti-Semitic book. While I do not support those ideas, my focus is on the content of Walker’s literary works. I will take Toni Morrison’s advice of not taking a “position . . . on the quality of a work based on the attitudes of an author” (1992, 90). For more information, see Abulhawa (2019) and Alter (2018).

²⁴ As Niko Heikkilä points out, the 1960s saw the third wave of Ku Klux Klan activity, and “the civil rights-era Klan was mostly a Southern movement” (2021, 23).

women. Albert, whom his wife, Celie, calls Mr. _____, is (along with a few more minor male characters) the reason why Walker has been severely criticized for her allegedly negative representations of men. According to Linden Lewis, *The Color Purple* is one of the works where "masculinity is positioned as the object against which femininity reacts. The characterization of black masculinity is sometimes accurate, but rarely represented as nuanced and complex, and frequently caricatured" (2008, 48). Albert is unfaithful, sexually and physically abusive as a husband, uses offensive language, and is also a father who ignores his children. On the outside, it looks like he embodies the "bad Black man" caricature, with no virtues or excuses.

In this chapter, however, I show that Walker's womanism interrupts the binary narrative of "*Good Black Man*" and "*Bad Black Man*" (Cooper 2006, 853; emphasis in original), deconstructing the badness of the male protagonist and offering instead something more nuanced: Black male vulnerability. I will analyze vulnerability as it manifests itself, firstly, as the outcome of single-axis oppression (for example, gender- or race-based discrimination alone), and, secondly, in the intersection of race and gender (Black *and* male) in multiple contexts. I will show how the vulnerable condition of the male protagonist in Walker's novel is constructed in contexts that operate on various levels (historical, political, and interpersonal/social) and how this representation seeks to deconstruct the image of the "bad Black man." In the critical response to this novel, there seems to be a consensus that Albert abandons his sexist ideas and violent behavioral patterns and starts making up for his bad deeds by the end of the novel, apparently due to replacing his patriarchal worldview with a womanist one. I argue that, while Albert might initially seem like a stereotypically violent Black male character who is humanized only by the end of the novel, readers are, in fact, offered a chance to understand him from the beginning of the novel. Instead of merely causing readers to judge Albert, the female focalization offers many ways of understanding the contexts for his behavior, in this way challenging a reading of African American males as stereotypically violent. Moreover, I argue, vulnerability in *The Color Purple* works as context.

The word *context*, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to the "whole structure of a connected passage regarded in its bearing upon any of the parts which constitute it; the parts which immediately precede or follow any particular passage or 'text' and determine its meaning" (n.d.). This definition embraces the idea that to be able to determine the meaning of a text, a situation, or an individual act of a person, we must have knowledge of its connection to some other thing (in the past).²⁵ In the case of literature, context may refer to the situation or the circumstances in which the literary text is

²⁵ The *OED* refers here to context-theory.

produced. Contexts can be historical events, events in the society or in the author's life, or the culture in which the literary work is created. For instance, as a Black female author writing about Black-on-Black-violence, Walker wrote from a position of vulnerability, depicting in her novel the most horrific actions that some women fall victim to in their families. On the (inter)personal level, any individual's historical, political, or social contexts can include any or all of the following: family ties, social connection, race/ethnicity, religion, education, generation, or life events. In a way, all the aforementioned factors (and there may be more) determine our "meaning" as agents. Literary characters are also complex combinations of identities and features. Even though Albert is a heterosexual, middle-class, non-disabled man, his actions have been cultivated in a place of vulnerability.

In his 2006 article, Frank Rudy Cooper argues that the experiences of the "singly subordinated"—such as heterosexual Black men—can also be approached using an intersectional lens:

Extending intersectionality theory to heterosexual black men is justifiable when we consider the shared interests of the multiply and singly subordinated in defeating the Western epistemological system of the scaling of bodies. The scaling of bodies is the assumption that we must rank identity characteristics against a norm and organize society according to those hierarchies. (853; emphasis in original)

That is, applying intersectionality theory to the experiences of, for example, heterosexual (and able-bodied or middle-class) Black men is valid when the aim is to resist the system of domination. The system of scaling of bodies generates the notion of "Americanness" (Morrison 1992), the figure of the "normate" (Garland-Thomson 1997), as well as the "civilized western subject/man" (Pickering 2001), that were discussed in the earlier chapters, leaving all other kinds of identities as Other. Also the singly subordinated fall in this category and their experiences can, therefore, be examined through intersectionality theory.

Cooper claims that representations of heterosexual Black men are often "bipolar" (2006, 853; emphasis in original). There is, on the one hand, the "Bad Black Man," an image that fits the stereotypical notions of the brute and the Black beast discussed earlier. On the other hand, there is the image of the "Good Black Man," who "distances himself from blackness and associates with white norms" (853; emphasis in original), a kind of "Uncle Tom"²⁶ (880).

²⁶ Having stemmed from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1995), "Uncle Tom" (or just "Tom") refers to the stereotype of a Black man who assimilates to the ways of White people, his own oppression included. According to Adena Spingarn, Stowe's literary character "has taken on a uniquely dynamic cultural life beyond the pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, becoming a widely recognized

According to Cooper, narratives in popular culture limit their representations of Black men to these two images, creating a gap, and thus a lack of more nuanced representations. This “bipolarity” can be seen as intersectional because it is “the product of the combination of narratives about blackness in general and narratives about black masculinity in particular” (858). The vulnerable condition of heterosexual Black men, according to Cooper, is an outcome of single-axis subordination. It derives, however, from the oppression based on the gender-specific stereotypes and race-specific historical contexts discussed earlier.

Cooper maintains that the bipolar manner of representing Black men “seeks to seduce heterosexual black men into accepting the right to subordinate others as compensation for [their] own subordination” (2006, 853; emphasis in original), and consequently, to accept the whole system that sustains social hierarchies. This means that, on a personal level, some heterosexual Black men accept the system of oppression and engage in oppressive behavior patterns themselves (see Cooper 2006). Even though I think this is partly the case when considering Walker’s Albert, I do not support a reading where structural challenges are deemed as the responsibility of the individual. Thus, I do not aim to argue, as Curry contends is often the case, that “Black males’ behavior, politics, and aspirations are explained by their cultural appropriations of white violence and their desire for white masculinity” (2017, 200). Curry refers to theories that seem to reduce the behavior of Black men into merely modeling White (patriarchal) masculinity as mimetic. He also maintains that “theory never posits that Black men behave violently or criminally because they are victims of poverty, prior physical or sexual abuse, or mental anguish caused by racism and their specific sexual vulnerability to both men and women” (199). However, in *The Color Purple*, explanations for Albert’s behavior other than mimetic or compensatory are provided. Keeping in mind that the cause of Black male vulnerability is primarily, but not only, racism, I argue that the vulnerable condition of Albert has developed at the intersection of race and gender, as well as in complex historical, political, and interpersonal contexts. This vulnerability, then, works as context when readers make sense of his actions and thus resists both the binary of good/bad Black masculinity and the stereotype of the “bad Black man.” When it comes to the early criticism of *The Color Purple*, however, not everybody noticed this aspect of the novel.

epithet for a black person deemed so subservient to whites that he betrays his race” (2018, 1; see also Goings 1994 and Bogle 2016).

4.1 CONCERNS AND CONTROVERSIES

“I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (Walker 1983a, 167). This is probably the most famous quotation from Walker’s controversial novel. With the metaphor of the color purple, Shug Avery refers to the importance of noticing and enjoying the good things in life. While the color symbolizes various things in different cultures—from regret and mourning to courage and royalty—here it stands for everything good God has created, sexual relationships between women included (see Christian 1985, 190). Purple is still a common color of symbolism in the LGBTQ+ community (for more information about color symbolism, see Hastings 2020; N. Warren 2019, 81). According to Shug’s faith, “God is everything. . . . Everything that is or ever was or ever will be” (Walker 1983a, 167) and her teachings are recorded in one of the protagonist’s letters, through which this epistolary novel is narrated. Celie’s letters first to God and then to her estranged sister Nettie recite her path from being abused by both her husband Albert and her stepfather, through falling in love with Shug, and finally to becoming a businesswoman surrounded by a loving family and, most importantly, becoming free. Considering the author’s womanist activism and the protagonist’s gender and sexual orientation, the criticism on this novel has logically focused on the central female character-narrator. *The Color Purple* is, after all, Celie’s story.

Of all the literary works explored in this dissertation, *The Color Purple* has received perhaps the most negative criticism, especially concerning the representation of Black men. According to Deborah McDowell, a general difference can be seen in the way male and female readers have perceived the novel: “With few exceptions, female readers see an implicit affirmation of *black women*, while males see a programmatic assault on black men, though I grant that these two responses are not mutually exclusive” (1995, 119; emphasis in original). McDowell focuses on the reception of *The Color Purple* by male readers and sheds light on the then-ongoing debate on African American female writers’ alleged attack on African American men that had already started before the publication of *The Color Purple* (118–121). As was the case with the criticism that other 20th-century Black women writers received, the disapproval not only concerned men, but also mainly came from men. Even though the negative response from critics quite often simply concerned “good” or “bad” representations of Black men in general, their comments were not completely off the mark. Many men in this novel are certainly dominant and violent.

In 1984, Trudier Harris criticized *The Color Purple* for giving “validity to all the white racist’s notions of pathology in black communities” (157). What she found disturbing was the stereotypical depiction of Black male characters

as violent and sexually abusive of women and children and African American communities as insouciant about marriages. She argued that Black women critics did not write about a novel containing negative depictions of African Americans due to the fact that they “would rather have their wisdom teeth pulled than be accused of objecting to [*The Color Purple*]” (155). This example describes well the early critics’ simultaneous admiration for and disappointment with the novel. In his book review for *The New York Times*, the African American author and critic Mel Watkins stated that “the underlying controversy over the portrayal of black men in fictional works by black women has been brewing in black literary circles for some time” (1986). Watkins himself perceived Walker’s male representations as a transgression of an unspoken rule in the African American community, a rule that apparently restricts the images of Black people in literature in order to minimize the risk of strengthening negative stereotypes (see Watkins 1986; J. Bobo 1989, 338; and Chapter 1 of this dissertation).

Since more people had access to Celie’s story after Steven Spielberg’s film version was released in 1985, the controversy over the representations deepened and even extended into criticism of Walker herself. For example, filmmaker Spike Lee stated that Walker “had problems with black men” (qtd. in J. Bobo 1989, 337) and that “the quickest way for a Black playwright, novelist, or poet to get published has been to say that Black men are shit. If you say that, then you are definitely going to get media, your book published, your play done—Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker” (qtd. in J. Bobo 1989, 337). Another specific example is David Bradley’s comment in *The New York Times Magazine* (1984) that “Alice Walker has a high level of enmity toward black men” (qtd. in McDowell 1995, 121). Some critics even viewed the story as a threat to the whole African American community: Screenwriter Richard Wesley claimed that “*The Color Purple* is not an attack upon Black men. It is a challenge to the entire Black nation” (BBC 1986).²⁷ According to Jacqueline Bobo, the reactions to the film version were especially harsh. The movie was, for example, compared to *Birth of a Nation* while “Ishmael Reed, a Black novelist, . . . labelled the film and the book ‘a Nazi conspiracy’” (2004, 177; see also J. Bobo 1988).

However, not all the criticism on this Pulitzer Prize- and American Book Award-winning bestseller negative. For example, Black feminist scholar Barbara Smith praised it for simply telling the truth:

The Color Purple is a breakthrough in Black literature, because Walker so succinctly names the unnameable: that Black women have at times been brutally and matter-of-factly oppressed by Black men, that they

²⁷ For more information on the reception of *The Color Purple* (the novel and the movie), see J. Bobo (1988, 1989, and 2004) and Walker (1998). See also Pinckney (1987).

have suffered from sexism as well as from racism, and that Black women's love for each other has formed the bottom line of our survival. The quality of our love has made all of our lives—Black women's, men's and children's—worth living. Period. (1984, 170)

The Color Purple was seen as a way of amplifying silenced Black female voices, the voices of not only Black female writers, but also the likes of Celie, both in literature and in real life. Moreover, as Smith's statement shows, the novel also made visible Black women's role in sustaining the whole community through womanist values.

Trudier Harris, however, brought up a problem within the readership of Walker's novel: The fact that White readers celebrated the novel was problematic because "the media, by its very racist nature, seem[ed] to be able to focus on only one black writer at a time" (1984, 155). Indeed, *The Color Purple* was a sensation, especially after the movie was produced, and, as we will see in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, the two other novels by Black women published around the same time, *Tar Baby* in 1981 and *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1982, provided similarly "negative" portrayals of Black men. Therefore, the risk that some White people would see *The Color Purple* as the "usual" story of Black families was real. Harris suggested that White readers were thus being led to conceive of the novel as "the quintessential statement on Afro-American women and a certain kind of black lifestyle in these United States" (1984, 155).

Certainly, all these stereotypes are present in the novel and I agree with Trudier Harris that some aspects of the novel might strengthen the preconceptions of readers that do not identify with the characters, and even lead prejudiced readers to formulate new biases, especially toward African American men (see T. Harris 1984, 155–56). However, the question could be raised whether African American writers need to be responsible for how their (White) readers perceive their characters, or how these characters interplay with stereotypes. As she describes in *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1998), Walker herself was devastated by the attack from male critics: "Of all the accusations, it was hardest to tolerate the charge that I hated black men. From infancy I have relied on the fiercely sweet spirits of black men; and this is abundantly clear in my work" (23).

Another bone of critical contention concerns the notion of rehabilitating violent males by feminizing them. Bernard W. Bell argues that "problematic for many black male readers is the implied author's and protagonist's hostility towards black men, who are humanized only upon adopting womanist principles of sexual egalitarianism" (2004, 160). This would mean in Albert's case his transformation from a violent, two-dimensional character into a contrite man who is able to openly discuss his feelings, the transformation's apparent cause being his simultaneous acceptance of more "feminine" roles.

As will be discussed in more detail later, Albert starts to take on the role of a caretaker of his household after Celie leaves him, and when she comes back, he gradually accepts taking part in the stereotypically feminine action of sewing and openly conversing about his feelings with her.²⁸

It would seem that only those men who “repudiat[e] patriarchal attitudes” (Awkward 1989, 162) are fully accepted in the “postcategorical utopia”²⁹ of the novel’s final scene, where stereotypical gender roles as well as the family structure have been “queered” (see Jenkins 2002). Candice M. Jenkins argues that it was indeed Walker’s queering of the Black family structure and “the very notion of the potent black patriarch” in *The Color Purple* that made her the target of negative criticism (2002, 970, 972). Interestingly, Walker received a lot of negative comments for “queering” her personal life as well, first by marrying a White man, Melvyn Leventhal in 1967 (divorced in 1976) and afterwards also by having intimate relationships with women, and by associating with White women (see, e.g., Tillet 2021, 44–45, 74, 121).³⁰ In the final scene of the novel, Celie celebrates the fourth of July with, among others, her sister Nettie who had finally come back—to Celie’s surprise—with Celie’s long-lost children. Even Albert joins the family reunion as a friend. Jenkins argues that “[Albert’s] acceptance of traditionally female gender roles goes along with his humanization in the text” (2002, 985), meaning that Albert becomes more “feminine” and, by implication, humanized only by the end of the novel.

My own initial reactions to the novel also focused on the seeming suddenness of Albert’s transformation at the end of the narrative. The

²⁸ Jennifer Martin argues that “Alice Walker selected the quilt as a strong metaphor in *The Color Purple* and ‘Everyday Use’ to show sisterhood” (2014, 33) and that the “quilt metaphor is loaded with a triad of positive traits: sisterhood, empowerment and bonding with nature” (42).

²⁹ By postcategorical utopia, I am referring to Pekka Kilpeläinen’s dissertation *In Search of a Postcategorical Utopia: James Baldwin and the Politics of “Race” and Sexuality* (2010). Kilpeläinen defines the postcategorical utopia as “an impulse towards a world, or a state of being, in which those identity categories [of race, sexuality, and gender] would lose their capacity for oppression” (iii).

³⁰ Walker has herself given problematic commentaries concerning, for example, the men of the Black Panther Party. In her article in *The New York Times* (1993), she comments on Elaine Brown’s and David Hilliard’s autobiographies and notes that “the homoeroticism is so evident as to be comic in [David] Hilliard’s carefully worded memories of Huey [Newton].” Walker also states that “all of these men abused women and apparently thought little about it.” In her answer in *The New York Times* (1993), Elaine Brown expresses her disapproval of Walker’s allegations, saying that violence was used both by men and against them (sometimes by women): “Tragically, it was our way—perhaps our way of finding a way out. It was inherited, no doubt, from the Master’s way—but then, too, from Mammy’s not-so-nurturing switch.”

progression of Walker's storyline from brutality to a happily-ever-after ending seemed naive and unrealistic to me, until I noticed that I had been led by my own preconceptions, thinking that Albert's badness is something innate and unchangeable. Challenging this reading, I started noticing implications of the male protagonist's humanization through the exposure of his vulnerability even earlier in the novel. Rather than either denying the existence of stereotypes or reinforcing them, I now see Walker's approach as moving us through and then beyond stereotypes. We are shown both the stereotypical images *and* their context, especially in the characterization of the central male character. As we will see in the following sections, those contexts can be historical, political, as well as interpersonal.

4.2 INTERNALIZING THE NARRATIVE OF BADNESS

As discussed in Chapter 1, a common feature in many of the stereotypes concerning Black men, such as the Black beast, the savage, the Black buck, is the alleged threat they pose to White women. According to Cooper, while "the image of the Bad Black Man should be seen as emanating from the intersection of race and gender" (Cooper 2006, 879), it "emanates in part from a gender-specific assumption that heterosexual black men are a threat to the sexual security of white women" (860–61). In other words, the stereotypes that concern heterosexual Black men often deal with Black corruption of White female purity. As we shall see, however, in *The Color Purple*, badness can also take intraracial forms.

In this novel, intraracial violence happens inside the family. The novel starts when Celie is 14 years old and is twice impregnated by the man she thinks is her father. Only decades later does she learn that "Pa" is actually her stepfather, who had taken over the role of the head of the family after Celie's actual father, a successful businessman, had been lynched. Pa repeatedly rapes Celie and takes her newborn children, a boy and a girl, away. When Albert, whose wife had been murdered by her lover, comes to ask for Celie's sister Nettie's hand in marriage, Pa convinces him to take Celie instead. After marrying Albert, Celie becomes a stepmother for her new husband's four children and works constantly at home and in the fields, while Albert sits on the porch, and beats and rapes her. Albert also drives away Nettie, who had escaped from Pa and later ends up in Africa as a missionary. What is worst for Celie, Albert prevents any communication between the sisters for almost three decades. Physical, emotional, and sexual violence is indeed a pivotal aspect of this narrative, so it is understandable that some readers have been—and still

are³¹—worried that these representations will reinforce stereotypes of Black male proneness to physical and sexual violence. In a recent article on *The Color Purple*, namely, Curry argues that “the Black rapist and abuser became not only the lynchpin for gender theories proposed by feminists, but a mainstay of Black literary theory and scholarship” (2021b, n.p.). If, as Curry claims, (literary or cinematic) representations influence the formation of theory, I think it is highly relevant to explore the construction of and resistance to those images in their various contexts.

The figure of the “bad Black man,” also has a literary historical context. In addition to the stereotype of African American men as bad and violent, namely, there is a corresponding image created in African American folklore, fiction, and music. This is the “badman” archetype that had been present in African American oral tradition—ballads, toasts, and boasting songs, for example—around a century before *The Color Purple* was written. Bryant (2003) notes, however, that this archetype appeared in African American novels only during the first decades of the 20th century in the work of, for example, Zora Neale Hurston. Because the novels in which badmen can be found depict life in African American communities, the violence in them is intraracial. Before Hurston’s work, Black-on-Black violence had been a topic in very few, if any, African American novels (Bryant 2003, 25). After authors like Toni Morrison explored the “badman” type,³² it became, alongside the trickster figure,³³ “one of the central mythic elements in the African American experience” (5). Although many different variations exist throughout African American folklore, according to Lawrence W. Levine, badmen were commonly “hard, merciless toughs and killers confronting and generally vanquishing their adversaries without hesitation and without remorse” (1978, 407–08).

There is also, however, a vulnerable side to the badman. Bryant argues that more often than not, badmen “are bound inescapably by a white law, and are figures of awe and pity rather than of sadism and remorselessness” (2003, 13). For instance, John Hardy is described in Lead Belly’s version of the ballad “John Hardy” as “a desperate little man” and a “poor boy” (Lead Belly n.d.),

³¹ In “Making Mister: Anti-Black Misandry in Alice Walker’s Portrayal of Black Men in *The Color Purple*,” Curry maintains that “Mister has become a well-established trope of Black masculinity which defined not only the propensity Black males have for violence against Black women, but the Black male personality” (2021b, n.p.).

³² The badman is exemplified in Morrison’s oeuvre by Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2006) and Son Green in *Tar Baby* ([1981] 2004).

³³ The trickster figure will be discussed in Chapter 5 on Toni Morrison’s fiction.

despite all the crimes he has committed.³⁴ Bryant continues, “for all their differences, these badmen form a variegated profile for the times, a projection of anger, frustration, and isolation during Jim Crow, of a simultaneous helplessness and power” (2003, 16). As with many of the stereotypes concerning Black men, that is, the badman is often a combination of opposing qualities. As crime-committing men, badmen are, of course, not innocent. However, their being is defined by a desperately vulnerable situation: “No amount of running, no amount of cleverness or speed, enables him to elude white punishment. Like Stagolee, John Hardy may be desperate; he may be mean, brave, tough, unequalled with a gun. But his condition is ‘caughtness’” (17). As with the other stereotypes concerning African American men, the image of the badman is marked with ambiguity.

Albert, as a son of the historical time and place he lives in, initially seems to have accepted the system of oppression and, alongside it, the belief that toughness is expected from men, even from those living in the “condition of caughtness.” Paul Kivel argues that, in the United States, boys and men “are taught to hide [their] feelings and appear to be tough and in control,” in other words, to “Act Like a Man” (2010, 83). Generally stated, “boys are taught to control their bodies, control their feelings, control their relationships—to protect themselves from being vulnerable” (84). The ability to control, according to Kivel, differs between groups of men coming from different ethnic backgrounds. As an oppressed group of men, Black men do not have as many opportunities to control their feelings, bodies, or their relationships, yet violence is expected from them (see, for example, hooks 2005, V.T. Harris 2016, Curry 2017) and not from Black women. The predator, the beast, the “bad Black man,” all are prone to violence. Even though Black women also share this vulnerability of being caught by the White legal system (or physically caught by White men), my focus will be on the combination of toughness and powerlessness as it manifests itself as a specific feature of Black male vulnerability in *The Color Purple*.

Yet, because this novel also depicts violence conducted by women, it is perhaps noteworthy to say a few words about the theme. As discussed earlier, as a result of slavery, African American women were deemed as more masculine than White women, thus creating the stereotype of the strong Black woman. Briefly stated, while strength has become a “natural” trait of Black women—at least in popular culture representations of them (see, for example, T. Harris 2001, M. Wallace 2015), female violence, in general, is considered “unnatural” (see hooks 2005). In other words, propensity for violent behavior

³⁴ As noted by Lomax (1960), while many versions of this song exist, it is commonly believed that John Hardy originally composed it himself (264, 271).

has often been reserved for (Black) men as a “natural” trait. However, hooks states that

feminist idealization of motherhood made it extremely difficult to call attention to maternal sadism, to the violence women enact with children, especially with boys. And yet we know that whether it is a consequence of power dynamics in dominator culture or simply a reflection of rage, women are shockingly violent toward children. *This fact should lead everyone to question any theory of gender differences that suggests that women are less violent than men.* (2005, 63; my emphasis)

The fact that women abuse their male children and passively witness their sons being abused by men often leads to male violence (see hooks 2005, 61–64). Instead of considering violence as a male problem (or a Black male problem), we should probably see it as a behavioral pattern of *some people*. In their fictional works, both Walker and Zora Neale Hurston depict violent men but also violent women. Bettye J. Parker-Smith states that

historically, Black women have been directed into feelings of guilt about responsibility for the emasculation of the Black male. Guilt, as demonstrated in Walker’s women, breeds a weakness that cripples. Women understand that despite the troubles their men see, men are actually able to get along very well together. Their ability to enjoy and maintain a camaraderie is an element of beauty in their strength. Black women not only digest the hurt and pain, they feel it their duty to become a repository of the Black man’s rage. . . . Black men, by the same token, understanding this weakness and, hence, vulnerability, use Black women as their “punching bag.” (1984, 481)

When considering *The Color Purple*, I do not agree with the fact that “men are actually able to get along very well together.” The men in this novel are in grief, some are alcoholics, some have eating disorders, and probably depression.³⁵ All of them need to fear being lynched, and some (like Celie’s biological father and his two brothers) are lynched. Moreover, how can characters who are in such “rage” as to contemplate using violence also be able “to get along very well”?

Moreover, while it is true that Celie initially lets herself to be treated as a “punching bag,” no other women in the novel do, not Sofia, not Shug, and, eventually, not even Mary Agnes. Sofia is used to fighting with men in her

³⁵ A similar pattern can be seen in Walker’s debut novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* ([1970] 1996), in which the contexts for Grange’s behavior are provided more explicitly and in more detail, and often explained by the male character himself. In my view, this shows that already in her earlier work, Walker handled her male characters with empathy, even though she also exposed their darker sides.

family, so when her husband, Albert's son Harpo, tries to beat her, she fights back, and continues fighting with him and also other people. Celie says Sofia and Harpo were "fighting like to mens" (Walker 1983a, 36). Sofia is seen as masculine because violence in this community is considered a masculine trait. Shug, who does not even seem to consider the option of being hit by men, is also compared to men by Albert: "He say to tell the truth, Shug act more manly than most men. I mean she upright, honest. Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost, he say. You know Shug will fight, he say. Just like Sofia" (228). It is interesting that Albert also associates honesty with his ideal image of "being a man." The most respectable trait for a man, it seems, is being tough and violent if necessary. It is considered so unnatural to women in this community that whenever women are tough, they are "like men."

The motif of violence also has to do with the tradition of Black women writers. Even though *The Color Purple* is unique in many ways to the African American literary tradition—in its epistolary form and its plotline, for example—it is also tightly tied to Black women writers' literary tradition and a celebration of Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ([1937] 2007). As discussed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey*, the connection between these works is mainly in their language, the Black vernacular in which Hurston's Janie speaks and Celie writes (1989, xxvi). In this way, Hurston's and Walker's novels "talk about" or Signify upon each other. "Signifyin(g)" to Gates is "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (xxiv), meaning, in this case, that Walker did not straightforwardly repeat Hurston's use of language in *The Color Purple*. Instead, according to Gates, "Walker Signifies upon Hurston by troping the concept of voice" (243) to meet her own purposes. While Walker herself has discussed the connection to Hurston on many occasions (see Walker 1983b), Ishmael Reed states in an interview with Mel Watkins that "those writers' citing of Zora Neale Hurston as a predecessor is a fraud, because unlike many of the current works, the women in Hurston's fiction could be as cruel as the men. Too often, that balance is missing now" (Watkins 1986). While there is some truth to Reed's comment—when one thinks about, for example, Hurston's short story "Sweat" ([1926] 1997)—generally I see Reed as only adding to the attack on successful Black women writers by Black male authors in the eighties. Keeping in mind that Hurston also got her share of criticism from male writers,³⁶ these comments seem to strengthen the kinship between these women rather than obstructing it.

In addition to the use of language, there are other ways in which *The Color Purple* Signifies upon *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The "bad Black man" motif is also present both in Hurston's and Walker's work, and I suggest that

³⁶ As noted in Chapter 1, author Richard Wright was one of Hurston's critics (see Ward 2008, 37).

Walker's creation of the violent male character can be seen as a further way of Signifying upon Hurston's novel. For instance, Hurston's violent men "act out of spite, envy, insecurity" (Bryant 2003, 58), and so does Albert. Similarly, in Hurston's work, "the boosters advertising themselves as the baddest of the bunch are often simply covering up their cowardice" (58), which is also parallel with *The Color Purple*. Remembering that Gates defines "Signifyin(g)" as "repetition with a signal difference" (1989, xxiv), I contend that while Walker's male characters repeat some aspects of Hurston male characters, there is a "signal" difference between Hurston's and Walker's badmen. The main difference between Tea Cake, the last husband of Hurston's female protagonist, and Albert is in fact the latter's growth in the course of the novel. Albert might initially appear as a flat, card-like figure (see Harvey 1965, 58, 60–61), a stereotype of the "bad Black man" come "alive." But unlike Tea Cake, whose identity seems quite static, Albert is presented by Celie the narrator as growing and changing. Gates argues that Celie "writes herself into being" (1989, 243) through her letters to God, and I would add that at the same time, she writes Albert into being. In other words, while her letters mediate her own development, they also reflect Albert's simultaneous maturation and becoming a more nuanced literary character.

At first glance, Albert fits the "badman" type well. He is a tyrant, a patriarch, a bully. Having married Celie merely because his children "sure could use a mother" (Walker 1983a, 9), he beats and dominates her, makes her work both in the house and in the fields, seemingly using his own time in fantasizing about and trying to win Shug Avery's love. According to Albert's sister, his previous marriage was no more successful than the one with Celie: "He just brought her here, dropped her, and kept right on running after Shug Avery" (19). After his former wife is murdered, Albert finds himself in need of a new wife, and settles for Celie. He also ignores and degrades his children, teaching them only his violent attitudes toward women. When Harpo asks his father Albert for guidance about his disobedient wife Sofia, he answers: "Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (34). Moreover, Albert takes his mistress to live in the same house with his wife and makes Celie attend to the guest.

I think it is important, however, to also look at specific features in Albert's character that distance him from the badman type found in folklore and ballads. According to Levine, "Black legend did not portray good bad men or noble outlaws. The brutality of Negro bad men was allowed to speak for itself without extenuation. . . . They preyed upon the weak as well as the strong, women as well as men" (1978, 417). But Albert's violence seems to stem from something else than that of the Black bandits, who, according to Levine, killed "not merely in self-defense but from sadistic need and sheer joy" (417–18).

Albert, for his part, only fights the people he views as his inferiors—his wife and children—restricting his badness inside the walls of his home. In other words, Albert is not the stereotypical man fighting other men in juke joints, and indeed, some of the women in *The Color Purple* take part in a bar fight. Sofia knocks out Harpo's new girlfriend, Mary Agnes (Walker 1983a, 73–74), and soon after the incident is convicted of violently attacking a White mayor. In this situation, contrary to what might be expected from a badman, Albert remains passive. Even his appearance, as Celie later reports, fails to follow the badman type to the letter: “For such a little man, [Albert] all puff up. Look like all he can do to stay in his chair” (Walker 1983a, 64). Albert's small size and “weakness” is referred to repeatedly in the novel (26, 43, 50, 57, 68, 71, 103, 104, 190, 191), and Celie never witnesses him standing up for himself or against anyone else except Celie and his children. Albert's physical and emotional vulnerability, discussed in more detail in the coming sections, combined with his proneness to only oppress those who are more vulnerable than he is, suggest that his “puff up” appearance is a mask, his violence a learned performance.

Whereas some badmen are reported to be born bad, the hate Albert directs toward other people has evidently been cultivated by political, historical, and social contexts. Using Cooper's idea of the scaling of bodies, I suggest that Albert has accepted and internalized some notions of the system of oppression, which is where his own vulnerability lies. We can examine how the historical and political contexts contribute to Albert's societal position by looking at the setting of the novel. First, in the early 1900s, White people controlled the justice system. Blacks were prosecuted and jailed more easily, and from prison, they could be hired as cheap labor to White families (see Bryant 2003, 21–23). Crimes against Whites were punished severely, whereas very little attention was paid when Blacks fought and murdered each other. Bryant notes,

black men were not ‘outside the law’ in the sense that the white law left them alone; rather, the laws they were most often imprisoned for breaking were laws peculiarly designed for them to break. Most of the time they went to jail for alleged crimes against whites, or petty victimless crimes like vagrancy, not having proof of employment, or public disorderliness. (24)

This system was a way of keeping the Black population “in their place” and is clearly seen in the way Albert's son Bub is thrown “in and out of jail” (Walker 1983a, 71). Celie does not report much of Bub's situation; he is only mentioned a few times. Not disclosing the nature of Bub's crimes (apart from drinking alcohol), Celie does reveal the horrifying ramifications that a Black man's crimes could have if he lacked fortunate connections to White people: “If his

granddaddy wasn't the colored uncle of the sheriff who look just like Bub, Bub be lynch by now" (71). Moreover, by the time Sofia is in jail, Albert has been seeing the sheriff so often because of Bub's (real or alleged) crimes, that Celie says the White sheriff and "Mr. _____ almost on family terms. Just long as Mr. _____ know he colored" (76–77), i.e., knows "his place." While Albert, Pa, Harpo and Sofia do not face any consequences for the domestic violence they commit, Celie later learns that her real father was lynched simply because he was too successful. His "store was burned down, his smithy destroyed, and the man and his two brothers dragged out of their homes in the middle of the night and hanged. . . . When the neighbors brought her husband's body home, it had been mutilated and burnt" (148).³⁷ While lynching is only mentioned briefly in this novel, considering the historical context, it has been a real threat to Black men at the time of the novel's setting.

While both male and female characters commit violent crimes in this novel, and are also punished for crimes, male characters are more vulnerable to being lynched. Black men at that time were among the people most often lynched (see Feimster 2011; NAACP n.d.), especially if they posed any real or imagined threat to White people, be it economic, physical, or sexual. The only violent crime against a White person in this novel is committed by Sofia, who is later found in jail, as Celie describes it, "just about the color of a eggplant" (Walker 1983a, 77)—that is, bruised (purple). She then spends years in prison and afterwards years serving as a maid for the White family that brought her to jail in the first place. What is significant for the purposes of this dissertation is how Sofia keeps her boyfriend, whom Celie calls "the prizefighter" (74), away from the violent scene. Sofia's sister Odessa tells Celie that the man "want to jump in," but "Sofia say No, take the children home" (76). The reason for this, it seems, is the high risk in that particular time and place for Black men to be lynched. Odessa continues her account of the events: "Policies have their guns on him anyway. One move, he dead. Six of them, you know" (76). The number of the policemen is also important: no jury would have believed a couple of African Americans against six police officers and a White mayor. The fact that in Albert's world Black men can be lynched for the smallest crimes against Whites may be one of the reasons behind his violent behavior in the home setting.

When it comes to the interpersonal context, Albert's misogynist and oppressive attitudes apparently come from older men, such as his father and Celie's stepfather, who have probably internalized their ways from White men and older Black men (see, e.g., Christian 2007, 23). This is evident in the scene where Albert visits "Pa," Celie's stepfather, Alphonso, at the beginning of the novel. Michael Awkward argues that when Albert comes to ask for Celie's sister

³⁷ According to Walker, Celie's father was lynched around 1903 (1998, 50).

Nettie's hand in marriage, "[Pa] effectively transforms the suitor's chivalrous antebellum act into a slave auction-like treatment of his older daughter" (1989, 140). Wanting to get rid of Celie, Pa suggests that Albert take her instead of Nettie, even offering her own linen and a cow on top (Walker 1983a, 10). Apparently in love with Nettie, Albert spends months until he comes back to surrender to Pa's will. When he finally decides to take Celie as his wife, Celie says it is because all other women in Albert's life had abandoned him: "The woman he had helping him" had quit and his "mammy" had said "No More" (12). It is not made clear whether this "mammy" is Albert's mother, but the implication of the stereotypical "mammy" archetype reveals a lot about the role Celie is supposed to fill as Albert's wife. Albert treats his wives like an enslaved mammy and tries to keep them in their place by beating them (see J. Martin 2014, 29). The capitalized words "No More" imply both the strictness of the utterance and that Albert has somehow contributed to his losing the support of the women. Called *Mister* by Celie, Albert treats his son Harpo like he is enslaved as well, making him work in the fields with his new stepmother. Of course, Celie is nothing like stereotypical mammies, who were, according to Trudier Harris, large women "specifically conceived to provide broad bosoms of comfort for whites" (2001, 2). Celie is not characterized as "large," and her apparent subservience—not unlike that of many mammy figures—is due to a threat of violence in the event that she would refuse to take care of the house and children. Also working in the fields, Celie takes responsibility for all the labor in the family, while Albert takes on the role of the slave-owner or the overseer, sitting on the porch and enacting any punishment he perceives is needed.

Both Albert's and Pa's behavior can be historically contextualized, however. As Christian notes, Albert "is a Southern black of the Reconstruction period whose family is descended from slaves and slave owners and who has observed the means by which white men maintain power" (2007, 23). Even though we cannot see much White racism at work in this novel, it obviously does not mean that slavery did not affect this family. The chains of internalization can, of course, be generations-long, and it is not made clear whether Albert has had any contact with White men, except for the sheriff. Internalization of racist myths, on the other hand, can be traced even further in history. George Yancy notes that "the white colonialist strategy was to get the colonized Black (or native) to undergo a process of epistemic violence, a process where the Black begins to internalize all of the colonizer's myths and thus begins to see his/her identity through the paradigm of white supremacy/ Eurocentricity" (2008, 7), an idea similar to that of Fanon's in *Black Skin, White Masks* (discussed in Chapter 1).

One dimension of the internalizing inferiority concerns what Fanon calls "cultural imposition" (2008b, 148), meaning that the Black subject

internalizes, or "epidermaliz[es]" (4), the image of himself as inferior, because that is all he is taught by society. This internalization, according to Fanon, leads to individual and collective aggression (35). The reason for this is a lack of "*collective catharsis*" (112; emphasis in original), which is an "outlet through which . . . aggression can be released" (112). In this way, Walker's small community is initially a failed one, offering its men no release from rage other than violence. But as the men who choose to be violent end up beaten, dead, or repeatedly left on their own, violence proves to be an inefficient survival strategy. Harpo, as mentioned earlier, gets beaten by Sofia after trying to beat her. Celie reports: "Next time us see Harpo his face a mess of bruises. His lip cut. One of his eyes shut like a fist. He walk stiff and say his teef ache" (Walker 1983a, 35). Failing in what his father had taught him about being a man, Harpo turns to overeating, apparently to avoid the negative feelings raised by emasculation, and having grown up in a dysfunctional family in a racist society.

Albert had told Harpo to beat Sofia, which can be read as Albert trying to convince him to accept the system of oppression and to internalize the idea of patriarchal manhood, which includes male violence. bell hooks contends that "showing aggression is the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood. . . . all men living in a culture of violence must demonstrate at some point in their lives that they are capable of being violent" (hooks 2004, 49). Within this logic, Albert's violent behavior is simply an assertion of patriarchal manhood, which, according to hooks, all American men must, at some point, demonstrate (hooks also notes that "violence is the norm in the United States," 50). There is, thus, a tension between Black feminist theory as exemplified here by hooks, and Black male studies. As Curry (2022) argues, "Black Male Studies insists that the racial castration or phallicism that Black males experience within Western patriarchal societies severs them from patriarchy in ways similar to women, while nonetheless creating caricatures of Black men and boys that serve to justify their extermination" (539). This means that, as Black men do not occupy a position of power similar to White men in a racist society, they cannot be analyzed within the same theory of patriarchal manhood with them. Instead, we should pay more attention to how White supremacy affects notions of Black masculinity and how anti-Black misandry contributes to how we interpret representations of Black men.

Thus, I suggest that Albert's behavior should be read as not so much an expression of patriarchal power but an indication of powerlessness, even though he claims to beat Celie because "she my wife" (Walker 1983a, 22). As Fanon puts it, "fervor is the weapon of choice of the impotent" (2008b, 2), and so Albert chooses violence because he has no alternative outlet for his feelings of rage. These feelings originate from not only White racism and his oppression as a Black man but also his personal experiences. He embodies the

badman archetype, that, according to Bryant, “may be the product of a suppressed collective rage, his violence a displacement of his anger from the white oppressor to the less dangerous targets of other blacks” (2003, 6). For Albert, there is no way of showing his anger at Whites over the threat of being lynched, and fighting other Black men might be dangerous because of his “weakness” and small size.

Through his attitude towards women, Albert repeats the violent master-slave relationship and the infantilization of the Black subject, and even passes on to his son the brutal attitudes toward women. He infantilizes Celie by beating her like a child, but, in my view, it could also be that he unconsciously reenacts his own experiences of being the victim of parental abuse as a child. Celie says that “he beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don’t never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks” (Walker 1983a, 22). After years of marriage, Celie finally curses Albert for his abusive behavior and tells him she is going to leave him and move to Memphis with Shug. Albert’s reaction summarizes his thoughts about Celie: “He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can’t curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (176). He lists all the forms of social stratification which make Celie vulnerable to oppression—race, class, and gender—and deems them as her defects. Around halfway through the novel, however, Nettie’s letters from Africa come to show that Albert’s conduct is not merely due to racism or even his family relations, in that they reveal similar sexist patterns in the relationships between African men and women.

As shown in this section, Albert’s violent behavior has been cultivated in multiple contexts and is partly an outcome of internalizing the narrative of badness. This narrative refers both to his own sense of self as inferior and the belief that men are supposed to be tough and act violently towards those who are lower than them on the scaling of bodies. However, because the “bad Black man” narrative is so ingrained in popular and even some academic discourses, readers must be careful not to merely read this male character through a narrative they may have also internalized. Albert has chosen violent behavior because he has no other way of achieving catharsis. By the end of the novel, he turns away from his badman ways and seems to find a proper emotional catharsis in discussing and sewing with Celie, which earlier he would not have been able to do because it contradicted his idea of male toughness, which was taught to him when he was a child. Through this stereotypically feminine action, he is able to show vulnerability which turns out to be his genuine strength.

4.3 NOTICING *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Nobody's as powerful as we make them out to be.

Alice Walker ([1970] 1996, 207)

Always with me was the inner twin: my true nature, my true self. It is timeless, free, compassionate and in love with whatever is natural to me.

Alice Walker (1998, 32)

The contexts that have been discussed so far have been, for most part, historical and political. However, as Harvey notes, "by far the most important of contexts is the web of human relationships in which any single character must be enmeshed" (1965, 52). In what follows, I will discuss Albert's human, or social, context in order to show how it has affected the way he behaves. Most importantly, I will show how the context of his vulnerability can be seen early in the novel and how Celie's representation of Albert can work to subvert the image of African American men as stereotypically bad and violent.

According to Harvey, in real life we have simplistic notions of other people, and we might react to them in terms of stereotypes due to sheer laziness (1965, 53). When it comes to fictional worlds and people, our reactions change:

A good novel, by its various strategies, breaks down our stereotypes and enforces its own perspectives. If we read well we shall attend to these; the effort of so attending—which implies understanding, sympathizing, judging, etc.—is a *real* effort, a real psychological adjustment on our part. (54; emphasis in original)

If *The Color Purple* is "read well," it becomes clear that Walker's depiction of Albert includes careful contextualization and extenuating circumstances. These are established by what Celie chooses to see and tell God and later her sister Nettie in her letters. I therefore disagree with Louis H. Pratt who argues that in Walker's novels, "there is not a single man among [Walker's male characters] who exemplifies the most basic attitudes of humaneness" (2007, 16) and that Albert only "reaches a near-human state" (16) by the end of the novel. Instead, in this section I show that Celie's description does depict him as humane from the beginning of the narrative.

There are two ways in which a reader might come to a fuller view of Albert. As mentioned earlier, the most obvious point is when he starts sewing and talking with Celie after having started to take care of his home "just like a woman" (Walker 1983a, 189). In other words, Albert starts performing a less

patriarchal identity towards the end of the novel. This is where he is described as “adopting womanist principles” (B. Bell 2004, 160) and accepting “the erroneousness of sex role stereotyping” (Awkward 1989, 162). But a more subtle positive perspective is provided by Celie’s focalization from the beginning of the novel. Through her letters, she represents not only Albert’s tyrannical, but also his vulnerable and sensitive side. Despite the struggles Celie has gone through, from the very beginning of the novel she is at times kind and understanding in her depiction of Albert. Celie does think Albert is “a lowdown dog” (Walker 1983a, 170), but that is just one side of the story. When we look closely enough, namely, we notice that Albert’s darker side also contains the vulnerability of the “bad Black man.”

Even though Christian suggests that Albert is “of the same sorry ilk as Celie’s father” (qtd. in Awkward 1989, 140), and Awkward argues that Albert is “nearly as vile in his mistreatment of her as Pa” (1989, 141), I see fundamental differences in the representation of these male characters. Reading Pa and Albert as similar, in my view, conforms to the idea that Black men are similarly “bad” and resists a nuanced reading of either character. While it is true that many aspects of the behavior of Celie’s stepfather, who continuously rapes the teenaged Celie and impregnates her twice, are similar to those of Albert, there are several ways in which the representation of the men can be contrasted. First, apart from White racism, there is no context for Pa’s dreadful actions. Furthermore, Celie’s narrative offers no understanding for him, and as the story progresses, he appears to have become even more evil. Continuing his improper behavior by marrying a teenaged woman, and showing no remorse over having mistreated Celie, Pa does not reach any kind of reconciliation.

Albert’s story, however, can be read through the lens of vulnerability. When he first appears in the narrative, Albert turns out to be a lonely man who has fallen for Nettie, who Celie describes thus: “My little sister Nettie is got a boyfriend in the same shape almost as Pa. His wife died. She was kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church” (Walker 1983a, 6). Even though Celie predicts that Albert would be similar to, or “in the same shape,” as her stepfather, at the same time she offers knowledge of Albert’s past. Celie decides to tell her audience about Albert’s family situation, and that even Pa thinks it would be a disgrace to the family if Nettie married Albert: “Say Mr. _____ got too many children already. Plus What about the scandal his wife cause when somebody kill her? And what about all this stuff he hear bout Shug Avery? What bout that?” (8). Pa acts as if he is more dignified than Albert, having himself sexually abused his stepdaughter and given away her children. Even though Celie first advises Nettie to “keep at her books” (6)—to choose education over marriage with Albert—she changes her mind because she

thinks Albert is a better option for her sister than becoming a victim of their stepfather (7).

When Albert comes to agree with Pa on marrying Celie, her description of Albert becomes even more sympathetic. As noted earlier, Albert had been deserted by whatever help he had at home. Pa spitefully uses his position to shame both Albert and his daughters and acts like someone who is selling people to work as slaves. If we abandon the slave-auction-like atmosphere created by Pa for a while, we see that here Celie describes a man left alone with the house and children. According to Celie, Albert is "looking all drug out" (Walker 1983a, 12), meaning he seems to be extremely tired. Albert, desperate for help, is denied the right to marry the woman he is in love with, Nettie, and is given Celie instead. In this way, Pa knowingly reconstructs the event that, as readers later learn, has been the most hurtful in all of Albert's life. While it does not justify his violent deeds, the circumstances Albert is in at this point of the story makes him appear less like a patriarch and more like a tired and lonely man left alone with four "rotten children" (97, 171, Celie's words) whom he does not know how to take care of. Like a grown child, he cannot survive the challenges of everyday life without the help of women. Of course, Albert has a tendency to drive away the women, and only one of them, Shug, keeps coming back to him.

Celie is at her most understanding as she reports how Albert acts near Shug, with whom he is desperately in love. When Albert comes to visit Pa for the first time, Celie finds out that Albert keeps a picture of Shug in his wallet (Walker 1983a, 8) and thus notices the different attitude he has towards Shug compared to how he acts with other women. When they are already married, Albert finds out that Shug is coming to town. He acts like a teenager, excited and nervous, trying to decide what to wear to be good enough for Shug: "He dress all up in front the glass, look at himself, then undress and dress all over again. He slick back his hair with pomade, then wash it out again. He been spitting on his shoes and hitting it with a quick rag" (24). After having stayed away from home for two nights, Albert comes back evidently depressed and already missing Shug, and again Celie sees the vulnerable side of him: "He stagger in, throw himself on the bed. He tired. He sad. He weak. He cry. Then he sleep the rest of the day and all night" (26). Afterwards Albert stops working for good, and merely sits on the porch, staring at nothing: "Every day [Harpo's] daddy git up, sit on the porch, look out at nothing. Sometime look at the trees out front the house. Look at a butterfly if it light on the rail. Drink a little water in the day. A little wine in the evening. But mostly never move" (27). While Christian depicts Albert as "frustrated," "weak," and "dissatisfied" (2007, 23), I argue that Celie sees here a man in love, depressed and lonely, a man who only comes to life when Shug comes to visit them. Far from being hostile, this

is quite a sensitive and detailed description from a narrator who, early in the novel, stated, “I don’t even look at mens. That’s the truth” (Walker 1983a, 7).

Not only due to Albert’s abusive behavior, but also her own sexuality, Celie does not care about her husband’s cheating on her, and, quite the contrary, has started to feel a passion for Shug herself. Celie gets to know Shug and falls in love with her when she lives in their house during an illness. Despite the fact that Celie is being forced into a “mammy” role, in which she takes care of her husband’s mistress who is “halfway tween good and evil” due to her illness and feisty nature (Walker 1983a, 51), Celie reacts quite positively to both of them. For example, she describes how sympathetic Albert is to Shug’s reputation as a “fallen woman,” even though he never had the courage to stand up for her: “Nobody fight for Shug, he say. And a little water come to his eyes” (44). Albert admits to Celie that he has been scared about Shug’s illness and is described as hiding behind his hands, apparently to cry (47). Later Celie tells Shug that Albert beats her because she is not Shug (66). While not approving of being abused, Celie is able to see some of the reasons for Albert’s violent behavior. In a sense, through the love for Shug that she shares with Albert, Celie understands the brutality that she has suffered in a different light and it enables Albert’s humanization in the text.

Through Celie’s eyes, we see that, as in his relationships, Albert continuously fails in his effort to oppress others. Homi Bhabha notes in his foreword to the 1986 edition of Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master’s place while keeping his place in the slave’s *avenging anger*” (2008b, xxviii; emphasis in original). As discussed earlier, Albert seems to have internalized this fantasy of dominance, but, rather than turning him into an all-dominating master, it is clear that the idea of patriarchal manhood does not work for him. There is a contradiction in the narrative between who the Black male character should be according to racist stereotypes and gender theory (a dominator) and who he is in reality (“a man of feeling,” see below). Albert has no real power. He fails as a father, a husband, and in all his relationships. His mother is never mentioned until the last pages of the novel, he alienates his sisters, and his father is such an appalling person that even Celie decides to spit in his drink (Walker 1983a, 49). In addition to differences with his family, Albert does not have any friends, male or female. Unlike the badman, who is “a solitary individual,” “a man apart” (Levine 1978, 417), Albert is actually lonely. In my view, this speaks for the fact that this male character is capable of showing feelings, which is probably the very reason for his loneliness. hooks maintains that “men of feeling often find themselves isolated from other men. This fear of isolation often acts as the mechanism to prevent males from becoming more emotionally aware” (hooks 2005, 70–71). As a result of his emotional isolation, he takes revenge for the sadness of being separated from the woman he loves

on the only person who understands it, Celie. Because of Celie's love for Shug, readers are able to see this side of Albert even before he abandons his dominant behavior.

4.4 WOMANIST ENCOUNTERS

In this section, I will analyze how the womanist encounters in *The Color Purple* work to reconceptualize the male protagonist as vulnerable. Strong bonds between Black women and the importance of relationships between them (as well as Black men and Black women) for the whole community is, of course, a recurring strategy in fiction written by African American women (see, for example, Tyson 2006, 389). Thorsson argues that in many African American women writers' work, "female coalescence [is] the essential element determining whether black communities thrive or fracture" (2013a, 616). In *The Color Purple*, too, it is the unbreakable unity of Celie and her sister Nettie that saves Celie, and Celie and Shug's relationship that saves Albert.

Because Celie loves her, she includes Shug's views about Albert in her letters. Without Shug's presence in the narrative, readers would not even know Albert's first name (Walker 1983a, 43). The neutrality of Celie's depiction of and attitude towards Albert can also be linked to her sexual orientation. With no passion or emotions toward him whatsoever to blind her judgment, Celie can observe her husband in a more unbiased way. Other women in town keep gazing at Albert, even describing him as "a fine looking man. . . . Not a finer looking one in the county. White or black" (15). Shug, for her part, experiences a passion for him that seems to last for decades. Unlike for Celie, for Shug the relationship with Albert was far from a domestic chore: "You know for me to have three babies by Albert and Albert weak as he is, it had to be good" (103). Celie, who thinks all men look alike (15), observes Albert more neutrally because she has no emotional or sexual connection to him. Later Celie tells Shug that Albert has, indeed, tried to build that connection: "Us try, I say. He try to play with the button but feel like his fingers dry. Us don't git nowhere much" (95). Celie's description of Albert's attempt to build a mutually satisfying intimate relationship with Celie further distances him from the image of the rapist. However, either due to lack of skill or romantic love (or both), the attempts fail, but I still find these moments important when interpreting Celie and Albert's relationship with each other.

The fact that Celie and Albert do share a bond—even if a weak one—can be seen in the way Celie sides with her abusive husband against his family, especially his father. "Old Mr. _____" is, according to Celie, a small man with "gold spectacles" who "clear his throat a lot, like everything he say need announcement" (Walker 1983a, 49). And the way he stands on the porch and scolds his son about Shug is quite a spectacle indeed. He says Shug, who is

“black as tar” probably “got some nasty woman disease” (49). Celie writes that she does not “feel mad at all. Just interest,” and spits in Albert’s father’s drink when she hears him speak condescendingly about Shug (49). During the visit, Celie even describes feeling close to Albert (50) apparently because she understands what it is like to love somebody and not be able to be with them.

Through Celie’s report of this visit readers learn about the context for Albert and Shug’s separation. Albert lost Shug apparently because otherwise he would have lost the house and the fields that were given to him by his father. Thus, Albert had to choose between two sets of emasculating scenarios: either marry Shug and live in poverty or keep his home but stay financially dependent. Celie briefly mentions that “[Albert’s brother] Tobias and his daddy always talk bout money like they still got a lot. Old Mr. _____ been selling off the place so that nothing much left but the houses and the fields” (Walker 1983a, 51), revealing that Albert is, in fact, poor and still fully dependent on his controlling father who is also losing his wealth. While Albert is not experiencing the most severe forms of poverty, I do not entirely agree with Nagueyalti Warren who contends that Walker “removes the stress of poverty” (2019, 84) in this novel. His financial strain, I argue, is an important detail of how Walker constructs Albert’s vulnerability. As Leak notes,

while poverty is not inherent to race, in the American experience the condition of poverty has been constructed in relation to African Americans and other nonwhite groups. Further, poverty signifies a fundamental lack on the part of men. This is doubly true in relation to African American men when we bear in mind the mandatory emasculation in the context of both bondage and segregation. (2005, 69)

Albert’s financial challenges, the relationship with his father, along with his identity as an African American man, combine to shape his position as vulnerable, further away from power and patriarchy. Now, as years have passed, he regrets the decision he made when he was younger. Apparently tired of arguing with his father, “Mr. _____ turn his head slow, watch his daddy drink. Then say, real sad, You ain’t got it in you to understand, he say. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance” (Walker 1983a, 49). This is something that Celie has understood all along. Tobias also comes to visit them, this time with a box of chocolate as a gift for Shug and praising Celie in comparison to his own wife. Not impressed by Tobias’ conduct, Celie depicts a sense of unity between herself, Shug, and Albert against Albert’s family. She says, “us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate.” Sitting together with her family, Albert and Shug, she says, “for the first time in my life, I feel just right” (52).

In this scene and many others, it is clear that Shug is the glue keeping Celie and Albert together. They team up to help her and love her, both hoping to be seen by her. Celie says, for instance, "Me and Mr. _____ both look up at her. Both move to help her sit down. She don't look at him. She pull up a chair next to me" (Walker 1983a, 51). At times, Celie tries to see in Albert what Shug sees: "She look over at Mr. _____ a little when she sing that. I look over at him too" (64). Her jealousy of Shug and Albert sometimes brings her violent fantasies, however: "When I hear Shug laugh I want to choke her, slap Mr. _____ face" (102). It is finding out about Nettie's letters from Africa that Albert has hidden that makes Celie finally act beyond fantasies. Even then, Shug works as a mediator between them by helping Celie find some of the letters and stopping her from killing Albert with a razor (102-03).

In general, however, Shug is no angel and Celie is much more understanding of Albert than her. Shug comments on the reasons for why she and Albert had broken up: "I don't need no weak little boy can't say no to his daddy hanging on me" (Walker 1983a, 43). In the same letter, Celie says, "I look at his face. It tired and sad and I notice his chin weak. Not much chin there at all. I have more chin, I think. And his clothes dirty, dirty" (43-44). As opposed to Shug's emasculating and infantilizing comments, through Celie's eyes we see Albert as a pitiful, depressed man who has not taken care of himself and has a smaller chin, a marker of masculinity, than his wife. Here, everything depends on the perspective the viewer takes: while Shug sees in Albert "a weak little boy," Celie "notice[s] something crazy in his eyes" (47). Albert is crazed and terrified by the thought of losing Shug again. It is important to note that Shug says, "I need me a man. . . . A man" (43). Perhaps Albert turns to patriarchal behavior as the last desperate effort to win Shug's love because he has heard from other men, Black and White, that manhood is equivalent to being violent, being bad.

My argument that the narrative does not represent Albert as violent by nature but makes clear that the circumstances in his life have made him act as he does, is supported by Shug's words later on in the novel. She asks, "How come he ain't funny no more? . . . How come he never hardly laugh? How come he don't dance? . . . Good God, Celie, . . . What happen to the man I love?" (Walker 1983a, 104). It becomes evident that Shug's previous harsh words about Albert not only come from the passion she has for him, but she is also confused by how much Albert has changed. Later she continues: "Cause I don't know the Albert that don't dance, can't hardly laugh, never talk bout nothing, beat you and hid your sister Nettie's letters. Who he?" (105). Until he got "knock down" (104) by his family, who opposed their marriage, Albert stayed in a loving and respectful (at least on his side) relationship with Shug. Therefore, I argue, under the mask of violence, there is "a man of feeling."

While many critics view Albert's humanization as an outcome of his acceptance of womanist attitudes (see Awkward 1989, B. Bell 2004, and Jenkins 2002), in my reading it is making amends that saves Albert. He certainly does seem to accept womanist values, but it is not this acceptance that brings him back to life after a seeming breakdown. He is reported to have become an insomniac and to have lost his ability to live after Celie moves away, but is nurtured back to life by his son Harpo, who had finally stopped trying to become an oppressor himself (Walker 1983a, 190–91). Celie reports, "Sofia say after I left, Mr. _____ live like a pig. Shut up in the house so much it stunk. Wouldn't let nobody in until finally Harpo force his way in. Clean the house, got food. Give his daddy a bath. Mr. _____ too weak to fight back" (190).

Albert acts like a person suffering from depression, having isolated himself and lost his ability to take care of himself. Along the same lines, Nagueyalti Warren argues that "had the novel been about him, the reader might have guessed that he was clinically depressed" (2019, 84).³⁸ Depression might also explain the fact that when Celie moves in at the beginning of the novel, she says that "The girls hair ain't been comb since their mammy died" (Walker 1983a, 13). That is, after Albert's first wife was murdered, Albert has been completely unable to take care of his children, which might be partly due to lack of skill and partly a period of grief and/or clinical depression. It is important to note that, as Serie McDougal III argues,

men in general, and Black men in particular have different ways of manifesting depression . . . Depressed men of all races are more likely than women to experience increases in anger, aggression, substance use, impulsive behavior, inability of focus, memory difficulties, and decreased sexual interest (but not necessarily decreased sexual activity) (Bryant, Haynes, Greer-Williams, & Hartwig, 2014). . . . The history of racist exclusion, racial terrorism, stereotyping, and continued institutional racism can affect how Black males express depressive symptoms. (2020 363–364)

Thus, periods of clinical depression might partly explain Albert's indifferent attitude and sudden fits of aggression. Others do not recognize his pain, until finally, his son Harpo does, but only after Albert is "too far gone to care" (Walker 1983a, 190).

Sofia tells Celie that Albert finally overcomes sleeplessness and regret by sending Celie the remainder of Nettie's letters (Walker 1983a 191), and gradually starts to recover. This implies that it is honesty and regret that humanizes him, and that he only takes on the stereotypically female roles *after* his humanization, apparently because that is what "[his] true nature, [his] true

³⁸ Even though I encountered Warren's book after having completed my research, I think it raises some very interesting, related issues about the depiction of Albert.

self" (Walker 1998, 32) uncorrupted by ineffective survival strategies, or desires, is. In other words, by being honest, he is able to demonstrate a fuller self beyond the stereotype of the "bad Black man." In this sense, he begins to represent "purpleness," the color of womanism. In Albert's case, womanism does not mean accepting "feminine" roles, but to love women's culture, to love women. In Walker's 1983 definition, a womanist is a woman, but as Albert becomes "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Walker 1983b, xi; emphasis in original), he can be seen as a womanist ally. However, as he earlier associated honesty and being "upright" (228) to being a man, he now also represents a more nuanced and positive idea of manhood.

Even though Celie represents him as sensitive and emotionally vulnerable earlier in the story, Albert's transformation into a more stereotypically feminine, humanized person by the end of the novel is very clear. When Celie comes back home from Memphis for Sofia's mother's funeral, she notices a change in Albert in that "his skin shine" and "his hair brush back" (Walker 1983a, 189). Just as Celie could see Albert's earlier depression in his unkempt appearance, now she pays attention first to his clean and well-cared-for exterior. Afterwards Celie moves back to her childhood home, and she and Albert start sewing and having deep, friendly discussions together. As Celie and Albert sew together, they retell the events of their past as if they were making a patchwork quilt to connect their subjective views of what happened. They weave together their experiences and memories, and, in a way, become each other's context. Albert opens his heart about how he feels about Shug, and Celie reveals that she started sewing pants in the first place "to keep from killing [Albert]" (214). Thus, even though she was initially drawn to violence herself, sewing pants becomes for Celie the "catharsis" Fanon refers to. As they sew, Albert says, "when I was growing up, . . . I use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it" (230). This illustrates that even though Albert wanted to join the cathartic communal actions of the women of his family, he was forced to turn to violence. Now he has the opportunity to join the catharsis of sewing, talking about his feelings, and caring for other people. Thus, he fully opens up to vulnerability. He admits his wrongs and is ready to choose a more compassionate path. It is his admission of his past "badman" behavior that humanizes him.

Albert is described as a fallible human being in this novel, even though his own actions have been dehumanizing. It is true that the likes of Celie are voiceless in society, but no one listens to Albert either. Only Celie sees him and chooses to tell God about him, and the fact that Celie hears and sees Albert indicates their unity in spite of what he has done to her. By the end of the novel, Albert starts making up for his deeds, and is fully accepted in Celie's new

extended family. As I have shown, however, Albert can be seen as humanized and vulnerable from the beginning of the story by an author who was supposed to have “a high level of enmity towards black men” (McDowell 1995, 121).

4.5 “[HER] EYES WERE WATCHING [HIM]”: ON LOOKING

When imposed on the Black male body, the gaze of others tends toward monocularity—meaning that one’s sight can fixate itself on only one aspect of that which is seen. In the case of the Black male, this perception leads toward negativity and the accentuation of colonial phallic myths to explain his relation to the *other*.

Tommy J. Curry (2017, 204; emphasis in original)

While what Curry examines primarily concerns the “White gaze” (see, for example, Yancy 2017),³⁹ having internalized the myths concerning Black men (discussed in Chapter 1), it is easy also for non-White people only to concentrate on the stereotypical “badness” of Black men, including literary representations of them. As I have noted earlier, Celie is the main focalizer in this novel, and from the fourth letter onwards (Walker 1983a, 6), Albert is the character most often focalized. In this way, there is a different perspective than the typical “White gaze.” Of course, Celie perceives her surroundings by looking and gathers information because, as Christian notes, “for the powerless, knowledge is essential to survival” (2007, 27). It is crucial that she understand other people so that she can be aware of when to hide from violence, for example. The fact that Celie is the focalizer and the narrator of the novel is also important because people like her were not the usual central visions in the pre-1980s American literature. However, I also argue that it is only possible to see Albert’s vulnerability because it is filtered through Celie’s gaze. According to Pratt, in Walker’s oeuvre in general, it is common that the male characters are focalized through another character’s (usually a woman’s) perspective (2007, 7). For example, in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, the fact that Grange is focalized by more than one character emphasizes different aspects of him throughout the novel. Even though the male protagonist of this earlier novel also develops during the story, the multiple perspectives shape the way we as readers view him. Even though in her first novel Walker created a character very similar to Albert, this is a major difference.

The previously mentioned relationality of vulnerability connects here to a running motif of looking—which is also a “*relational* activity” (Sturken and

³⁹ Yancy notes that “within the context of white racist America, whites inherited the privileged status of being the ‘lookers’ and gazers, with all the power that this entailed” (2017, xxxiii).

Cartwright 2009, 94; emphasis in original). The act of looking consists of the subject (the one who looks) and the object (the one who is looked at) and their relationship. Simply stated, the one who gazes makes interpretations and is not (necessarily) exposed to the vulnerability of being looked at. Celie carefully describes not only her own act of looking but that of others, too. For example, Celie says, "I see [Harpo] staring at [Shug] real hard when he don't think I'm looking" (Walker 1983a, 63), because Harpo is "puzzle by Shug" (63). Celie can see this partly because she, too, has her "eye on Shug," i.e., she is focused on anything that has to do with her.

Many aspects of this powerful theme of looking in *The Color Purple* work as another way of Signifying on Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. To use Gates' terms, the way Walker uses the motif of looking can be seen as "tropological revision" (1989, xxv), which refers to "the manner in which a specific trope is repeated, with differences, between two or more texts" (xxv). Gates theorizes about the trope of voice, as noted earlier, and in my view, the trope of looking also has to do with the repetition process. Deborah Clarke notes, "for Hurston, . . . the construction of African American identity requires a voice *that can make you see*, a voice that celebrates the *visible* presence of black bodies" (2001, 600; my emphasis). In other words, Hurston's narrative is "a voice that can make [readers] see" what her protagonist Janie tells the narratee, Phoeby, and thus adds vision to the important trope of voice. Walker, in turn, uses Celie's vision to serve as the gatherer of first-hand information, which she then later narrates in her letters, thus gaining a voice.

Of course, Celie's vision is restrictive in the sense that knowledge of her world is transferred to us as how she thinks it looks. That is, her letters do not bring the events to readers as they are but, instead, as her interpretation of what happened. As Gates contends:

There is no true mimesis, then, in *The Color Purple*, only diegesis. But, through Celie's mode of apparently reporting speech, underscored dramatically by her written dialect voice of narration, we logically assume that we are being shown discourse, when all along we never actually are. (1989, 249)

Celie does not strike me as an unreliable narrator as such because she is writing to God and her beloved sister Nettie, two narratees she would not, most likely, lie to. However, she transcripts conversations she has heard, and might not understand or remember everything correctly. In addition to the fact that we never hear Albert speak, all the knowledge we have of him, is filtered through Celie's consciousness: we only have second-hand or

contextual knowledge of Albert.⁴⁰ We are dependent on Celie's words to show his action; everything we read, therefore, is Celie's interpretation of how the events took place. Celie only presents his external actions. She does not reveal what Albert says about his feelings, yet we do not know what Celie leaves out from her letters. In this way, as a focalizer and as the character that perceives and narrates the story, Celie holds some power. Sturken and Cartwright note that the "act of looking is commonly regarded as awarding more power to the person who is looking than to the person who is the object of the look" (2009, 111). The fact that Celie is constantly, over decades, watching Albert and recording the events of their lives in her letters, slowly makes her more powerful and, correspondingly, makes Albert's emotional vulnerability more visible by the end of the novel.

While Nettie's letters mainly serve to put Celie's story—and Albert's behavior—in a global context, they also provide contextual information about the relationship between looking and power. Nettie writes to Celie while she lives in Western Africa, and her letters describe the different customs of the people she meets. Nettie emphasizes how looking at each other works as a vehicle for power among the fictional Olinka tribe, and how those power relations intersect with gender relations:

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (Walker 1983a, 137)

In the culture where Celie's sister resides at this point of the novel, no one looks at each other. Nettie explains the social customs of the villagers with her own contextual knowledge of gender relations, so it remains uncertain whether the Olinka men not looking at the women is an act of respect, disrespect, or indifference. Nettie, however, provides an explanation that the men do not respect the women so much as to even look at them and that the Olinka women's similar behavior is shaped by fear and humility. Her interpretation is clearly colored by her experiences of how men and women behave in her own family of origin. An interesting detail is that, as she describes the (in her understanding) dominating and arrogant behavior, she relates it to Pa, but not Albert.

⁴⁰ Harvey argues that in real life we can have *intrinsic* knowledge of ourselves and *contextual* knowledge of each other. In literature, we can access intrinsic knowledge of the characters as well (1965, 31–33; my emphases).

Of course, the gaze not only denotes power, but can also be a metaphor for understanding. In everyday language, we ask others to "look" when we want them to understand our side of the story. On the other hand, we say we "see" when we do understand something. As Albert's wife, Celie finds the courage in herself to even look at men. As mentioned earlier, she contends, "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them (Walker 1983a, 7). After a while, however, Celie says in her letter that her 17-year-old stepson Harpo "ain't so bad looking" (22) and even complements Albert by saying "you looks nice" (24). To me the reason that Celie now looks at Harpo and Albert is that she is no longer scared of them and, even though she does not like them, is willing to understand them.

The motif of looking also signifies trying to understand when there are no words. For individuals like Celie, who are controlled by other people, there are often occasions where speech is simply not allowed. The whole novel begins with a quote apparently from Celie's stepfather: "*You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy*" (Walker 1983a, 3; emphasis in original). Celie thus has to replace performing the speech act with merely watching others act. Albert is described by Celie as saying nothing at all apparently every time he feels vulnerable, and often also staring at nothing. As mentioned before, quite early in the novel, Albert's father comes to visit Albert and Celie. Albert zones out in his usual manner: "Mr. _____ don't say nothing. Look out cross the railing at the trees, over the top of the well. Eyes rest on the top of Harpo and Sofia house" (49). Whether merely angrily uninterested or depressed, Albert gazes around the property that he was forced to choose over marrying Shug. His almost paralyzed and silent demeanor reveal not only his unfinished (if ever even begun) mourning process on his lost love with Shug but also the absence of fatherly love. hooks notes, "emotionally abandoned by parents and by society as a whole, many boys are angry, but no one really cares about this anger unless it leads to violent behavior" (2005, 50) and "boys learn to cover up grief with anger; the more troubled the boy, the more intense the mask of indifference" (50). It seems, thus, that Albert has become stuck in the angry and indifferent behavior and consequently become a "grown child," which, as Nettie says, is "a dangerous thing" (Walker 1983a, 141-42). Listening to his father's nasty words, Albert finally seems to find some understanding in Celie's eyes: "Mr. _____ look up at me, our eyes meet. This the closest us ever felt" (50). As the novel suggests, only when the look is answered with a look, can real connection begin.

Celie's narrative contains a lot of description of the characters looking at each other. Looking at somebody can also signify an effort to find connection with another person. Celie says, for example, "he love looking at Shug. I love looking at Shug. But Shug don't love looking at but one of us. Him" (Walker 1983a, 64). A change in their mutual relationship can be observed in the way

they act when Celie comes to town after having moved away. Celie says: “On his way back to his seat he look over at me. I raise my fan and look off the other way” (189). She shows apparent contempt by not looking at Albert but says later on: “I look in his eyes and I see he feeling scared of me” (189). Later, Celie admits to Albert that the only reason for not looking at men, now that she does not fear them anymore, is her lesbianism: “Take off they pants, I say, and men look like frogs to me. No matter how you kiss ’em, as far as I’m concern, frogs is what they stay” (215). And then, finally, Albert and Celie’s understanding becomes reciprocal: “I see, he say” (215). Albert is finally able to understand Celie and gain power in vulnerability. At the end of the novel Celie and Albert observe each other: “Mr. _____ look at me real thoughtful. He not such a bad looking man, you know, when you come right down to it. And now it do begin to look like he got a lot of feeling hind his face” (231). Yet, even at this moment of connection and seeming understanding, readers do not know what feelings Albert still conceals.

The trope of looking thus also reminds us how subjective our perception of the world can be. As in the previous example, Celie constantly refers to things *looking like* something. This seems to remind readers that things are not always how they look. Celie’s children only look like Nettie, and Celie learns from Shug that her idea of a God that looks like a White man is internalized. Shug believes that since God is everything, God “don’t look like nothing” (Walker 1983a, 167), and, as Nettie wisely says, “not being tied to what God looks like, frees us” (218). Shug manages to explain to Celie that thinking about the internalized God as a (White) man prevents one from perceiving God’s creation: “Now that my eyes opening, I feels like a fool. Next to any little scrub of a bush in my yard, Mr. _____’s evil sort of shrink. But not altogether. Still, it is like Shug say, You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a’tall” (168). While Shug means that Celie has to get the White-man-as-God (as well as Albert) out of her view in order to be able to see from her own perspective, her advice can be taken by readers of *The Color Purple* as well. Interpreting Albert’s character having the “bad Black man” caricature on “your eyeball” (168) can make one read this novel “monocular[ly]” (see Curry 2017, 204).

4.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Art is the mirror, perhaps the only one, in which we can see our true collective face. We must honor its sacred function. We must let art help us.

Alice Walker (1998, preface)

In this chapter, I have shown that Albert is not and never was as bad as he might seem. Consequently, *The Color Purple* is not so much "a challenge to the entire Black nation" (BBC 1986), but actually challenges our preconceptions, including racist and gendered stereotypes concerning Black men. To notice the color purple in *The Color Purple* is to see that Celie is not watching God, but Albert as someone made by God. She finds it in her heart to understand him, even though he acts, like God and every other man in Celie's life, "trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (Walker 1983a, 164). The fact that the "bad Black man" motif is resisted and that there is also understanding in the narrative, is mainly foregrounded by the way the female focus draws the readers' attention to the male protagonist's vulnerability and especially the reasons for his behavior. The narrative helps us see that Albert's condition is that of "caughtness" (see Bryant 2003, 17). He is caught by the structures and systems of society and also the "narrative of badness" he has internalized and keeps telling himself even though the image does not match his "true self." Unlike some critics, I do not believe this novel seeks to "air the dirty laundry" of the African American community but instead reflects the fact that "there [still] has never been an ongoing effort made to address male pain" (hooks 2005, 110). As Nettie says: "Oh, Celie, there are colored people in the world who want us to know! Want us to grow and see the light! They are not all mean like Pa and Albert" (Walker 1983a, 112).

After reading *The Color Purple* for the first times, I somehow felt that the (implied) author loved Albert. Then, after re-reading the novel many times and having written this chapter almost in full, I encountered Walker's 1998 account of the movie version of the novel:

But even more calming to my heart, I found again the old imperfect sinner and pagan I love so much, my grandfather. Surely doing his part, after a sorely misguided youth spent in dissipation, confusion, and cruelty, to represent, as a grandfather, an old man, the sacred masculine. It broke my heart that so few people were able to really see him, in the much maligned character of Mister. (34)

The knowledge of Albert's real-life counterpart in the author's life sewed together the last piece of patchwork in the quilt of contexts in my reading. Instead of enmity and hostility towards Black men, Walker's womanism

extends to understanding the Black male experience in its multiple contexts. Also, for Celie, as opposed to hate and hostility, it all comes down to love: “After all the evil he done I know you wonder why I don’t hate him. I don’t hate him for two reasons. One, he love Shug. And two, Shug used to love him” (Walker 1983a, 221). Celie could see Albert in the context of his vulnerability from the very beginning of the novel. Underneath the stereotype of the “bad Black man” lies the “sacred masculine,” worthy of love if we can only move beyond our own preconceptions and prejudices—individual and collective. How these stereotypes can be turned back on themselves will be the focus of the next chapter.

5 THE PRIMITIVE BEAST: VULNERABILITY AS PERSUASION IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*⁴¹

In the previous chapter, following Bryant's discussion of the badman, I mentioned "caughtness" as a symbolical state of some Black men in America. Here I will focus on William "Son" Green, the male protagonist of Toni Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby* ([1981] 2004). Son is literally at large but still apparently "caught" by stereotyping imposed on him by others but also by those images of Black manhood and "underclass rural folk culture" (Bouson 2000, 105) that he cherishes himself. Having been on the run outside the United States for eight years, since 1971, he jumps ship and finds himself on a Caribbean island, only to fall in love (and frustration) with a mixed-race woman with a completely different background, Jadine. Son might be a survivor, an escape artist who perhaps indeed evades "caughtness" at the end of the novel. But Son's journey, too, is accompanied by both violence and vulnerability.

Interpreting this novel, it is crucial to acknowledge that Morrison is paying tribute to the trickster story that her novel is loosely based on, because the story of Brer Rabbit and Tar-Baby⁴² helps us better understand this ambiguous male character as well. Originally the name of an inanimate character in the trickster tale, the term *tar baby* has more recently come to stand for "an object of censure; a sticky problem, or one which is only aggravated by attempts to solve it." While it may have also positive implications in certain situations, this controversial term is also used as a pejorative word referring to a Black person (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.). The trickster figure of the originally oral story is Brer Rabbit, who appears in Morrison's *Tar Baby* in many forms. In addition to characters like Son, Jadine, and Thérèse, even Morrison herself can be characterized as a trickster (see, for example, J. R. Smith 1997, 129, 142). Indeed, what readers of *Tar Baby* once held as truth is constantly unsettled by a masterful "trickster" storyteller, and thus the novel *itself* can also be seen as a tar baby.

⁴¹ A version of this text was published as an article in *American Studies in Scandinavia* (see Kolehmainen 2018). I also examined *Tar Baby* in my master's thesis (see Kolehmainen 2011). In addition, an article where I compare the male characters in *Tar Baby* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is currently in peer review to be published in *Wagadu* (a journal of transnational women's and gender studies).

⁴² I will use "Tar-Baby" to refer to the character in the trickster story in Joel Chandler Harris (1955), and "tar baby" when I otherwise discuss the multifaceted concept/character/slur.

Common to trickster figures, Son is carefully constructed as ambiguous in the narrative (see, for example, Bousoon 2000, 126), and he is also associated with ambiguous stereotypes. The image of the “primitive beast” (also “savage”), whose features naturally overlap with those of the “bad Black man” (see Chapter 4), is a long-standing and persistent stereotype. As discussed in more depth in Chapter 1, the image of the Black beast has roots even further in history than American slavery and, as bell hooks notes, Black men are still, in the 21st century, “seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers” (2004, xii). According to age-old racist thinking, the savage is at the same time hypersexualized *and* “outside the civilizational accounts of gender” (Curry 2017, 7) because of his “animal-like” i.e., dehumanized nature. In other words, the savage can be seen as a sexual predator or completely de-sexualized (because dehumanized), depending on the motives for the use of the stereotype. Most importantly, like all the other stereotypes analyzed in this dissertation, vulnerability is not often associated with this image. I argue that the representation of Son’s vulnerability comes to disrupt his already controversial portrayal as well as to deconstruct the image of the primitive beast. Moreover, through the representation of Black male vulnerability, Morrison plays with readers’ sympathies and attempts to persuade them to take part in her process of resistance. In other words, in *Tar Baby*, representations of Black male vulnerability work as persuasion.

The chapter-specific function of vulnerability here is persuasion, which, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to “the addressing of arguments or appeals to a person in order to induce cooperation, submission, or agreement; the presenting of persuasive reasoning or compelling arguments” (n.d.). In this case, the “person” who is persuaded into “cooperation, submission, or agreement” is the (implied) reader but, as we will see, the characters also persuade each other in arguments about issues such as race, class, gender, culture, and community. Most importantly for my argumentation, one of Morrison’s acts of persuasion is creating an ambiguous image of the Black man, associating Son with negative stereotypes of Blackness and lower social class but also subverting those images by offering glimpses of vulnerability as well as more positive sides of the character. Son, for example, represents the idea of Black male criminality: he is a murderer and a thief, his social class seeming to be that of the outlaw. Then again, he is shown to have strong bonds with family and his cultural heritage. In this way, the author invites readers to feel in a particular way towards the character and then forcing them to revise initial interpretations and reactions to him. As we will see in the following sections, that has also happened to many critic-readers of *Tar Baby*. Since the majority of criticism received by *Tar Baby* somehow also deals with the traditional tar baby story, the next section will examine the connection between these narratives in more depth.

5.1 SIGNIFYING ON THE TRICKSTER

There is an old tale of Brer Rabbit and Tar-Baby, which was originally brought with the slave ships to the States from West Africa. In the story, Brer Fox (in other versions, Farmer John) has made a “baby” out of tar and turpentine and put it in a sitting position at the side of the road, hiding himself in the bushes. Brer Rabbit passes by and, greeting the Tar-Baby and getting no answer, becomes angry. After a few more trials, the Tar-Baby remaining silent, the maddened rabbit attacks it. With every punch and kick however, he becomes more and more stuck on the tar. When Brer Fox finds the rabbit completely stuck on the Tar-Baby, he is unable to stop laughing. In a version found in *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*—told by the formerly enslaved African American man Uncle Remus to a White child—the narratee asks whether the fox killed and ate the rabbit at the end of “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story” (1955, 8). Uncle Remus answers: “Dat’s all de fur de tale goes. . . . He mought, en den again he mought. Some say Jedge B’ar come long en loosed ’im—some say he didn’t,” and continues the tale later on in “How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox” (12). Another version, found in *The Favorite Uncle Remus*, however, has Uncle Remus move straight from the scene in which Brer Fox finds Brer Rabbit stuck on tar, and in “The Briar Patch,” continues the tale as follows. The trapped rabbit figures out a trick of his own: he begs the fox to burn him alive or strangle him to death—anything except throwing him into the briar patch. Soon the fox will do exactly what he was begged not to do, and the rabbit, having of course been “bred en bawn in a briar-patch,” gains his freedom (J. C. Harris 1948b, 54).

While many different accounts of the trickster tale exist, I will use the one compiled in Joel Chandler Harris’ *Uncle Remus* books. Morrison has stated that she had not read any of the versions before writing *Tar Baby*, but merely reminisced about the ones she had heard when she was a child (J. R. Smith 1997, 128). Thus, the story on which *Tar Baby* is based, is an oral one. Although similar stories can be found in the folklore of many Native American, Meso-American, and South American tribes, as well as in India and Iran, Morrison clearly explores the tale’s African roots. However, Brer Rabbit stories have been transformed into their current form to fit the experiences on the plantation and are, therefore, primarily African American rather than African stories (see also Werner 1988, 155). Like the storytellers, the stories themselves have a kind of double consciousness. Gates and McKay note that double consciousness, as W.E.B. Du Bois meant it, “defined both the crux of black Americans’ struggle to identify themselves and the crucible in which their African and American identities could be merged into a unity of which they and the nation could be proud” (1997, 608). Similarly, critics have debated over the importance of the European and/or African roots and their

influence on the stories (see, for example, Roberts 1989), while at the same time, the stories have continued their existence specifically as African American.

Tar Baby also comes from a place of double consciousness. Morrison has not rewritten the traditional tale as such; instead, the novel can be seen as echoing the traditions of oral storytelling as well as trickster tales (see, for example, J. R. Smith 1997). The extensive use of dialogue and various focalizers increases a sense of oral (or communal) storytelling typical of the African American folktale tradition. In this way, *Tar Baby* is also an example of “Talking Books,” which to Gates are “double-voiced texts that talk to other texts” (1989, xxv). Moreover, like *Tar Baby*, trickster stories are essentially about survival which is also a recurring theme in the African American literary tradition as a whole (see, for example, Tyson 2006). Fee and Webb note that trickster tales featuring Brer Rabbit “are about what it means to charismatically survive in a world where starvation, murder, and traps are always around the corner” (2016, 162). This is also true for Morrison’s *Tar Baby*. In fact, the author has stated herself, in an interview with Nellie Y. McKay, that

there is always something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel. I’m interested in survival—who survives and who does not, and why—and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be. I do not want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. (1983, 420)

This aim is materialized especially at the end of *Tar Baby*, as both the protagonists are left in a place of in-between—Jadine on a plane to Europe and Son perhaps on his way to the mythical world. Whether they are running towards (or away from) danger or safety, is not made clear.

In addition to the theme of survival, the name of the novel, and its polyvocality, the characters of *Tar Baby* also have their origins in the trickster tradition. According to Jeanne Rosier Smith, Morrison’s fiction is crowded with trickster figures: “Tricksters Sula, Son, Jadine, Therese, and Pilate shatter the myth of a definitive ‘black man’ or ‘black woman’” (1997, 115). Morrison, thus, employs her trickster characters in challenging stereotyped gender roles, which was also one of the functions of the characters discussed in the earlier chapters. The trickster has “many guises—shape-shifter, charmer, escape artist, magical world-weaver, and conjurer” which, according to Smith, “remind us of the multiplicity of human perspectives” (115). *Tar Baby* also reminds readers of the “multiplicity of human perspectives” by, for example, using multiple focalization and extensive employment of dialogue. The novel portrays each character with their own set of stereotypes and prejudices, most notably the protagonists.

As many critics have mentioned, *Tar Baby* can be read through the Brer Rabbit story: Valerian Street, Jadine's White patron, has "made" Jadine (the Tar-Baby) by paying for her education in the University of Sorbonne in Paris, France, to lure Son (Brer Rabbit) to get stuck on her (see, for example, Rayson 1998). Son and Jadine do not understand the stereotypes imposed on the other, to say nothing of each other's vulnerabilities. They nevertheless end up in a passionate relationship, but keep on arguing about issues concerning race, class, and gender, seemingly unable to let go (see, for example, Oforlea 2017, 184–185). According to this reading, Son then would "out-trick the trickster" by means of manipulation and deception, finding his "briar patch" and freedom at the end of the novel. To Smith, Son is "a nameless outlaw, a masterful storyteller, a catalyst whose presence disrupts the tenuously held serenity of the social order" (1997, 129), which makes him a "classic trickster" (129). I agree that the narrative quite explicitly constructs him as such. Oforlea notes,

within the first quarter of the book, readers learn that Son is intelligent, resourceful, and reflective—he isn't mean spirited but definitely more concerned with his own self-preservation. Like a trickster figure, who relies on wit and rhetoric to outmaneuver larger and ferocious animals, Son gains the confidence of Jadine and her family before he outsmarts, misleads, and ultimately divides them. (2017, 201)

Son definitely is an intelligent storyteller interested in his own survival. After he has been constructed as the primitive beast, as discussed in more detail later in this chapter, Son indeed gains the sympathies of all the other characters since he is used to modifying or reinventing his life story so that others hear what they want to hear. Jadine's role as the tar baby, in turn, is implied many times in the narrative. Son, for example, directly refers to her as tar baby (Morrison 2004, 220) and recounts the first part of the story during a fight with her (270). Furthermore, Jadine, whose room Son characterizes as a "dollhouse for an absent doll" (131), is constructed as the tar baby when she falls into a swamp (182), covered with "black stuff" (184) that "looks like pitch" (185) and seems "like mucilage" (184). In an effort to find Jadine at the end of the novel, Son apparently disappears into the jungle of Isle des Chevaliers. The end of the novel also supports this reading as the final words of the novel echo the sound of Brer Rabbit's run: "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split" (306).⁴³ Despite the amount of textual evidence, I believe reading Morrison's *Tar Baby* primarily as a re-writing of the animal tale is an outcome of the trick the author is playing on readers. In other words, simply recasting the characters from the Brer Rabbit story would be one of those "easy answers

⁴³ In Joel Chandler Harris' versions, the sound is "lippity-clippity, clippity-lippity" (1955, 6–7).

to complex questions” (McKay 1983, 420) Morrison specifically set out to avoid. I believe, thus, that it is Morrison who “outsmarts, misleads, and ultimately divides” us readers.

As a number of critics have pointed out (e.g., Jeanne Rosier Smith and Trudier Harris), the roles of Brer Rabbit as trickster and the Tar-Baby as deceptive trap can be assigned to more than one character in *Tar Baby*, and this is symptomatic of the way Morrison ultimately withholds a definitive judgment or final analysis. Thus, drawing from Bakhtin and Gates, Smith contends that both the narrator and Morrison herself can be viewed as trickster figures, suggesting that Morrison uses a “tricksterlike narrative technique” (142–144). Similarly, Letitia L. Moffitt claims that Morrison has created “a tar-baby-like ‘trap’” (2004, 14), which to her is “judging the characters in terms of overly simplistic, quickly formed definitions based on their apparent roles” (14). Agreeing with both Smith and Moffitt, I also argue that the novel persuades readers to interpret it in a *Eurocentric* way when, in fact, it should be read *Afrocentrically*. Tyson explains that “an Afrocentric reading of the trickster tales . . . accounts for both the continuity and the transformation of the tales without severing African American culture from its African roots” (2006, 367). Similarly, Black masculinity in this novel must be interpreted from an Afrocentric perspective, and I argue that the most significant construction of tar in *Tar Baby* lies in the ambiguous, even controversial representation of Son.

Ambiguity is a key feature of the trickster figure, as pointed out by William J. Hynes (1997, 34). Hynes characterizes the trickster under six features: 1) anomalous and ambiguous, 2) deceiver/trick-player, 3) shape-shifter, 4) situation-inventor, 5) messenger/imitator of the gods, 6) sacred/lewd bricoleur (1997, 34). While his narrative role cannot be completely separated from Jadine’s, I view Son in particular as an embodiment of tar: his ambiguous representation stands for a pit into which readers might fall as they seek to locate ever-changing objects of sympathy. Morrison, the “provocateur” (Oforlea 2017, 189), deliberately keeps readers in suspense about the real nature of Son, and even encourages readers to adopt stereotypical reactions to him in order to challenge the stereotypes. He is represented in terms of the most negative stereotypes that are connected to African American men, and yet the story entices us to side with him, even feel sympathy for him through periods of exposed vulnerability in the narrative. The ambiguity of the novel, however, has extended itself into the scholarly discussions as well, and many critics, myself included, have found themselves stuck on *Tar Baby*.

5.2 CRITICISM OF *TAR BABY*—A STICKY SITUATION

In her foreword to *Tar Baby*, Morrison describes the story of Brer Rabbit and Tar-Baby as “very funny, then scary, then funny again. Yet puzzling” (2004, xii). Through my own research on the novel, I have noticed something similar. The narrative has power to move me from one impression or feeling to the next and then back again. Looking at the early critical debates on the novel, “puzzlement” describes their tone quite aptly. *Tar Baby* has received a relatively small amount of criticism compared to other novels by Morrison, such as *The Bluest Eye* ([1970] 2006) or *Beloved* (1987), and was once claimed to be “the least admired, least researched, and least taught of [Morrison’s] novels” (Pereira 1997, 72). *Tar Baby*’s open ending and refusal to answer questions make the novel challenging to analyze, leading James Coleman even to deem it “a failure” (1986, 72). A notable debate, described by Moffitt, concerned finding the “moral center” or the “central—or ‘true’—vision” of the story (2004, 13–17). Of course, the text quite explicitly invites readers to choose sides between Jadine and Son by juxtaposing them (see also Bouson 2000, 105–106). The contradiction is constructed on a phenomenon that Fanon describes thus: “In every country of the world there are climbers, ‘the ones who forget who they are,’ and, in contrast to them, ‘the ones who remember where they came from’” (2008b, 24). In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is a “climber” while Son is the one who has not forgotten where he came from. However, Morrison seems to suggest that both of the described options might be harmful. While Jadine wants to rise above the identities both the Black and White communities try to impose on her, she has allegedly abandoned her African American heritage. Son, on the other hand, possesses a set of more traditional values, but clinging to them leads him to separatism and misogyny. However, because *Tar Baby* specifically resists simplistic readings, it is easy for critics to “get stuck in the ‘tar baby’ of a critical and emotional impasse as they participate in the shame and blame drama presented in the narrative” (Bouson 2000, 129).

Similarly to the characters, indeed, critics have sometimes seemed caught on disputes of race and gender in the novel (see also Bouson 2000, 129). For example, there have been debates over which of the characters is more qualified as the hero the story, Jadine or Son. Lauren Lepow views Jadine as the novel’s hero because the female protagonist rejects dualism (1987, 372)—which to Lepow represents the original sin in Morrison’s novel (369)—by rejecting the roles imposed on her. By contrast, Evelyn Hawthorne suggests that Jadine is constantly ridiculed by the novel, while Son is “the most sympathetically treated character,” even “Morrison’s reflector character of the work” (1988, 104). Karla Holloway maintains that Son “represent[s] natural truth” (1987, 126) and wonders “why should someone [meaning a Black man

like Son] want the nearly white and disrespectful Jade” (122). Jadine reminds Holloway of her belief that relationships of Black men with White women are “a threat to Black men” (122). John Duvall, in turn, argues that Morrison uses Jadine (as well as Milkman in *Song of Solomon*) “to figure her own struggle to construct an authentic identity as an African American woman” (1997, 326). More recently, and drawing on Morrison interviews, Oforlea notes, “neither Son nor Jadine represent Morrison’s own personal views on gender roles in relationships” (2017, 185), which is a view I agree with.

As may have become clear in the review above, the narrative specifically resists a Eurocentric binary reading of goodness/badness or hero/villain, and so does the representation of Son. Still, some accounts of him seem to try to categorize him. For instance, Oforlea argues that “Son functions as the representative of an empowered and self-defined black man, as a culture and community protector and symbol of black male sexual politics” (2017, 210) whereas Duvall (1997) provides evidence of Son actually raping Jadine in the narrative. His reading—which I find quite convincing and will discuss later—thus challenges the possibility that Son could stand as the “moral center” of the novel, or, as Duvall says, serve “as the source of value in the novel (335). Many readers (and critics) have, however, missed the rape scene (335–336) or read the scene differently. This is understandable, because one of Morrison’s tactics for misleading readers is seducing them to recast the characters to pick out heroes and villains as well as making them desire a clear conclusion in the first place. Or, in other words, to read in a Eurocentric way.

This kind of approach fails to acknowledge the ambiguity and complexity of the novel and its characters, as well as the tradition on which it feeds. As Jeanne Rosier Smith suggests, *Tar Baby*’s open ending is typical of trickster tales, and “Morrison specifically connects *Tar Baby*’s ending to an African dilemma tale tradition, distinguishing it from western folktales” (1997, 141). While European stories are often about a hero who wins a woman’s heart (or receives the woman as a prize after a conquest) at the conclusion of the story, within some African traditions, a dilemma tale usually carries a moral question that is left unanswered for the audience to ponder, and often has an educational function. In the African American folktale tradition, best known through the Brer Rabbit stories, the closure of the story is less significant than what has been learned along the way. So, if the narrative is principally drawing from African (and African American) storytelling traditions, it is clear that *Tar Baby* must be analyzed from an Afrocentric perspective. In this case, it would mean replacing the Eurocentric narratives of heroes and villains with a deeper analysis of the trickster as ambiguous. The most important remaining question, however, is what we learn about ourselves and the prejudices we might hold—through reading Morrison’s story.

The novel is “puzzling.” Forcing interpretations that are based on one’s own preconceptions onto the open questions is like punching a sticky effigy and getting caught by it. What does not stick, however, is the stereotyping of the African American male. If the tar pit is seen as sacred and tar as a unifying material, as Morrison implies in an interview with Thomas LeClair,⁴⁴ I would suggest that getting stuck on *Tar Baby* is not necessarily harmful but can actually build bridges between the reader and the text, as well as between different people in real life. It is made possible by the gradual deconstruction of racist stereotypes through representation of vulnerability of the male protagonist.

5.3 THE AMBIGUOUS MAN

As was the case with Manny, Raymond (Chapter 3), and Albert (Chapter 4), the vulnerability of this Black male character is also constructed at the intersections of identity. More specifically, Son’s vulnerability stems from intersecting ideas of race, gender, and class. Race and gender-specific stereotypes connected to Son are crystallized in the racist image of the Black beast, who is violent (towards women), hypersexual, and inferior to Whites in general. Since many of Son’s vulnerabilities are based on the fact that he is a man—a lower-class Black man—his gender becomes an important determiner of his vulnerability. Even though some aspects of these stereotypes have been imposed on Black women as well, the Black beast that poses a threat to White womanhood in the imagination of mainly White people, is specifically a male figure.

Furthermore, Son’s class as a poor southerner can only work to strengthen the stereotypes associated with race. Samantha L. Moore-Berg and Andrew Karpinski state, “a closer analysis of stereotype studies reveals that many of the stereotypes traditionally associated with Blacks are also associated with the poor (e.g., unintelligent, lazy) and many of the stereotypes associated with Whites are also associated with the affluent (e.g., educated and well-spoken)” (2019, 3). Moore-Berg and Karpinski add that race and social class have become so closely associated with each other (White – high social class, Black – low social class) that “when race or social class is unknown” people tend to “fill in the missing information with stereotypes and rely on automatic mental representations” (8). Moreover, according to Candice M. Jenkins, class in the African American context refers to more than just economic success. It also has to do with aspiration and has often been associated with certain corporeal

⁴⁴ In “The Language Must Not Sweat” (LeClair 1981), Morrison says that to her, tar baby stands for “the black woman who can hold things together.” Morrison derives this metaphor from the fact that tar has been “used to build things” as a unifying material.

markers, such as lighter color of skin and less kinky hair (2016, 622–624; see also Jenkins 2019). In this way, the different categories of identity not only intersect to construct a unique subjectivity, but also seem to strengthen each other. In the following, I will show how Son’s characterization shifts between his many roles, from a stranger into a primitive Other, from a charming young man to an abuser of women, from a loving man to wife-murderer, and back again.

The Stranger

Although the first impressions of Son are his own internal focalizations, he is portrayed as a stranger and an outlaw from the very beginning of the novel. His name is not revealed, and he is referred to as “he” and “the man” (Morrison 2004, 5). Within the first couple of pages of the novel, before Son hides in Valerian’s house, the text makes clear that Son is a poor, solitary fugitive as he is jumping ship and starting his passage to an island called Isle des Chevaliers: “He had no things to gather—no book of postage stamps, no razor blade or key to any door” (3). These outwardly mundane items tell volumes about Son’s current state: “No book of postage stamps” signifies the lack of communication with other people, “no razor blade” the inability to take care of oneself (e.g., cutting one’s beard or defending oneself from possible attacks). Having no “key to any door” means there is no place to go, a sign of homelessness, rootlessness. This is the position of a runaway. Nevertheless, we have no reason to doubt the righteousness of his purposes at this point, and Yvette Christians even notes, “he is the most positive male figure in all of Morrison’s novels up until *Tar Baby*” (2013, 184).

Positive or not, the first impressions of this male character also make him quite a vulnerable one. His story is marked from the beginning by escaping and the desire for survival. While being constantly on the move might seem like the action of a “hard-boiled man” (see Nyman 1997), escaping is often an act of vulnerability. Son has to fight the stream personified as an “insistent woman” (Morrison 2004, 4), the “water-lady” (5) that pushes him toward a boat sailed by two women, Jadine and Margaret. In addition to his runaway status, Son’s vulnerability is shown in that he is physically losing his power. He feeds himself with “tiny . . . bitter oranges” (7) that only make him hungrier. According to John W. Roberts, this is a very common situation in trickster stories: “In African trickster tales, the trickster’s need to compensate for shortages in the food supply, often under famine-like conditions, is mentioned often enough to almost be considered a formulaic opening sequence for African trickster tales” (1989, 26). This “famine-like condition” at the beginning of the novel is one of the more obvious links to Son’s trickster role (see also J. R. Smith 1997, 113). According to Hynes,

most tricksters are forever hungry and in search of food. No prohibition is safe from the trickster, especially if it lies between the trickster and a prospective meal. But when such food is gained it is seldom actually consumed. Although the trickster is represented as being insatiably hungry, on those rare occasions when he does eat, little overt evidence of pleasure or enjoyment is indicated: the process of the search and not its fulfillment is the rule. (1997, 42)

Son's unsuccessful search for food is described in the narrative. Having followed the smell of curry, Son only finds the empty cartons the women have left after eating (Morrison 2004, 8), and later eats an avocado only to find out that its "completely tasteless, wholly satisfying meat . . . made him thirstier than he was before" (135). Food, even when satisfying, makes him merely crave for more. An islander called Thérèse senses that there is a human being "starving to death" (105) in L'Arbe de la Croix from the smell and chocolate wrappings Son has left behind. According to Thérèse, "like a beast who loses his animal smell after too long a diet of cooked food, a man's smell is altered by a fast. She caught the scent twelve days ago: the smell of a fasting, or starving, as the case might be, human" (105). Although Son gains Thérèse's sympathies, he is already associated with animality and a smell that will become a central feature of how he is characterized as the story progresses (see Bouson 2000, 114). Having created condescending nick names for all the Black inhabitants at L'Arbe de la Croix,⁴⁵ Thérèse starts calling Son compassionately the "chocolate eater" (Morrison 2004, 104) and "the chocolate man" (104–105), which differs drastically from the words the other characters use of him, as will be discussed below. This stranger seems to be completely lacking resources, but then again, he also seems to survive as if that is exactly what he is used to doing.

The lone man, of course, evokes another set of stereotypes. As Robert F. Murphy notes, "several generations of Americans have been weaned on western films that portrayed the solitary, history-less, and taciturn rider who arrives in a town dominated by the powerful and corrupt" (1990, 200). There have been western films with Black protagonists in the 1960s and 1970s, and also more recently in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), but I think the stereotype of the lone hero, who is invulnerable precisely because he has no connections, is mainly a *western* concept.⁴⁶ Murphy adds that, for example, "the characters of Rambo and Shane are part of American values,

⁴⁵ Thérèse calls Jadine "fast-ass," Ondine "machete-hair," and Sydney the "bow-tie" (Morrison 2004, 112). White people she refuses to notice at all (110–111).

⁴⁶ For more information of stereotypical representations of Black masculinity in American cinema, see Kocić (2017). In addition, Jopi Nyman's *Men Alone: Individualism, and Hard-boiled Fiction* (1997) is an interesting study on "hard-boiled men" in fiction.

projections of an uncertain and threatened masculinity, denials of emasculation, assertions of autonomy—all the very opposite of physical weakness and dependence, of disability” (201). Son, of course, exhibits some of these traits, but when one thinks back on the stereotypes and their history discussed in Chapter 1, it is clear that a lone Black man entering a house of White people is in danger.

Before this stranger’s arrival, Valerian, the White owner of a big house in the Caribbean, L’Arbe de la Croix, and his wife Margaret, a former beauty queen, and their African American servants, Sydney and Ondine, seem to have balanced roles and relationships with each other. Even the niece of the servants, Jadine, fits the equilibrium of the house. Of course, equilibrium for these characters means that they are maintaining the roles they have adopted perhaps a long time ago. Jadine describes her White patrons as “decent like Sydney and Nanadine [Jadine’s nickname for Ondine] were decent, and this house full of decent folk situated in the pure sea air was exactly where she wanted to be right now” (Morrison 2004, 68). Sydney thinks, however, that “everybody’s going crazy in this house” (36), which might seem to foreshadow the coming conflict, but, as I see it, it reflects his preferred role as the only sane person in a house filled with insanity.

Later that day, when Son is found hiding in Margaret’s closet, having “lived like a foraging animal” (Morrison 2004, 105) in the house for days, the balance is severely interrupted. Son is portrayed as the very antonym of “decent” and even Sydney’s sanity is jeopardized. In the passage, Son is taken at gunpoint by Sydney from Margaret’s room to the dining room. As the story progresses, readers may be forced to revise some of their initial reactions to the characters as well as confront their own possible prejudgments, as I will explain more fully in the next section.

The Beast

Whereas the first impressions offered to readers construct Son as a stranger, the initial reactions to him by the other characters are based on the opposing qualities of the primitive beast. Stuart Hall argues that

people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time!* (1997, 229; emphasis in original)

All the characters (and possibly readers, too) perceive Son through some of these binaries. Based on their first impressions of Son, the characters dismiss

him through stereotypes of race, class, and gender, disregarding the multiplicities of identity and readers' possible first reactions to him before he was introduced to the other characters. As Moffitt suggests, at the beginning of the novel "this is the only way the characters can relate to each other: by creating boundaries by means of stereotypes, to define themselves" (2004, 15). As will be discussed below, Son is described by most of the other characters as the primitive beast: animal-like, child-like, unclean, ignorant, perverted (see also Bouson 2000, 105). Readers, who have already seen his vulnerability as a lonely, hungry man on the run, have the opportunity to perceive how Black men become constructed as beasts and the absurd forms that stereotyping can take.

The omniscient narrator of *Tar Baby* reveals how the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix, one-by-one, react to Son's brute-like appearance. Margaret's prejudices are made clear after the actual scene as she reminisces about meeting the stranger for the first time. She contemplates whether the "bum that even Sydney wanted to shoot" (Morrison 2004, 83), "this real live dope addict ape" (87), had "killed everybody" (84) and she even plans to organize a street patrol with the neighbors (84). Margaret creates a vision in her mind of what Son was doing in her closet: "In her things. Actually in her things. Probably jerking off. Black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans or down in the toe of her Anne Klein shoes" (86). Within only a couple of sentences, the most common racist stereotypes of the African American male are listed: animality, violent behavior, criminality, and hypersexuality. In her horrific image/fantasy, Margaret immediately connects a hiding Black male stranger to a sexual threat. Curry contends,

the Black man is made into a sexual catalyst of phobia evoking eros. His mere presence ignites the sexual paranoia of the white mind—phobic cravings and the anxiety caused by the fearful relation to the Black male—and drives the white to imagine its sexually terrifying fantasies as actual. (2017, 98)

Even though all clues show that Son was not planning to rape Margaret, Son's "mere presence" seems to provoke Margaret's "sexual paranoia." At the same time, Margaret's behavior reinforces the stereotype of White women who fear being raped by the "Black beast."

Margaret also invokes an old image of the "nigger in the woodpile" (Morrison 2004, 83; see also Mayberry 2007). The obsolete and offensive phrase has been used to denote "a concealed motive or unknown factor affecting a situation in an adverse way" (*Oxford English Dictionary* n.d.). As the idiom is used in *Tar Baby* also in a more literal way (i.e., there actually is a Black man hiding on the property), it thus underscores Son's "escape artist" role as the trickster hiding in the shadows, which is a common trait of the

trickster, especially of Brer Rabbit. The term also emphasizes the stereotype of the beast in the sense that other people (in this case, Margaret) think he was hiding because he was planning a (sexual) attack, while in reality, he was hiding to save himself. According to Curry,

the Black male—the Nigger—was constructed as the white race’s antipodal monstrosity, a sexual threat to the very foundation of white civilization if its savagery was not repressed. These speciations from the ideal (white) male type are examples of the *testeric* condition that plagues Black maleness generally in the United States. (2017, 4; emphasis in original)

In this scene, Son represents the Other, “the antipodal monstrosity” which is in binary opposition to Margaret’s “ivory fingers” (Morrison 2004, 7) and “blue-if-it’s-a-boy blue eyes” (56). Furthermore, what Margaret sees in Son is the explicitly Black male condition that Curry describes in the above quote. Son’s “testeric condition”⁴⁷ puts him under threat of being shot to death, and that, I suggest, would not happen as naturally—if at all, in the event that the stranger were a White male or a Black woman. Even Ondine says, “the man was black. If he’d been a white bum in Mrs. Street’s closet, well, she would have felt different” (Morrison 2004, 102). To emphasize Son’s bestiality and difference from the other characters, Son is repeatedly referred to with the N-word. It is done by Margaret (87), Sydney (100), Ondine (102), and Jadine (121), and they all seem to have their individual justifications for doing so. As discussed above, Margaret connects Son’s Blackness and maleness to this image of the beast, and thus, for her, Son represents a sexual threat. The only word she can say right after finding Son is “Black” (79), implying that Son’s Blackness is the Blackness of the primitive beast. Son’s Blackness is apparently different from Sydney’s, which to Margaret seems to be already “repressed,” perhaps even “civilized” (see also Chapter 1), because Sydney does not scare her like Son. Thus, Son’s otherness is one that seems to invite reflections of other people’s fears and desires.

As noted in Chapter 1, Morrison herself has addressed these conceptions in her theoretical work *Playing in the Dark*, where she explores the functions of Africanist personae in the works of the White canon. By contrast with these personae, in her own work she has expressed a need to “learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (1992, XI). In the scene where Son is first introduced to the other

⁴⁷ According to Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin, whom Curry refers to here as well, “testeria manifests a certain relationship with the testes, the testicles, and the testicular or testerial component of masculinity” (1994, 1066).

characters of the novel, however, Morrison seems to be using exactly the language she herself criticizes. In my reading, the goal of “freeing up the language” is accomplished in *Tar Baby* by the way the narrative is first filled with the racially marked characterization of Son and then is freed from it by means of irony and exaggeration.

The abundance of racist stereotyping, accompanied by each of the characters’ need to other Son in order to maintain a somewhat balanced sense of self, works to ridicule the stereotypes themselves. In other words, the extent to which the stereotypes and racial slurs are used in this scene, work to dismantle them by ridiculing them. This effect is reinforced by the fact that it is not Margaret’s wealthy White husband, 70-year-old Valerian, who mirrors her in reacting to Son as a brute, but the other African American characters, Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine. Valerian, as the representative of upper-class White manhood, surprises everyone by not conforming to the role that others expect of him. He does not “call the harbor” (Morrison 2004, 80) as his wife and servants would have him do, but merely says to the stranger, “good evening, sir. Would you care for a drink?” (80).

By contrast, Sydney and Ondine’s views of Son are apparently influenced or shaped by the very same racial myths as Margaret’s. Finding all Black people equal is not self-evident for the “black bourgeoisie” couple (Rayson 1998, 94); they actually employ racial hierarchies within the Black community. Sydney and Ondine’s comments include stereotypes of “badness” (no-count), hypersexuality (pervert), and that of the rapist (wife-raper). Sydney refers to Son as “a wife-raper” (Morrison 2004, 99), “a wild-eyed pervert” (100), and “a stinking ignorant swamp nigger” (100) while Ondine calls Son “a crazy hobo” (101) and later a “no-count Negro” (193). Sydney and Ondine strongly categorize other people, but at the same time, are afraid of ending up pigeonholed themselves. They have, it seems, internalized the racism of western culture as a survival strategy in order not to be affected by racism themselves.⁴⁸

The couple’s reaction to Son also has to do with class. Sydney calls himself “a genuine Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of that name” (Morrison 2004, 284), “the proudest people in the race” (61), thus distancing himself from the likes of Son. The book Sydney is referring to is *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* ([1899] 2007) by W.E.B. Du Bois, “the first case study of a black community in the United States” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* n.d.). Lawrence Bobo notes in his introduction to this sociological study that “a signal feature of Du Bois’s approach was to highlight the internal heterogeneity

⁴⁸ A similar phenomenon can be seen in Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which the whole all-Black community constructs a scapegoat of one of its most vulnerable members, a little African American girl, Pecola Breedlove, due to internalized racism.

and complexity of the black population itself. He put forward what may be the first effort to describe empirically a class structure within the black community” (2007, xxvii). Having apparently internalized the idea of African American class structure, Sydney places himself in the upper class in relation to Son. Morrison adds a layer of irony also in this discussion: Sydney’s classist remarks about Son are in stark contrast with Philadelphia, the “city of brotherly love.”

Ondine sees their distance from Son in that “the man upstairs [Son] wasn’t a Negro—meaning one of them. He was a stranger” (Morrison 2004, 102). Creating a boundary between themselves and Son by emphasizing their own class helps them escape the negative stereotypes concerning Black people in general. Moore-Berg and Karpinski contend:

When both race and social class are specified, stereotypes typically associated with Whites (e.g., intelligent, ambitious, and industrious) are associated with upper class Blacks and upper class Whites. Likewise, stereotypes traditionally associated with Blacks (e.g., lazy, unreliable, and ignorant) are associated with lower class Blacks and lower class Whites (Bayton, McAllister, & Hamer, 1956; Smedley & Bayton, 1978). (2019, 4)

In Son’s case, this means that his apparent poverty, accompanied with corporeal signs of the lower class—the “skin as dark as a riverbed” (Morrison 2004, 113) and “dreadlock hair” (80)—reinforce racist stereotypes associated with Black people, at least in comparison to the light-skinned Jadine. Sydney, of course, wants to be seen as upper class, and is ready to use Son’s vulnerable position as a lower-class stranger to keep his own status. This is understandable, because “social class influences categorization in stereotype-inconsistent race-class associations (i.e., middle class Blacks; Weeks & Lupfer, 2004)” (Moore-Berg and Karpinski 2019, 5).⁴⁹ As mentioned earlier, Sydney insists that, unlike Son, he is a “Philadelphia Negro” probably because there is no apparent corporeal difference there, as, according to Valerian, Sydney and Ondine have “faces as black as [Son’s] but smug” (Morrison 2004, 144). As Morrison notes in *The Origin of Others* (2017), “the danger of sympathizing with the stranger is the possibility of becoming a stranger. To lose one’s racialized rank is to lose one’s own valued and enshrined difference” (30). Even though Son is the one who is actually in danger in this scene, Sydney and

⁴⁹ This kind of distancing is historical: Curry contends that, already in the 1800s, “for Black Americans, who saw themselves as the Best men and women of the race, there was a demand that their class, their distance from poor uneducated Blacks, convey the quality of their manhood and womanhood. Because class denoted intraracial divisions, those who had elevated—the upper class—took responsibility for improving the (uncivilized) rank and file” (2017, 66).

Ondine cannot sympathize with him due to the need to protect their own “valued and enshrined difference.”

Sydney and Ondine still remember having had to work for the status they now have. For example, they make a local man called Gideon do all the physical chores they used to do themselves. Sydney reminds Ondine, “well, what you don’t have the strength for, Yardman [nickname for Gideon] is supposed to do. I don’t want you running all over the yard after chickens. Killing them neither. We long past that, Ondine. Long past that” (Morrison 2004, 98). Sydney’s attitude toward Gideon, whom they call “Yardman,” resembles a way that enslaved people were categorized during slavery. There were those who lived in the master’s house (“house negro”) and those who worked in the fields (“field negro”) and the latter was generally at the very bottom of the hierarchy of the plantation (see, for example, X 1963 and Jenkins 2016, 629). Living with “the master,” and working indoors, seems to Sydney an elevation in the social hierarchy of the island. He accepts that Jadine sleeps on the same floor with Margaret and Valerian while they live “up over the downstairs kitchen” (Morrison 2004, 100), but he cannot accept that Son is sleeping in the guestroom (100).

Sydney and Ondine’s hierarchical thinking becomes visible to Valerian after Son’s arrival: “Their manner struck him as what [Valerian’s son] Michael meant when he said ‘bourgeois’ in that tone that Valerian always thought meant unexciting, but now he thought meant false, but last night he thought meant Uncle Tom-ish” (Morrison 2004, 144). Valerian notices that Sydney acts “Uncle-Tomish” when he turns to protect his White supervisor without even having been asked to. For Sydney, threatening Son with a gun and calling him names is an effort to keep his own middle-class status. According to E. Patrick Johnson,

the *appearance* of belonging to a particular class does not always reflect one’s actual class status. In the black community, for instance, middle-class status is often performed—what is referred to in the vernacular as acting ‘boojee’ (bourgeois). The way a black person adorns herself or publicly displays his material possessions may not necessarily reflect his or her economic status. (2001, 8; emphasis in original)

Thus, Sydney needs to show that there is a difference between himself and the intruder, particularly after Valerian invites Son to stay as a guest and offers him a better room in the house and his own clothes to use. He “performs” an upper status, even though he remains a servant in Valerian’s house.

Similar class divisions are normal to Jadine, who “had not seen a Black like [Son] in ten years” (Morrison 2004, 126). She views Son as lower-class because he lacks ambition: “The black people she knew wanted what she wanted—either steadily and carefully like Sydney and Ondine or uproariously and

flashily like theater or media types” (126). Jadine’s account distances Son from her (as well as Sydney and Ondine, and Jadine’s friends from New York) in class hierarchy because, as Jenkins notes, “for African Americans social class historically has been shaped as well by less objective markers, such as aspiration” (2016, 624). Ironically, Jadine is surprised that Valerian seems to view all Black people as equal (and people in general): “Doesn’t [Valerian] know the difference between one Black and another or does he think we’re all . . .” (Morrison 2004, 125). For Jadine, Son is “strange-and-exotic” (S. Hall 1997, 229), apparently because “her elite education has taught her that African culture and its antecedents are primitive culture” (Oforlea 2017, 202) and thus she and her New York acquaintances have distanced themselves from many aspects of African American cultural heritage.

Jadine’s very first reactions to Son are a combination of fear and desire. Following the reactions of Margaret, as well as those of her uncle and aunt, Jadine is appalled by the stranger, who “burrowed in his plate like an animal, grunting in monosyllables, but not daring to look up” (Morrison 2004, 94). In addition to comparing him to an animal, Jadine also pays attention to Son’s rural behavior: “The man poured his demitasse into the saucer and blew on it gently before sipping it through a lump of sugar” (92). Smelling “the man’s odor,” she looks as “the man sopped the salad dressing on his plate with a round of French bread, and gulped it down. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand” (93). In her internal monologue, she refers to Son as “a nigger” (92) and a “raggedy black man who had . . . rape, theft or murder on his mind” (91), perhaps trying to create a boundary between herself and Son also because she feels attracted to him.

To Jadine, Son is clearly both “repelling-because-different” and “compelling-because-strange-and-exotic” (S. Hall 1997, 229), which is foregrounded by the description of Son’s hair. Jadine thinks Son has “wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair” (Morrison 2004, 113). While Jadine’s comments may also imply White people’s apparent desire to touch and feel affinity towards Black hair, numerous historical and cultural references are also made here. Again, they are associated with the stereotyping of the African American male, more specifically images of criminality. “Mau Mau” points to a 1950s’ conflict where a Kenyan nationalist group known as Mau Mau rebelled violently against British colonizers. Here the allusion underlines the fact that Jadine views Son as a primitive beast and an uneducated criminal, just like the Kenyans were seen by the British, as opposed to her own imagined goodness, produced by European education. A similar reference is made in mentioning Attica, where there was a prison revolt in 1971, only a decade

before *Tar Baby* was published.⁵⁰ Son's "chain-gang hair" (another criminal-reference), further distances Jadine from the savage as she sees him at this point because her own hair doesn't require straightening (48) but turns into a "rain cloud" (64) in fog. The ambiguity of stereotyping is evident here, as Son is constructed both as a threat, a hypersexualized criminal that should be killed or incarcerated, but also as animal-like, de-sexualized because dehumanized (see also Curry 2017, 7). After seeing him smile for the first time, Jadine stands speechless and stares at Son's hair, which looks "overpowering—physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly. And would" (Morrison 2004, 113). That Jadine thinks Son's hair should be put in prison reflects her need to take control of her almost uncontrollable attraction to the oversexualized primitive Other.

Son is analyzed by the other characters as simply a body, an embodiment of what Morrison described ten years after the publication of *Tar Baby* as "the image of the reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness [that] became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona" (Morrison 1992, 39). He remains a stranger and an Other for a long period of the narrative, a piece of meat that should, according to Jadine, be thrown to the alligators (Morrison 2004, 121) or "return[ed] . . . to the sharks where [he] belong[s]" (125). Even though Son is the first character readers meet, everybody else's personal histories are revealed before his. In fact, after almost half of the novel, he is still nameless and referred to as "the man." While Son may appear as sympathetic and vulnerable after this scene in which he is othered on account of his race, class, and gender, Morrison quickly subverts his vulnerable position into something less sympathetic.

The Misogynist

As mentioned earlier, the narrative creates boundaries and contrasts between Jadine and Son. As Morrison is more often than not defined as a feminist writer, the assumption that Jadine would reflect the author's values would fit well, and the fact that Son is later represented as a misogynist makes this reading even more natural. When Jadine and Son have their first conversation, Son makes Jadine laugh, and she even feels "a flash of pity" (Morrison 2004, 119) towards him, but the situation is reversed as Son treats Jadine rudely by accusing her of having had sex with powerful people to gain success as a model and actor. He asks, "how much . . . dick [she] had to suck . . . to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy?" (120). They start fighting, which will be discussed in more depth later, and Jadine blames Son for trying to rape her.

⁵⁰ According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "racial tensions were also a major factor" in the revolt, because "the inmate population was nearly 55 percent African American and 10 percent Hispanic while all the guards were white" (n.d.).

After the accusation, Son offensively asks Jadine, “why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?” (121). During this scene, Son’s arrogant and provocative attitude towards Jadine is also shown in the way he asks her in surprise: “You don’t belong to anybody here, do you?” (118), and later threatens to “throw [her] out the window” (121). Jadine, in turn, calls Son an “ape,” a “nigger,” and an “ugly barefoot baboon” (121). As the characters lean on stereotypes when they quite aggressively encounter each other, the narrative invites readers to take sides between them and perhaps adopt stereotypical reactions to them.

Later that day when Son visits Valerian in the greenhouse, Son’s misogyny is further revealed. He tells Valerian that he knows “all about plants. They like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to” (Morrison 2004, 148). Son tells a sexist joke to Valerian and they share a moment of laughter together instead of fighting: “When Jadine ran to the greenhouse certain the noise coming from it was somebody murdering somebody she heard laughter to beat the band” (149). The way Son is represented at this stage of the novel gives little room for sympathizing with him. However, the context for Son’s attitudes should be acknowledged. hooks argues that “most black males are being encouraged through their uncritical acceptance of patriarchy to live in the past, to be stuck in time. More often than not they are stuck in the place of rage” (2004, 60). Son certainly has a fixed image of his past and is stuck in the somewhat patriarchal values he has internalized from his old-fashioned hometown in rural Florida and during the eight years spent at sea with other outlaw men. One way of viewing Son’s behavior is to consider it Morrison’s comment on the patriarchal values that make some males act according to obsolete attitudes.

The Folk Hero

Even though my argument is that Son cannot be read as a hero as such, he is, at times, characterized as a folk hero, whether it be the outlaw or the trickster (Brer Rabbit). Once we get more information about him, we learn that after coming home from the Vietnam War, he has killed his wife and has therefore become an outlaw: “In those eight homeless years he had joined that great underclass of undocumented men” (Morrison 2004, 166). Here Son and his travel companions are compared to a set of other folk heroes and fictional characters: “Some were Huck Finns; some Nigger Jims. Others were Calibans, Staggerlees and John Henrys” (166). The narrator tells that “what distinguished them from other men (aside from their terror of Social Security cards and *cédula de identidad* [ID in Spanish]) was their refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long” (166; emphasis in original). These kinds of men have to stay anonymous and on the move for

safety reasons. As J. Brooks Bouson suggests, Son's outlaw status also invokes the image of the badman:

By insisting on Son's "authentic" African and folk-heroic qualities, the narrative counteracts its earlier shame-ridden descriptions of Son as the uncivilized and unclean Other. But it also, in part, undercuts its antishaming agenda by invoking yet another problematic stereotype in constructing Son: that of the lawless "bad nigger," a folk character that has long fascinated Morrison. (2000, 119)

However, as noted in Chapter 4, the image of the badman also includes vulnerability. Son has been running from the law for most of his adult life, but staying away from prison does not always mean that one is safe. Referring to Evelyn Patterson's research, Curry points out that "society is so dangerous for Black men and boys that prison, despite its deleterious consequences" might be safer, even "preferable" for them (2017, 31). Of course, prison is dangerous but so is society for Black men who are hunted and thus on the run. For these men, life is associated not with work, but survival.

As mentioned earlier, survival is also one of Brer Rabbit's main concerns. Son survives the situation where he has enraged and frightened most of the inhabitants at L'Arbe de la Croix by reversing the way he acts, and they gradually accept and start to sympathize with him. Here, he functions as both Tar-Baby and trickster. Tar-Baby is made by Brer Fox, and similarly Son is cleaned and dressed in new clothes, made anew by Valerian. He puts on the White man's clothes and cuts his "chain-gang" hair, and is immediately more attractive to most of the people in the house who are "seduced by the Hickey Freeman suit and the haircut" (Morrison 2004, 165). One by one, he starts to win them over, and consequently, perhaps, readers as well. He apologizes to everyone and helps Valerian with his greenhouse. He makes Ondine's heart melt by eating a lot of her food (161) and Sydney's by asking if he could eat with them in the kitchen (164), thus creating a "fellow-feeling" (see, for example, Vesala-Varttala 1999, 30) between Sydney and Ondine and himself. Having had his status raised as Valerian's guest, he "lowers" his status by refusing to eat in the same room with the "master" Valerian. Later he even wins Margaret's attention by flattering her and asking about her son, Michael (Morrison 2004, 198), pleasing everybody with behavior accepted by each one of them. Jadine is the toughest, because she is trying her best not to be seduced by Son and because his misogynist words and actions have understandably enraged her. In reality, however, Jadine is "more frightened of his good looks than she had been by his ugliness the day before" (158). Here Son is represented—quite the contrary to his earlier portrayal as the primitive—as a handsome, witty man with good social skills.

Of course, the trickster is the “master of metamorphosis” (Hynes 1997, 37), and the scene also underlines the shape-shifter trait of Son the rabbit, one that “can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception” (36). The trickster may lie, change roles or clothes, even its gender, to achieve a goal, be it the acquisition of food or sex, or mere survival (35–37). One reading of the scene is thus that Son manipulates the other characters to take his side, in order to gain Jadine’s trust. He says that he had “told each of them as much of the truth as he had to” (Morrison 2004, 164) and performs the kind of role that he (rightly) thinks is expected of him. For example, Morrison quite humorously describes how Son tries to please Sydney: “He kept calling him Mr. Childs and sir and allowing in gesture how he [Son] was a reprobate” (164), thus validating Sydney’s feelings of superiority. Of course, as Gates and McKay argue, “the rabbits can be just plain pretentious. . . . that is what gets Brer Rabbit into trouble in the famous Tar-Baby Tale: he insists on being addressed with genteel etiquette, and to say the least, the effort fails” (1997, 102). In this way, seen from the point of view of the trickster story, Son’s exaggerated kindness towards the inhabitants on L’Arbe de la Croix implies that in the next scene he might be in danger again. As Hynes notes, the trickster can “can turn a bad situation into a good one, and then back into a bad one” (1997, 37).

By now, the male protagonist has been constructed as a stranger and a threatening and sexualized primitive Other as well as a misogynist and a folk hero. The central activities of the trickster figure are deceiving and shape-shifting (Hynes 1997, 35–37), and it is evident that many of these roles Son takes are the outcome of his own coping mechanisms. In other words, he masks his vulnerability with arrogance and humor, for instance.⁵¹ Even though trickster tales are usually condensed with humorous events and told for entertainment, they carry a message: hide your vulnerability the best you can, and you will (probably) survive. Author Ralph Ellison, who describes the masking act of minstrel shows in *Shadow and Act* published in 1964 (Ellison 1972), suggests that “the Negro’s masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity” (55). What Ellison refers to here, is in the core of vulnerability. The function of the mask is that it conceals one’s “real” identity. In this way, the mask is also worn to mock the ones that have created the stereotypical image of in the first place. Therefore, the mask can be worn both in self-defense and for the “joy of the joke” (55). At times, Son does seem to joke in order to provoke any reaction in other people and to entertain himself by mocking

⁵¹ Morrison has stated herself that she thought about masking when creating this novel (Morrison 2004, xiii). I will turn to this theme in more detail in Chapter 6.

those who stereotype him (for example, Jadine). However, he also appears to hide his true self by acting arrogantly, even violently, and uses humor as condescension or manipulation.

The representation becomes even more ambiguous as Son's vulnerability starts to emerge from under his survival strategies. As Robert Staples suggests "those things that bother black men—feelings of inferiority, fear of vulnerability—are not often talked about. What is articulated comes out sounding like insensitive male chauvinism" ([1982] 2004, 123). As discussed so far, the narrative resists categorizing the characters by combining repulsion and attraction, judgment and sympathy, and subverting initial and subsequent reactions to Son by providing additional information on his character. In the next section, I will concentrate on how Morrison portrays Black male vulnerability and how it is both masked and exposed, and how those expositions work to deconstruct the stereotype of the primitive beast.

5.4 EXPOSING VULNERABILITY: SYMPATHY FOR SON

According to Howard Sklar, narratives may persuade readers with the help of various textual features, such as "narrative progression, expositional disclosure, focalization, levels of discourse, narrative voice, and others" (2013, 47–48). Narrative progression, which refers to how the story progresses from one event to the next, is particularly complex in *Tar Baby*. The same event is often repeated as each character relives their experiences in their inner thoughts to which we are provided access through multiple focalizations. The omniscient narrator moves between the different rooms of the house as well as between the consciousnesses of its inhabitants, reporting personal thoughts and private conversations. As discussed in the previous section, through their first reactions to Son, it becomes clear that all these characters stereotype each other (see Moffitt 2004), and this stereotyping continues in later dialogues and focalizations. Moffitt suggests that because readers get to see all the different characters' perspectives in the course of the novel, they are able to develop nuanced views of the characters and thereby avoid the trap of stereotyping created by the author (2004, 14–24). In my view, though, any "definitive" reading is impossible as the story has a way of reversing fixed judgments—those of the characters, and even those of readers. In this way, the "expositional disclosure" of each character's hidden attitudes and past deeds further complicates—rather than completes—the way the characters can be viewed. Nevertheless, as Son's personal history is bit by bit revealed, we learn about his negative sides, but at the same time, more vulnerability is exposed.

Vulnerability is one of the ways the narrative asks us to sympathize with Son. According to Sklar, sympathy includes, in part, the recognition of an unfair or unpleasant situation of another human being, feeling for that person,

and sometimes also the desire to ease the pain the other might experience (2013, 54). An important difference between empathy and sympathy, Sklar notes, is that the sympathetic reaction always, implicitly or explicitly, includes a judgment. This judgment may concern the unfairness of the other's situation, for example (53–54). While we do not have to understand the character in order to sympathize, Sklar continues, sympathy is in essence an ethical response (54). In my view, the most challenging character in *Tar Baby* to respond to is Son, because his representation relies heavily on both negative stereotyping and vulnerability.

It is easier to sympathize with Son as we get closer to him as his personal history is revealed. From his inner monologues we learn, for example, that in Son's view of himself, there is a sense of lack, that he is a

man without human rites: unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced. He had attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Propertyless, homeless, sought for but not after. There were no grades given in his school, so how could he know when he had passed? (Morrison 2004, 165–166)

What adds to his sense of lack is that he lost his mother as a child (161) and was raised only by his father who is as emotionally frozen as Son (173). In addition, one of his brothers had died in the Korean War (247) and that one of his sisters, Francine, lives in a psychiatric institution (247) having apparently been attacked by police dogs (268). Son himself, we learn, jumped ship because “he went crazy with homesickness” (138).

Most importantly, Son struggles with his memories of the Vietnam War, which also connect to Black male vulnerability in the United States. During the Vietnam War, for example, the recruits in general were exposed to deprecating rhetoric. According to Herman Graham, “drill instructors addressed their recruits by feminine, animal, scatological, and other terms intended to indicate their powerlessness and insignificance” (2003, 34). At the same time, “[hyper]masculine rhetoric” was used in order to “to seduce recruits into complying with their regimen” (31). This contradictory mode of gender rhetoric reminds one of the beast/child binary discussed in Chapter 1. There was also a race and class⁵² bias in the drafting process. Graham notes that “African American males were left extremely vulnerable to the draft” (16) and “because of general economic inequality between blacks and whites and

⁵² According to Christian G. Appy, around 80% of the men fighting in the Vietnam war were either poor or working-class (1993, 27–28).

discriminatory implementation of draft laws, the class bias of the draft imposed a special burden on black men" (16).⁵³

As Appy points out, the war had deepened the socioeconomic challenges of draft-age working-class men before they were drafted, and after they returned from the war, they were still poor and some were even left homeless (1993). Even though they had hoped to gain civil rights by fighting in the war, Black men came back as second-class citizens. As pointed out by Graham, the U.S. military "promised young blacks generous benefits, marketable skills, and the opportunity for personal growth in a homosocial world [but] racial inequality remained largely unchanged" (2003, 15). Notwithstanding these devastating ramifications of the war to an individual, the war is only briefly mentioned a few times in *Tar Baby*. To me, this reflects not only Morrison's technique of leaving important parts of her narrative untold (even if the narrator knows what the ants and butterflies think at times) but also the silence that often surrounds the theme of war, and the way traumatic memories function.

Having survived the abyss of war, Son is clearly suffering from post-traumatic stress. He has been through hard times: "Lambs, chickens, tuna, children—he had seen them all die by the ton. There was nothing like it in the world, except the slaughter of whole families in their sleep and he had seen that, too" (Morrison 2004, 131). These brief memories of the war seem to follow him to the jungle of *Isle des Chevaliers*: "An old dread of mines called him—stopped him dead and he had to remind himself several times that this was the Caribbean—there were no beautiful pygmies in the trees or spring mines in the road" (134). The memories of the time he had to be constantly afraid for his life affect his body: like according to an old habit he stops dead to check the land and the trees for fatal threats but his conscious mind knows he is safer now than in the war—thus, he "remind[s] himself" that he is not in Vietnam. Looking for a place to stay the night on the island, he is guided by fear:

He would have sunk where he stood and slept under the dreaming trees and the holy sky except for the part of him that never slept and which told him now what it always told him: to hide, to look for cover. So he obeyed the self that never blinked or yawned, and moved farther from the house looking for anything: a hutch, a toolshed, a cloister of shrubbery—and found a gazebo. (136)

⁵³ Graham maintains that "approximately 12 percent of draft-age men were African American, yet black men were drafted at rates that exceeded that number for much of the war. In 1963, the percentage of black men who were drafted reached a high of 18.5 percent" (2003, 16). Furthermore, "as a result of growing up in impoverished settings, many African Americans lacked the academic skills and health requirements to qualify for military service" (17), which meant in practice that "eligible black men were drafted at twice the rate of qualified white men" (17).

The narrative seems to be implying that the previously discussed toughness and arrogance of this traumatized man is merely a mask covering his vulnerable side, a stress reaction partly caused by the atrocities he witnessed while in Vietnam.

War has made Son vulnerable in the most corporeal ways, and his friends, who as kids had “laughed and pointed their fingers” (Morrison 2004, 136) at him, fear for his safety: “Each of them had been afraid for something different: his balls, eyes, spine” (136). Son, an 18-year-old young man in the war, “had been afraid for his hands” (136), because of his love for playing the piano. It is thus clear that, as a veteran suffering from trauma, Son must have been terrified when he was taken at gunpoint downstairs by Sydney. Even though at that point Son appalls Sydney by asking him if he could “take a leak” (100), as if he did not care about being threatened by Sydney, acting indifferent and relaxed is evidently one of Son’s survival strategies.⁵⁴ Later, when Son comes to explain himself and apologize to Sydney and Ondine, “[Sydney] point[s] to a spot between Son’s eyebrows” and says, “if this was my house, you would have a bullet in your head. Right there” (162). Thus, he has to relive the war not only through his agitated nervous system—“the self that never blinked or yawned” (136)—but also the actual threat of being shot to death by Sydney. In addition to the fact that he had encountered serious threats to his life during the Vietnam War, Son’s vulnerability also includes that he risks being sent to prison, and even his life is potentially threatened by both Sydney and Chayenne’s mother, Sally Brown, who “slept with [a] shotgun every night waitin for [Son]” (248) until she died.

Along with the trauma of war in general, Son came back from Vietnam with an additional burden: shame. Due to his disrespectful conduct, he was sent home “without honor or humor” (Morrison 2004, 224). We learn that he had tried to mask his vulnerability with laughter:

He had laughed, in fact, laughed all over Vietnam because at eighteen laughter was his only reliable weapon. . . . laughter was always there, almost always; but one day it ran out too. . . . The silence in his throat where laughter or tears ought to be blew up in his head and he was stockaded, busted and, when he refused to re-up, discharged without honor or humor. (224)

When humor betrayed him, Son was humiliated, and in this quotation, we can observe his vulnerability. “The observer role,” Sklar contends, is “a form of aesthetic distance [and] critical to understanding the nature of narrative sympathy and its distinction from empathy” (2013, 56). I suggest that in *Tar*

⁵⁴ As mentioned earlier, hooks claims that “the more troubled the boy, the more intense the mask of indifference” (2005, 50).

Baby distance is preserved by the use of the third-person omniscient narrator instead of the first-person narrator. Even though this passage is focalized through Son, we are not immersed in Son's feelings but are able to observe and make judgments instead. At the end of the novel, right before Son returns to Isle des Chevaliers, we are told that "he moved like a man saving his strength, or one suspicious of trip mines" (Morrison, 2004, 293), and thus reminded again of his fatigue and war trauma. As becomes clear, the narrator's awareness of Son's thoughts and feelings is sometimes limited: "It was hard to tell how Son felt. Perhaps he did not know himself" (196). Even if we do not feel what he feels, we can feel for, or sympathize with, him due to his struggles. Most importantly, due to the "aesthetic distance," we are invited to judge Son as "good" or "bad."

Another point where the text exposes Son's vulnerability and attempts to persuade us to sympathize with him is when he thinks of his hometown Eloë and his family. The first time the narrative reveals his moniker, the name that carries the memory of his family, community, and cultural past that was given to him in Florida, readers get a glimpse of his sensitive side. While the name "Son" may also generate biblical associations ("the Son of the Heavenly Father"), to its bearer it signifies both security and the identity he wants to secure: "It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to, the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die" (Morrison 2004, 139). At the same time, Son has had many identities, because he has been escaping the law, and the identities have become masks to hide his vulnerability: "The other selves were like the words he spoke—fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least" (139). Son's "one reality" is a reminder of where he came from and connecting him to his family and ancestors. Son's father had been called Old Man since childhood, and Son was called Old Man's son until another child was born and Son became just Son (139). Going on thirty, he is still a son, a motherless child in need of a father, his "one reality" always in danger of being hurt. Sigrid King notes that "taking possession of one's own name and thus claiming sovereignty over one's self is an act of power" (1990, 684), but Son's name seems to be a source of his vulnerability. Therein lies the paradox: our greatest vulnerability might be our greatest source of strength. Along with his family and friends, Son seems to cherish his cultural heritage, and is respectful of the islanders Gideon and Thérèse. Coleman argues that "the sentiments of the reader are most likely with Son, a sensitive, warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities" (1986, 65), and I agree that he is at times represented as such. However, his misogynistic thoughts seem to originate from the same place as his folk values and warmth: his hometown Eloë.

The depiction of the small all-Black community is as ambiguous as that of Son. In *Eloe*, unmarried couples are expected not to sleep in the same room, but Son's friend Soldier tells Jadine that Son's late wife had "the best pussy in Florida, the absolute best" (Morrison 2004, 254), exemplifying a misogynous way of talking about women as opposed to the seemingly virtuous values of the community. The ambiguity of Son's representation is also shown in his thoughts on gender equality. His previous chauvinist utterings seem like a performance or mere jokes, as his way of thinking about the women in his hometown shows him to fully accept gender equality: "[Jadine] kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior. . . . Anybody who thought women were inferior didn't come from north Florida" (268). He treasures the women of *Eloe*, but he did kill his wife, who, according to Demetrakopoulos, "was an incarnation of pure sexuality" (1987, 136). In a private conversation, Son's friend Soldier warns Jadine: "Son, he don't like control. Makes him, you know wildlike" (Morrison 2004, 255). In this way, the narrative reemphasizes Son's misogyny and his role as a (sexual) threat. Soldier also tells Jadine that "when it comes to women [Son] thinks with his dick" (255), which got him into trouble with the law. Soldier says that "every one of [Son's friends]" (254) advised Son not to marry Chayenne, implying that many of them had already slept with her when they got married. "But he did it anyway to his grief and sorrow" (254), meaning that Chayenne (apparently as expected by everyone) cheated on Son, which made him eventually drive his car through their house and thus accidentally kill her.

However, the narrative explains the deed by offering context. Right after finding out that Chayenne had a teenage lover, a boy of thirteen, Son was going to leave the scene but "turned the car around and drove it through the house" (Morrison 2004, 176) in which his wife and the boy were sleeping together. Son tells Jadine that he did not run his car over them, but "just busted up the place. But the car exploded and the bed caught on fire. It was a little place we had, just a little box, and I drove through the bedroom wall" (176). Knowing the context, it might be easier to have some sense of why he did it, at least for those who are inclined to side with Son or have sympathy for him.

Jadine definitely does not have sympathy and reacts to Son's story of how he ended up on the run by stereotyping him. First, she assumes that Son had killed a man, and when she hears it was not a man, she asks, "that's all you could think of to do with your life? Kill a woman? Was she black? . . . Of course she was" (Morrison 2004, 176). Having infantilized Son already before the revelation ("You think like a kid" 171; "You're like a baby. A big country baby," 172), she says, "I hate killers. . . . All killers. Babies. They don't understand anything but they want everybody to understand them" (175). Wishing the reason for the killing would have been "something simple like . . . or something forgivable like . . . temper" (175), Son concludes that he did it "accidentally

when [he] was fucked-up" (178). This last quote implies that, at the time of the murder he had suffered from some problems with his mental health (*fucked-up*), which is not surprising for a veteran in his twenties. At this point the representation of Son is so complex and ambiguous that readers are likely to end up as confused as Jadine. "Trying to figure out whether he was the man who understood potted plants or the man who drove through houses" (178), Jadine struggles to put Son in an "either-or" mold.

Son's visit to Eloë also reveals from where he has internalized avoiding emotionally difficult situations with often inappropriate humor. When Son and his father finally meet in Eloë after eight years of separation, the narrator reports that the two men "didn't touch" because "they didn't know how" (Morrison 2004, 247). After a while, they find the way out of the confusion through humor. They joke together about the thirteen-year-old boy that Son found in bed with his wife and almost killed:

"Where's the boy?"

"Gone away from here, his folks too."

"He get his eyebrows back?"

"Never did. Guess his folks figured he couldn't hide nowhere around here looking like that. Sally was lookin for him too."

"I didn't see his face. All I saw was his asshole."

"That didn't have no eyebrows either I bet."

"I should have made him some with a razor." They laughed together then and an hour or so passed while Son told what all he'd been doing for the last eight years. (248–249)

Here Son and his father mask their vulnerabilities with humor and are able to connect in that way because it is the only way they know. Close to the end of the novel, we learn that Son uses humor to survive, but when it does not work, he turns to violence. Reminiscing his experience in the army close to the end of the novel, he reveals that "when he ran out of laughter ammunition [he had] kicked an M.P. in the groin" (300).

Understanding the social and cultural contexts for Son's behavior and becoming familiar with him as a fully realized, complex, human being is also one of the ways the narrative interrupts the binaries on which his representation was previously built. Vesala-Varttala presents a "magnetic connectedness between the self and the other" as one of sympathy's basic meaning components (1999, 30). New information about Son's character and past may attract us to him and, if "connected," it can be more difficult to adjust or reverse the sympathetic reactions to him. However, as Trudier Harris argues, "Morrison manages to subvert whatever unqualified sympathy may be directed toward either character by casting them in molds of ambivalence" (1991, 125), which may be the reason for the frustration of many critics of this

novel. The effect of this is that our need to deal with these ambiguities seems to be one aspect of moving away from relying on stereotypes concerning Black men as hypersexual, violent criminals, even if this character is, *also*, sometimes a misogynist, hypersexual(ized) man with a criminal past. Even the debate among critics, discussed by Moffitt (2004) and Bouson (2000), is an example of the need of readers to sympathize with either Son or Jadine and the difficulty of changing the object of sympathy.

This is because the text keeps reframing the characters for us. In addition to the fact that he is a wife killer, a liar, a violent man, it turns out that he is prone to dualistic thinking and defines himself and others by race. He also preserves his identity by denigrating other people, and possesses a worldview that is essentialist and apparently unchanging. For example, he thinks that “people don’t mix races; they abandon them or pick them” (Morrison 2004, 270). His interior monologue also reveals his demeaning thoughts about Jadine: “Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap” (219–220). These examples would either distance him from being “a sensitive, warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities” (Coleman 1986, 65), or indicate that Son’s idea of “folk values and qualities” do not imply equality or kindness.

In the very same paragraph, however, the narrative explains the motives for Son’s cruel words and behavior towards Jadine through his interior monologue:

For if he loved and lost this woman whose sleeping face was the limit his eyes could safely behold and whose wakened face threw him into confusion, he would surely lose the world. So he made himself disgusting to her. Insulted and offended her. Gave her sufficient cause to help him keep his love in chains and hoped to God that the lock would hold. It snapped like a string. (Morrison 2004, 220)

Afraid of loving Jadine because of the fear of abandonment makes Son “vulnerable to loss” (Nussbaum 1992, 80). Knowing that he actually loves Jadine and only said such cruel things to her in order to protect himself might again ask for reader sympathy. However, in an interview with McKay, Morrison herself says of Son: “You can’t really trust all that he says” (1983, 423) and it makes one wonder whether Son’s inner thoughts are sincere or if they are—as he describes his own words—mere “fabrications of the moment” (Morrison 2004, 139).

Even if the narrative has at this point constructed Son as a multifaceted human being and distanced him from the Black beast image, his violent behavior towards Jadine worsens in New York where Son feels estranged and inadequate. The scene where Son allegedly rapes Jadine in New York is crucial, especially if the text has succeeded in connecting Son and the reader. The

passage involves the Tar-Baby story, which Son tells Jadine while approaching her on the bed, having torn open his own shirt (Morrison 2004, 270). Duvall argues that most critics have missed the actual rape, the reason being that until that point, the text has been “in pains to construct Son as non-rapist by questioning stereotypes about black male sexuality” (1997, 335). With this scene—thoroughly discussed by Duvall—I argue that Morrison plays a trick on anybody still thinking Son could stand for the character that reflects the author’s ideals and makes it clear that nobody is on the winning or correct side in this novel. Son as the multivocal trickster appears to defy all categories, even that of the non-rapist.

I think the rape scene has been ignored by many because it is, as most other scenes in this novel, highly ambiguous. First, it may be unfathomable to those readers who have made up their minds on Son’s character as a non-rapist and had acknowledged that this narrative specifically deconstructs stereotypes of Black men. The Black male rapist is, after all, one of the most notorious, even “the primary stereotypical image of black men in the white supremacist imagination” (hooks 1999, 72). The way the scene is constructed also diverts from Morrison’s earlier literary techniques because, for example, in *The Bluest Eye*, scenes of violence are narrated in detail. Not very much critical attention has been paid to the violent acts in Morrison’s novels in general, probably because there is so much else to explore in her oeuvre. As Bouson suggests, “because Morrison’s novels are carefully designed and make self-conscious use of folklore and myths, critics have tended to avoid or downplay the violent, even perverse, subject matter of Morrison’s novels” (2000, 3). In the case of Son, for those readers who first saw him as a beast and a possible rapist and changed their minds later, it might be extremely difficult to change their minds back again. Reading the scene carefully would mean either admitting that the man with the “voice of righteousness” who represents the author’s ideals is, in fact, a rapist or, alternatively, challenging the idea of what constitutes a rape in the first place. It is a difficult ethical situation for readers. Because this scene is so brief and ambiguous, one can easily choose to ignore it.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the climax of this scene is left out, as is evident in the version offered by Duvall that only shows Jadine’s part of the dialogue to emphasize the pressing atmosphere and her obvious dissent:

“Don’t touch me. Don’t you touch me.” . . .

“Quit! leave me *alone!*” . . .

“You better kill me. Because if you don’t, when you’re through, I’m going to kill you.” . . .

“I am going to kill you. *Kill* you.” . . .

“As sure I live,” she said. “I’m going to kill you.” (1997, 334; emphasis in original)

After this scene, Son leaves and Jadine lies “in wrinkled sheets, slippery, gutted, not thinking of killing him” (Morrison 2004, 271). When Son comes back, he is “repentant, terrified that he had gone too far” (271). A few hours later, they quickly start fighting again (about money, class) and as Son sees Jadine’s T-shirt “up around her waist . . . her nakedness below embarrass[s] him” (272). Moreover, the narrator concludes, “he had produced that nakedness and having soiled it, it shamed him” (272). As these are the only clues to the possible rape, it is understandable that it has been missed. As Duvall points out, “this rape seems almost to resist the resisting reader; that is, it is a rape that is rhetorically constructed to deny the reader’s awareness of the violence” (1997, 332–333). I agree with Duvall that it is completely possible that the rape in fact occurs, thus creating another layer of complexity in Son’s character. However, I think it is important to note that Jadine, Margaret, and the Childs have been constructing Son as rapist even when there was no reason for that. When they first talk privately, a scene that also marks their first physical fight, Jadine says, “you rape me and they’ll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now” (Morrison 2004, 121). In that scene, Jadine physically attacks Son even though nothing at this point has implied that he would hurt her. Nothing else, that is, except that he is a Black man.

Critics have paid attention to Son’s violent behavior toward Jadine (see, e.g., Lutz 2013, n.p.), but almost no critical attention has been paid to the female protagonist’s violent thoughts and behavior. One reason might be the stereotypes discussed in this dissertation. On the one hand, as Curry explains, “the criminalization of Black men and boys makes it difficult to believe that they can ever actually be victims of violence” (2017, 133). Women, on the other hand, are more often than not associated with images of healing and nurturing (as opposed to violence), which might lead to the fact that “contemporary thinking about patriarchy condemns Black male violence as an instrument of domination, while absolving Black women immersed in the same circumstances who display the same violent behaviors” (14).⁵⁵ There is, in fact, reciprocity in Jadine and Son’s emotionally and physically abusive behavior, but only Son is usually referred to as violent. Jadine, for example, refers to someone killing Son many times in the narrative, and she mixes the threats among the racist slurs, as was also seen in the (possible) rape scene. During their first fight, she says, “Valerian will kill you, ape” (Morrison 2004, 121).

⁵⁵ Even though patriarchal behavior is most often seen as a male trait, bell hooks does maintain that “the perpetuation of male violence through the teaching of a dominator model of relationships comes to boy children through both women and men” (2005, 61) and that “in patriarchal culture women are as violent as men toward the groups that they have power over and can dominate freely; usually that group is children or weaker females” (63).

Later, she calmly speculates with Margaret on when Sydney is going to kill the stranger: "I thought he would have killed him by now" (129).

The first violent episode in Jadine and Son's relationship, as mentioned earlier, happens when Son sarcastically asks how many sexual favors Jadine has had to give for her success in the modeling world, and Jadine understandably gets mad. The narrator explains that Son "wanted to go on and ask her was it true what the black whores always said, but she was hitting him in the face and on the top of his head with a badly formed fist and calling him an ignorant motherfucker" (Morrison 2004, 120). In this scene, as well, it becomes clear that Jadine was "trying to kill him with her fists while her mind raced to places in the room where there might be a poker or a vase or a sharp pair of shears" (120) that she could use in killing him. Later, when Son returns from Eloë to Jadine's New York apartment, the narrator reports that "she fought him" (262). Within the next few paragraphs, the fact that *she had fought him* is repeated twice, which means that Jadine is the one initiating the physical violence. However, Son allows himself to take part in the fight, first to defend himself:

She slapped him and before he could turn his head back she was choking him with both hands around his neck. . . . He pulled her hair until she let go and when she tried another blow, he dropped her as carefully as he could. She fell back on her behind, turned over and crawled on all fours to jump him again. He held her arms behind her back and she bit him to his teeth. The pain was so powerful he had to put out her light with his fist. (263–264)

We are provided with access to Son's experience through this focalization, the fact that he was about to "turn his head back" when Jadine hit him and the intensity of his pain, for example. Even though Son is no doubt more physically powerful than Jadine, it is clear that he tries not to hurt her if possible. Both of these characters have their triggers for violence. The scene in the above quote starts as Son challenges the benevolence of Valerian and Jadine disrespects Son, saying his "ignorance . . . isn't lovable" (264). The fight climaxes with Son holding "her out of [the window] by her wrists" (264)—as he had threatened to do when they first met—while they continue shouting at each other. I think the scenes discussed so far work against literary scholar Robert O'Meally's review of *Tar Baby*, in which he says that the novel is "deeply flawed . . . what's missing is the spark of life that makes a good novel not a formula but vibrant art" (1988, 33). I think the lively dialogue, the inner monologues of all the characters, and the complex characterization of people, men and women, White and Black, with all of their flaws, but strengths as well, is what makes this such a compelling novel. Therefore, I disagree with O'Meally who adds,

the novel fails . . . to bring these folk-characterlike figures to life. Finally, we do not care about Jade or Son, and their tiresome musings, for they seem stillborn. Stuck to each other or unstuck, these tar babies stir our minds but not—and here is the crucial test for all art—our deepest emotions. (1988, 37)

O'Meally thinks the characters are flat or too ambiguous for us to care about them one way or the other. My claim is that this very ambiguity asks readers to both feel for the characters and question their own stereotypes, and thus works better than has been understood before. Even at this point where the protagonists have fallen into a spiral of reciprocal violence, *Tar Baby* strongly refuses to provide any definitive answers to its readers but steers the action towards an even more ambiguous final scene.

5.5 “HE MOUGHT, EN DEN AGAIN HE MOUGHTENT”

After their last violent episode, Jadine returns to the Caribbean to meet her uncle and aunt. Having waited a while in Jadine's empty New York apartment, Son decides to follow her because “being still was the problem” for him (Morrison 2004, 294). Being constantly on the move might seem like the action of a hard-boiled man, but as Son's restlessness originates from the years of escaping, the desire for constant movement reminds of his vulnerability. At the end of the novel, however, Son seems to be in a position where all options are dead ends. There is no going back to New York, his dreams of Eloë now belong to the past, and at L'Arbe de la Croix, Sydney is preparing to “put that bullet in him” (284). Jadine has hinted her relatives of Son's violent behavior and Sydney says, “I'll shoot him the same minute I see him and explain later” if Son is ever seen on the property (284). It seems as if Son's only option is to join the mythical horsemen on the island.

According to the islanders, marooned enslaved Africans hid on the island three hundred years ago and became a group of mythic horsemen still riding around the island. The offspring of the “slaves who went blind the minute they saw Dominique,” the story goes, become blind at the age of forty. Gideon believes that Thérèse is “one of the blind race” (Morrison 2004, 152). “You can't tell them nothing,” Gideon explains, “they love lies” (152). Due to their blindness, the “slaves could not see how or where to swim so they were at the mercy of the current and the tide” (152), quite similarly to what happened to Son as he jumped into the sea at the beginning of the novel. He, too, has a hard time seeing as he walks on the island after docking, repeating over and over again that “he had not followed the women. Had not even seen them clearly” (138). The text invites us to agree with Thérèse that Son is indeed “a rider” (105). Still in search for Jadine, he gets a boat ride from Thérèse back to the

Isle des Chevaliers. Thérèse tricks him so he ends up mistakenly on the wrong side of the island and leaves him there, apparently forcing him to decide whether to go after Jadine or become a mythic horseman.

Many critics have pondered the meaning of the ending, and whether Son dies or becomes free is important for my current research as well, because the connotations of his fate dictate what happens to Black masculinity in this novel. To Hawthorne, Son's "self" is the only one "in the process of reformation" at the conclusion of the story (1988, 106), while in my earlier reading Jadine manages to overcome the stereotypical reactions to her and live beyond the need to define herself according to race (see, Kolehmainen 2011). Whether or not a similar fate is available for Son is one of the questions that remains unanswered. Jean Wyatt argues that Son, "as heir to the Middle Passage," escapes "both slavery and colonization through a return to the natural" (2014, 43) and adds that Son "recognizes kindred spirits in the island horsemen [and] sees them as rebel slaves who thwarted the machinery of capitalism" (43). Jenkins introduces an interesting option when thinking about Son's fate. She proposes that Son could represent the "new black subject" (2016, 629), which would mean understanding "him as a postmodern subject" instead of a modern/traditional one (629). I think this a fascinating idea and partly in line with what Mayberry says that Morrison sometimes has in mind: a "free black male, determinedly unbound by western cultural or class restrictions and bred simply to breed and play" (2007, 121). At the end of the novel, Son is surely free from western cultural heritage, represented by Jadine's internalized values that she quite aggressively tried to impose on him, but we are not shown whether he manages to overcome any internal conflicts or personal trauma. Again referred to simply as "he" and "the man" in the last chapter of the novel (Morrison 2004, 294), the narrative seems to withdraw Son's humanity.

Son might indeed become "reduced to a rabbit" (see Demetrakopoulos 1987, 136) or "a rider" (Morrison 2004, 105) as he disappears into the world of the mythic, even though he has been humanized through the latter half of the novel. The last words of *Tar Baby* are "Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split" (306), evoking Brer Rabbit's successful escape at the end of Tar-Baby story. In *Tar Baby*, however, a number of interpretations of success at the end of Son's journey are possible. Is Son running towards safety or is the sound of his running soon to be joined with the noise of the thundering hooves of the mythic horsemen? Whether joining the horsemen would mean becoming a part of a still resistant indigenous spirit world of the island—or its slave, forever galloping around the island—is not made clear. On an allegorical level, the questions raised concern the freedom or further slavery of the Black male. According to Rayson, "in the late twentieth century, it [was] the African American male who [was] trapped" (1998, 97). Even if Son/Brer

Rabbit returns to a place he has been “born and bred” in, it does not mean that place represents safety and freedom, or even humanity. It is a place where he has been accustomed to surviving, but not necessarily thriving. At the conclusion of *Tar Baby*, Morrison leaves the audience to consider whether the African American male can or cannot be freed from the trap of stereotypes, racist mainstream representations, or anti-Black misogyny. Like the source story, *Tar Baby* asks a lot of questions and leaves readers wondering whether the questions can be answered in a racist society.

5.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Books ARE a form of political action. Books are knowledge. Books are reflection. Books change your mind.

Toni Morrison (Solomon and Morrison [2003] 2016)

Son is stuck in time and trapped by racism and conservative notions on class and gender. Yet again, he represents a trap himself, a warning for readers not to stumble over similar, too-easily-constructed categorizations. First impressions of the male character in *Tar Baby* need to be adjusted as we read on, and then readjusted, as additional information about him is revealed. Son is a trickster, and like the trickster, he is a “‘criminal’ culture hero, [and thus] embodies all possibilities—the most positive and the most negative—and is paradox personified” (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 148). His portrayal shifts between the outlaw, and the sensitive folk hero, between the “mama-spoiled black man” (Morrison 2004, 269) desperately in love with Jadine, a victim of violence, and the wife-killer, the Vietnam veteran, and possible rapist. Trying to make sense of him according to good-and-bad dichotomies informed by a Eurocentric worldview is likely to trap readers. According to Hynes, “the trickster’s position midway between the gods and humans allows him to function as a cultural transformer” (1997, 40). The fact that readers of *Tar Baby* might get tricked can indeed lead to cultural transformation as common stereotypes and beliefs about people and literature are subverted. Morrison’s epistemological aim, through the representation of Son, seems to be to refuse to commit herself to fixed definitions of Black male identity, or any ready-made roles for herself, her characters, or her audience. *Tar Baby* is confusing in many ways, but the ambiguous representation of this male character is its stickiest aspect.

It is important to note that it is not the reader’s duty to decide where Son ends up. As Thérèse says, he has the choice now. Following the dilemma tale tradition, we can merely reflect upon his story. Here in essence is a major theme of the novel, namely the fact that Morrison pays tribute to the trickster

tale tradition by leaving Son's fate unresolved. He remains "betwixt and between" (Babcock-Abrahams 1975, 155)⁵⁶ love and hate, right and wrong, dead and alive. At the closure of Son's story, we do not know whether he loved Jadine, raped her, or ever met her again. We do not even know whether he stayed alive. The only possible answer to the questions about his fate can be traced back to the animal tale: "He mought, en den again he moughtent" (J. C. Harris 1955, 8).

⁵⁶ Babcock-Abrahams notes that "marginal figures also tend to be associated with marketplaces, crossroads, and other open places which are 'betwixt and between' clearly defined social statuses or spaces or in which normal structures or patterns of relating break down—with places of transition, movement, and license" (1975, 155).

6 THE BLACK MACHO: VULNERABILITY AS ATONEMENT IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BREWSTER PLACE* NOVELS

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask" ([1895] 1997)

In the previous three chapters, I have shown how the stereotypes of the "perpetual boy," the "bad Black man," and the "primitive beast" have been resisted through representations of Black male vulnerability in the literary works of prominent African American women authors. The stereotype discussed in this chapter is the "Black macho," as portrayed in Gloria Naylor's *Brewster Place* novels. While, according to Alfredo Mirandé, the "macho" may also have positive connotations, such as "strength, virility, masculinity, and sex appeal," I will focus on its more negative attributes, which include "male dominance, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and spousal abuse" (2010, 27).⁵⁷ In other words, I will use it in the sense the term has been referred to in discussions on Black machismo.

By the time Naylor published her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* ([1982] 1983), debates on Black machismo were ongoing in the African American community. For example, Michele Wallace's *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* ([1978] 2015) critically examined the stereotypes and reality—as Wallace had experienced it—of Black machismo and the image of the strong Black woman. In short, Wallace's book is best known for her argument that it was Black nationalist rhetoric, which she called the "Black macho," and interracial relationships that "helped to destroy the political effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement" (2015, 15). In this well-known Black feminist classic, however,

⁵⁷ Mirandé notes that the macho's positive meaning is often applied to "entertainers, athletes, or other 'superstars,'" while the negative ones are more likely "applied to Mexicans or Latinos" (2010, 27).

Wallace wound up criticizing Black men in ways that even she herself later regretted.⁵⁸

Wallace was not the only one criticizing Black men at that time, however. Barbara Christian notes that “*The Women of Brewster Place* was preceded by a decade of American feminist writing which responded to patriarchal society’s devaluation of women by revalorizing female values” (2007, 111). *The Women of Brewster Place*⁵⁹ clearly continued this tradition of revalorizing female values, and, in responding to the devaluation of women, Naylor’s first novel can, indeed, be interpreted as perpetuating the devaluation of Black men. Sixteen years after its publication, a re-centering of male experience was apparently needed by some critics and Naylor herself. In her 1998 novel, *The Men of Brewster Place*,⁶⁰ the author revisited the stories of her earlier novel by turning the focus on the male characters. Morrison’s *Tar Baby*, discussed in the previous chapter, left us wondering what the future for Black men would look like. This final analysis chapter mainly explores the last-published of all the works in this study, *The Men of Brewster Place* and, thus, also considers the future visions it reflects for Black American men at the turn of the millennium.

In this analysis, I concentrate on one of the stories found in both novels, and told from the perspective of Lucielia Louise Turner, or Ciel, in the first novel. Her husband, Eugene, is depicted as an archetypal macho whose apparent misogyny, selfishness, and aggressiveness wind up destroying the family. Telling his own story to his now former wife Ceil⁶¹ in a chapter in the later novel entitled “Eugene,” the male protagonist is revealed to be a gay man struggling to pass as heterosexual. Eugene tells that having been terrified of being exposed as vulnerable, represented by the possible disclosure of his gay identity, he has had to wear the “Black-macho-man” mask, a tool for survival present also in the lives of the male characters discussed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5.

As exemplified by the poem in the epigraph, masking is a common trope in (early) African American writing, discussed, for example, by Daniel P. Black in his 2005 article (and Chapter 5). In the African American context, the mask is

⁵⁸ In a 1990 introduction to *Black Macho and the Myth of Superwoman* called “How I Saw It Then, How I See It Now,” Wallace explains the background of her negative views of Black men that she then understood were closely linked to her own negative experiences (2015).

⁵⁹ Henceforth, *Women*.

⁶⁰ Henceforth, *Men*.

⁶¹ Lucielia’s nickname is Ciel in *Women* and Ceil in *Men*. For clarity’s sake, I will only refer to her as Ciel from now on.

a survival strategy that becomes a trope in literature, a method of expressing the need to conceal certain aspects of the self. Indeed, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem describes the mask as a method of coping and survival. While the mask consists of smiles and singing, there is mourning and fatigue hidden under it. In this way, the mask may "signal conformity to white social stereotypes" (Wolosky, 2004, 341).⁶² The poem illustrates the fact that showing their real feelings would have been lethal to (enslaved) Black Americans, so they were forced to perform another reality for themselves. However, the need for masking continued long after emancipation, and sometimes still does. The "strong-black-man mask" (Naylor, *Men*, 91) keeps Eugene from showing his vulnerability but, as it becomes clear, the macho mask only makes men more vulnerable, as they perform the roles (they think) are expected of them and hide their vulnerabilities. In my view, performing the badman or the macho male role is a form of masking. In addition, it is important to note that, wherever there is a mask, it is evident that there is something *to* mask. According to Wolosky, "the mask thus at once encloses and discloses. It prevents the outsider from seeing in, but hints at a secret world for those inside, whose mystery it both points to and yet protects" (2004, 341). In other words, while the mask hides a reality—vulnerability, for example—it also signals that there is something to hide. This idea is, I believe, well portrayed in Naylor's novels. Instead of perceiving the Black macho as a category of African American men, I view the stereotype as exposing some core vulnerabilities of Black men living within a racist and/or patriarchal society.

In the *Brewster Place* novels, Naylor shows just how devastating are the consequences of sustaining the narrative of Black machismo for everyone in the community, including Black men. While the novels can be read as separate works of literature, in my view, when *Women* is read side by side with *Men*, a specific theme of atonement emerges (see also L. Lewis 2008, 51). Naylor can be seen as working to challenge the Black macho stereotype by exposing the vulnerability of the central male character in the later novel. While my primary interest is on how Eugene attempts to atone for his past deeds, the author can also be seen as making amends not only to those readers who found the earlier representations of Black men offensive, but also to the characters who are now able to tell their stories. In the later novel, the vulnerabilities of the male characters are exposed, which might affect the way readers view those characters. In this way, vulnerability works as atonement.

Thus far, I have shown that many narratives created during the so-called renaissance of Black women writers reveal the vulnerabilities of the Black male

⁶² A famous psychoanalytical analysis of ethnic masking is found in Frantz Fanon's seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 2008b). Fanon is, of course, referring to the African, colonial context, but his analysis fits the African American context, as well.

characters no matter how negative or stereotypical they might at first appear. Careful analysis of the texts gives us an opportunity to notice through focalization and other narrative choices that the representations of vulnerability actually deconstruct negative stereotypes of Black men. I view *The Women of Brewster Place* as an exception in the sense that it exclusively represents Black male characters through highly negative stereotypes without any redeeming qualities to counterbalance those impressions. In other words, as the male characters in these stories are violent, irresponsible, and untrustworthy, they reinforce the stereotypical assumptions regarding African American men. At the same time, the male characters are textually marginalized and largely silenced. As mentioned earlier, a re-centering of male experience is implemented in the sequel, *The Men of Brewster Place*, in which Eugene, who embodies the Black macho stereotype in the earlier novel, is exposed as homosexual.

In order to take a deeper look at how Eugene's vulnerability is constructed, I will continue with an intersectional approach. Instead of queer theory, I will refer to E. Patrick Johnson's "Quare theory," which, according to Sheena C. Howard, is "a vehicle for simultaneously addressing sexuality, race, class, and gender as identity formations" (2014, 19). Johnson argues that queer theory has not only failed "to focus on materiality, [but] it also has failed to acknowledge consistently and critically the intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions of nonwhite and non-middle-class, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people in the struggle against homophobia and oppression" (2001, 5). Johnson defines quare thus:⁶³

Quare (Kwâr), *n.* **1.** meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes "Black" Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan's famous play *The Quare Fellow*.

–*adj.* **2.** a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.

–*n.* **3.** one who *thinks* and *feels* and *acts* (and, sometimes, "acts up"); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.

–*n.* **4.** one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.

⁶³ Johnson is intentionally using the same format in his definition of quare that Alice Walker used in her definition of womanism in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (Walker 1983b).

5. quare is to queer as “reading” is to “throwing shade.” (E. P. Johnson 2001, 2; emphasis in original)⁶⁴

Like Naylor herself and both Eugene and Ciel from the *Brewster Place* novels, quare theory has southern origins. Johnson (2001) calls it “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” emphasizing “quare’s” etymological roots in the southern African American pronunciation of “queer.” In addition to offering an alternative to (White) queer theory, quare also challenges “black nationalist claims of ‘black authenticity’ that exclude, categorically, homosexual identities” (E. P. Johnson 2001, 10). Black authenticity has been mentioned in discussions on the functions of African American literature (see Chapter 1), as well as Black manhood and Black machismo. Naylor portrays the problematics of Black authenticity along with giving her male character voice, thus atoning for some of the earlier representations.

I use the word atonement in its meaning of making amends for earlier injustices or injuries made to others. Despite its theological implications, I will concentrate on how the concept of atonement was used in popular discourses on Black masculinity in the United States at the time *Men* was published. The concept of atonement is also quite clear in the later novel, where Naylor’s male characters seek redemption. Linden Lewis sees Naylor’s aim in *Men* as one of atonement (2008, 51), but my intention is to show that it is the representation of Black male vulnerability that functions as a tool for atonement both for the author and the central male character. In the following section, before analyzing the stories more closely, I will show how Naylor’s fictional narratives intersect with real life discourses.

6.1 SETTING THE SCENE

Born in New York City to sharecropper parents who had moved to the North from Mississippi, Naylor was an enthusiastic reader and writer from very a young age. Having worked as a telephone operator before her writing career, she even joined the Jehovah’s Witnesses for a period of seven years in 1968–75. Later she received a scholarship (and a stipend) and a master’s degree from Yale University (1983, African American studies, see Fowler 1996, xii; Rowell 1997, 185). Naylor was influenced by White authors such as Charles Dickens

⁶⁴ In his article, “Snap! Culture: A different kind of ‘reading,’” Johnson defines “reading” and “shading” as forms of “snapping,” which, in turn, he places under the category of Signifying (1995, 124). Snapping is a form of playful or, in some cases, serious insulting used by many different groups of people, but most famously, and most importantly for the purposes of this thesis, Black women and Black gay men. Throwing shade, according to Johnson, is the “nonverbal counterpart” of reading (1995, 126).

and the Brontës, but it was only after reading *The Bluest Eye* in 1977 (at the age of twenty-seven), when she learned that African American women wrote fiction. After that, she also turned to authors like Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker for inspiration (see, for example, Fowler 1996, 13–14). Between the *Brewster Place* novels, Naylor published three works of fiction: *Linden Hills* (1985), *Mama Day* (1988), and *Bailey's Café* (1992). In these novels, she continued wedding her reading of certain classics, such as Shakespeare's works and Dante's *Inferno*,⁶⁵ with contemporary African American experience. After *Men*, Naylor wrote one more, relatively obscure, novel, *1996* (2005), but she remains mostly known for her very first piece of fiction.

Published contemporaneously with Walker's *The Color Purple* ([1982] 1983a) and Morrison's *Tar Baby* ([1981] 2004), *The Women of Brewster Place* ([1982] 1983) clearly elevated Gloria Naylor into the canon of celebrated African American women authors. As mentioned earlier, these authors wrote to amplify previously silenced female voices, and Naylor's first novel achieved this by telling the stories of seven women living in the fictional neighborhood of Brewster Place. The novel was well received by both the reading public and literary critics. Having won both the American Book Award and the National Book Award in the category of First Novel, *Women* was soon adapted into a 1989 TV miniseries and a 1990 spin-off by Oprah Winfrey. An interesting detail is that one of the adaptations was advertised as "a portrait of strength & courage," while another DVD box cover described *The Women of Brewster Place* as "the classic story of faith and courage." Evidently, Naylor had made sure that the audience of her seven stories in *Women* was left with no doubt about the courage of African American women. One can, of course, argue that, taking stereotypical gender roles, sexism, and racism into account, the stories of women of color may not represent the most "classical" of stories. Rather, as mentioned earlier, the 1970s and 1980s were the decades when the stories of Black women only started to become available to various audiences as both the literary and the audiovisual versions of *The Color Purple* and *Women* hit the American mainstream.

As was the case with Walker, however, the general recognition of Naylor's work did not save her from the disapproval of certain audiences. Similar to the negative response that Walker received, the criticism addressed to Naylor hardly moved beyond reviewing the male characters on a good/bad scale (or the amount of hostility towards Black men by the author), and it was the audiovisual adaptations that garnered the most criticism (see hooks 1990, 73–74; Slotnik 2016; Wahlström 2009, 64). Wilson notes, for example, that

⁶⁵ Charles E. Wilson, Jr. (2001, 83) notes that *Linden Hills* is loosely based on Dante's *Inferno*. For information about Shakespeare and Naylor, see Kubitschek (1994), Storhoff (1995), Wilson (2001), and Montgomery (2010, 96).

both Naylor and Walker came under fire for their allegedly insensitive portraits of black men. And though Naylor did not respond at length to the accusations at the time, she did reveal later that she was concerned about the negative appraisals. In fact, she even restructured the chapter that was the impetus for *The Women of Brewster Place*, “Lucielia Louise Turner,” in anticipation of such critical responses. (2001, 25)

Since I focus here on the chapter “Lucielia Louise Turner” (and its counterpart, “Eugene,” in *Men*), it is important to note that what was eventually published in *Women* was, in fact, the restructured version. Naylor herself admits that she had, in fact, constructed the men as antagonists, because “at that time the men were used as dramatic devices to bring conflict, of some sort, into the lives of the women” (qtd. in L. Lewis 2008, 49). By starting the chapter in *Women* with Eugene’s discussion with Ben, however, Naylor “hoped to shed light on Eugene’s psychological pain and guilty pangs in order to balance the depiction of black men” (Wilson 2001, 26). As noted by Wilson, Naylor did not actively respond to the criticism at that time. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, she notes that “it’s a different country now from the 1980s, at least academically it’s different and critically it’s different in terms of what people expect to be reading about women. At that point, that was sort of an avant garde thing to do: just to name a book the women of anything” (1997, 192). She understood the expectations of the reading public as reflecting the gender politics of that time.

In addition to the negative representations of men, criticism concerned Naylor’s alleged responsibility to the African American community as a writer. As Margaret Whitt points out, critics included, “Loyle Hairston, writing for *Freedomways*, a quarterly review of the Freedom Movement, [who] point[ed] out Naylor’s shortcomings in addressing the issues of the Movement” (1999, 11). According to Whitt, Hairston even called Naylor a “kind of closet social Darwinist who does not see the U.S. as oppressive” (11–12). This seems to imply that these critics still viewed the function of African American literature as first and foremost to fight racism, while any other focus—in this case, criticizing patriarchal structures and sexism—was turning attention away from the racial struggle.

However, considering some aspects of the gender politics in Black communities preceding the publication of *Women* in 1982, this critique was relatively understandable. For instance, the Moynihan Report from 1965 had already infuriated many African American men (and women) due to its claims about their role in (or absence from) the family. Although it had been a while since its publication, the report had a long-lasting effect on the debates around

African American families.⁶⁶ Second, many African American men, in fact, lived in a rather precarious societal position at that time. For example, Robert Staples argues in his essay “Black Masculinity: The Black Male’s Role in American Society” (1982) that in the 1970s, the mortality of Black men of marriageable age was twice as high as that of Black women. Staples goes on to claim that “even the remaining black men suffer from serious problems. Almost a half million of them are behind bars; an estimated one-third of the black men in the inner city have a drug problem; and 25–50 percent of them are without steady employment” (2004, 125). This means that many African American men lived in an extremely vulnerable position both physically and economically. Without going too deeply into the underlying reasons for these details, it is understandable that some African American men did not feel comfortable about negative textual or audiovisual representations which could further deepen their vulnerability by reinforcing negative stereotypes and anti-Black misogyny. What the critics may not have known is that Naylor was, in fact, worried about the status of Black men in America. This was later revealed in interviews, and, most importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, in the sequel, *The Men of Brewster Place*.

In her fifth novel, Naylor revisits Brewster Place, exploring the male characters and their relations with their families and communities. Thus, she reverses the cycle of feminist rewriting by giving voice to the previously silenced male characters and letting them re-tell the same seven stories introduced in *Women*.⁶⁷ In so doing, she makes available a rather cathartic experience to those readers of the earlier *Brewster Place* novel who want to see more nuanced and positive representations of men in Naylor’s writing. Whether the rewritten stories are, in fact, more positive will be discussed later in this chapter. At least the author seemed to have found peace with Brewster Place soon after writing the sequel. In a 1998 interview, she stated, “I feel total closure now. Total. There won’t be *The Children of Brewster Place* or *The Pets of Brewster Place*. I have told the whole story” (African American Literature Book Club 1998).

Even though *Men* won the American book award in 1999, it never became as critically acclaimed as its predecessor. Although there have been many book-length studies of Naylor’s work, such as Wilson’s *Gloria Naylor: A Critical Companion* (2001), Whitt’s *Understanding Gloria Naylor* (1999), and *Gloria Naylor’s Fiction: Contemporary Explorations of Class and Capitalism*, edited by Sharon A. Lewis and Ama S. Wattlely (2017), *The Men of*

⁶⁶ Recent articles concerning Moynihan’s report include, for example, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration” in *The Atlantic* (see Coates 2015b).

⁶⁷ There are actually eight chapters in *Men*, the last one being “The Barbershop,” narrated by Ben. Eugene briefly appears in this chapter, and it will be analyzed later.

Brewster Place is seldom the focus of detailed discussion. Maxine Lavon Montgomery's *The Fiction of Gloria Naylor: Houses and Spaces of Resistance* (2010) is an interesting study, but—even though it was published well after the appearance of *The Men of the Brewster Place*—it only mentions the latter novel in an interview with Naylor that is included in the book.

The function of the new depictions of men was not only of atonement, however. Knowing that “the primary function of her art” was “making sense out of things” (Fowler 1996, 6), writing *Men* might have been Naylor's way of trying to understand men in general. This, in turn, may have arisen from the fact that “only since the death of her father in 1993 . . . has the writer begun to explore in print what her father's experiences and feelings may have been” (Fowler 1996, 4). Naylor dedicated the novel to her father (and those of the readers), and clearly wanted to give her Black male characters new, more nuanced, lives outside the constricted mold of the negative stereotypes often associated with them. She talked about the issue in an interview in *The Chicago Tribune* (Lauerman 1998):

The situation of black men, she says, is one that “still needs work . . . Americans fear black men, individually and collectively,” Naylor says. “It is really very tough to try to fight those kinds of images and still keep your home together. They have to face the stigma created by the (errant) one-third and also the fact that they live as archetypes in the mind of Americans—something dark and shadowy and unknown.”

By “the errant one third,” Naylor refers to the men who, for reasons like those mentioned by Staples (2004), are not taking part in family life in African American communities. The society of the late 1990s in which *Men* was published was, of course, different from the 1970s or early 1980s in which the novel's storyline takes place. However, one could argue that during the sixteen years between the two novels, the precarious societal position of Black men in the United States had hardly improved at all (see, for example, R. L. Allen 1995).

Indeed, the later *Brewster Place* novel reflects and takes a stand on the actual problems of Black men in American society. In other words, *Men* deals with the issues presented in Moynihan's (1965), Wallace's (2015), and Staples' (2004) writings, which were again on the table in the 1990s. One of the most notable events was the Million Man March in 1995. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly African American men, gathered at the National Mall in Washington D.C. to “atone and address the problems particular to the Black community” with a focus on Black men (Riley 2015). Called by Louis Farrakhan, Sr., a Black nationalist and a member of the Nation of Islam, the Million Man March was supposed to show the world “a New Black Man” (see, for example, Neal 2015, 21), and in some ways succeeded. The march

“presented male citizens not just as sensitive new men, as men who feel, but, more importantly, as men who feel regret about their mistreatment of women, children, and each other and who pledge themselves to act more compassionately, more responsibly, and, at times, more justly in the future” (Newton 2004, 29). According to Wahlström, however, “the March can certainly be seen to speak for a 1990s version of Black Macho” (2009, 77). Despite the fact that notable speakers and guests included women, such as Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks, and Dr. Betty Shabazz (the widow of Malcolm X), women were advised to “stay home” (see Carbado 1999, 6). Understandably, the march was criticized for being sexist, misogynistic and anti-Semitic,⁶⁸ and the Black community also seemed torn about whether or not to support Farrakhan’s march due to his open homophobia.⁶⁹ While others argued that the march could be seen as separate from its leaders (supporters included Cornel West and Ishmael Reed), others did not (see Carbado 1999).

Farrakhan, who along with his co-organizers, “firmly associated with antigay positions and activities and with gender conservatism” (Newton 2004, 31), evidently had a certain kind of masculinity in mind, “a new Black man” that was responsible but manly in a heteronormative sense. Thus, many African American gay men had to think twice whether or not to attend the march at all for safety reasons (see, e.g., Reid-Pharr 1996). In his essay on the Million Man March, “It’s Raining Men,” Robert Reid-Pharr criticized the march for reinforcing traditional gender norms (1996, 69). Having attended the march himself, Reid-Pharr also contended that the march fortified the “notion that at the root of the difficulties facing African Americans is a certain male lack—an inability, or unwillingness, to take responsibility as men, to stand up for community and self” (36).

Published three years after The Million Man March, Naylor’s *The Men of Brewster Place* therefore can be understood as an attempt to make “sense” (Fowler 1996, 6) of the position of Black men in the United States. In other words, the author uses the textual constructions of literary characters to try to understand real African American men beyond the archetypes that live “in the mind of Americans” (Lauerman 1998). Linden Lewis also connects the promise of atonement made by the Million Man March with *The Men of Brewster Place*, noting that

⁶⁸ In her 1995 article in the Los Angeles Times, Ruth Rosen notes that “like many people, I’m not thrilled that Farrakhan initiated this event; I have been outraged by his anti-Semitic and sexist pronouncements.” Rosen also states, however, that “unlike some feminists, I do not regard these activities as a backlash against the gains women have made during the last two decades.”

⁶⁹ See, for example, Marriott (1995).

the concept of atonement was pivotal to the staging, purpose, and legacy of the Million Man March. As problematic as this idea was, it finds broad support in much of the sentiments of *The Men of Brewster Place*. So that there is little surprise when one sees in this novel a special effort being made by Naylor to have her characters atone for past misogynist sins. (2008, 51)

It is obvious that Naylor has her characters “atone for past misogynist sins”—in my view, sometimes to the point of being unconvincing. What is important is that in her effort to make amends, the author ends up exposing the problematics of Black manhood and the vulnerabilities of Black men. Whether the individual characters are able to take responsibility and atone for their shortcomings is not always so clear. In the following analysis, continuing the discussion on intersectionality and relationality from the earlier chapters, I explore the way Naylor portrays the Black macho and then grapples with the taboo of Black male gay sexuality in her writing.

6.2 THE MACHO IN *THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE*

As mentioned earlier, the chapter in *Women* about Ciel tells the story of an African American couple with a daughter. Eugene works on and off at the docks, while Ciel raises the child, Serena, at home at Brewster Place. They are constantly arguing and, when Ciel becomes pregnant again, she feels forced to have an abortion. Eugene, on the other hand, is the one who feels trapped in the marriage, which is best demonstrated by his selfish and aggressive reaction when he hears about the new baby. Reported by the third-person narrator and focalized through Ciel, he says: “With two kids and you on my back, I ain’t never gonna have nothin’. . . Nothin’, do you hear me, nothin’!” (Naylor, *Women*, 95). Eugene seems uninterested in their toddler and obsessed with his own needs and wants. Constantly leaving the family and then aggressively moving back again is his pattern of behavior. In other words, he embodies the negative attributes of the macho listed in Mirandé’s research: “Synthetic/Exaggerated masculinity,” “Male Dominance,” “Authoritarianism,” “Violence/Aggressiveness,” “Self-centeredness/Egoismo” (2010, 30–31).

It is clear that only the negative attributes of the macho are present in Eugene’s conduct. His mask, which is not specifically mentioned in *Women*, is also that of rage, and the third-person narrator reports he “grabbed her by the shoulders and shouted on her face” (Naylor, *Women*, 95). He swears a lot, uses slurs about Ciel’s friend, Mattie Michael, and drives Ciel to have an abortion. Trudier Harris suggests that after her own share of difficulties, Mattie becomes

“the strong black woman on Brewster Place” and “hers becomes a voice of righteousness” (1995, 120; emphasis in original). The women’s community on Brewster Place and Mattie as the representative of it are so powerful that Eugene tries to challenge that power by demeaning Mattie. He refers to Mattie with words like “that frig” (Naylor, *Women*, 90), “that fat bitch” (94), and “that old hag” (97) behind her back. Probably the fear of emasculation makes him feel “the need to prove himself in front of [Mattie]” and stay away from her in general (97). Eugene’s machismo ends up destroying the family. Left unattended during a fight, Serena tries to extract an insect from an electrical socket and dies. Heartbroken, the parents try to find their own ways of surviving the pain. Ciel’s savior is Mattie, whose almost exorcistic nurturing rituals force the sorrow out of Ciel, who had quit taking care of herself after Serena’s death. Eugene, on the other hand, embraces his familiar survival strategies of masking and coldness, aggressively blaming others, and leaving.

In *Women*, readers follow the story almost exclusively from Ciel’s point of view. First, Ciel is introduced in an earlier chapter about Mattie, who she was living with as a child, and who now is the Turners’ neighbor. In this way, readers are familiar with Ciel’s history, while Eugene only briefly appears in the story about Ciel. Consequently, readers might be more inclined to believe Ciel and condemn Eugene. The narrative thus guides readers to feel sympathy for Ciel. She is trying her best to keep the family together and please her husband, who is portrayed as a man who only cares about himself. We see Ciel as vulnerable, and Eugene as dominant and intimidating:

Ciel jumped when the front door slammed shut. She waited tensely for the metallic bang of his keys on the coffee table and the blast of the stereo. Lately that was how Eugene announced his presence home. Ciel walked into the living room with the motion of a swimmer entering a cold lake. (Naylor, *Women*, 93)

Ciel obviously feels threatened by Eugene, whose self-proclaimed authoritarianism is seen in the way he “announces his presence” coming home. The way the macho man dominates the atmosphere in the family is emphasized by the choice of words such as “slam,” “bang,” and “blast,” while the simile of Ciel walking into the room with the “motion of a swimmer entering a cold lake” shows how scared she is. Even though there is no description of physical or sexual domestic violence, the threat of it is clearly present, along with emotional abuse. When Eugene starts packing to leave Ciel again, he obviously lies about where he has found a new job, having lost the previous one. As Ciel asks about the job, Eugene shouts, “None of your damned business!” (Naylor, *Women*, 99). The narrator reports that “his eyes were flashing with the anger of a caged animal. He slammed down the top of the

suitcase and yanked it off the bed” (99–100).⁷⁰ Eugene’s conduct accompanied with the representation of Ciel’s inner monologue, leaves little room to sympathize with Eugene.

The effect of the story’s being focalized through Ciel is most obvious in the scene where Eugene is about to leave her again:

She looked at Eugene, and the poison of reality began to spread through her body like gangrene. It drew his scent out of her nostrils and scraped the veil from her eyes, and he stood before her just as he really was—a tall, skinny black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape. (Naylor, *Women*, 100)

Eugene is depicted as Ciel sees him in the moment. What she now perceives on Eugene’s face is referred to as “reality,” and she is portrayed as seeing Eugene “just as he really was.” In my view this means not only that Ciel fails to recognize what Eugene hides behind the macho mask but also that Naylor has failed to imagine, in this novel, what is behind that mask.

Readers do get a different viewpoint in the beginning of the chapter, where Ben’s frame narrative pictures Eugene and Ben talking about Serena’s funeral. Whitt argues that in this passage, Naylor “depicts a lost, broken, and emasculated man” (1999, 90). While that may be true, I contend that the passage leaves readers with no doubt about Eugene’s macho qualities:

‘Yeah, well, damn, I took it bad. It was my kid, too, ya know. But Mattie, that fat, black bitch, just standin’ in the hospital hall sayin’ to me—to me, now ‘Whatcha want?’ Like I was a fuckin’ germ or something. Man, I just turned and left. You gotta be treated with respect, ya know?’ (Naylor, *Women*, 90)

Eugene is condescending towards the person who tries to save Ciel’s life, Mattie, and is only worried about how others view *him* and whether they respect him or not. Of course, he must feel frustration and disappointment inside, but what he expresses is hatred, anger, and selfishness. Any sign of disrespect makes Eugene turn to his familiar behavioral pattern of leaving. Confirming that those are the qualities of a *man* living in Brewster Place, and perhaps the larger African American community, even men in general, Ben declares, “yeah, a man’s gotta be a man” (90). According to Mirandé, “a theme that was very prevalent in the responses [in his research] is that machos are men who are insecure in themselves and need to prove their manhood” (2010, 30). This is also true for Eugene, and it becomes clear in *Men* that what he was hiding under what he calls the “fuck-you-all-who-gives-a-shit mask” (Naylor,

⁷⁰ Here Naylor is using animal images similar to those that were discussed in Chapter 3 and 5.

Men, 91) was his true identity, which turns out to be very insecure and vulnerable.

6.3 TRAGICALLY GAY

My dad said, “you have 3 strikes against you in this world. Every Black man has 2 . . . that they’re Black and male. But you’re Black, and you’re a male and you’re gay. You’re gonna have a hard fucking time.” But he said, “if you’re going to do this, you’re gonna have to be stronger than you’ve ever imagined.”

Pepper LaBeija, *Paris is Burning* (Livingston 1990)

In *Women*, Ciel appears to be suffering a lot more than Eugene, but she is shown as having a strong support system and opportunities to grow on Brewster Place. Montgomery notes, for example, that “Ciel’s apartment, and, indeed, Brewster itself, [is] a womblike nexus offering seemingly limitless opportunities for self-identity” (2010, 18). She adds, “as if to signify Ciel’s transformed self, the young woman’s story concludes with an emphasis on rebirth and renewal” (19). But while the spaces on Brewster Place, most specifically the homes, may offer opportunities and places of rebirth for Ciel and other women, for Eugene they fail to offer opportunities for transformation, renewal, or rebirth, or the possibility to atone for his past behavior. Probably because “*Brewster Place [had become] especially fond of its colored daughters*” (Naylor, *Women*, 4; emphasis in original), Eugene’s identity remains to be fully constructed, and his vulnerability is merely renewed in the course of the later novel.

One of the reasons for this binary is the womanist ethos of the Brewster Place novels that emphasize women’s community. Wahlström argues that “seen against the love, nurture, and sense of community stressed in *Women*, there is in *Men* an overwhelming negativity, despair, and lack of community” (2009, 80). In other words, the most important sources of strength and courage for the women, such as the circle of same-sex friendships, reciprocal nurturing, and emotional support, are clearly lacking in the community of men. However, even after centralizing the male characters and giving them voice, the emphasis in *Men* is on “the black man’s blues” (Naylor, *Men*, 161).

In Eugene’s chapter, his first-person narration becomes the central vision of the story, which is likely to bewilder most readers already familiar with *Women*. According to Wahlström, Eugene, who was “marked almost exclusively by negativity, above all anger and violence” in *Women*, is now “changed beyond recognition” (2009, 67). In his confession, Eugene explains his side of each bit of the story and fills in the gaps of the earlier version. Soon

readers find out that Eugene was not cheating on Ciel with other women after all but was in fact spending time with his boss Bruce at a gay club and cheating on Ciel with other men. In other words, he was living on the “down low,” which in this case alludes to Black men who are married to women taking part in secret sexual activities with men.⁷¹ Allegedly heterosexual, Eugene confesses in *Men* that he had exposed his secret identity merely in the realm of the Bull & Roses gay bar. This clarifies his behavior after Serena’s death, as he explains to Ciel:

I hid behind two masks to get through the next few days with neighbors and your friends. If they tried to console me, it was the strong-black-man mask. And if they came too late to blame me for what I’d already blamed myself for, it was the fuck-you-all-who-gives-a-shit mask. But inside I was feeling nothing; and I mean that, Ceil—nothing at all. (Naylor, *Men*, 91)

Eugene has two masks, first of which is constructed at the intersection of being both Black and male. This mask shows other people the “Black macho,” and thus, for Eugene, the only space to mourn the loss of his daughter is behind the mask (see also hooks 2005, 49–50). The one that Eugene calls “the fuck-you-all-who-gives-a-shit mask” is perhaps the same one that hooks calls the “mask of indifference” (50). hooks maintains that this kind of masking is created in the family of origin, but Naylor does not give much context about Eugene’s relationship with his parents. Having met Ciel already when they were young (Eugene 14 and Ciel 12 years old), losing the connection with Ciel (and their daughter), can be likened to losing motherlove which, according to hooks, leads to the fact that, “unable to cope with the loss of emotional connection, boys internalize the pain and mask it with indifference or rage” (hooks 2005, 65). As we can see from the above quote, Naylor is straightforward in her narration about how Eugene reflects on these masks and his own behavior. Even Eugene’s changed perspective—emphasized by the repetition of the word *nothing*—is made quite clear. In other words, he has quite suddenly gained the ability of introspection, analyzing his deeds and his motives for them now as a completely changed man.

It seems that Eugene’s paralyzed and silenced feelings are a coping mechanism. As Wilson argues, there is a reason for masking feelings that has to do with race:

Given the black man’s inherent struggle, then, with the majority population, his very existence as a survivor is an affront to the tenets of white supremacy. As a consequence, the black man has been forced to adopt the posture of silence and to mask feelings of frustration and

⁷¹ The related, more widely used, abbreviation *MSM* refers to men having sex with men.

anger lest such expressions render dangerous repercussions. (2001, 149)

Historically speaking, then, exposing their feelings and thus vulnerability has been potentially fatal to Black men. Fanon contends that Black people have to wear a mask of Whiteness—or at least a different face for White and Black people (2008b, 8)—in order to survive in a racist society. Moreover, Fanon states that “the Black man” has often internalized “the White man’s” racism and therefore suffers from an inadequacy complex which is why he is “full of rage” and “unbearable insularity” (35). In this way, while the mask has many functions, it also has profound consequences. Eugene’s is not a mask of smiles as described in Dunbar’s poem, but he is represented through “the toxic abnormality of a hegemonic white masculinity” that, according to Curry, “becomes the conceptual norm for Black men and boys” (2017, 3). While any explicit descriptions of White racism have been left out of Eugene’s account of his experience, readers must acknowledge that Eugene lives in a racist society. In fact, apart from the briefly mentioned “white boys” at Bull & Roses (Naylor, *Men*, 81) and Eugene’s co-workers—“the white boys who liked sitting around and telling darcy jokes on their lunch hour” (72)—there are no White characters in this story. In addition, Eugene’s boss, Bruce—himself African American—treats his Black employees with more severity than the White ones. For instance, Eugene describes being warned about Bruce: “And don’t think you could pull that ‘brother man’ shit on him, the other black longshoremen warned me. If anything, he’s harder on our asses than the others” (72). Thus, even though Naylor was accused of not taking racism into account in her earlier novel, here it is present, but only implicitly. This is also the reason why my analysis of this Black male character focuses more on gender and sexuality, and less on race, even though White supremacy is obviously a primary mode of oppression in his life.

Along with the fact that there is very little portrayal of racism in the novel, there is no apparent class oppression described in the story even though it is certainly one of the kinds of social stratification that affects Eugene’s condition as vulnerable. It is evident that Eugene is having economic troubles due to unsteady employment. Having “lost [his] job” (Naylor, *Women*, 94), he wonders how they will afford taking care of the new child Ciel is expecting: “And what the hell we gonna feed it when it gets here, huh—air?” (95). Furthermore, as readers, we know that Naylor’s Brewster Place is “a steadily decaying black neighborhood” (Saarinen 2012, 23), a “modern urban ghetto” (Fowler 1996, 24). Itself a result of residential segregation, the neighborhood offers housing for migrants, the latest wave of which having been brought with the Great Migration from “*the starving southern climates*” (Naylor, *Women*, 4; emphasis in original). Although not explicitly discussed in the novel, class

is another system of oppression intersecting in this particular matrix that constructs Eugene's identity.

In addition to race and class, Eugene's gender provides him with little or no privileges. As noted earlier, this is an issue that has been debated over for a long time, and the discussion continues even today. According to hooks, for example, "until black men can face the reality that sexism empowers them despite the impact of racism in their lives, it will be difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue about gender" (1990, 75). On the other hand, Curry explores a completely different viewpoint, stating that, because Black men are feminized in relation to White men, but not actually female, they experience a position of being "man-not," which dehumanizes them (2017, 6, 34). While the two arguments do not necessarily completely disqualify each other, I believe that it is due to this position of the "man-not" that the men of Brewster Place feel the need to assert their manhood through stereotypically masculine behavior. As Wahlström argues, "Naylor's emphasis on black male victimization at the hands of United States culture in general, and at the hands of African American women, can only finally be broken by resorting to a stereotypically American rhetoric of self-made manhood standing against the rest of the world" (2009, 76). In my view, this is partly because there are no other options available for the men in this novel.

Unlike the women, the men do not have a community to help them in their attempts at being men and "doin' it right" (Naylor, *Women*, 90). As Whitt puts it, "*The Men of Brewster Place* is a novel of men who do not share a common goal, a common dream; each is alone" (1999, 205). Moreover, as Eugene sees it, the women are standing in between him and the opportunity to take responsibility: "But how you gonna be a man with them ball-busters tellin' everybody it [Serena's death] was my fault and I should be the one dead? Damn!" (Naylor, *Women*, 90). In this way, rather than empowering him, Eugene's gender can be viewed as placing him in a more vulnerable position in the particular community where he lives. Indeed, Curry goes as far as to claim that "instead of being protected by patriarchy, Black men and boys are revealed to be its greatest victims under closer examination" (2017, 8). It could be said that one of Eugene's gender-specific vulnerabilities is the fact that *because* of patriarchal structures, Eugene has no choice but to attempt to conform to the (patriarchal) Black macho mold. And there is absolutely no room for homosexuality in that mold.

Homophobia inside and outside the borders of Brewster Place thus becomes the central aspect of oppression for Eugene in this novel. In part, his story comes to depict the general attitudes toward homosexuality in society in the 1970s and 1980s. For example, as Michael G. Long points out, only in 1973 did the American Psychological Association remove "homosexuality from its classification of disorders" (2012, 42), meaning that homosexuality was

considered a mental health problem before. Also, "in 1986, sodomy continued to be a criminal offense in 24 states and the District of Columbia" (8), and for many homosexuality was considered a choice, unlike being born Black (22).

It has to be acknowledged here that sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, was a taboo subject at the time of the novels' setting. Johnetta B. Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall argue that in order not to reinforce the racist stereotypes of, for example, promiscuity or hypersexuality, many people in African American communities have considered it safer to stay silent about the subject. Moreover, the authors maintain that "if this is true of Black sexuality in general, then it is even more the case for homosexuality within African American communities" (2003, 155). Not unlike the rest of the United States at that time there was a lot of homophobia in African American communities (see C. Clarke 2000), including the fictional Brewster Place. In 1996, for instance, Cornel West said, "my view is that I have to recognize deep homophobia inside of me, because I grew up in the black community, in the black church, on the black block, and there's a lot of homophobia in all three sites" (1999, 403). The innate homophobia is the reason why the mask of heterosexual Black machismo is imposed on Eugene by his own community. Although Black lesbians suffered from oppression (see, for example, Taylor 2017), some vulnerabilities were aggravated in the lives of African American gay men, especially during the time between the publication of Naylor's two novels:

At the center of [Coretta Scott] King's public battle against AIDS was her special concern about its ravaging effects on African American communities. This concern came to expression most visibly in 1999 when she played the leading role in launching a national tour of the AIDS Memorial Quilt at historically black colleges and universities. Citing the alarming statistic that AIDS was the leading cause of death for African American males between ages of 25 and 44, King lashed out against what she believed to be one of the worst causes of the spread of the disease in black communities: homophobia. (Long 2012, 17)

Set probably in the years immediately preceding the year of publication of *Women*, 1982, the novel also acknowledges the spread of HIV during that time, the first cases having been found in the United States around 1981. In *Men*, as Eugene asks Bruce, "aren't you worried about AIDS?", Bruce answers, "Every day" (Naylor, *Men*, 81), thus exposing another reason for masking.

In addition to the fact that in the early 1980s, gay men were ostracized due to the fear of the new and unknown disease caused by HIV, also other fears are connected to the oppression of Black gay men. According to Jerry Gafio Watts,

during this era when heterosexual machismo was thought to be synonymous with the revolutionary male ethos, no image could have

better captured the idea of an obsequious racial weakling than that of the “faggot.” Such slurs as “faggot” were common in the black nationalist community. They not only embraced a homophobic stereotype but also conveyed an aggressive dislike for gay men. (2001, 233)

Having internalized this homophobia, Eugene tries to reinforce his macho identity, not to be exposed as a “faggot.” In his world, they are the only two choices for Black men, and because he is neither, it renders him as “nothing.” As mentioned earlier, the quare “denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*” (E. P. Johnson 2001, 2; emphasis in original), but for Eugene, who has internalized the “conventional categories of being” of his homophobic community, this leads to a crisis. Eugene cannot reveal his vulnerability, and thus searches for spaces to construct a stable identity outside his community and family. His sexuality invites ferocious self-hatred and is the cause for further social shame. He cannot really bond with other men in his neighborhood and has to “pass” as a straight man. In fact, Kimmel argues that homophobia is fear of other men: “Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men. . . . Our fear is the fear of humiliation. We are ashamed to be afraid” (2005, 35). Thus, Eugene’s fear and shame has to do with masculinity also on a more general level.

However, in Eugene’s case, the question is not only of possible humiliation. Being “unmasked” as gay might be a threat even to his life. In fact, in *Women*, some of the men of the community attack one of its most vulnerable members, a lesbian character called Lorraine, due to homophobia. The other women of the community take part in the violent acts against Lorraine by abandoning her. Christian notes that “it is [Lorraine’s] tragedy that she believes because she is black, she is in the same boat as the other residents of Brewster Place” (2007, 107). The fact that Lorraine is oppressed even in her in-group (the African American community) where she is supposed to be safe from oppression, comes to show how race and sexuality intersect to construct vulnerable identities (and bodies), and this is also true for Eugene. The difference from Lorraine, though, is that Eugene recognizes the vulnerability of his position.

Even though Eugene seems safe in the gay community, which they call “The Life,” he is fearful of the reaction of his everyday community, as represented by Ciel, because of its homophobic understandings of manhood, which seem to be quite similar to those mentioned by Mark Anthony Neal,

the same faulty logic that suggests real black men ain’t “fags” also suggests that black women are lesbians because black men have failed to live up to some “Strong Black Man” ideals, as if black lesbians were

solely motivated by their displeasure with black men as opposed to their own social, cultural, and sexual desires. (2010, 593)

A certain male lack, the inability of some Black men to “do the right thing,” which was also one of the issues that the Million Man marchers wanted to atone for, is one of the main themes in the Brewster novels. Whether the reason is the “ball-busters” (Naylor, *Women*, 90) or the lesbian women, or his own homosexuality, Eugene does not seem to reach the needed measure of manhood to survive in the society the novels depict.

Eugene's vulnerability is not only (re)constructed in relation to the illusionary ideal of Black masculinity but also to other people's real or imaged reactions to his identity. Judith Butler notes that “we cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside this conception of social and material relations” (2016, 16), meaning that being open to physical harm always originates in relation to something else, for example, another human being. Taking materiality into account is also what Johnson (2001) calls for in his quare theory. Naylor does gesture towards building a community for Eugene in *Men*, but as he ends up asking for a whipping from his new sadomasochist friend Chino, he is very concretely wounded at the end of the story. Indeed, it is in relation to other people that Eugene's race, gender, class, and sexuality form a web of oppression that results in not only physical vulnerability but also self-hatred and eventual self-imposed destruction of his material being.

6.4 RELATIONAL VULNERABILITY

Eugene's sense of self and his own manhood is in the process of being constructed through his relationships with two contrasting people: the powerful and strong Black gay man, Bruce, and Chino, who is a gay, sadomasochist prostitute whose gender as well as race are ambiguous and left undefined.⁷² Even though Naylor has been criticized for her gay figures (see, e.g., Bahr 1998), Bruce and Chino have important roles in the narrative when it comes to analyzing multiple quare masculinities. Eugene considers Bruce his godfather, as “Chino had become, in his own words, [Eugene's] fairy godmother” (Naylor *Men*, 85). I believe that to Eugene, Bruce and Chino

⁷² While Chino's ethnicity is not revealed in the narrative, the various meanings of the name “Chino” suggest that she stands for the hybrid, or the in-between, identity. As the word has been used as a derogatory term for a Chinese person in North American slang (*Oxford English Dictionary*), it has also been used by Mexican people to refer to curly hair or a person of mixed-race, “mestizo,” and even a servant (see, *Collins Dictionary*). Since the word has Spanish origin and ends with an “o,” the name refers to a male.

represent the only two alternatives of “manhood” for gay men, and Eugene feels he is in a position of having to choose an identity from those two.

The difference between Bruce and Eugene is that Bruce is depicted as a powerful man, both physically and mentally. Bruce knows who he is and is not afraid of being exposed—in his own words, he doesn’t “give a flying fuck what anybody thinks” (Naylor, *Men*, 82). At work, as the “head foreman” (72), he is in control and is not afraid to assert power. Eugene says, “when the foreman said, Jump to it, Turner, you better believe I jumped” (73). In a sense, Bruce enjoys some privileges of hegemonic masculinity: “Dominant ideals of U.S. masculinity, for example, have been deeply identified with being aggressive and competitive, with making it and being on top, and with suppressing empathy for others” (Newton 2004, 17). To Eugene, who idealizes macho masculinity, Bruce represents everything that he thinks “a black man should be: big, dark, and mean” (Naylor, *Men*, 72). Another difference between Bruce and Eugene is that Bruce actually does not care what other people think of him while Eugene feels compelled to wear the “who-gives-a-shit mask” (91). Interestingly, however, Bruce’s attributes match the positive traits of the macho: “Strength, virility, masculinity, and sex appeal” (Mirandé 2010, 27).

In addition to embodying all the listed traits and asserting power as a superior, Bruce shows his competence on the basketball court by playing “like a machine” (Naylor *Men*, 75), which Eugene juxtaposes with his own feelings of incompetence and inadequacy. It is important to note that playing basketball is a stereotypically heterosexual masculine performance, and racially codified as Black in the popular imagination (see Anderson and McCormack 2010; T. Lewis 2010, 6). As Eric Anderson and Mark McCormack point out, “at a cultural level, we seem unable to imagine black men as gay, and this is particularly true for black gay athletes—something evidenced by the fact that no strong prevalent stereotype for them exists” (2010, 146). According to Anderson and McCormack, the stereotypes are quite straightforward: “Despite the gains of both the civil rights movement and the progress toward gay and lesbian social inclusion, the understanding in sport remains that black athletes come in only one sexuality [meaning heterosexual] and gay men come in just one color [meaning white]” (2010, 146). Probably because of this kind of stereotyping, it might be hard to imagine basketball as something else than a heteronormative performance of masculinity. As discussed in Chapter 3, the narrator points out in “The Hammer Man” that handling the basketball in a technically elegant way is “about the most beautiful thing a man can do and not be a fag” (Bambara, HM, 42). Thus, the narrator connects playing basketball to heterosexual manhood even though no mention of Manny’s sexuality is made in the story. I believe the reason is that in playing basketball, there is an innate assumption of heteronormativity.

Perhaps out of a desire to imitate Bruce's machismo and prove his own (heterosexual) manhood, Eugene tries bonding with him by playing hoops and telling nasty jokes on the basketball court (Naylor, *Men*, 76):

"You're gonna crucify me, Bruce."

"Big time."

...

"Then, again, maybe you won't," I said. "You so big and ugly, that ball's already crying out for a new papa."

"I invented signifying, Turner, so don't start up with me."

"That right? You invented signifying?"

"Damn straight. Your monkey ass was still in diapers when I started playing ball." (Naylor, *Men*, 75-76)

Bruce and Eugene surrender to a performance of signifying, and Eugene apparently tries to take the role of the Signifying Monkey, who in African American trickster tales "has no respect for authority; in fact, his primary goal is to dupe the lion—the 'king' of the jungle" (E. P. Johnson 1995, 130). But Eugene is no trickster. As the Signifying Monkey is closely attached to the "search for a voice that is depicted in so very many black texts" (21), this scene emphasizes Eugene's search for a voice but also anticipates the fact that Eugene can very soon talk openly about his homosexuality with Bruce.

The basketball court can also be seen as a space for male bonding and a sort of "marketplace" where masculinities can be tested. According to Kimmel, "masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood" (2005, 33; emphasis in original). Eugene tries to impress Bruce by performing well both physically and linguistically. The basketball court functions as a stage for performing (heterosexual) Black masculinity and is also the space where Eugene quickly realizes that he "wasn't like Bruce" (Naylor, *Men*, 82). His fear of being crucified by "his own" foreshadows his visit to Chino at the end of the chapter, which will be discussed later. Instead of crucifying Eugene, Bruce ends the conversation with a fatherly reminder of his longer experience. As Linden Lewis notes, "Bruce, despite his gay machismo, seems rather sensitive and discerning of the struggle that Eugene is waging with his sexuality" (2008, 57). That is, Bruce had noticed Eugene's distress and decided to support him by bringing up the topic in a friendly way. After rounds of playing basketball—and the dozens—Bruce introduces Eugene to the realm of "The Life," which is condensed in Bull & Roses.

In this apparently safe space for diverse sexualities and ethnicities, Chino appears "out of [Eugene's] worst nightmares" (Naylor, *Men*, 79), and her⁷³

⁷³ I refer to Chino with the pronoun *she* because she has chosen to do so herself, even though the other characters refer to Chino with the pronoun *he*.

ambiguous and undefined gender and sexuality make Eugene wish “real hard that [he had] gone straight home” (*Men*, 81). Clinging to his idea of being a man, Eugene others Chino, whose explicit trans identity poses a threat to him as if it was infectious. In truth, Eugene suffers from immense self-hatred, which he projects not only onto Chino but also onto Ciel. He is afraid that Ciel “would no longer see [him] as a man. . . . but as some sort of freak” (*Men*, 82). Eugene has internalized the homophobic view that lack of heteronormative (macho) masculinity, not to mention the existence of femininity, turns a man into a freak. As Kimmel argues, “whatever the variations by race, class, age, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, being a man means ‘not being like women’” (2005, 31). Horrified of being seen as feminine, he tries to console himself: “You’re looking at men, Eugene, I kept telling myself, nothing but men. They aren’t freaks. So why did I feel so freaky inside?” (Naylor, *Men*, 83). Eugene’s plight is defined by the fact that he wants to be a man but cannot conceive of manhood as including homosexuality.

Eugene copes with the feelings of “freakiness” by reflecting his own self-hatred onto Ciel, but also by objectifying Chino. I use the word *objectification* in the sense Kevin J. Mumford explains it:

The point is that the status of being black and gay involved not only sexual prejudice and defamation but also racialization and misrecognition. To understand this interaction of forms of stigma, I explore the historical operations of what I have come to term *objectification*. In my usage, objectification was a marginalization process akin to the designation of social pathology. (Mumford 2016, 5; emphasis in original)⁷⁴

In other words, when one’s identity is constructed at the intersection of racial and sexual oppression, one becomes, “not only an object of ridicule but also caught up in a process of sexual objectification” (Mumford 2016, 5). This is also true for Black men, because, as discussed in the earlier chapters and, for example, Curry (2017), the stereotyping and violence towards Black men has always been sexual in nature. Behind the mask of White supremacist racism, there has often been homosexual desire (see Curry 2017, 35). Mumford notes that “designating the other as ‘pathological’ also serves to protect one’s precarious sense of the normal self” (2016, 5). By objectifying Chino as a freak, Eugene pathologizes her in a desperate attempt to nurture his own sense of self as normal. What is interesting is that Chino objectifies both Eugene and herself by talking about herself in the third person. Having met Eugene for the first time and heard his name, Chino immediately turns Eugene into a sexual object: “It’s precious. She loves it. Her first Eugene” (Naylor, *Men*, 80). Only

⁷⁴ In his book, Mumford discusses the time period between the March on Washington and the AIDS crisis.

later does Eugene understand that “Chino’s perfume and paint were nothing but a hiding place to anchor himself somewhere after having managed to put himself nowhere by running away from his true self under a surgeon’s scalpel” (79). That is, as Chino had interrupted her gender reassignment, having realized that she was not, in fact, a trans woman but a gay man, Eugene believes that she is now hiding that “true self” under the “perfume and paint” of femininity. Eugene is running away from his true self, too, but his hiding place is under the macho stereotype.

6.5 “I CAN SPEAK FOR MYSELF”: VOICES AND SILENCES FROM THE IN-BETWEEN

Even though the author has atoned for the previous negative representation of this male character in *Women* by giving him a voice in *Men*, it seems that there is more silence than voice in Eugene’s story. There is a constant play of voice and silence in the novel which I will briefly address in this last section.

The Closet

First of all, Eugene’s hidden identity is a sort of silence. Referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s well-known theory of the “epistemology of the closet,” C. Riley Snorton notes that “for Sedgwick, ‘closeted-ness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence” (2014, 19). Just as E. Patrick Johnson (2001) suggests in his writings about the quare, the closet gains different meanings when applied to people of color. Snorton writes, “Black sexuality then is figured within a ‘glass closet’ . . . marked by hypervisibility and confinement” (2014, 12–13).⁷⁵ For Eugene, the closet produces a “sense of immobility” (Snorton 2014, 16). Stuck in his own idealization of heteronormative manhood, he cannot leave his family for good, not even when Chino advises him to do so (Naylor, *Men*, 86). The closet of Brewster Place’s conventional way of thinking about sexuality and the homophobia of American society in general at that time, confine Eugene in the closet from where it is also impossible to have one’s voice heard. However, coming out would not necessarily benefit him either, since, as Snorton notes, the closet may also function as “a shelter from oppression” (2014, 17), meaning that, as discussed earlier, coming out as gay would most probably be life-threatening to Eugene. Telling his story but not coming out of the silence of the closet, Eugene is immobilized in a space of in-betweenness.

⁷⁵ Snorton continues that “the glass closet shares with its syntactical cousin the glass ceiling a sense of immobility; each term describes alternatively how the materiality of racial and sexual difference structures a restrictive parameter that precludes movement. Both metaphors speak to the way stereotypes fix people where they stand” (2014, 16).

The Freak

In-betweenness can be described as a “means of figuring an elsewhere different from the source and the target culture” (Guldin 2016, 54). For Eugene it means he is neither fully the man he would like to be and, as a closeted gay man, is not performing that role, either. Living in a state of in-betweenness can also mean being a combination of different elements or ending up separated from everything and everyone, like Chino, who, according to Eugene, “was an island unto himself; his own country; his own god” (Naylor *Men*, 79). Emotionally separated from everyone and wearing a mask of self-sufficiency, Chino ends up performing the role of the “freak” for others. Eugene is stuck with the idea of hegemonic masculinity, which is constructed by othering any other kind of masculinity by deeming them “freaky,” in order to try and contain his own self-hatred. But as Naylor shows, hegemonic or patriarchal masculinity does not work for men of color. Chino, too, has suffered from self-hatred, and for him, too, the ramifications were dreadful:

It was just easier to handle the world’s contempt—as well as his own—to think of himself as a woman loving men than as a man loving men. But they had already castrated him when he stopped the operations. And there was no going back. So he moved forward, caught in limbo, and left to define himself. (Naylor, *Men*, 80)

Having interrupted her gender reassignment, Chino lives in between sexes. What she thought would make her less vulnerable, in reality does just the opposite, because trans women of color are put in an extremely precarious position even today.⁷⁶ A current example of representations of trans people in popular culture is a 2018 TV series, *Pose*, in which a trans woman of color called Blanca Rodriguez-Evangelista clearly defines this vulnerable position to a Black gay teenager: “Bitch it was over before it started. Everybody needs someone to make them feel superior. That line ends with us, though. This shit runs downhill past the women, the Blacks, Latins, gays until it reaches the bottom and lands on our kind” (*Pose*, episode 2, 23:30). Perhaps to avoid relations that could create binaries and objectification, and, thus, vulnerability, Chino becomes “an island unto himself” (Naylor, *Men*, 79).

The fact that Eugene also lives in a kind of limbo is manifested in *Men* by various instances of voice and silence. It is true that in *Men*, Eugene finally gains voice outside the limited scope of dialogue in *Women*. In the sequel, even Ben the janitor accepts that Eugene “*can speak for himself*” (Naylor, *Men*, 68; emphasis in original). Wahlström notes that “claiming oneself by voicing one’s self is an activity that can potentially serve to unite African American and

⁷⁶ For more information on trans people of color, see, e.g., C. Riley Snorton’s *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (2017).

(black) feminist struggles for subjectivity and self-definition” (2009, 74). Yet Eugene does not actually gain manhood or identity by gaining voice, but he remains unable to “claim” himself because he does not have a voice in his own community or in the racist society in general.

The Barbershop

However, there is one particular space for men to talk at Brewster Place, as represented in a chapter called “The Barbershop,” in which Eugene briefly appears. Called the “heartbeat” (Naylor, *Men*, 157) of Brewster Place by Ben, the narrator of the chapter, the barbershop is a place where “men have a chance to hang out and talk” (157). The self-proclaimed barber chair politicians discuss several issues, ranging from the weather to politics, but when it comes to vulnerability, there is silence. For example, when Greasy, who has apparently lost his mental health due to crack use, visits the barbers, Ben says, “the shop would get silent as a tomb” (159). In Greasy’s case, the other men have, of course, learned to stay silent in his presence because of his unpredictability. Greasy keeps saying, “I’m a man . . . I’m a man . . .” (165), which, I believe, shows the novel’s message that the more vulnerable the man, the stronger the need to assert manhood. The silence of the other men remains even after Greasy commits suicide in front of them in the barbershop. Ben recounts, “we had plenty to talk about,” but admits, “it was never about what happened to Greasy” (166).

In this sacred space of African American heteronormative manhood, men are known to grieve differently from women. Ben says, “a whole lot more is kept inside,” but “when the blood begins to flow, it’ll have to fill up every space in his body before you finally see it in his eyes” because “most [men] just cry inside” (Naylor, *Men*, 163). In the barbershop chapter, Ben remembers talking to Eugene after Serena’s death and seeing him getting his hair cut for the funeral he never had the courage to attend after all. Ben claims to have seen suicide in Eugene’s eyes, but perhaps following the code of silence he has learned from the men in his family, only consoles him in his thoughts, never uttering the words aloud to Eugene (162). The silent advice/prayer, “just let the pain and the regrets wash over you; you won’t drown although you’ll feel like you will” (162), does not, of course, reach Eugene but instead shows readers how desperately disconnected the men are from each other.

For Ben, “silence [is] not only expected but associated with manliness” (Whitt 1999, 206). Men are not supposed to reveal their emotional vulnerabilities; only rage, violence, and asserting manhood is allowed. According to Wilson, when men “suppress all feelings that might be construed as signs of weakness,” ironically “the resultant silence is then defined as a hardened machismo that almost obliterates even a semblance of humanity” (2001, 149). The silence of machismo is fatal to the men, one of which “took

the straight razor and slit his own throat” (Naylor, *Men*, 166). As Ben says, he could see in Eugene’s eyes that he had already chosen the same path. Others can see Eugene’s silenced feelings under the macho mask, which he does not seem to be able to let go even though he gets to share his story in *Men*. In his 1995 article, Gary Storhoff argues that in Naylor’s fiction (preceding *Men*, which was published in 1998), telling one’s story leads to claiming one’s own identity: “By trusting our own voice and by telling our own story, which at its best incorporates and affirms the Other (especially the Other that is within us), we become truly ourselves” (1995, 45). Even though Eugene talks openly about his feelings in the letter to Ciel, readers remain uncertain whether he ever sends it to her, or whether he ever talks about the letter or his feelings with anyone. A certain silence remains.

The Faggot

In contrast to this uncertainty about whether Eugene ever reveals the truth about his sexuality, the narrative includes a mysterious voice which does: the word “*faggot*” is repeated in between the paragraphs of Eugene’s story four times (Naylor, *Men*, 70, 72, 74, 82; emphasis in original). It appears first in the middle of Eugene’s regrets for having emotionally abused Ciel by constantly leaving and returning:

Why did I keep leaving? Baby, that’s not the right question. It never was. The question is, Why did I keep coming back?

faggot

And you can believe it or not, but I loved you. I had loved you from the first time I saw you, racing past my house in Tennessee. (Naylor, *Men*, 70; emphasis in original)

Eugene’s letter continues as if the word is not there, and he goes on to reminisce about their youth in the South. Whitt suggests that the word’s position outside the text—or, in between paragraphs—means that Eugene does not speak the word: “As though the word itself interrupts his telling, just as the reality of the word interrupts his life” (1999, 211–12). Since the word is outside the narration, the most important thing is to consider who is uttering this homophobic term.

First, it might be the voice of community. As noted earlier, Watts maintains that “such slurs as ‘faggot’ were common in the black nationalist community” (2001, 233). In this way, the slur echoes the homophobic attitudes in Black communities. To me, the fact that the word is in italics might indicate that it is a reminder of the community’s homophobia, because the frame narratives provided by Ben the janitor are also italicized.

A second possible explanation, I believe, is that the word reflects Eugene's own internalized homophobia. The slur in italics is an inner voice, an internalized bully that chastises him for not performing the Black macho role well enough, for not being a *man*. The faggot is a word for effeminate gay men, but as C. J. Pascoe argues, "becoming a fag has as much to do with failing at the masculine tasks of competence, heterosexual prowess, and strength or in any way revealing weakness or femininity as it does with a sexual identity" (2011, 49). Eugene struggles with all of the issues mentioned by Pascoe, but repeating the slur does not ease his agony. Nor does any amount of self-hatred atone for his earlier deeds. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Butler notes, "we do not only act through the speech act; speech acts also act on us" (2016, 16). Thus, *faggot* seems to become a self-reinforcing statement.

The End

I am inside someone
who hates me. I look
out from his eyes.

Amiri Baraka, "An Agony. As Now" (1964)

The narrator in this poem, "An Agony. As Now" by Amiri Baraka speaks a language that revolves around similar themes that Eugene struggles with. Reminiscent of W.E.B Du Bois's notion of double consciousness (see Dickson 1992, Gates and McKay 1997) and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008b), the notion of living inside *someone who is also me* can be applied to the experiences of the closeted gay man. Even though the Black Power thinker and poet Baraka also used homophobic rhetoric in his poetry (see, for example, Cheney 2005, 35), I think this poem clearly portrays how the split self is constructed through binaries like inside/outside, real/fabricated, gay/straight. The "outside" performs behavior that contradicts with the reality that the "inside" knows as true. On the outside there is the mask of heteronormative/patriarchal masculinity, as in Eugene's case, which also hates what is inside, the true identity.

In *Men*, Eugene thinks he can atone for his sins by being wounded in very concrete way. In the final scene of the story, Eugene visits Chino to receive a whipping with "nine lashes that ended with metal tips" (Naylor, *Men*, 94) in a desperate attempt to find redemption. If "*self-determination* [is] the power to decide one's own destiny" (Collins 2000, 300; emphasis in original), this is sadly Eugene's only act of self-determination, and, as a ritual of atonement, ineffectual. Chino tries to stop hurting Eugene, and Eugene, embracing his own voice, says to Chino, "I'll tell you when to stop . . . I'll tell you when to stop . . ." (Naylor, *Men*, 94). He does not understand that he could choose another

kind of atonement rather than physical pain. Eugene lives, and seemingly continues to live, “in between” sexualities, getting inside “The Life” of gay people, while at the same time performing his role as a straight man inside the closet, which might offer safety but also silence and stillness. Perhaps the novel is arguing against living in that kind of limbo since, in Eugene’s case, it destroys his family through the death of both of his children and the departure of his wife. Thus, Eugene faces the ultimate lack of the heteronormative macho man: now he is the one who is left alone, with no wife and no offspring to continue his name and kin. At the same time, the mythical Superwoman, in this case, Mattie Michael, retains and gains power in the community as Ciel regresses into a child and Eugene is left alone to grieve.

Men can be seen as demonstrating that patriarchal attitudes, along with the stereotype of the Black macho, can be dangerous to the whole community. The difference between Eugene and Lorraine, who was also wounded by the attitudes of the community, is that Lorraine is a victim of male violence, and, because of that, accidentally kills Ben. Eugene, on the other hand, has agency in his own woundedness, and may even die at the hands of his reluctant whipper, Chino, thus also participating in his own death. In Baraka’s poem (1964), Maurice A. Lee argues, “the excruciating pain of this solitary isolation is evident” (2004, 32), and it is “this tension of polar opposites [that] ushers forth the scream, the voice of alienation” (32). Chino, who Eugene sees as “his own god” (Naylor, *Men*, 79), isolated like an island, and thus an embodiment of “solitary isolation” (Lee 2004, 32), tries to save Eugene, but is probably too late. At the end of the story, it is apparent that while the spaces on Brewster Place may offer opportunities for transformation and rebirth for Ciel and other women, for Eugene, the spaces—public and private—fail to offer these opportunities. Primarily because “the Black male is not given the power of male domination in this white-supremacist society” (Curry 2017, 92), Eugene cannot play the macho role, but he cannot express his true emotions either. His identity remains to be fully constructed, and his vulnerability is merely reconstructed in the course of the later novel. “Through a throat that [is] like sandpaper,” he says to Chino, “no . . . I’ll tell you when to stop . . .” (Naylor, *Men*, 94), and continues to suffer the “excruciating pain of this solitary isolation” (Lee 2004, 32), an agony.

Silencing Women

One of the silences in *Men* is that there are no actual female characters. Ciel has moved to San Francisco after the tragedy in the family, and Eugene is merely addressing her in his letter which describes his earlier own deeds and his relationships with men. Wahlström notes that it might mean that “in a culture where the focus on male self-definition becomes obsessive, women will necessarily suffer increased marginalization” (2009, 79). Similar to the Million

Man March, where women were instructed to stay home while manhood was being re-defined, “the novel raises the question of the place of female agency in masculinity discourses” (79). I agree with Wahlström, who reminds us that there is still the “interested (if ambiguous) female authorial voice on black men [who claims] space for African American female voices to be heard on these issues” (79). Still, the novel seems to imply that without the presence and support of Black women, those Black men who have internalized the Black macho image and are not committed to struggle against all forms of oppression, cannot break free. This can be seen in how hopeless the future for the men seem in this novel where female voices are silenced.

However, by exposing the hidden selves of the men, Naylor does succeed in deconstructing the stereotype of the Black macho. In *Men*, she reveals the complex and nuanced inner lives of her male characters, implying that the macho, for example, is not a real-life category of Black men. In addition, Naylor suggests that categorizing Black masculinity in either-or means (macho/non-macho) is detrimental to men and is something that others should not impose on them. Thus, she perhaps atones for some previous misunderstandings. Also, Michele Wallace atoned for her earlier arguments against Black men: “When I began to date as a teenager in Harlem, I expected and found no better men than my father and stepfather had been. I expected and found hostility, anger, competition, violence, dishonesty, misogyny and ignorance” (2015, 24–25). Wallace admits that she based her arguments too much on her own experiences rather than turning to scientific studies: “What I am saying is that I was not actually aware then that there was any other kind of man” (24–25). Yet Naylor’s agenda with this novel was ultimately well-meaning. Having also lived some years of her youth in Harlem (as well as in other neighborhoods in New York), the author dedicated *Men* to her late father, saying, “I wrote *The Men of Brewster Place* as a testament to the hidden majority, men like my father who worked hard all of their lives, who struggled to keep their homes together against incredible odds and who remained even after their deaths unsung, unknown” (qtd. in L. Lewis 2008, 50).

6.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

For my father . . .

And yours

Gloria Naylor, *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998, n.p.;
emphasis in original)

In this chapter, I have shown that in Gloria Naylor's Brewster Place novels, expositions of Black male vulnerability work as atonement, but at the same time, show how Black male vulnerability is merely reconstructed in the public and private spaces of America. As Linden Lewis notes, "for Eugene as a gay man, the issue of atonement, as articulated by the Million Man March, would only be possible in the context of a renunciation of his homosexual lifestyle" (2008, 60). While voicing his previously silenced feelings might be cathartic to this male character, it does not guarantee him a full sense of identity nor an invulnerable position in the society he lives in. As the chapters ends, Eugene's possible death remains "unsung, unknown."

One of the most striking differences in the representations of male and female characters in Naylor's novels is, according to Wahlström, that "manhood, unlike womanhood, is represented as problematically linked to individualism rather than community, partly because it is so strongly marked by a struggle for self-assertion" (2009, 66). Thus, while Naylor's former novel could have been seen as critiquing patriarchy and men in general, the latter novel allows reading the same stories as a critique of essentialist views of Black men. At the same time, *The Men of Brewster Place* stands as a critique of the processes that construct and reconstruct the need for the maintenance of the Black macho model. As it stands, however, the novel does not provide much hope for those like Eugene, who is depicted as refusing to fully join the community.

I believe that Naylor's part in the atonement is precisely the womanist ethos of this novel: showing that asserting masculinity without women might be destructive to everyone in the community. Montgomery states that "the idea that there needs to be intraracial unity in order to achieve progress remains underdeveloped, and the women in the text are as demonized as their male counterparts are in Naylor's earlier novels. The tension between genders remains unresolved" (2000, 177). In my view, though, the tension between men and women remains unresolved because it reflects the way things are in real life. Simply put, the idea of intraracial unity in the novel is underdeveloped because intraracial unity is underdeveloped. However, in Eugene's case, Naylor quite clearly shows that freedom for the whole community cannot be achieved without intraracial unity between all genders and all sexualities. By

exposing Black male vulnerability, the author atones for some of the negative representations, but at the same time stays loyal to Black feminist thought.

7 CONCLUSION: “WE STILL CAN’T BREATHE”

At the beginning of this dissertation, I referred to an incident in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Home*. The male protagonist, Frank, and his sister, Cee, had witnessed an organized fight between a Black father and his son in which “one of them had to die or they both would” (Morrison 2012, 138). As children, Frank and Cee had thought it was a horse fight but, as an adult, Frank finds out the truth and asks Cee to join him to find the bones of the murdered man and bury him with the dignity he would have deserved in the first place. When Frank digs up the bones, Cee forces “herself not to look away, not to be the terrified child who could not look directly at the slaughter that went on in the world, however ungodly” (143).

This dissertation has focused on the work of Black female writers who chose to look directly at what was going on around them. In the narratives of African American women, the interested and compassionate, yet vulnerable, female observer/protagonist is always present, be it a Celie, Ciel, Ceil, or Cee (or a Janie or Jadine). Having started publishing their literary works in the late 1960s to early 1980s, Bambara, Walker, Morrison, and Naylor were in a vulnerable situation as authors. They were not only marginalized by the racism in the women’s movement and the misogyny in Black nationalism (as well as in Black studies), but also by the power structures of the (White) publishing industry. The business was still White-owned and the African American canon male-dominated. As discussed in the analysis chapters, there were eyes watching the Black female authors’ every move, as if waiting for them to fail. Yet they forced themselves “not to look away” and, in their works of fiction, described the experiences of African American women, “however ungodly” (Morrison 2012, 143). And they succeeded. The female authors became political actors and, through their writing in which they concentrated on portraying “black women as real people with all the complexity and depth that black women have” (Tyson 2006, 389), participated in discourses on race, gender, and class.

As a researcher, I recognized a need to “dig up the bones” of the male characters in the literary works of the selected Black women writers. They were, in most cases, buried and forgotten, only to be remembered as stereotypical images that looked like men. But what I had initially thought were merely caricatures and stereotypical representations were, in fact, men. Representations that I (and many others) had thought might risk reinforcing anti-Black misandrist stereotypes—such as the “perpetual boy,” the “bad Black man,” the “primitive beast,” and the “Black macho”—worked, in fact, to resist

those very same stereotypes. As the criticism from contemporary readers and critics stated, these male characters seemed to be conforming to age-old racist stereotypes. In these stories, male characters committed murder, rape, and other violent acts. There was misogyny, sexism, and ignorance of other people's vulnerability, and they certainly had some qualities of the violent beast and sexual predator created in the White racist imagination. I wanted to know why these highly educated, prominent authors had crafted such stereotypical male figures. What I found, however, is that the works also expose the vulnerabilities of these male characters and, in so doing, challenge the power of stereotyping. What I expected to learn was why the male characters were so stereotypically crafted, but what I found was that these stereotypes are life-threatening to Black men and boys. This condition represented in the narratives was reality for Black men when the books were written, and, for the most part, it still is. I had to look directly at what I had dug up, not at what I had wanted to find.

While many scholars contend that Black masculinity implies privilege in patriarchal society (see, e.g., T. Hasan Johnson 2018), my research reveals that—at least in the selected narratives—Black men gain little or no privilege due to their masculinity. On the contrary, Black male vulnerability is partly constructed through a racialized form of gender oppression. In this way, my research shows the importance of Black male vulnerability to the study of Black masculinity. As I have shown, even in these works of fiction, but more so outside the realm of the literary, Black men are more than caricatures, and even the most stereotypical representations of men can be nuanced, complex and ambiguous. My contribution to the academic discussion of these works is that I view the Black male characters as victimized due to their gender (as well as race, class, sexuality, and cognitive abilities), as opposed to viewing them merely as perpetrators. Black male vulnerability is rarely mentioned in research on the work of these authors, which reflects the fact that male vulnerability is still a rare, even taboo, subject in our contemporary society. The vulnerabilities of these Black male characters allow readers to extend their perception of the limitations of human beings, and more specifically their perception of African American male experience.

As explained in Chapter 1, African American literature has been used as a tool to fight stereotypical images and segregation to gain civil rights for African Americans since its beginnings (see, e.g., Gates and McKay 1997). Thus, I see no reason not to believe that literature can deconstruct stereotypical thinking also outside the literary realm. At the very least, literature can raise awareness of the strength and pervasiveness of stereotypical images and thinking and, thus, make readers pay attention to their own possibly biased or even racist ideas.

The selected authors were no doubt aware that their works might have an impact on readers. As discussed in Chapter 3, in Toni Cade Bambara's stories, the representations of the inability of society to sometimes understand and nurture the most vulnerable, work as education. As an author, Bambara wanted to "keep certain kinds of calls out there" (Bonetti 2012, 35). Her stories were calls to action and calls for the members of her community to take responsibility for each other. Walker, for her part, was, and still is, a target of brutal criticism for her male characters. As discussed in Chapter 4, many people could not see the contexts of vulnerability at work due to all the misogyny and violence in the novel. Considering the fact that some people argued that Walker's story was a threat to the "entire Black nation" (BBC 1986), it is clear that a story can also have the power to challenge a reader's stereotypical thinking. Toni Morrison, who believed firmly that "books change your mind" (Solomon Evan and Toni Morrison, [2003] 2016), used the representation of Black male vulnerability to persuade readers to understand the power of an image, and the power of their own (possibly unconscious) prejudices, as discussed in Chapter 5. As a testament to the fact that literature has the ability to affect the way people act, Morrison shared a story in a documentary film about the impact of her writing:

I have a little framed document in my bathroom, a letter from, I think, Texas Bureau of Corrections, saying that *Paradise* was banned from the prison because it might incite a riot. And I thought, how powerful is that? I could tear up the whole place! (*The Pieces I Am* 2019)

This anecdote leaves no question about the power of a literary representation. If a piece of literature can provoke people to riot, I believe it can bring some peace, too. Understanding the motifs behind the actions of another human being may affect the way one views other people also in their everyday lives. Gloria Naylor, herself a target of criticism (in addition to praise), made an effort to find peace with certain characters and readers by atoning for previously marginalizing her male characters as caricatures. As shown in Chapter 6, she ended up revealing the vulnerabilities that Black men still faced near the turn of the millennium.

As I have shown in this dissertation, the stereotypes concerning Black men date back centuries, and were as vibrant in the period from the late 1960s to the 1990s as they are today. Why has so little changed? On January 20, 2021, poet Amanda Gorman recited her spoken word poem "The Hill We Climb" (see, Liu 2021) at the inauguration of the 46th president of the United States, Joe Biden. In the poem, Gorman reminds the audience that "history has its eyes on us." It is true that while awareness has increased on many levels due, for example, to the Black Lives Matter movement, some problematics seem to remain unchanged. When it comes to resisting anti-Black racism, on the one

hand, there has no doubt been progress. On the other hand, as Ibram X. Kendi states, the inequalities between the White and Black populations in America are still striking:

Young Black males were *twenty-one times* more likely to be killed by police than their White counterparts between 2010 and 2012, according to federal statistics. . . . Federal data show that the median wealth of White households is a staggering *thirteen times* the median wealth of Black households—and Black people are *five times* more likely to be incarcerated than Whites (2016, 1; emphasis in original)

While these data are from a few years back, we have seen so many Black men put down even since then. When it comes to the number of killings of Black men by the police and mass incarceration, it is clear that the stereotypes explored in this dissertation are alive in the collective subconscious. Even the current coronavirus pandemic reveals existing racial inequalities. The COVID Racial Data Tracker shows that, in the US, "nationwide, Black people have died at 1.4 times the rate of white people" (The COVID Tracking Project, 2021). Moreover, while I was writing this conclusion, the state of Florida (among others) banned Critical Race Theory in schools (Asmelash 2021). In the 2020s, some Americans—the former president Donald Trump included—have claimed that talking about race to children is "anti-American" (Gómez 2020). In light of these and so many other factors, it is still highly necessary to discuss, theorize, and analyze racial stereotypes and racial vulnerabilities. We have to look at the racial myths that still help sustain anti-Black racism and anti-Black misandry, both on the macrolevel of policymaking and institutions, as well as on the microlevel of social relations. We have to.

The question remains: Why has so little changed for Black men? If racist misandry is reconstructed decade after decade because of the age-old racist stereotypes, who is responsible for sustaining them? Perhaps more importantly, who is responsible for resisting them? Moreover, when we think about literature and authors in general, what responsibility do fiction writers have for the audience, other authors, or society? The selected authors were political actors, and their literary works, as mentioned earlier, were influential. But literary representations are not sufficient means when one wants to understand and raise awareness of the vulnerabilities of Black men and boys. There is a need for theory. Even though there are a few feminist works on masculinities (see, for example, hooks 2004 and hooks 2005), what we need is a new understanding of Black men and boys beyond the stereotypical roles society imposes on them. Curry states that

contemporary gender theorists maintain that the only hope for Black men and boys lies in reformulating Black masculinity toward a Black feminist ethics. Although this claim is largely accepted by the culture of

disciplines throughout the university, it has never been substantiated with any actual proof; instead, it is insisted on as if it is the only proper moral conclusion, given the direction of gender theory in the university. Why is it necessary to understand Black masculinity as problematic, redeemable only by the externalized politics of other groups, rather than through the study of Black males' actual lives and realities? (2017, 200)

As also mentioned in Chapter 1, in masculinity studies Black men have been studied only as marginalized and in feminist studies only as privileged. In other words, Black men have often been studied through the lens of theory constructed for other groups of people, not in their own right. That being said, using intersectionality theory in this dissertation was necessary not only because of the backgrounds of the authors but also because of the womanist ethos in the works themselves. In addition, I used intersectionality as a lens in my analysis of the characters because I wanted to show that maleness, too, always intersects with other forms of social stratification and cannot be ignored merely as oppressive and privileged. I still agree with Curry that there should be a theory to help explain the vulnerabilities of Black men and boys.

Although there is a lot of literature on Black masculinity, however, there is no university in the United States that teaches Black male studies (see, "Institute for Black Male Studies" 2021). The only university that does is the University of Edinburgh, Scotland, with Tommy J. Curry as the professor. For this reason, Dr. T. Hasan Johnson has started an online institute for Black male studies, in order to "study Black males beyond stereotype" ("Institute for Black Male Studies" 2021). I believe that anywhere research is being done with a Black feminist lens, Black male studies could be conducted. Perhaps in law, philosophy, sociology, gender studies, literary studies, and history? The aim would not be to substitute Black feminism or explain it away, but to interrupt the narratives of Black men in society that are, in the end, harmful for everyone. As hooks maintains, "when black males are in pain we are all in pain" (2004, 135).

At least two strands of research require scholarly attention. First, Black men as sexually vulnerable should be studied (as also suggested by Curry). As Curry maintains, because Black men and boys are seen as beasts and rapists, according to racist stereotyping, they are very seldom included as victims in discourses on sexual abuse. The theme would have been an extremely important addition to my current research but did not appear in my primary sources. Second, it would be interesting to study what happens in narratives where true courage arises from vulnerability, when (Black male) vulnerability means honesty and being brave enough to feel and show one's own feelings. Moreover, fruitful discussions could arise from the following questions: Are there any men in any works of African American literature who are shown to be quietly, confidently strong? Men supporting each other? Compassionate

friends and fathers? Acknowledging how racist imagery has been constructed and sustained, it is also important to move beyond the stereotypical images and "problem orientation" (see McDougal 2020, xv–xvi) because, as President Barack Obama once stated, "what we can do, as flawed as we are, is still see God in other people, and do our best to help them find their own grace."

As I have shown in this dissertation, careful reading of literary texts reveals surprising vulnerabilities and even the stereotypes that have been around for centuries still need to be paid attention to. The fact that even these literary works by African American women have often been read through racist misandrist stereotypes tells not about how stereotypical the selected works are but how ingrained the images are in our collective subconscious. We need to join forces to resist them or they will continue trying to force Black men "in their place." And it is a place where they cannot breathe.

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