SCENES OF TRAUMA: VIOLENT RITES, MIGRATION, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF AFRO-CARIBBEAN MASCULINITIES

By

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To my mother who led by example. You were my first teacher, through your own adventorous spirit you opened me up to the world, you gave me an appreciation for knowledge and a desire to see the world, and for that I am eternally grateful
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Scenes of Trauma: Violent Rites, Migration, and the Performance of Afro-Caribbean Masculinities is an interdisciplinary project that combines cultural studies, film, gender, and postcolonial studies to investigate Afro-Caribbean models of masculinity in film and literature. My project details the ways in which imperialist phallocentric masculinity is valorized within African American cinema and exported to the Caribbean where it is mimicked and valorized. Secondly, I am interested in an analysis of the reverse journey. While Afro-Caribbean men have long been a part of African American culture and have contributed greatly to the shaping of African American masculinities, much of the recent work on African American masculinities studies have tended to flatten out the diversity of men from across the African Diaspora as simply Black, ignoring the nuances of migration and its effects on the performance of Blackness and maleness of these subjects within their new locations.

My study introduces Afro-Caribbean masculinity into the scholarly discussion of African American masculinities started by several African American cultural critics such as Mark Anthony Neal and bell hooks. Both of these prominent scholars in African American studies criticize the construction of African American masculinity as presented
in African American culture. They, and others, call for a more progressive Black masculinity, one that supports Black feminism and fights homophobia. Much of their critique also applies to Afro-Caribbean culture, which has been strongly influenced by African American culture in regard to the traumatizing transition between boyhood and manhood which has great influence on Black males perspectives on feminism and homophobia. hook’s critique in particular challenges the passive acceptance of “soul murder” or, in other words, silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage into manhood for African American men. I take up hook’s critique in my analysis of the post independence Afro-Caribbean productions of Black masculinity as they reiterate similar problematic performances of Black masculinity. I am especially interested in how Afro-Caribbean performance of masculinity is affected when Black men from the Caribbean migrate to the metropole, specifically the United States and Britain.

To this end, I juxtapose contemporary representations of Afro-Caribbean masculinities, produced in the new millennium, with earlier presentations, developed during the Black Power movement in the 1970s when Black filmmakers and authors produced images of Black masculinity built on soul murder. I am interested in whether contemporary productions engage new and progressive forms of Black masculinity or simply rearticulate conventional representations of Black masculinity that draw on dominant patriarchal and homophobic modes of gender performance. I suggest that many of the contemporary Black filmmakers and writers whose work I examine here remain ambivalent to challenging the phallocentric patriarchal masculinist practices of traumatic rites of passage for Black boys into manhood; however, there are others who offer glimpses into what a challenge to that model might look like.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

My book, it is hoped, will be a mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation.¹

Frantz Fanon

In his essay “Caribbean Masculinity at the Fin de Siécle,” Caribbean sociologist Linden Lewis states that “Culture is never pure but always hybridized; that which we celebrate as Caribbean culture has long since been borrowed and adapted mainly from Africa, Asia and Europe, and creatively fashioned within the region” (260). What Lewis argues here is that the Caribbean is a space where many different cultures collide, and it is continually affected and influenced by global cultures. In a similar vein, in “Masculinities in Transition: Gender and the Global Problematique,” Keith Nurse asserts that “the significant measure of the global gender dynamic is a result of the ‘export of the European/American gender order to the colonized world’ through institutions like the church, the military, Western education, the modern state, transnational corporation and the worldwide media” (4). Here Nurse describes what amounts to cultural and gender imperialism. This sort of gender imperialism has very real effects in the way masculinity is performed. In his discussion of “Globalization and men’s bodies” from his text The Men and the Boys, R.W. Connell asserts that “Empire, then, marks a decisive historical change in the social embodiment of masculinities. Under imperialism men’s bodies are shifted around the world, trained and controlled in new ways, sorted and symbolized on different principles” (62). These discussions note a decidedly one-sided and oppressive flow of constructs of gender—one that Toni Cade argues has us “so turned around

¹ In the Richard Philcox translation, Negro is actually translated as “black man,” and indeed for Fanon “[t]he black is a black man” (italics mine, 8). All references to Black Skin White Masks are taken from the Charles Lam Markmann translation.
about Western models [of gender roles], we don’t even know how to raise the correct questions. But raise them we must if we are to fashion a natural sense of self, if we are to develop harmonious relationships with each other” (105).

While I do agree with Lewis, Nurse, and Connell’s assessments of the imperialist nature of Western religious, political, and economic influences on the performance of gender roles globally, it is important to acknowledge that this is not a one way street. Lewis notes that the Caribbean is a hybrid space but does not seem to account for the agency of this position. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha, however, explains that hybridity “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power…reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (160). As Western constructs of gender roles inundate postcolonial and colonized spaces like the Caribbean, Caribbean constructs of gender roles also infiltrate the West. In his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy makes the related argument that “the cultures of this group [Britain’s black citizens] have been produced in a syncretic pattern in which the styles and forms of the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa have been reworked and reinscribed in the novel context of modern Britain’s own untidy ensemble of regional and class-oriented conflicts” (3). Popular culture, including music, films, literature, and dance, travels across the Black Atlantic influencing and being influenced by the people who consume them. Through continuous exchange of cultural ideas and gender performances that have existed since Africans were kidnapped and carried to the New World, Blacks undoubtedly continue to have intra-diasporic exchange and dialogue. The performance of Black gender and sexuality then
also continues to dialogue across the Diaspora, which affects the way Black people, and more specifically Black men, perform and represent blackness and Black masculinity. Consequently, modes of gender construction and sexuality are certainly a part of cultural exchange and influence. My dissertation attempts to raise the questions that Cade calls for. For example, how do African American and Afro-Caribbean men challenge imperialist, phallocentric patriarchal constructs of masculinity? Have we actually been doing so all along?

*Scenes of Trauma: Violent Rites, Migration, and the Performance of Afro-Caribbean Masculinity* is concerned with the contemporary representations of Afro-Caribbean masculinity in late 20th and early 21st century literature and film by Anglophone Afro-Caribbean male artists from across the Black Atlantic including the Caribbean, the United States, and Britain. My project details the ways in which imperialist phallocentric masculinity is valorized within African American cinema and exported to the Caribbean where it is mimicked and valorized. Secondly, I am interested in an analysis of the reverse journey. While Afro-Caribbean men have long been a part of African American culture and have contributed greatly to the shaping of African American masculinities, much of the recent work on African American masculinities studies have tended to flatten out the diversity of men from across the African Diaspora as simply Black, ignoring the nuances of migration and its effects on the performance of Blackness and maleness of these subjects within their new locations. I problematize that flattening out by focusing on the ways Afro-Caribbean male migrants perform Black masculinity within America. As noted above, gender roles are normalized and disseminated via popular culture. I find it important then, to conduct a comparative
analysis of popular filmic as well as literary representations of Afro-Caribbean and African American masculinities.

I begin this project by citing Fanon’s desire that his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) provide Black men with a path to disalienation because I hope that my project will, like Fanon’s seminal work, assist Black men in finding new, disalienating models of Black masculinity. Fanon’s work appears early in the period of decolonization. Within this work Fanon traces the psychological damage that colonialism produces in its Black subjects. Fanon hoped that his work would lead to “the liberation of the man of color from himself” (8). Fanon was attempting to lay the groundwork for the possibility of a new Black man—a progressive Black man. However, his limited discussion of Black women and his refusal to admit to the presence of Caribbean homosexuality limits the potential of his work. Ultimately, Fanon does not challenge patriarchy. Indeed, Fanon, a Pan-Africanist, was not so much interested in dismantling patriarchy as much as he was interested in unshackling Black men from an inferiority complex created by a colonialist mentality. The end result is to create psychologically sound men of color who can take their rightful place within patriarchy. In the essay “Feminism as a Persistent Critique of History: What’s Love Got to do With It?” bell hooks finds, through reading *Wretched of the Earth*, a similar conclusion. She comments, “I see in his work a profound lack of recognition of the presence of the mothering body, of the female body that thinks” (81).

She continues, “[h]ealing, as Fanon envisions it, takes place only as this conflict between men is resolved…all will be well when men are able to reach a level of homophilia: a quality of love for one and another that precludes the possibility of
domination and dehumanization so central to the maintenance of the colonizer/colonized relationship” (81-82).

Despite its shortcomings, Fanon does provide a powerful theoretical framework in which to think about Afro-Caribbean men’s encounters with whiteness in the metropole and the psychological trauma that interaction engenders. Even though Fanon’s work focuses on the mental liberation of Black men on the French-Caribbean island of Martinique where he was born and its fatherland France, his findings accurately describe the experience of Black men across the Diaspora, most of whom were suffering under the yoke of colonialism. However, in the more than fifty years since this text was written, the world has become a very different place.

Liberation movements led to the independence of many African countries in the late 1950s and 60s, the civil rights legislation in the United States of the mid 1960s, and the attainment of independence of many Caribbean nations beginning in the early 1960s. Black men have indeed been liberated from de jure colonialism. But liberation from social, political, and cultural colonialism constituted only a part of the battle facing Black men. Many remain victims of what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o might call a colonization of the mind. Many Black men across the Diaspora remain mentally oppressed by patriarchy and the sexism, homophobia, and machismo it comprised. But rather than challenge patriarchal notions of masculinity which historically oppressed them, Black men during the liberatory moment valorized patriarchy and sought to seek their place within its ranks. hooks notes “[c]ontemporary black power movement made

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2 Fanon writes” We recall once again that our findings are valid for the French Antilles; we are well aware, however, that this same behavior can be found in any race subjected to colonization. (Pg 9 new Philcox editing)
synonymous black liberation and the effort to create a social structure wherein black men could assert themselves as patriarchs, controlling community, family, and kin” (Black Looks 98).

The representation of Black men comprised a critical element of culture produced in the liberation movements and by subsequent generations as Black men sought to define themselves in realistic and meaningful terms. This self definition was in response to the dehumanizing representation of Black masculinity perpetuated through racist North American and European discourses. However, many of these representations of the Black male experience continued to promote troubling and homogeneous visions of Black masculinity steeped in old iconography—hetero-normativity, homophobic patriarchy, and traumatic rites of passage.

In New Black Man, Mark Anthony Neal asserts that the portrait of the “father of black nationalism” Martin Delaney was adopted by the Black Power movement as the prototype of the “Strong Black Man,” unfortunately, this image of the “Strong Black Man” is informed by “reactionary black nationalism,” a movement that on one hand “advocates self-love, self-respect, self-acceptance, self-help, pride, unity’” but on the other hand “ promotes ‘bigotry, intolerance, hatred, sexism [and] homophobia’” (Neal 22-23). This view of the strong Black man continues to perpetuate itself throughout popular culture. hooks finds that popular culture of the 80s and 90s equates Black masculinity “with brute phallocentrism, woman-hating, a pugilistic ‘rapist’ sexuality, and flagrant disregard for individual rights” (Black Looks 102). My project is heavily influenced by hooks’ advice that “listening to and learning from progressive black
women is one way for black men to begin the work of self-recovery” (*We Real Cool* 141).

In much of our cultural productions, indoctrination into patriarchy and the cult of masculinity occurs very early for many young Black boys. Traumatic rites of passage for urban youth are oftentimes presented as a necessary stage in the development of Black youth, in order to achieve their place within phallocentric patriarchy. In popular cultural products coming out of the United States as well as the Caribbean, many young male protagonists must silently endure physical or mental trauma before they can be considered men. In his 1988 text, *The Men from The Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America*, American historian Ray Raphael investigated the initiation practices of contemporary American (read white) males. He maintains, “The central theme of male initiation rites…is a change in identity: the death of the boy, the resurrection of the man” (4). Raphael continues, “Judging by the amount of ritualistic activity in primitive cultures, the transition from boyhood to manhood ranks as one of life’s most significant events; it is paralleled only by birth, marriage, and death” (7). While he acknowledges that “since adolescent boys no longer have to be turned into hunters and warriors, [and] there is no longer any reason to subject them to firebrands or genital mutilation or any other forms of primitive torture”(xii), formalized initiations rituals have begun to wane. Raphael does suggest, however, that “unless a youth can find an alternate means of repudiating the weakness and dependency of childhood, he condemns himself to an indefinite state of insecurity; he is likely to experience the normal, everyday uncertainties of adult life as particularly problematic, for he can easily interpret them as threats to his masculinity” (15). Raphael takes a decidedly problematic *colorblind* and
class specific approach to his research, focusing on “working class to middle class American men” who chose to undergo self-designed or self-inflicted rites of passage in order to prove themselves as men. His case studies include but are not limited to subjects who joined the army, interned in medical school, or worked in the gold fields of Western Australia rather than attend college. Raphael says of these men, “These are people who have tried to create for themselves some semblance of a rite of passage” (xiii). He investigates whether these modern rites of passage psychologically enhance these men’s sense of self and their concepts of their own masculinity. In the final analysis, the chosen rites of passage do provide the initiates with a positive perspective in which they see themselves as men in the world.

However, Raphael feels the inclusion of “interviews with members of ghetto gangs” (read poor males of color) would distract from his studies. Raphael’s refusal to engage in this segment of society illustrates the larger and perpetual problem in American society of rendering poor people of color, Black men specifically, invisible. I am interested in focusing on those individuals who might potentially become members of those “ghetto gangs.” Indeed, it is the unrecognized traumatic and violent rite of passage that might lead lower class Black youth to join a gang. The differences between Raphael's subjects and the Black male subjects represented in the film and literature of my study are significant. Firstly, those Raphael focus on have a choice of whether to undergo the rite. Secondly, the rites they experience are not violent, though

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3 Of his subjects, Raphael writes, “Instead of dealing with the complete range of economic classes and ethnic groups which feed into our heterogeneous society, I have focused primarily on young men coming from working-class or middle-class backgrounds-mainstream Americans, as it were. Although interviews with members of ghetto gangs or private clubs for the rich would certainly have been of interest, these sorts of initiations are specific to particular subcultures and might have distracted our attention from the more general questions I am asking” (XV).
they may be traumatic. By contrast, the subjects I study do not have the choice; they must undergo initiation rites, usually violent and always traumatic. The important question for me then becomes: If the subjects of Raphael’s study find psychological value in their chosen rites, what is the psychological effect on those who experience forced and traumatic rites of passage?

At least a part of the answer may be “soul murder,” a term hooks appropriates from John Bradshaw’s *Bradshaw On: The Family*, and one that I also use as a basis for my study. According to hooks, “the image of emasculated and castrated black males is so embedded in the cultural imagination that many black parents feel it is crucial to train boys to be “tough”” (WRC 86). Unfortunately, this toughness comes at the expense of other forms of expression. She explains that “soul murder is the psychological term that best describes this crushing of the male spirit in boyhood” (WRC 87). Citing John Bradshaw’s definition of soul murder, hooks goes on to explain its particular effect on Black boys:

’Soul-murder is the basic problem in the world today; it is the crisis in the family. We programmatically deny children their feelings....Once a person loses contact with his own feelings, he loses contact with his own body....To have one’s feelings, body, desires and thoughts controlled is to lose one’s self. To lose one’s self is to have one’s soul murdered.’ Unlike black females, who are given permission by sexist thinking to be emotional and therefore able to remain in touch with our feelings in childhood even when we are abused or taught to mask them to appear “strong,” black males are required by rituals of patriarchal manhood to surrender their capacity to feel. The soul-murdered black boy then has a much harder time recovering himself than the damaged girl has. Tragically, the patriarchal thinking the black man embraces is precisely the logic that will keep him mentally enslaved and mentally ill. (hooks WRC 137)

hooks here suggests that African American boys are destroyed when they accept soul murder as the only vehicle to manhood. Soul murder engenders an alienation from self but paradoxically, the further the soul murdered boy moves away from self the closer he
comes to patriarchal Black masculinity. But the African American community is not alone in this paradoxical struggle; Afro-Caribbean men (and women) are also victims of phallocentric patriarchy which leads to soul murder. The same images that circulate within African American communities that advocate soul murder as rites of passage into the cult of manhood also circulate within the Caribbean. Caribbean cultural critic Carolyn Cooper makes the point that Jamaican [Caribbean] youth “learn to imitate and adapt the sartorial and ideological ‘style’ of the heroes and villains of imported movies” (*Sound Clash* 147). However, the effects of soul murder last well into adulthood. In Kamau Brathwaite’s *The Zea Mexican Diary*, a text composed of extracts from a diary he began upon learning about his wife’s terminal illness, the poet is extremely critical of the limited role Caribbean society has constructed for its men. He writes:

> But it seems to me that we have
> So marginalized our males (or have they so marginalized themselves) that we don’t even know how to comfort them except perhaps as lovers or children…or in other words unless they **SURRENDER** their pain & abasement to yr **conditions**…
>
> ……
> But the widow’s Other? The *widower*? In a-we-culture? Depending on his age/con – dition he’s either useless cock or hot new unexpected ‘property/the newly ‘eligible “bachelor”. In either/neither case **NO/ BODY** bizness wid im grief & dislocation. im is suppose to **cope** *(‘real man’ na cry et etc etc)/ & **stann up pun im onetwofeets** as VP rather harshly told me when I ask for help (174-75)

Brathwaite introduces a paradox of a society that does not know how to comfort men because it demands that its men not express the kinds of emotions that require
comfort. Grief, pain, loneliness, and despair are acceptable emotions for women to display; therefore, the society has ways of comforting a widow. But for Brathwaite, a widower, there is nowhere for him to turn, and if he asks for help, he is reminded that he is a man and should be emotionally self sufficient. While Brathwaite’s text critiques patriarchal constructs of masculinity here, it simultaneously challenges patriarchal limitations of masculinity as the text itself is an emotional outpouring that lays open the emotions of a man dealing with the grief over a lost wife. In the foreward of the text Sandra Pouchet Paquet asserts that within the text Brathwaite uses his grief to expose “unparalleled public examination of hitherto unrevealed aspects of self, of self and community, of the author’s intimate relationship with his wife,” she continues, “[the text] moves from disbelief and denial to rage and withdrawal and, finally, to acceptance and a measured joy and celebration in the lived-life. (ix) In other words Brathwaite uses his text to express all those emotions that phallocentric patriarchal masculinity denies. Rather than simply “taking it like a man,” he allows himself to feel, and even more radical, he gives voice to his pain through his poems. While the specific poem cited above recounts the patriarchal credo “real man na cry,” the entire text is a lament over the loss of his wife. Including emotions that run the gamut from fear to loneliness, bewilderment (emotions Black men are prevented from expressing publicly, if at all), and even rage. However, rage is only one emotion among many. It is by moving through all these emotions that Brathwaite finds his way back to joy. Brathwaite’s text is an important intervention into phallocentric masculinity as it allows for a new way of thinking about emotional experiences of Black men; his text combats the psychological
terrorism engendered by the credo “real man na cry,” which is one of the lessons of the initiation rites of passage and soul murder.

hooks explains that soul murder is a part of the “psychological terrorism that is involved in socializing black boys into patriarchal thinking” (WRC 86). In *Will To Change*, hooks points to the chapter “A Conspiracy of Silence,” from Terrence Real’s *How Can I Get Through to You?* in which he emphasizes that we are not allowed in this culture to speak the truth about what relationships with men are really like. This silence represents our collective cultural collusion with patriarchy. To be true to patriarchy we are all taught that we must keep men’s secrets. Real points out that the fundamental secret we share is that we will remain silent: When girls are inducted into womanhood, what is it exactly that they have to say that must be silenced? What is the truth women carry that cannot be spoken? The answer is simple and chilling. Girls, women—and also young boys—all share this in common. None may speak the truth about men.”(56)

This patriarchal thinking as it relates to the traumatic violence inflicted on the bodies of Black boys does not allow them to express and/or even process their emotions of pain or fear. The literature and films that I examine in this project are permeated by silences. Caribbean poet P.D. Sharma’s “Flights Of Fancy” ends with these lines: “Silence is also seditious/ it bespeaks knowledge of the atrocious” (27). It is through interrogating the silences in the work of some Afro-Caribbean artists that we may begin to challenge patriarchy and the traditional cult of masculinity. In some cases, for instance, silence in a film may function to elide a young boy’s emotions. This silence manifests not only through the lack of dialogue of the characters, but also through the filmic narration and editing. Those silences may also be read as an indictment on the construct of patriarchal masculinity.

In *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), hooks specifically called for a rearticulation of Black masculinity in her chapter “Reconstructing Black Masculinity.”
She challenged members of the Black communities who urge their men “to aspire to a masculine identity rooted in the patriarchal ideal” to reject that model of masculinity and “to choose against patriarchy, to choose themselves, their lives” (88). hooks points to men whom she has known personally who have worked against patriarchy in an effort to define manhood on their own terms. Since hooks’ call to action, many African American men have taken up her challenge; sociologists, cultural critics, queer theorists, and Black male feminists and womanists have begun challenging the representation of Black masculinity in popular culture. By the end of the 20th century, the question of what it means for African American men to be a part of and to resist patriarchal masculinity has become more prevalent.

In 1992, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson published their study Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America (1992), in which they discuss the uses of “cool” within contemporary African American urban communities. Don Belton edited a collection, Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream (1995), by African American men who had “inherited a legacy of masculine silence about one’s own pain going back seven generations”(3). The essays in Black Men Speaking (1997) continue to address the troubling codes of Black masculinity. Michael O’Neal analyzes what he sees as a part of the problem with contemporary African American men’s ideas of masculinity:

I want to tell a lot of you, my brothers, that most of us don’t even deal with our own personal pain, our own personal suffering, or even with what our own personal definition of manhood is. The sad truth is that a number of us lack self-esteem and self-confidence, and because of this, too many of us use the little head between our legs as a measurement of our manhood. Not enough of us realize that manhood is the harmony of mind and spirit and not the size of or frequency with which one uses his penis. (149).
O’Neal’s assessment of African American men’s self alienation and its concomitant sexual acting out is echoed in another essay in the same collection, David Nicholson’s “What It feels Like to Be a Problem”

The thing is, black men aren’t supposed to admit to vulnerability. Hemingway’s dictum about courage being grace under pressure is supposed to be the code we live by. As children we aren’t just told that boys don’t cry, we’re encouraged to fight, and not merely to redress some childhood wrong, but for the entertainment of older black men on street corners and sidewalks and playgrounds. We grow up learning to pretend we have no feelings. We are supposed to be cool, cooler than cool. Cold. Icemen." (170-71)

This coolness that Nicholson speaks of has long been a part of African-American male performance of masculinity; it is this display of “cool” or self control that Billson and Majors analyze in their text Cool Pose. Billson and Majors explain the double edge nature of what they call “the cool pose”; on the one hand it “embodies the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the black male self. People are drawn to the power of the cool black male because he epitomizes control, strength, and pride”(2), indeed this type of cool performance might have helped usher the first Black man into the Presidency of the United States. However, “on the other hand, being cool can become more important than life itself”(2); it could lead to “suicide, homicide, accidents …and illnesses…Cool pose is implicated in the fact that…the young black male in America is an endangered species”(2-3). This latter model of the cool pose is more often time than not performed by Black boys and men of the lower classes. While boys and men of the lower classes may not have economic or political control, they are able to exercise control over their own bodies and emotions. Sociologist Victor Seidler writes that “through a widespread identification of masculinity with self-control, men learn to relate to emotions as threats to their male identities” (95). Therefore, masculine heroes’ emotions are limited to
either stoic and emotionless or angry. Under heterogeneous patriarchal norms, expression of emotions would weaken the already fragile constructed identity of the Black male. Shame, fear, and/or love are seen as feminine attributes and Black boys/men who express them are seen as unmanly or worse yet, womanish. Cade explains, “If a man is at all sensitive, tender, spiritual, he’s a faggot” (102). As a result, the only emotion allowed to Black boys and men is anger.

The 21st century has seen African American men and women go beyond merely breaking the silence around patriarchal Black masculinity to now calling for new and progressive forms of Black masculinity. With her two texts Will to Change and We Real Cool, both of which were published in 2004, hooks continues her assault on imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy and Black men’s acceptance of that mode of masculinity. Mark Anthony Neal’s New Black Man (2005) also demands a significantly different model of Black masculinity. Neal does not claim to be the new Black man he calls for; rather, he suggests that it is a “metaphor for an imagined life.” He continues:

New Black Man represents my efforts to create new tropes of black masculinity that challenge the most negative stereotypes associated with black masculinity, but more importantly, counter stringently sanitized images of black masculinity, largely created by blacks themselves in response to racist depictions of black men...New Black Man posits, indeed celebrates, new visions of black masculinity not beholden to conservative and essentialist notions of how black men should act in American society, a black masculinity that, for example, takes lessons from the progressive politics of the black feminist movement.(xxi)

In his text Neal explains that the current focus on the hip-hop generation as the lost generation of Black manhood is disingenuous. He suggests instead that it is the middle class, educated heterosexual Black man, comfortable within American patriarchy that presents the bigger threat to Black communities and Black families (3). Neal’s text is part memoir and part manifesto, and with it he provides a working template for the “New
Black Man.” For Neal, a “New Black Man” must be willing to move beyond patriarchy, he must be anti-sexist and anti-homophobic.

One theme that I explore in my analysis of the films and texts in this study is that of homosocial bonding. I use the term homosocial bonding here not to denote a homosexual relationship between male characters, however, I do wish to evoke Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s notion of a continuum between the homosocial and homosexual desire. In her influential text *Between Men*, Sedgwick writes that homosocial is a term used to describe social bonds between persons of the same sex; the term is formed by an analogy with, but also meant to be distinguished from homosexuality. She explains that the term can be applied to activities between men such as a bonding experience via homophobia. She continues, “To draw the ‘homosocial’ back into the orbit of ‘desire,’ of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted” (2-3). I find Sedgwick’s argument useful in my analysis because I see this homosocial desire as a symptom of phallocentric masculinity, one that blinds most men to an alternative performance of masculinity, one in which women are traded, rejected, and used in order to ground one’s own position in patriarchy.

Queer theory also provides me with the necessary framework to engage ideas of nonnormative expressions of male gender and sexual performances. In many of the cultural productions that I analyze in this project, the male protagonists inhabit worlds that are almost exclusively masculine. When women are present, more often than not, they are reviled, the conduit through which “unmanly” emotions are expressed or they
are simply traded as sexual objects; in this way their bodies are used to create lasting bonds between the men who trade and use them. Conversely, these men develop strong emotional, loving relationships between each other. I see many of these relationships between men as queer. While the aforementioned homosocial bonding provides a useful critique of this mode of male bonding, queer theory can open up spaces for discussing new modes of identity formation for Black males. As with homosocial desire, the use of the term queer does not automatically indicate a homosexual relationship between men. However, I do wish to draw attention to the possibility for such relationships whether acknowledged or not by the characters in film and literature or the creators of those characters (writers, actors, directors, et al). That said, a performance of masculinity could lie anywhere on a the continuum between the possibility of a loving male to male relationships on the one hand, a seemingly nonsexual identity on the other, or a rejection of the codes of patriarchal masculinity all together. Gust Yep explains that

In a narrow sense, “queer” is intended to mean lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirited, transgender, intersexed, questioning, or different because of one’s sexual orientation, presentation, or identity…In a broader sense, ‘queer’ signifies nonnormativity… “queerness takes its bearings in defining itself against normativity, not heterosexuality; given the fact that heterosexuality is nothing if not normative.” (36)

Offering a queer reading of the hypermasculine Black male heroes is one strategy I offer in moving towards the idea of a New Black Man.

This project is meant to take up hooks and Neal’s challenge to move toward a progressive Black masculinity by interrupting the silences around scenes of trauma in popular cultural productions in which Black boys are indoctrinated into manhood. In much of our popular culture violence against young Black boys is represented as
natural routine occurrences which warrant no special attention. Generally, it is silently accepted as a necessary stage to manhood. But if we are to become the new, progressive Black men that hooks and Neal call for we must begin to fill the silences. My project will show that while unnoticed, and with varying degrees of success, African American and Afro-Caribbean filmmakers and writers have indeed begun to challenge patriarchal constructs of masculinity.

In the first two chapters of the dissertation I show how phallocentric patriarchal modes of masculinity have been conveyed through foundational film performances. My analysis begins in Chapter One with two highly influential films that focus on Black masculinity, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *The Harder They Come* (1972) from the United States and Jamaica respectively. I argue that the representation of Black masculinity influenced by the Black Power movement in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s was transported to the Caribbean via the film *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, and those influences are clearly seen in *The Harder They Come*. I use hooks’ concept of soul murder to discuss the pivotal scene in the films in which the young male protagonists are transformed into the “Bad Man” hero. These films are important because of their significant impact on the film industry in their respective countries. However, they present a silent acceptance of traumatic violence (rape and government sanctioned physical violence) as a necessary step in preparing Black boys to become strong Black men and enter the cult of black masculinity. This image of Black masculinity set the model for the filmic representation of Black masculinity in America and the Caribbean.
In Chapter Two, I examine two contemporary films, *Baadasssss* (2003) from the United States and the *Shottas* (2002) from Jamaica. Forty years have passed since the release of *Sweetback* and *Harder*, but little has changed in the representations of silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage into manhood for Black boys. These contemporary films and film makers tentatively attempt to challenge patriarchy and the effects of the trauma represented in the earlier films. However, rather than posit a progressive presentation of Black masculinity, they remain ambivalent and ultimately continue to validate the silent acceptance of trauma as the path to patriarchal masculinity.

The last two chapters of the dissertation explore the careers of two Afro-Caribbean men who have been influential in the shaping of African American performance of Black masculinity. In Chapter Three, I analyze Black British writer Caryl Phillips’ novel about Bert Williams, the Black Bahamian actor who performed in blackface and became the most famous Black performer of the early Twentieth Century. Phillips’s work challenges the accepted code of masculinity by articulating the effects of trauma in the lives of his protagonists. Phillips also makes clear that Afro-Caribbean masculinity and trauma differ significantly from that of African American men in that it often features migration to the metropole, doubling the experience of Diaspora. A reading of Phillips’ oeuvre reveals that since his early career he has been preoccupied with themes of manhood, migration, and melancholia. In multiple novels, his male protagonists migrate to the metropole only to be haunted by ultimately unresolved melancholia. I begin my analysis with Phillips’ first novel *Final Passage* (1985) and conclude with his recent *Dancing in the Dark* (2005).
In Chapter four, I utilize Mark Anthony Neal’s metaphor of the “New Black Man” to analyze the life and autobiographic text of the Bahamian born actor, writer, director, and producer, Sir Sidney Poitier. Poitier is arguably one of the most significant cultural icons of the later Twentieth century inextricably connected with the popular image of African American manhood and masculinity. Through his autobiographic writing over the last thirty years, Poitier has consistently challenged the limited phallocentric patriarchal representations of Black masculinity. While Poitier does use his memoirs to defend and reassert his own masculinity, he simultaneously challenges the code of phallocentric patriarchal masculinity by disrupting the popular masculinist narrative of boyhood and refusing to silently accept traumatic violence as a rite of passage into manhood. As the first Black man to win an Academy Award for acting in a motion picture during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, Poitier remains a significant figure in African American popular culture. At the height of his career, Poitier’s perceived “integrationist” roles were heavily criticized by his detractors, but Poitier’s memoirs function, in part, as a response to the overwhelming negative response to his onscreen and sometimes off screen performance of Black masculinity.
I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me.

Frantz Fanon

This chapter investigates common tropes found in the filmic performances of Black masculinities in the Anglophone Caribbean and the United States in the early 1970s at the height of the Black Power movement. I am specifically concerned with the ways that traumatic violence and its corollary silence is continually presented in the stories of Black urban youth culture as rites of passage that move Black boys into manhood. I am most interested in the urban or what some might call “gangsta” genre of African American, Afro Caribbean, and Black-oriented film since they tend to focus exclusively on issues of Black masculinity. This genre of film usually claims to, or is assumed to offer an authentic view into the Black male experience. In many instances, however, this view of the Black male experience “in the hood” is usually, at worst, romanticized or, at best, an uncritical representation of traumatic violence as rites of passage for poor urban youth. I trace these representations with what are arguably two of the most innovative and influential Black films at the time, coming out of America and Jamaica: \textit{Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song} (1971), and \textit{The Harder They Come} (1972) respectively. Because of their lasting cultural impact and phenomenal box office sales,

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4 \textit{Black Skin, White Mask} 140

5 Though discussions regarding what constitutes a “Black film” remain vexed, I consider Mark Reid’s discussion useful for my purposes. Reid defines African American films as “any film whose central narrative explores the life and experience of the African Diaspora in the United States. Additionally, the term African American film refers only to films directed, written, or cowritten by members of this community [I use Afro Caribbean in a similar way specific to the Caribbean]. The term black-oriented film denotes similar black-focused films whose directors and screenwriters are nonblack” (Reid \textit{Redefining Black Film} 1).
both films can be considered foundational in Black filmic production in their respective countries. While both films did offer groundbreaking portrayals of revolutionary Black masculinity, those portrayals, nevertheless, remained wrapped up in a capitalist white supremacist patriarchal notion of masculinity. A close reading of both films’ use of traumatic violence as rites of passage for Black boys into manhood, silence and denial of male emotion, and spontaneous violence as a revolutionary act, will illustrate that rather than defy the status quo, the characters upheld a patriarchal rule that maintained a subordinate position for Blacks, women, and homosexuals.

**Sweetback’s Revenge: Harder Black Man on Film**

Garnering national and international acclaim in the early 1970s, Melvin Van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) became one of the highest grossing independent films of that year. Initially opening at only two theatres, one in Detroit and the other in Atlanta, *Sweetback* quickly became a hit and went on to pack theatres across the country. The film gained even more popularity after being viewed by the Minister of Defense for the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, who promptly made the film required viewing for all current and potential Party members; he also dedicated an entire issue of the Black Panther Party’s newspaper to the film penning a review of the film himself in which he proclaimed it revolutionary. Van Peebles acknowledges that his film would not have become the success it was had it not been seen by members of the California branch of the Black Panther Party. With a production budget of about $500,000 the film went on to gross an estimated $10-million dollars at the box office. Film scholar Mark Reid credits Van Peebles’ revolutionary film as helping to usher in the “second renaissance in black independent filmmaking” in the United States (*Black Lenses* 9), while cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal asserts that
“Sweetback was in fact a revolutionary character, paving the way for portrayals of Black masculinity previously absent in mainstream film” (24). After years of being marginalized and represented as stereotypical caricatures in mainstream Hollywood movies, Sweetback gave the working class or urban Black community a hero it could be proud of. Fanon says of the typical images of the Negro on film “on the screen his Negro essence, his Negro ‘nature,’ is kept intact: always a servant / always obsequious and smiling / me never steal, me never lie / eternally ‘sho’ good eatin’…” (italics mine 186). In writing about his inspiration to create a character like Sweetback and develop the plot for the film Van Peebles states:

I made the picture because I was tired of taking the Man’s crap and of having him define who we were to us. Sick and tired of watching the parade of jigaboos, valets and tap-dancing coons on the big screen, I felt we had the right to define who we were to ourselves. I am most proud of the fact that I decided to do something about it. (29)

Van Peebles, like Fanon before him, waited to see a real representation of himself on screen. But unimpressed with what he saw and refusing to wait any longer, he created this man in his own image. He created Sweetback, a Black man from the streets who defies (and kills) corrupt police officers, saves the life of a revolutionary community leader, and eventually escapes to Mexico.

This image of a new Black man soon became pervasive as Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song effectively ushered in what is called by many the blaxploitation film

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6 Reid traces out the three major epochs of African American film: the first, 1912-1940s saw the advent of “race films” by independent African American film makers such as The Johnson brothers and Oscar Micheaux. Second, the late 1960s – mid 1970s which included documentary filmmakers like Carroll Parrott Blue and St. Clair Bourne as well as both non-university and university trained film makers which included Van Peebles, Charles Burnette and Julie Dash. Finally, the 1990s introduced African American filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Kasi Lemmons, and Mario Van Peebles. (Black Lenses 7-13)

7 Besides writing, directing and producing the film, scoring and performing on the soundtrack, he also starred as the titular character.
era. This rash of similarly themed films was, more times than not, written and produced by whites; however, they were directed by African Americans, and featured a predominantly African American cast. Most of the films featured a male lead wearing this new Black masculinity as stylishly as he did his afro (and in the case of select pimps, his perm). Van Peebles takes no joy in the association of his film with what he sees as the far less political films of the blaxploitation era. He asserts “Hollywood took my formula, diminished the concept of negritude to a flamboyant cartoon, and reversed the political message turning it into a counter revolutionary one. And voila, out of the commercial success of Sweetback, to make a long story short, the blaxploitation movie was born” (*Classified X*). The blaxploitation era in American film history continues to be a bone of contention for many critics. Gladstone Yearwood charges,

Blaxploitation films compromised black cultural signification because they were contemporary white productions in blackface. These films were produced by whites (and some blacks), featured black casts and were set in black communities. Economic exploitation of the black audience was the principal reason for their existence (43).

William Grant, on the other hand, who argues the necessity of the blaxploitation era in the development the current Black film industry, sees the era in a much more positive light. He explains that blaxploitation films “featured Black heroes and heroines, trying to gain money, justice, glamour and power, stuck in White-dominated culture”(41). While

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8 According to Grant, “The number of films produced between 1970 and 1975 varies widely, from 50 films to 200 are considered blaxploitation.” He mostly agrees with Marshall Hyatt’s account of “57 films produced between 1970 and 1975” as fitting “neatly into the rubric blaxploitation.” However, “there are several films whose inclusion raises questions about the criteria used in compiling the list. His list includes films which while exploitative, might not necessarily fit the rubric...” Grant notes Gerald Martinez’s more recent yet still troublesome account of “close to 150 films...whose inclusion has to be questioned, Nothing But A Man (Cinema V, 1964), For The Love of Ivy (Cinerama, 1968), and The Harder They Come (New World Pictures, 1973)” Grant asks whether Black films produced prior to Sweetback, Shaft, and Superfly “be considered blaxploitation film?” His answer is “Not really, because the aesthetic issues, production values and marketing strategies that led to the coining of the term blaxploitation did not coalesce until after the release of the big three” (41).
I agree with Yearwood that Hollywood did exploit Black audiences by pumping out cheaply made, poorly produced films for their consumption, I also agree with Grant’s positivist outlook on the importance of the Black hero imagery within those films. For better or worse the blaxploitation era significantly changed the way Blacks were seen as film makers, subjects, and audiences. Van Peebles will always be associated with the genre despite his objections and refusals to be seen as a part of the blaxploitation film era, much less the pioneer, since this genre of film began with the astounding success of *Sweetback*. Of this film, Edward Guerrero writes, “[b]ecause of its independent ‘guerilla financing’ strategy, and the aesthetic, gender, and political debates that it still inspires, *Sweet Sweetback*…stands as a salient marker in the discourse on the construction of Black manhood” (*Traps* 275). It is fair to suggest then that Van Peebles’ impact on African American cinema, independent cinema, and African American popular culture is undeniable.

While *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassssss Song* set into motion the blaxploitation film era in the United States, the Jamaican film industry was also beginning to take shape with the release of the 1972 action film *The Harder They Come*. In the article “Shape and Shaping of Caribbean Cinema,” Mbye Cham explains that historically a majority of the islands in the Caribbean remained “subjected to a dominant regime of foreign film culture, itself a derivative of the history of plantation slavery and western imperial and colonial exploitation and of the resultant social-political, economic, and cultural relations of dependency of the Caribbean on the west” (242). However, he goes on to point out that “it is only in the 1970s and, more significantly, the 1980s that one begins to witness the beginnings of a shift, no matter how feeble, toward the
position of producer/transmitter” (242). Though Cham’s overall project is concerned with the filmic productions of the French and Dutch Caribbean, he does concede that “awareness of indigenous film practices by the people who inhabit the various islands of the Caribbean tended to be limited to one film, Perry Henzell’s The Harder They Come from Jamaica” (244). The film, the first full length feature produced locally, was initially banned by Jamaican censors, but upon being viewed by the then newly elected Prime Minister Michael Manley, it was edited by the censors and subsequently released to the public. Henzell reports that the film was an instant success. In a 2001 interview with the online magazine Zink Fence, he recalls excitement and pandemonium surrounding the opening of the film in Kingston, Jamaica:

In those days it was one big 1500 seat theatre [the Carib Theatre]. Outside, the crowd was so big that you could not see the end of it. There was a huge industrial chain link fence around the theatre and the crowd just flattened it. They broke the doors down. When there were three people in every seat, we ran the film. People just started screaming. It was unbelievable. It was every director’s wildest fantasy. It ran for several months, and at two other cinemas. It just took over Kingston.

The film went on to win awards at film festivals from as far away as Ireland and Venice; it was a smash hit in London, and eventually moved on to the United States where, according to Hanzell, it played for seven years, making it the “second or third longest running picture in the history of the United States cinema” (A Hard Road). The Harder They Come is also noteworthy because of its accompanying soundtrack, which introduced the world to recording artist Jimmy Cliff and reggae music. The movie and soundtrack paved the way for up and coming reggae artists such as Bob Marley and the Wailers, whose major-label-debut Catch a Fire would be released the following year.

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9 A Hard Road, a documentary about the making and success of The Harder They Come, appears on the extra features section of the 2000 DVD release of the film.
(1973) and take the world by storm. Like *Sweetback* did in the U.S., *The Harder They Come* has had and continues to have a major impact on the Jamaican as well as the larger Caribbean film and music industries and popular culture\(^\text{10}\).

**Black Power, Independent Film, and the Black Cowboy**

It is because of the undeniable influence that the two films have had on the production of Black popular culture that an analysis of their representation of traumatic violence and silence as rites of passage is warranted. But before I analyze this very troubling trope, it will be useful to outline the many other similarities *Sweetback* and *The Harder They Come* share. Both films were independent endeavors produced outside of the Hollywood machine in the early 1970s, and against all odds both small films went on to unbelievable success. But the similarities go even further; the very storyline of the films are somewhat comparable. *Sweetback* is the story of a non-political hustler who comes into his awareness of self after seeing another Black man victimized by the police. *Sweetback* kills the two police officers while defending the young Black militant called Moo-Moo. He subsequently goes on the run from the corrupt legal system and is aided along the way by members of the Black community. *Sweetback* becomes an antihero who functions outside of the law. He becomes a symbol and hero of a people who, according to Van Peebles, were tired of the white man’s foot up their ass. After evading several confrontations with unscrupulous law enforcement officers and becoming the embodiment of resistance for his community, *Sweetback* escapes to Mexico.

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\(^\text{10}\) Inspired by the film, in 1980 Michael Thelwell wrote a best-selling novel of the same name and in 2005 *The Harder They Come* was developed into a stage musical by the Theatre Royal Stratford East and UK Arts Productions in London.
Similarly, Henzell’s *The Harder They Come*, released shortly after *Sweetback*, features a protagonist, Ivan, who eventually becomes tired of the man’s foot up his ass.\textsuperscript{11} This pioneering film tells the story of Ivanhoe Martin, a naive country boy who comes to the big city, Kingston, to find his fortune as a singer but instead falls victim to a neocolonial state represented by perverse religion, unscrupulous (music) industry, and corrupt justice systems. After killing a police officer in what he understands as self defense, Ivan, like Sweetback, goes on the run from corrupt police officers and his onetime friend, and police informant, Jose.\textsuperscript{12} Ivan too, like Sweetback, is assisted by members of the community who see him as a hero for fighting back against an oppressive neo-colonial judicial system. The film ends finally with Ivan as the martyred antihero of the oppressed people of the slums. Ivan is shot down in a hail of bullets as he attempts to make his escape to Cuba. The screenplay for *Harder* is actually based on the real adventures of Ivanhoe Martin, also known as Rhyging, who was somewhat of a folk hero to many sufferers.\textsuperscript{13} An outlaw mystique clearly underlies the two films.

\textsuperscript{11} While for Sweetback “the Man” might mean the white controlled government and law enforcement agencies, for the Jamaican Ivan “the Man” would mean white and Black neocolonial government and law enforcement agencies.

\textsuperscript{12} Ivan shoots the officer because he thinks that if he is caught by the police he would be publicly flogged. In an earlier scene Ivan is flogged after being arrested for fighting and cutting a man’s face.

\textsuperscript{13} Kevin Aylmer provides an overview of the exploits of the real Ivan Martin: “For a few brief weeks, this little gunman desperado astonished Kingstonians with a flurry of robberies and shootings and a Robin Hood-style bravado. The island’s premier newspaper, the Daily Gleaner, followed his exploits for six weeks during the autumn of 1948. It reported on the ‘two gun’ killer of one Detective Lewis and of Lucille Tibby Young; on a spree of shoplifting and larceny in and around West Kingston; on a stint in prison; and his aliases, ‘Alan Ladd’ and ‘Captin Midnight.’ Born Vincent Martin in Linstead, St. Catherine, he was variously known as ‘Ivan Martin,’ ‘Ivanhoe Martin,’ ‘Ivan Brown,’ and ‘Rhyging’ or ‘Rhygin.’ He eventually escaped from the general penitentiary and became something of a folk hero, taunting the authorities with photos of himself brandishing a brace of pistols. Eventually cornered by the police about seven miles from the old pirate haunt of Port Royal on Lime Cay, he came to an ignominious end on October 9, 1948” (Chanting Down Babylon 284).
Both Henzell and Van Peebles are inspired by European cowboy/outlaw films of the 1960s. To be sure, Van Peebles’ film could be seen as a modern spaghetti western set in the hood. Van Peebles’ relationship to the Western can be traced via a scene from *Baadasssss aka How to Get the Man’s Foot Outta Your Ass* (2003), a feature film on the making of the original *Sweetback* by Van Peebles’ son, Melvin.¹⁴ In the scene Van Peebles meets with his agent on the set of an unnamed Western; the film within a film features a sheriff in black followed by a shuffling and giggling Black man carrying suitcases. The scene is no doubt meant to exemplify the way most Black men were portrayed in Hollywood films of the seventies in general but Westerns in particular. The scene continues as the director of the Western yells “cut” and the camera pans to Van Peebles who complains about the portrayal of the Black character. His agent reassures Van Peebles that the actor is being paid: “it’s a western, everybody loves a western,” to which Van Peebles replies: “speaking of westerns this idea I gat is kinda like a ghetto western in fact the brother even wears like a black kinda cowboy hat.” This scene suggests that Van Peebles was quite aware of his films borrowing from the western genre. Henzell was also invested in this genre of film. Aylmer writes that “*The Harder They Come* is eerily reminiscent of American westerns and ‘spaghetti westerns’ of Sergio Leone, for instance, *Once upon a Time in the West* and the ‘Dollars’ trilogy (*Hang ‘Em High, A Fistful of Dollars, and For a Few Dollars More*)” (285). Henzell readily admits his debt to European cowboy/outlaw films as his inspiration. In fact, the film begins with what might be seen as homage to the ‘shoot em up’ genre. Viewers are introduced to Ivan as he travels by bus into the city. Once there, Ivan’s first order of

¹⁴ I will analyze this film in more detail in the next chapter.
business is to see his mother to inform her of her mother’s death; his second order of business is to attend the cinema to watch a “spaghetti western,” Django (1966). From the look of the faces of the young Jamaican men who sit in the cinema next to Ivan it is clear that many of them identify with the outlaw hero they see on the screen even though he is white and “American.” But it is just as clear that Henzell is also indebted to the genre.

Besides their spaghetti western legacy these films also share a rootedness in the Black experience which makes them very different from their European/United States counterparts. Undoubtedly, the timing of both films’ release was considerably important to their success. Events from the decade leading up to the ‘71/’72 release dates of the films in the United States and Jamaica were critical to the forming of Black identity; the culmination of these events and a new world view of Blackness surely coalesce in the formation of the films’ protagonists. The 1960s was a turbulent period of profound change for Blacks in both the United States and Jamaica. The early 1950s Civil Rights movement gave way to the more aggressive Black Power movement. Even though the nonviolent movement led to the passing of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1965, and 1968, African Americans still suffered from de facto racism, disproportionate poverty, and police brutality. With the passing of the Civil Rights Acts in 1964, African Americans expected full integration into social, political, and economic fabric of American culture; however, the assassination of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy among others, proved that Blacks in America had a long way to go.

Some younger African Americans, former members of the Civil Rights nonviolent movement, became disillusioned with the system and in response to the continued
violence meted out on Black bodies across the country formed the Black Panther Party in 1966. The Black Panther Party (BPP) rejected the tenets of the Civil Rights nonviolence ideology and adopted a stance of self-defense and self governance. The BPP coined the slogan “Black Power” and ignited the spark of Black Nationalism among the Black masses. Influences of this new Black Power Movement (BPM) were widespread and could also be found in cultural productions by African Americans of the time, such as James Brown’s hit “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” and the work of poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. In the world of sports no one embodied this new attitude of Black Power and Black Nationalism like Muhammad Ali. In the early 1960s the heavyweight boxing champion joined the nation of Islam, changed his name from Cassius Clay and refused to ‘serve his country’ by fighting in the Vietnam War, arguing that “the Viet Cong were not the enemy of Black people” (Trotter 602).

Though the BPM originated in the United States, its influence was felt worldwide. In a 2004 interview for the documentary How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It), former assistant to Huey Newton, Billy “X” Jennings, reveals that

The impact of Huey and the Black Panther Party could be felt throughout the world…even Mandela talks about the Party being a strong, positive image, something that kept him going all those years when he was in prison in South Africa. Stephen Biko started a Black Panther Party. The militancy of the BPM as well as its valorization of Black art and Black beauty proliferated all across the Black Atlantic as far away as South Africa, validating the

15 Jennings continues: “The Grey Panther Party, who were senior citizens; the Polynesian Panther Party, they have a Panther Party in India, you know, the lower-class people there, they call them the untouchables. They have a caste system in India, so they have a Panther Party in India that represents the lower-class people because the word Panther stands for freedom fighter, someone who stands up for their rights.
struggles and showing camaraderie with those who opposed oppression and were strong enough to stand against it. Black Power consciousness also permeated the Caribbean. According to historian Veront Satchell,

The Black Power Movement, which engulfed the United States during the late 1960s, developed on the island [Jamaica] in part as a direct response to white racism locally and as a show of solidarity with black liberation and anti-imperialist struggles internationally. In 1968 students of the Mona, Jamaica, campus of the University of the West Indies donated money to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the United States to assist its struggle against racism. (Africana.com)

As the Negritude movement before it, the BPM clearly united the struggle for freedom of Black people across the world. But while influenced by the Pan-Africanist sentiments of the BPM, there were also localized issues that lead to the development and acceptance of the cinematic character of Ivan in Jamaica. Jamaica gained its independence from Great Britain in 1962; and the first ten years post-independence saw many changes in the country. Unfortunately, independence failed to bring economic opportunities to the Black working poor and peasant majority, and was recognized by the intellectuals as a failure by the end of the 1960s. The hope of independence was soon replaced by politically charged violence caused by lack of opportunities and high unemployment rates led to the development of rude boy culture; but the period also saw the development of ska, which would eventually become reggae music. Gordon Rohlehr provides a brief overview of this tumultuous period; “There were racial riots in 1965; the bull-dozing in 1966 of hundreds of squatters from the West Kingston area; the growing anarchy of the dispossessed, who were driven even from the cemetery; the organization
of violence along party lines in 1967” (89)\textsuperscript{16}. During this period says G. White, (as early as 1962) the “rude bwoy” was “heralded” in popular music and “another musical ode, this time by the ‘Wailers’ in late 1965 signaled that rude bwoy was no passing indulgence but a very real element” (41). Rohlehr explains that

Jamaica had moved from the era of Brother Man, the ritualist, to that of Rudy, the anarchist...The Rudies...are like the early Blues men who sing their devil music...anarchists, who celebrate anarchy as the only true freedom left in the world. The term ‘rudeness’ is used to connote a disrespect for authority in any form. (90).

This shift in terms, from “Brother Man” to “Rudy,” demonstrates a philosophical shift in the minds of some Jamaican men. Rather than the pious Brother who follows the rules and waits for his reward in the afterlife, the “Rudy” will not follow unjust rules that maintain his second class status. The Rudy functions outside the law and will not ask for the scraps from the master’s table but will take what he wants. This same juxtaposition can be made with their American counterparts, the Civil Rights activist and the Black Power militant as they were embodied in Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X respectively. It is plain to see then that the political, social, and cultural milieu in the United States and in Jamaica were quite similar in the years leading up to the release of the two films I examine here. The Black power sentiment sweeping across the Black Atlantic added a timely urgency to the stories of Sweetback and Ivan Martin as proud, powerful Black men bucking the system, and the films in return reiterated the zeitgeist.

\textsuperscript{16} See Aylmer for a more detailed discussion of the social and political upheavals of the period; conditions, he argues, which “made this environment ripe for an artistic response to the potentially explosive mixture of popular discontents” (286).
Patriarchy and the Authentic Black Man

In addition to being conceived of and produced under very similar circumstances, both films are preoccupied with a particular representation of Black masculinity steeped in patriarchy. As I stated in the introduction, the model of masculinity for the newly liberated African American as well as Afro-Caribbean man of the 1960s was that of his oppressor, and for many Blacks of the time, liberation meant inclusion into patriarchal systems of government and economics for the Black man who had been ‘castrated’ and disenfranchised by oppressive colonialism. In the Caribbean, Patricia Mohammed writes, “[a]lthough they were excluded from control over resources and from equal access to power with their European counterparts, African men, and later Indian, Chinese, and Portuguese men came to internalize and support these very same patriarchal standards” (59). In other words, they molded themselves in the image of the patriarch, albeit in Black, Brown, and Yellow skin. In his work Pedagogy of the Oppressed, educationalist Paolo Freire explains this seemingly contradictory impulse: “During the initial stages of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors…Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity” (27). In Cool Pose, Richard Majors and Janet Billson further argue that African-American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector. Unlike white men, however, blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success. Many have become frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated, and impatient. (1)

What Majors and Billson show us here is that the patriarchy game is fixed and the rules are different for Black men because they are denied access to the means to play the game. Further, in addition to denying Black men access to the material and financial
signifiers of manhood, this imperialist, white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy denies emotional expressions such as love or fear, deeming them unmanly while encouraging and engendering other emotions such as anger.

Besides their concerns with patriarchal constructs of masculinity, the films I analyze in this chapter and the one that follows are concerned with what they see as realistic portraits of the urban Black male experiences. They were promoted as gritty, realistic, and even authentic insights into the Black (African American or Afro Caribbean) experience.\(^\text{17}\) It is to this claim of the “real” and “authentic” coupled with scenes of traumatic violence as rites of passage in the filmic representations of urban Black boys into manhood that I will now turn.

In his book *Reading Race*, Norman Denzin writes that Black filmmakers of the 1990s were “committed to a mimetic conception of representation […] they sought to present the referential realities of race using a grammar of visual or mimetic realism” (176-77). Though Denzin refers to filmmakers of the 1990s specifically, I suggest that this phenomenon is not unique to 90s era films, but in fact is also true of their predecessors. The unspoken assumption made of minority films, by Hollywood executives and viewers alike, is that this work will reveal some authentic or real vision of that community; this seems especially true of Black films. This assumption is given further credibility when Black filmmakers themselves profess that their films do indeed represent the *real*. However, as Denzin uncovers, there are dangers inherent in accepting these films’ “mimetic realism.” He warns that “telling it like it is assumes that

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\(^{17}\) I see films such as *Boyz N the Hood, Juice, and Menace to Society* in the United States and *Third World Cop, Rude Boy, and Shottas* in Jamaica as following a mould set by *Sweetback* and *Harder* respectively. These films are also represented as the “real” and “authentic” representation of the “hood life.” I will analyze several of these films in the following chapter.
you can in fact tell it like it is; that there is but one telling. But this is not the case, for conservatives tell it differently than radical black feminists, for example” (177). Here, Denzin troubles the notion of an authentic *telling* of any experience as *telling* is always conditioned by perspective which makes all the difference.

In 1971 Melvin Van Peebles identified his film as just such a telling of the real Black male experience; and to be sure his telling is certainly not a “radical black feminist” one. Grant quotes a ’71 interview in which Van Peebles says of his film:

> Sweetback is the first Black movie that doesn’t cop out. *It tells you about Black life like it is — not like the man wants to hear it is…It shows a nigger that busts a White man’s head and gets away with it! Now, bourgeoisie critics don’t like that, but Black folks do. They scream and cry and laugh and yell at the brother on the screen. For the Black man, Sweetback is a new kind of hero* (38, italics mine).

Van Peebles’ claims knowledge of Black life in its entirety and suggests that his film represents that real Black [male] experience. He additionally assumes an awareness of the reaction of the real Black (again, read Black male) audience. As Van Peebles is Black and male himself, his claims are less likely to be questioned.

Further to the south, Perry Henzell and co-writer Trevor Rhone professed a similarly realistic representation of the Afro-Caribbean man through their film. In an audio interview, Henzell states that as a film maker, he is obsessed with realism and furthermore, with *Harder*, he wanted to offer an authentic Jamaican story.18 “My mark as a film maker,” says Henzell, “is to present Jamaican slices of life to the world at large” (*Hard Road* interview). In her article “The Harder They Come: Rougher Version,” Loretta Collins reports that Trevor Rhone, upon receiving Henzell’s original, “basically

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18 This interview is also in the special features section of the 30th Anniversary DVD release of *The Harder They Come*. 
started from scratch to draft a script that would reflect the realities that he understood as a black Jamaican”(60). Rhone as a Black Jamaican ‘from country’ is able to authenticate the script in ways that Henzell, a wealthy white Jamaican, could not. Collins further reports that with the new script in hand, the two writers “combed West Kingston, through Trenchtown, Jones Town, the Dungle, and Spanish Town, in search of filming locations—in actual rum shops, jukebox joints, and ganja haunts”(60). Both Sweetback which lists the “black community” as its stars, and Harder use local residents to people their fictional worlds. According to Collins, “with few exceptions, the actors were people off the streets. No one played a part too far removed from his own life experiences” (60). Certainly, a major reason for both productions’ use of the community members was a lack of funds to pay professional actors; however, the use of local residents certainly added an authenticity to the projects that could not be manufactured. For these reasons the claims to authenticity of both films are hard to dismiss.

Most interesting for my project though is that both films’ representations of this so-called authentic Black male experience rest on a masculinity defined through traumatic violence as rites of passage of boys into manhood; their masculinity is further ensured through the ability of the initiates to accept and suppress that traumatic violence silently. In essence, these boys experience soul murder. In both films, this traumatic violence takes place during childhood or a childlike phase, transforming the boys into, what inevitably becomes of all Black boys, angry (at the system) Black men. While I do not deny that traumatic violence may be the experience of some Black ‘boys in the hood,’ for example gang violence, police brutality, domestic (sexual and physical) abuse, the normalization of these experiences as rites of passage in film remains troublesome.
When the Black boys in these films experience traumatic violence, they are denied the opportunity to process/express their hurt, pain, and/or fear, and in fact they are meant to endure the traumatic violence as a rite of passage. By extension, the audience is also meant to accept this soul murder as a routine and necessary step for these boys to develop into the anti-heroes (read as new representation of Black man) they eventually become; however, the truth is, this is a misguided attempt to attain a place in imperialist white-supremacist patriarchal masculinity, and rather than challenge the system, it simply maintains the status quo.

**The Child as Father of Man: Death of the Boy and Birth of the Bad Man**

At this point, I turn to a close reading of the films to demonstrate the ways in which traumatic violence or soul murder is presented as rites of passage for the young Black male protagonists. Released a year apart and in the “first” and “third” worlds respectively, *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song* (1971) and *The Harder They Come* (1972), both present traumatic violence as a prerequisite in the development of not just the Black male but the Black male (anti)hero. The films’ refusal to allow their audiences to view the effects of the traumatic violence on the young protagonists in any significant way is a clear indication that the Black boys are not expected to experience traumatic violence as such but simply as a silent rite of passage. From its inception *Sweetback’s Baadassss Song* has courted controversy. Not only did Van Peebles shock producers with the concept of a Black antihero but he then decided to eschew Hollywood and make his film independently. Controversy only heightened upon the film’s release when audience members were confronted within the first minutes of the film with a sexual encounter between a young boy and an older prostitute. This scene has been a point of contention for over forty years. Most serious engagement in the origins and
development of independent African American cinema, by academics and lay critics alike, at some point has contended with *Sweetback* and the significance and value of this scene. Reid for example, analyzes the very different positions taken by the spokespersons for the Black Panther Party and Chicago’s theatre group the Kuumba Workshop upon release of the film. In his review of the film, minister of defense for BPP Huey Newton suggests that the sex act is in fact “‘a very sacred rite. For the boy, who was nourished to health, is now being baptized into manhood’”; but an oppositional view is advanced by the black cultural nationalist drama group Chicago’s Kuumba Workshop which viewed the sex scene as a “‘filthy, graphic look at one of the whores engaged in sexual intercourse with the boy’” (*Redefining Black Film* 80-81). In the September 1971 issue of *Ebony* magazine, Lerone Bennett is far less generous or euphemistic with his language when he writes that the scene depicts “the rape of a child by a 40-year–old prostitute.” The age of the boy in this film along with the explicit nature of the sex scene in some cases may cause concern if not outright objections from some viewers.

While debates focused on the child sex scene in *Sweetback* has preoccupied film critics since its release, not as much attention has been paid to the similar traumatic and violent rite of passage presented in *The Harder They Come*. The age difference between the protagonists and the perception that the traumatic violence as rite of passage in the latter film engendered via corporal punishment rather than sexual abuse may lead to some of this oversight, but I argue here that these two instances of soul murder share more in common than one might suspect, and it is important to view both in the same light.
Both scenes engage in eroticized violence against young Black boys. While it is presented as a seduction, I, like many critics before me, read the sex act in *Sweetback* as rape. Gladstone Yearwood argues that Van Peebles disrupts the simplistic reading of the scene as rape with the juxtaposition of religious music and sexual imagery: “The clustering of these images suggests new meanings that arise only with the juxtaposition of the visual and sound…The religious music [Wade in the Water and This Little Light of Mine] of the soundtrack counterpoints the sexual scene by injecting meanings of purification, baptism and initiation” (191). He then goes on to compare this scene to the opening scene of Gordon Park's *The Learning Tree* in which a similar initiation takes place between Newton, the young protagonist of that film and prostitute Big Mable. Yearwood argues that Van Peebles demystifies the sex act in ways that Parks’ film does not and is incredulous that critics complain about Van Peebles’ scene of ‘Initiation Into Manhood’ where little attention is paid to Parks’ (191). What is interesting about this argument is how heterosexual patriarchal gender norms guide both the films and the critiques of the films. Both *Sweetback* and *The Learning Tree* present images of older women bestowing manhood on pubescent boys, but how would the films and the critiques of the films differ if the roles were reversed? What would be the effects of an older male ‘initiating’ a thirteen year old girl in this way? What if the young boys were ‘initiated’ by an older male? It is unlikely that in either case the conversation would include words such as “purification, baptism, or initiation”; undoubtedly the scene would be viewed as rape and trauma. And in the case of the second scenario I suggest: with an older male as initiator of young boys, the conversation would certainly focus on the threat to manhood and masculinity rather than initiation and confirmation of it.
In *Sweetback*, the ‘initiation’ scene begins as the young boy, who earns his keep by doing odd jobs at the brothel, delivers towels to the rooms and the prostitute beckons him into the room. She disrobes and commands the young boy to do the same. The young boy silently and timidly obeys, and once he is nude and on top of the woman, she commands him to “move.” As the stone faced child silently obeys and begins to move, the prostitute writhes with pleasure. Despite Yearwood’s claims that Van Peebles’ filming technique disrupts the eroticizing gaze in this scene, and subsequent sex scenes in the film, I maintain that for the *imagined* audience for this film, the one Van Peebles claims to know and represent, erotica is not always a part of sexual intercourse, especially when sex is used to establish masculinity via domination of a female. In fact, the scene is presented in such a way that audiences, especially young Black men, are expected to cheer on the young hero—especially after the professional sex worker, much to her own surprise, is so overcome by the young boy’s *natural skills*, (indicated by the biting of her lips and clawing at his back) exclaims that he has a “sweet, sweetback.”19 In this, his first sexual encounter, the young hero is bestowed with a name—an identity—Sweetback, which establishes his machismo. Keith Nurse explains that in Latin America and the Caribbean, machismo is built on a “bolstering male reputation” which leads to “a masculine ideal stressing domination of women…[and] predatory sexuality” (8) Undeniably, Van Peebles used these sex scenes to bolster Sweetback’s masculinity via his sexual domination of women; this myth of the sexually potent Black man would have been well known and admired by the film’s audience.

Reid notes that Van Peebles “wanted to entertain and instruct the black audience whom

19 Prior to this scene the boy is unnamed and from this point on the character is only known as Sweetback.
he calls ‘Brer’ (brother): ‘If Brer is bored, he’s bored. One of the problems we must face squarely is that to attract the mass we have to produce work that not only instructs but entertains’” (Redefining Black Film 77). We see then that for Van Peebles, the imagined audience is urban, Black, male, and heterosexual. For Reid, “[t]his audience can be defined as a street-oriented film culture” (RBF 79). In response to Van Peebles’ statement however, we may need to ask ourselves, while entertaining, what type of instructions does he provide about Black masculinity?

In The Harder They Come, the protagonist, Ivanhoe Martin, is a young man in his late teens to early twenties; however, the narrative of the first half of the film goes to great length to show that Ivan is not yet a man and is actually very childlike. Ivan comes to Kingston from “country” a naive and trusting innocent. He thinks he will cut a record and become a star. But Ivan is still a boy; this is established by the opening scene where the camera focuses on a close up of Ivan’s smiling face as he looks out of the window of the bus, giddily waving at the driver of a convertible, followed by his nervous fondling of a mango he is bringing from “country” for his mother. A naïve country boy, Ivan is tricked and robbed of all his belongings moments after disembarking the bus in Kingston. He then pays a quick visit to his mother whom he informs of her mother’s (and Ivan’s primary caretaker’s) death. He gives his mother the remainder of what little cash he has left. Ivan then informs her of his decision to remain in the city and his plan to become a star. His mother, unsuccessful in convincing him to return to country, provides him with the address of a local pastor who provides assistance for the needy. Unfazed by his mother’s warning about the harsh reality of city life, and like an obstinate adolescent, a homeless, jobless, and broke Ivan decides to visit the cinema where he
watches a cowboy film. After days of wandering the city aimlessly, Ivan grudgingly finds
his way to the preacher whom his mother recommended he seek out. The preacher
gives him a job, but that relationship ends when Ivan seduces the preacher’s ward,
Elsa, whom we discover the preacher was “saving for himself.” When he is fired, Ivan
attempts to retrieve the bicycle he had refurbished, but his coworker claims the bike as
his own. In an earlier scene Longer, Ivan’s coworker, teases Ivan that he is still a “bwoy”
and sets him tasks such as passing the hammer and fetching the broom to sweep up
the shop in order to make the point. The two men fight for the bicycle, and after
receiving a cut himself Ivan ends the fight by slashing Longer’s face several times. Ivan
is jailed and ordered to receive eight lashes with the tamarind switch.

After the speedy trial Ivan is taken to a public area, stripped nude, tied over a
barrel, and whipped across the buttocks to the point of urinating on himself. Ivan’s
beating, I would argue, is nothing short of a sadomasochistic rape, both psychologically
and physically. Paradoxically, the beating which is meant, in this neocolonial milieu, to
emasculate and infantilize him, simultaneously initiates him into the cult of patriarchal
masculinity. Nurse points out that “[h]istorically[in the colonial context], subordinate
masculinities have been constructed and represented as effeminate and infantile to
distinguish them from the hegemonic forms. They have also been racialized and
sexualized as a means to justify their oppression” (original italics 7). Ivan’s
infantalization is clearly demonstrated through the beating and urination, but it is
important to analyze how the scene is also one of sexual domination. In discussing
public lynching and castration of Black men, Robyn Wiegman suggests that lynching
“enacts a grotesquely symbolic—if not literal—sexual encounter between the white mob
and its victim” (446). While Ivan is not lynched in the literal sense of the word, I would argue that the effects of the public beating are the same. As with the spectacle of a lynching, this beating provides voyeuristic sexual pleasure for the audience who witnesses it. The fact that Ivan is beaten by order of the court, that the sentence is carried out by a policeman dressed in uniform, and that the implementation of the order is a switch (wood) to the bare backside is significant in my reading of this scene in that it could be said that Ivan (like many poor Black and Brown men and women in the community) is raped by the system. While this particular scene demonstrates the physical raping of Ivan, the rest of the film indicates that he is also raped economically and psychologically. But it is Ivan’s ability to survive the trauma and to “take his punishment like a man” that transforms him into a member of patriarchal masculinity. Ivan’s public whipping, then, is the defining moment for him, his rite of passage from naive country boy into Kingstonian bad man.

The disturbing move in both Sweetback and Harder is the method by which the traumatic violence is negated and reframed as rites of passage into the cult of manhood. In Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song, the scene of the rape ends with a fully-grown Sweetback dismounting the prostitute and putting on his cap. In this case audiences can clearly understand that the sexual act, the rape of the child, has produced the man: Sweetback, legendary cocksman and soon to be revolutionary. The scene following Sweetback’s transformation finds him as the star of the brothel’s sex show; this establishes his sexual prowess and even establishes his threat to the status quo as he is willing and able to pleasure any female in the room, many of whom are

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20 In the local parlance of Jamaican patois, wood means penis.
white. His willingness to publicly engage sexually with both Black and white women marks Sweetback as an outlaw, his readiness to do it in front of white men marks him as dangerous as he does not seem concerned with the white man’s law against miscegenation. But while his sexuality marks him as outlaw, it is the scene in which Sweetback bludgeons two white police officers that mark him as outlaw-hero.

In *The Harder They Come*, we do not see the physical manifestation of the change from boy to man as in *Sweetback*, but Ivan’s persona drastically changes after his fight, imprisonment, and whipping. Unlike *Sweetback*, *Harder* does not totally negate Ivan’s pain; nonetheless, it produces a similar effect by juxtaposing the emasculating whipping scene with a reaffirmation of Ivan’s masculinity. The scene immediately following Ivan’s whipping shows Ivan’s face buried in Elsa’s naked breasts. Ivan gives the audience his back; as low, muffled moans come from Ivan, the camera zooms in and focuses on a tight shot of Elsa’s tear-stained face. Ivan appears to be naked in this scene, as does Elsa. Viewers are only allowed to see Ivan’s back, while his sobs are barely audible; what viewers do see are dark shadows, pain, fear, and sadness written across Elsa’s face. In this scene, the female body is used as conduit of male emotion. Since patriarchal masculinity does not allow men to be seen crying, the audience is not allowed to see Ivan’s tears, only Elsa’s, in this moment of pain and despair.

In the following scene Ivan is a changed man; he is more serious and much more aggressive. We find Ivan in the studio with cigarette in hand, (we have not seen him smoke prior to this) singing the titular song *The Harder They Come*. Ivan’s new attitude is presented in the lyrics of the song and is clearly displayed in Ivan’s interaction with Mr. Hilton, the unscrupulous music producer. Lyrics from Ivan’s song include: “I’m
gonna get my share now of what’s mine,” “The oppressors are trying to keep me
down/making me feel like a clown,” and “I’d rather die than live and be a slave.”
Ivan’s song seems to articulate a very different conceptualization of masculinity
then what he had been performing before. His desire for immediate gratification and
his articulation of his refusal to allow the oppressors to negate his masculinity by
their attempts to make him feel like a “clown” or a slave through violence—the
harder they come, the harder they fall—indicates that he now understands the
mechanisms of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. After Ivan
finishes his recording of the song, he refuses to sign what he knows is an unfair
contract with Hilton and attempts to sell the record on his own. At this point, Ivan
is an outlaw in terms of the recording industry, a foreshadowing of what is to
come. Because he refuses to cave into Hilton’s unfair contract, Ivan is ostracized
from the music industry. This pattern is repeated when he crosses both the
police and the drug dealers.21 In the end, he becomes an outsider in all realms of
the society, the church, the (music)industry, and the law, and even crime.

**Bad(man) Heroes**

Neither film engages in the serious implications of the effects of traumatic violence
as rites of passage for the young boys. In fact, the protagonists’ resultant alienation,
violent tendencies, and sexual aggression are presented as desirable, heroic
masculine qualities. Henzell, like Van Peebles, no doubt, has a very specific
audience in mind for his project. As I explained above, Van Peebles imagined his
audience as “Brer.” Reid defines them as “street-oriented film culture” (*RBF* 79);
these are “black street people” or “Black inner-city youth” (*RBF* 79). I agree
with Reid’s definition of the intended

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21 Ivan is eventually forced to accept Hilton’s terms as Hilton supplies all the music to the local DJs and
has warned them against making a deal with Ivan.
audience; furthermore, I think that this audience would view the film in a very specific way, and I call this an urban masculinist reading. This reading assumes an essentialized heterosexual Black male subject with some ties to the inner city (he may have grown up there or merely adopts the persona or style of one who has); he is familiar with “street culture” and its code of silence. Of course, as bell hooks points out, females are not exempt from patriarchal thinking simply based on their gender, and their worldview may be as phallocentric as their male counterparts. These viewers would of course perceive no traumatic violence in Sweetback’s “seduction”: sex is the most natural function human beings can perform, and if the little man is getting some at his age, he is doing a lot better than most. Likewise, *The Harder They Come* also depends on this urban masculinist reading which assumes an “urban” audience’s familiarity with certain types of scenarios. These assumptions are that violence, jail, death, murder, robbery, physical and mental abuse are all a part of life in the ghetto and are to be silently accepted.

By shifting seamlessly from “boyhood” traumatic violence to outlaw/badman through a basic dissolve and other cinematic techniques, these filmic presentations continue to silence and normalize traumatic violence against urban youth. It normalizes traumatic violence in the lives of young Black boys as trivial and not worthy of analysis or discussion, yet necessary to their development into patriarchal men. The implications of these types of representations then are that Black boys can be raped, beaten, abused, and traumatized, but it is no big deal. In fact, these films maintain that the boys are expected to “take it” or “face it like men.” Undeniably, they suggest that these are the experiences that make them men. And in order to become the men they
must be, the boys they are must be sacrificed. To this point hooks writes, “Black boys, more than other group[sic] of male children in this society, are asked to surrender their childhoods in order to pursue an elusive patriarchal masculinity” (WRC 90). This surrender is quite literally played out in certain films; for example, young Sweetback’s rape scene is the last time the child actor appears on screen and Ivan’s whipping is the end of the immature, trusting, and naïve, innocent who arrived in Kingston by bus. Again, the fact that the films are encoded with silences speaks volumes as to the role of silence in constructing masculinity.

Performance artist, ethnographer, and scholar E. Patrick Johnson and documentary film director and producer Marlon Riggs are highly critical of this silencing of trauma, which they see as an integral element in constructing patriarchal Black manhood. In a discussion of “authentic blackness” and how silence functions in that construct of masculinity, E. Patrick Johnson quotes Marlon Riggs’ voice over narration in *Black Is Black Ain’t*:

> To be a black man required a code of silence. You didn’t express your feelings. You couldn’t acknowledge hurt, pain, and rage and anger. And what that engendered was silence. No one talked to each other, because that would have been admitting vulnerability and vulnerability was associated with being feminine (31).

Johnson extends Riggs’ argument:

> Although silence as sign of masculinity is a trope that circulates in the broader U.S. cultural context, within raced communities, and especially among black men, silence often sustains a dysfunctional denial of sexual difference and the imperialism of patriarchy, or what Phil Harper calls the “proper affirmation of black male [heterosexual] authority”(31-32).

Silence then, according to both Johnson and Riggs, maintains the status quo or the patriarchal norm. I agree with Johnson and Riggs’ assessment and would add that the silent acceptance of traumatic rites of passage, rather than empowering Black boys
merely oppresses them further. If Black boys and men were to give voice to their pain or fear they would become vulnerable, but under a patriarchal system, vulnerability is unacceptable in males since it is equated with femininity. Within patriarchal systems, gender roles are so strictly controlled that any perceived feminine qualities and or homosexual qualities are quickly crushed. Nurse notes, “homosexual men are defined as the most unmasculine or emasculated of men…homophobic responses to gay men are one of the means by which hegemonic masculinity polices the boundaries of a traditional male sex role and reinforces a strict heterosexual practice”(8). What this means is that not only do homosexuals maintain silence about their sexuality, but all men maintain silence around their emotional pain out of fear of being perceived as homosexual, and therefore, unmasculine.

That both movies construct silence around the traumatic rites of passage of their hypermasculine, heterosexual protagonists then is no surprise. This silence consequently denies these boys the ability to grieve or even admit to themselves that there is indeed cause for grief; therefore, their ability to heal is also denied. What makes these movies so disturbing is their implication that traumatized boys are transformed into men, indeed heroes, precisely because of their ability to transcend or even disregard their trauma. In the two films I analyze here, not only do the characters tend to slip seamlessly into adulthood, but they also become venerated heroic members of their respective communities. Sweetback’s defense of Moo-Moo from corrupt police, his sexual prowess, and his ability to challenge the corrupt system and survive makes him a hero, and his community rallies behind him to help him make his escape to
Mexico. Similarly, Ivan becomes the celebrity/hero in much the same way when he too
decides to challenge the unjust system that conspires to keep him oppressed.

Once they are transformed into heroic men, the two protagonists also become
dangerous and angry, and they strike out against the oppressive system and those who
represent it. Sweetback’s anger emerges as he watches two police officers beating a
defenseless young man. He realizes that he is tired of the treatment of Blacks by “The
Man.” When Sweetback strikes back, several white police officers are left dead. Ivan’s
anger is aimed at several institutions including the church, music industry and the
police. His rage is most spectacularly seen during what should have been a problem-
free drug run (as his gang’s drug running is sanctioned by the police) when a police
officer attempts to pull him over. Ivan shoots the officer when he has a flashback of his
first arrest and the whipping he received. In the case of Ivan, with the insertion of the
flashback, it is clear that his traumatic and violent rite of passage is the defining moment
in his life which transforms him into an outlaw and ultimately (anti) hero. In his reading
of Sweetback’s “baptism” Newton writes that it is “the giving of manhood, [the prostitute]
is also bestowing upon the boy the characteristics which will deliver him from very
difficult situations” (qtd in Reid 80). Newton sees the rape—this traumatic rite of
passage—as the defining moment in Sweetback’s life, and it is this experience which
prepares him to become the (anti) hero he is meant to be. Both films construct their
narratives in this way, implying that the protagonists can only become heroic members
of their respective communities after they have successfully, silently, stoically passed
through the traumatic rites of passage. In turn they can confront their oppressors with a
righteous violence when the time comes.
Sweetback is the story of a journey of an ineffectual street boy who becomes revolutionary hero. The film’s narrative suggests two initiation phases for Sweetback. The second is his killing of the two white policemen (his baptism in blood) which initiates him into a revolutionary Black masculinity via resistance to the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist juridical system—here he reclaims his masculinity from the man, by force. But, if we accept Newton’s argument, this second initiation is only possible because of the first rite of passage. Newton suggests that it is the intercourse with the prostitute that bestows on young Sweetback the characteristics which only manifest themselves at the later moment. Of course, the sex scene is also a foreshadowing of Sweetback’s heroic qualities; though he is smaller and less experienced than the prostitute, he nevertheless dominates the female’s body, causing her to scream out in the throes of ecstasy and orgasm. If this is true, then the film posits the rape as a necessary rite of passage for the Black boy since it equips him with what he will need to become the people’s hero.

Likewise, Ivan’s killing of the police officer functions in the same way in Harder. The killing of the corrupt police officer is seen as a strike against the oppressive power structure by a “sufferer.” Ivan becomes a man through his attack of the representative of “The Man”; another baptism in blood. But again we see a contention between this view of reclamation of manhood and the earlier scene of forced initiation where the boyishness is literally beaten out of the man. After evading both the police and drug dealers, the two forces work together to find Ivan, and in doing so the head detective offer the drug runners a larger cut of the drug money if they give up Ivan. When Pedro, another runner, tells Ivan about the new cut for the runners, Ivan concedes that that was
all he wanted. Pedro then tells Ivan that he needs to leave Jamaica, and that he could arrange transport for Ivan to Cuba where he would be welcomed. Ivan likes the idea, exclaiming “Revolutionary to rass!” Ivan sees himself as a revolutionary in the image of a Castro, a fighter for the rights of the disenfranchised.

Uncritically accepting the protagonists’ violence as heroic or even anti-establishment, however, is troublesome since violence in this context works much like silence does to perpetuate patriarchal masculinity. hooks develops this argument by citing Orlando Patterson who “emphasizes that long before any young black male acts violent he is born into a culture that condones violence as a means of social control, that identifies patriarchal masculinity by the will to do violence. Showing aggression is the simplest way to assert patriarchal manhood” (WRC 49). Therefore, rather than destabilizing the patriarchal hegemony with their violent acts, as they imply, these characters inadvertently support and perpetuate that dominating system which keeps Blacks, women, and homosexuals in their place. The angry Black man as hero is also dangerous because he presents unfocused anger as liberating while in actuality it may be the opposite. According to hooks “Black male rage is often interpreted as a positive response to injustice and as a consequence it is encouraged. In actuality black male rage is usually a sign of reactive powerlessness” (WRC 96). hooks develops this point further: “The chronically angry Black male is living in an emotional prison. Fear-based, he is isolated and terrified. In patriarchal culture his anger may be seen as ‘manly,’ so it becomes the perfect cover-up so that no one, not even himself, can know the extent of the pain he feels”(WRC 96). In many, if not most cases then, these men are not even
fully aware of why they are angry. Their anger is simply reactionary, it is immediate, uncritical, and more times than not, self serving.

Both Sweetback and Ivan are justified in their anger against the capitalist supremacist patriarchal system, and they certainly do become important heroic figures for their communities; however, the presentation of traumatic rites of passage in each film as a prerequisite in becoming ‘real men’ and/or revolutionary heroes is deceptive. The pain of childhood trauma, no matter how deeply hidden, must surface at some point. While the social, political, and economic injustices facing the protagonists are real, their childhood trauma must also affect the ways in which they engage with the world around them. Neither of the two movies ever analyzes the abuse and abandonment of the protagonists in any significant way. The lack of attention to these issues by the films suggests that childhood traumatic violence is an expected and routine part of the move into adulthood by Black boys. Further, they suggest that these violent traumas actually provide the boys/men with ways in which to function in the world. However, it is never clear how they do that since the trauma is never spoken of again nor are viewers provided a visual example of how the protagonists work through the trauma. The presentation of these characters as heroes unaffected by their trauma sends a dangerous message to viewers, especially Black males. These audiences, in the end, are left with a message that supports a destructive patriarchal notion of masculinity, one that negates an emotional outlet for Black boys and encourages anger and violence for Black men. The example of trauma as rites of passage for young Black boys will permeate Black film into the twenty first century. Indeed, the cult of Black
masculinity is carried on through the works of the filmic descendants of both Van Peebles and Henzell.
Silence is a way to grin and bear it. A way not to acknowledge how my life is discounted each day.

Essex Hemphill

It has been over thirty years since the release of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, and *The Harder They Come* in the United States and Jamaica respectively. Black film production has grown by leaps and bounds in both countries since those two films proved to the world that there is an audience for Black themed cinema. In the United States, Black independent cinema has seen the rise of internationally acclaimed African American film producers, writers, and directors such as Spike Lee, John Singleton, and the Hughes brothers, to name just a few. Their films such as *Do The Right Thing* (1989), *Boyz N Da Hood* (1991), and *Menace to Society* (1993), respectively, have gone on to box-office and critical success. The Jamaican film industry has not become as prodigious; but given the economic, political, and social drawbacks plaguing the third world nation over the past forty years, the fact that it has grown at all and managed to achieve the successes it has is significant. Several Jamaican writers, producers, and directors have etched out names for themselves in both the local and international markets. Trevor Rhone, Rick Elgood, and Desmond Gumbs have garnered international acclaim for films such as *Smile Orange* (1976), *Dance Hall Queen* (1997), and *Rude Boy: The Jamaican Don* (2002).

The tropes of black masculinity produced in *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* and *The Harder They Come*, that of the silent endurance of trauma in particular,

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1 From *Tongues Untied*
has come to define masculinity in later black films produced in the United States and Jamaica. Many of these later Black films focus on the inner-city experiences of their predominantly male protagonists; inevitably most of these films have been written and directed by men.² In this chapter I focus on two recent films: *Baadasssss!*(2004), from the United States and *Shattas*(2002), from Jamaica. *Baadasssss!*, is inextricably connected to its filmic predecessor; in it Melvin Van Peebles' son, Mario, tells the story of his father’s struggle to make *Sweetback*. As the son of writer, producer, director, and star of *Sweetback*, Melvin Van Peebles, as well as a supporting character in the original film, Mario undoubtedly learned the craft by watching his father during those early years. *Shottas*, on the other hand, is written and directed by newcomer to the industry Cess Silvera. While Silvera has no familial connections to the creators of *The Harder They Come*, his film’s connection to the earlier one can be traced back to their common styles and themes. In fact, the DVD cover for the film proudly acknowledges this fact. The later films are indelibly marked by the legacy of the earlier films not simply in style and genre; both contemporary films continue to uphold and support a limited and even oppressive idea of patriarchal Black masculinity which posits a silent acceptance of traumatic violence as a necessary rite of passage into powerful, independent manhood. However, while these contemporary films (and film makers) validate and venerate traumatic rites of passage, they also take tentative steps towards a critique of patriarchal masculinity. Ultimately, however, they are not able or willing to divest

² There have been several African American females who have made names for themselves in the film industry over the past years. July Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, and Kesey Lemons’ *Eve’s Bayou* may be the most commercial and successful. The Jamaican Film industry and the Anglophone Caribbean film industry as a whole have yet to produce their first breakout female writer, director, or producer; though *Dancehall Queen* (featuring a female protagonist) and *Third World Cop* are co-written by Susanne Fenn, she is not Caribbean.
themselves of patriarchal masculinity and its privileges in order to present significantly progressive models of masculinity.

Both of the later films also promise to give the audience the *real* story…to tell it like it is. *Baadasssss!* attempts a chronological, largely realist portrayal of the making of *Sweetback*. In an interview with “The Crisis,” Mario Van Peebles says of his decision to make *Baadasssss!,* the story behind the making of *Sweetback*, “I was there and I knew the real story…I took that as a challenge to make a film that was real…I just told the truth” (49-50). While there is no doubt in my mind that the story of Melvin van Peebles’ struggle to make *Sweetback* needed to be brought to the big screen, I suggest here that as a son, Mario is inevitably caught up in the patriarchal ethos of his family, and the predominantly male African American film industry which complicates his ability to tell the real or better yet, the entire story. Undeniably, the symbolic silence of Mario, the character, within the film speaks to the complexity of telling the truth—the real story—while adhering to the code of patriarchal masculinity, which remains dependent on silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage for young Black boys into manhood. Cess Silvera along with the stars and supporting cast of *Shottas* also asserts the film’s ability to truth telling and realness. However, like Van Peebles, Silvera also finds himself in the predominantly male film industry, working in an even more masculinist genre of the gangster film. So while Silvera may represent realistic situations within his film, his position in patriarchy makes it difficult for him to challenge themes of silencing and trauma as rites of passage for urban Black boys into manhood. Unfortunately, the contemporary films may align themselves too closely to their predecessors, specifically in their limited representation of Black masculinity.
Through a Boy’s Eyes

The 2004 release *Baadassss!* could have provided Mario Van Peebles with the opportunity to interrupt and destabilize the accepted construct of silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage into Black masculinity. hooks tell us that “[m]ass media are a powerful vehicle for teaching the art of the possible. Enlightened men must claim it as the space of their public voice and create a progressive popular culture that will teach men how to connect with others, how to communicate, how to love” (*WTC* 134). While Van Peebles tentatively attempts to use his film to respond to the damaging effect of soul murder, in the end, his interventions results in a mixed message with limited challenges to phallocentric patriarchal masculinity. In his film, Mario re-presented the instance of soul murder first documented in the controversial opening scene of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song*. Mario’s perspective on this is important since he is so intimately connected to the scene—he plays the young Sweetback. Sadly, his treatment of the event ultimately shows the success of his own indoctrination into patriarchal masculinity. Symbolic of his passage into patriarchal masculinity, in what can be called an ironic, smart or even oedipal casting move, Mario Van Peebles casts himself in the lead role of his film, as his own father, Melvin Van Peebles. In the film *Baadassss!* the son literally becomes the father. This casting decision ironically symbolizes the anxiety that we see throughout the film. Mario’s project is disrupted by the tension between his desire to both celebrate Melvin’s accomplishment and take his place as patriarch, and a desire to redefine masculinity, specifically traumatic initiation rites of passage of boys into manhood—soul murder, so that it would allow for those emotions traditionally associated with femininity such as fear and empathy.
Baadasssss! focuses on the difficulty Melvin Van Peebles had in 1970s Hollywood while trying to develop an independent film on his own terms. Mario's screenplay is based partly on the biography written by Melvin in 1972, Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song: A Guerilla Filmmaking Manifesto, and partly on his own experiences with his father during that time. Mario ultimately presents his father as a driven visionary who would stop at nothing to get his film made. As a result, Melvin could be at times demanding, domineering and even abusive to his crew, his friends, and even his children. However, within the film's narrative, this abuse is overlooked and understood by everyone because of Melvin's unprecedented vision to make a film on his own terms, to defy the man, and to present a new version of Black masculinity for the silver screen. Mario's film suggests that the pressure of raising money, avoiding bill collectors, and outsmarting the union all contributed to Melvin's caustic personality during the making of the film.

Mario does not hesitate to show his father's short-comings, and neither is Melvin afraid to have them revealed. In an interview with American Cinematheque, Melvin states that the only stipulation he gave his son in representing his story is that he (Mario) “don’t make me too nice.” Even though Mario does not make Melvin “too nice,” the film is a loving homage to Melvin's contribution to the Black film community. This is undoubtedly a worthy and necessary endeavor since Melvin's work is so influential, not only to Black film makers and the entire film community, but to American culture as a whole. Baadasssss!, however, is not simply about Melvin’s struggle to make a film. Mario insists that his film has an A and B story, the A story is about Melvin making a film which shaped cinematic history, and the B story is “about the father and son getting to
know each other and the stuff we went through together.” He further declares that the summer during the shooting of *Sweetback* was the time he got to know his farther. (*Baadasssss! - Mario and Melvin Van Peebles Interview*). But by the end of the film viewers know only as much about young Mario as they do at the beginning. Viewers do know that by the film’s end, the father and son who are somewhat estranged at the beginning are closer; however, neither the estrangement nor reconciliation is communicated via Mario’s, the character, point of view. The film, unfortunately, is told from Melvin’s perspective rather than Mario’s, whose voice (as a character in the film) is deafeningly silent.³ It would seem then, that in order to tell his father’s story, and eventually take his father’s place, Mario must omit his own.

*Baadasssss!* opens with several scenes that indicate its preoccupation with imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In one scene Melvin and Mario drive through the desert on a motorbike; Mario wears a red and white striped helmet while Melvin wears a blue bandana with white star-like designs. The stars and stripes imagery, the open road, the father and son bonding experience all symbolize the themes of the film. It is about the American Dream, male bonding, and a boy’s journey into Black manhood. In other words, this film is about patriarchy. Melvin, who drives the motorbike as Mario holds on behind him, is Mario’s guide into patriarchal masculinity. Mario’s position, behind Melvin, in what is colloquially known in popular culture as “the bitch seat” is an indication of the uninitiated Mario’s status as feminized child.

³ In the original film *Sweetback* is famously silent, only speaking eight lines of dialogue. In *Baadasssss*, Mario is as silent if not more so.
One of Mario’s first lessons in patriarchy is the rejection of the white and feminine rule of the mother and acceptance of the Black and patriarchal rule of the father. The thirteen year old Mario and his sister live primarily with their white mother and are visiting with their father in California for the summer. In one of the earlier scenes in the film, Melvin picks up his children who are visiting with their paternal grandparents. Melvin walks to the back of the house where he finds his children along with his father. Mario is raking leaves while his sister swings on a rope tied to a tree. Melvin greets his dad who responds to the greeting with “I am teaching the boy about work; a man has got to know how to make a living.” This lesson of work ethic apparently is not necessary for women/girls to learn since Mario’s sister simply watches the men work. This scene illustrates one of the problems Toni Cade sees with gender roles in American society. “Generally speaking, in a capitalist society a man is expected to be an aggressive, uncompromising, factual, lusty, intelligent provider of goods, and the woman, a retiring, gracious, emotional, intuitive, attractive consumer of goods” (102). Both of the children are being tutored for their ascribed gender roles. Not to be outdone in patriarchal instructions by his father, Melvin offers his own instructions to his children at the end of the same scene. As he prepares to leave, still in his parents’ driveway, Melvin demands that the children start calling him dad. Mario explains that their mother

4 Melvin’s father is played by a contemporary of his father’s, veteran actor/director Ossie Davis.

5 The scene continues with Melvin’s father then asking Melvin if he needed anything, Melvin say no and asks his father the same but the conversation is interrupted by the shrill call of Melvin’s mother to the father. His father takes his leave stating “Guess I better be going, you know how your mother is.” Here again, this demonstrates first, the negation /erasure of mothers (neither Melvin nor Mario’s mother is represented in the film), and secondly, the intimate relationship between the two men is interrupted by the demanding call of the invisible wife/mother, who by the way, never greets her son or says goodbye to her grandchildren.
lets the children call her Maria as it is “less confusing when everyone is calling out for their mother.” Melvin’s response is immediate and authoritative “I am not your mother I am your father, and when you’re here you do what the fuck I say.” The lessons Mario learns through these interactions with his grandfather and then his father begin his indoctrination into patriarchal rule: first, under patriarchy a man must work, and secondly, never question the authority of patriarchy.

The shooting of Melvin’s movie happens to correspond with the children’s visit; consequently, both of them are cast in the film. Mario, as a matter of fact, has two scenes in the movie. In one scene, he and his sister are cast as two community kids who help Sweetback escape from the police. But more significantly, Mario also plays the young Sweetback who is seduced by the prostitute in the opening scene of the original film. It is writer/director Mario’s treatment of the issues surrounding this controversial scene that warrants a close analysis. While Mario does use his film to speak to the issue of Melvin’s decision to use him (Mario, at thirteen years old) in such a sexualized and public way, he never puts the words of protest into his own mouth. However, the fact that there are several voices which protest the cinematic rape of the young boy does speak volumes even though the character Mario does not.

Young Sweetback’s trauma—his rape—I would reason, can also be seen as Mario’s rape by proxy. In *Broken Boys/Mending Men*, Stephen Grubman-Black writes:

> When a role-model’s power and influence is used to coerce a boy into a relationship involving exhibition, fondling or penetration, we have met the criteria for sexual abuse...The older male role-model has immense psychological leverage and when sexual abuse is involved he can effectively silence the victim. He often manipulates the boy so that he cannot distinguish between sexual abuse and closeness-attention-status (3)
Applying Grubman-Black’s definition of sexual abuse to the Van Peebles father/son interaction on the set of *Sweetback*, we can clearly discern the dynamics of a sexually abusive encounter. What is even more insidious about Mario’s abuse is the publicness of it. As a thirteen year old, probably beginning puberty and not very secure in his body image and/or sexuality as many boys are not at that age, Mario is forced by his father to simulate sex in a public setting. He appears nude, in a room surrounded by complete strangers, following directions from his father, all the while knowing that his actions are being recorded and will eventually be projected on movie screens across America.

All things considered, participation in a scene such as this must have been somewhat traumatic for the young inexperienced actor; however, at no point in the movie does Mario, the screenwriter, ever allow Mario, the character, to articulate the emotional confusion, fear, and vulnerability he must have felt at that time. Even as an adult Mario is not able to articulate his trauma for himself. During the commentary for *Baadasssss!*, throughout the scenes which focus on the rape of young Sweetback and the dissent by several characters regarding Mario’s playing the role, a remorseless Melvin laughs and makes comments such as “I wish dad had gotten me a girl,” and “What’s the big deal?” With these statements Melvin attempts to dismiss the critiques leveled against him over the controversial scene, while simultaneously extolling his own position in patriarchy above his father’s, whom he implies is lacking since he did not secure a girl for his preteen son. Mario responds to these comments with either silence or measured laughter; at one point he makes the oddly ambiguous statement that he would like another shot at the scene today. He then comments on the appearance of the females he had to work with in the original film, joking that the women in his film are
much better looking than the ones in the original. We can see here that Melvin continues to have a psychological leverage over Mario which renders Mario silent. Even more disturbing, the focus on the very serious issue of abuse is downplayed and shifted through the denigration of female bodies.

Mario’s refusal (or inability) to use his film to allow himself, as young Mario, to explicitly express his fears, pain, and or embarrassment about appearing in the sex scene of the original movie is an indication of his acquiescence to the patriarchal notion of masculinity, a stance that promotes the ideology of soul murder. Mario (the adult, writer/director) does not allow himself, (the child/character in the film) to voice or show any emotion that could be construed as unmanly. In the scene where he is told what is expected of him in the sex scene, the young Mario accepts his instructions silently—“like a man.” In the commentary Mario calls attention to the eyes of the actor playing himself claiming that “Mario talks with his eyes.” Unfortunately, the silence in the film speaks louder than Mario’s eyes. I do not mean to dismiss Mario’s comments here as he was the boy who at one time attempted to “talk with his eyes.” In fact, his commentary here seems to highlight the fact that as a young boy he felt unable to voice his fear and pain but did attempt to silently communicate through his eye what he could not speak. But as the celluloid record shows us via the opening sequence of *Sweetback*, Mario’s silent protest was not heard then and I argue that it is in danger of not being heard now.

Interestingly, other characters in the film do voice their concerns/fears about Mario’s taking part in a sex scene. Not surprisingly, since emotions are ostensibly the realm of the female, the three characters who express concern or apprehension about
the sex scenes are two women and a feminized man. First, Priscilla, Melvin’s secretary, questions his decision to use Mario in the scene. Melvin refuses to engage the question and responds that everybody is somebody’s son. He then challenges Priscilla on the moral implications of using someone else’s child for the scene and not his own. Shortly thereafter, Bill Harris, a Caucasian hippy with long flowing blond hair, Melvin’s friend and business partner, also confronts Melvin. Harris can be seen as a “feminized character” only in comparison to Melvin who is hyper-masculine; where Melvin is stoic, unemotional, and single-minded, Harris is flighty and sensitive, characteristics usually ascribed to women. Harris attempts to convince Melvin that he cannot force his thirteen year old son to perform in a sex scene. Melvin rebuffs Harris and walks away from the conversation.

The most dramatic confrontation, however, takes place between Melvin and his girlfriend at the time, Sandra. Sandra tries to convince Melvin that Mario is too young to take part in the sex scene. Melvin responds with a story about his own childhood experiences when his father sent him to work at eight years old; he tells her that he was forced to sell old clothes while avoiding the bullies on the streets. He remembers that he got his “ass whipped damn near everyday”; but everyday his father sent him back on the street. Melvin explains that he figured out a way to get the bullies off his back was by giving free clothes to the local gangsters. While he rationalizes this traumatic incident as a positive moment of learning, he does acknowledge that he did not like it at the time; but he recognizes too that the lesson he learned from the experience is what made him the man he became. Of the traumatic experience Melvin tells Sandra, “My

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6 In the commentary, referring to the way his father treated him, Melvin laughs and dismissively comments that “now they would probably call it child abuse.”
dad taught me how to survive, how to hustle.” Melvin sees the traumatic events of his boyhood as his own rite of passage; he does not hold his father accountable for any damage done to his psyche, and in fact, he praises his father for initiating him into the cult manhood. Ironically, in interviews promoting the new film Mario speaks in a similar way about Melvin; he acknowledges that while they have “‘had their differences,’” he learned plenty from observing his father at work” (Jones 6). Bob Meadows reports Mario’s current views of his father, “[dad] showed me the array of humanity. He taught me, like his dad taught him, how to survive” (123/4). In both cases, the child’s trauma is seen, by both abuser and victim, as a necessary component in the development of the strong and independent man each have become.

Melvin sees Mario’s participation in the film’s sex scene as Mario’s initiation: he tells Sandra, “he’s [Mario] tough, he’s resilient, he’s ambitious, little mother fucker can handle it.” Sandra perceptively sees the risk involved in this initiation of the young Mario. She challenges Melvin’s nonchalant attitude toward Mario’s involvement in the scene: “What if he can’t handle it? You going to risk fucking up his childhood just because yours was fucked up? You want to turn him into some macho stud man you think you supposed to be?” Sandra shows great insight here as she recognizes the danger of this ritualistic rite of passage for the Van Peebles boys and what might be its disturbing results—another mimic man—another black man who has bought into phallocentric patriarchal notions of masculinity. She understands the perils of a legacy of trauma and silence that constructs the “macho stud man” which many black men
have been bequeathed from their fathers before them. bell hooks explores this issue in *The Will To Change*: “To the patriarchal dad, sons can only be regarded as recruits in training, hence they must constantly be subjected to sadomasochistic power struggles designed to toughen them up, to prepare them to maintain the patriarchal legacy” (47).

But despite Sandra’s spot-on assessment of the cycle of traumatic rites of passage for the Van Peebles men, Mario, as screenwriter, nullifies her critique by casting her as an outsider. Priscilla, Melvin’s personal assistant and secretary, is the first to mark Sandra as other when she refers to Sandra as Melvin’s “bougie girlfriend.” Melvin further marks Sandra’s otherness during their argument when he refers to her as “a nice sister who don’t know about life on the other side of the tracks.” These statements symbolically remove Sandra from the community of the disenfranchised ghetto and align her with the capitalist system that Melvin and his crew are fighting against. Sandra, from Melvin’s perspective, could never understand what a poor black man must go through so her objections are silenced and rendered meaningless.

**Silent Resistance**

While the debates rage between Melvin and his friends regarding the sex scene, Mario silently stands by. Insightful viewers, however, will note that as the director of *Baadassss*, Mario does not replicate the contested rape/seduction scene in the later film. Rather than requiring the young actor playing Mario to recreate the sex scene from the original film, Mario splices together images of the infamous brothel scene of the original film with new footage. The result is seamless; it appears that the young actor in both scenes is one and the same. The fact is however that they are not the same. It is imperative to note that Van Peebles chooses not to use the young actor playing Mario in the same way his father used him. So, why then does Mario as writer/director choose
for young Mario to remain silent while others speak in his stead? Clearly, Mario’s
directorial choice is a not so subtle testament to his own experience as a child actor.
With his decision to forgo a re-shoot of the sex scene, as well as his choice to have
three characters speak out against Melvin’s use of his young son in the scene, Mario is
in fact speaking out—making his own statement about his experience. However,
Mario’s decision to speak through other female or feminized characters, also makes it
clear how difficult it is to refute the code of patriarchal masculinity.

Silence in this film challenges while it simultaneously rearticulates the tenets of the
cult of masculinity. Van Peebles the writer/director straddles the fence of critique and
endorsement by maintaining young Mario’s silence while others plead his case. Mario’s
choice to have other characters speak out against the use of the young boy in the sex
scene, along with his decision against reshooting the scene with another young actor, I
see as indirect acknowledgements of the trauma he suffered as a result of being forced
into the sex scene as a young actor. So, while the fear and pain surrounding the sexual
trauma of the child are presented within the film, these emotions are disconnected from
Mario personally. As writer and director Van Peebles could have included a scene in
which Mario vocalizes his fear; he chooses instead to have Mario say nothing and
speak with his eyes. Van Peebles hopes viewers pay attention to the character’s eyes in
order to discern his internal emotional response; the specificity of that emotion remains
unclear. Even in his commentary on the scene Van Peebles never says what the
emotions were. Van Peebles’s directorial choices, his silence, ultimately demonstrate
his support of soul murder— young Black boys should remain silent in the face of their
traumas.
But this is a dangerous silence. In the documentary *Tongues Untied*, Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill explain the dualistic and dangerous role of silence in constructing black masculinity:

Silence is my shield; it crushes  
Silence is my cloak; it smothers  
Silence is my sword; it cuts both ways  
Silence is the deadliest weapon

Undoubtedly, Van Peebles’ use of silence in this film is complicated; however, since he does choose to deflect the objections to his trauma—his rite of passage—onto others rather than give voice to them through his own character. And in the case of the interaction between Sandra and Melvin, turning Sandra’s objections into a problem of the hysterical bougie female, it is clear that he supports the notion of those initiation rites.

Van Peebles’ position on these initiation rites is made even clearer in his film with his treatment of the reactions to the sex scene. The cast and crew meet for a viewing of the scene. The shot cuts back from the sex scene (the original scene) to the cast and crew sitting in a dark screening room, all eyes on the screen. Mario’s face is emotionless as he watches with the rest of the cast and crew. When it is over, an African American male crew member gives Mario a hug and musses his hair exclaiming, “Damn little man, I wish that shit was me. I didn’t get my dick wet till I was eighteen and she was double bag ugly.” Hearing this, Melvin (as performed by Mario) looks on with a smile while Mario blushes. This scene suggests that getting one’s dick wet, regardless of the trauma that accompanies it, is a positive rite of passage into manhood for young boys. This rite of passage does not only bond fathers and sons but initiates young boys into the larger community of men.
Homosocial Erotica and Male Bonding

At this point I find it necessary to pause for a moment to consider the homosocial erotics of the original film and the latter. I use the term homosocial erotics in light of Sedgwick's term homosocial desire. For me, homosocial erotics is an erotic manifestation of homosocial desire. In Sweetback, I see homosocial erotics played out in the opening scene of the film. Some critics and even Mario himself, even though he took part in the film, may be unable or unwilling to perceive and articulate the problematic of the highly sexualized nature of the opening sex scene of Sweetback. For example, People Magazine writer Bob Meadows determines that the filming of the scene in which the thirteen year old Sweetback loses his virginity was of no consequence since “Getting naked didn’t bother Mario,” who says “we were sort of like the Adams family anyways. I was used to being a real different kid” (123-24).

However, as I stated above, the implications of the scene are a bit more complex than Mario simply getting naked. Mario was directed to disrobe as well as simulate sexual intercourse by his father. The significance of a father directing his nude thirteen year old son and a nude older woman in simulated sex for the camera cannot be overstated, nor can the fact that Melvin later “simulates” sex with the same woman. This is homosocial erotica par excellence. In this scene we see what Sedgwick might call an erotic triangle made up by Melvin, Mario, and the actress playing the prostitute. Sedgwick explains that the bond created between rivals in an erotic triangle are even stronger that that between that of the lovers and the beloved. These bonds, she continues, “are most

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7 Melvin infamously sued for workers compensation (and won) because he contracted a sexually transmitted disease during the shooting Sweetback.
often those in which two males are rivals for a female” (*Between Men* 21). While Melvin and Mario were never rivals for the affection of the actress, they could be said to be rivals in patriarchy. While in the original film we see that the female body is used in this particular scene as the conduit that transform the boy into the man, Sweetback, I would argue that a more interesting homosocial bonding takes place behind the scenes. This is made clear in *Baadasssss!* where we see that it is that young Mario’s ability handle this scene “like a man” that in essence defeminizes him and establish him as deserving to be a part of patriarchal heterosexual masculinity, just like his father.

The homosocial erotics of *Sweetback’s* opening scene marks the film as somewhat unusual. Where most exploitation films objectify and hyper-sexualizes the female body via the gaze of the camera, Van Peebles’ camera focuses on the male body; in the rape scene, the camera focuses on Mario’s naked backside as he grinds on top of the nameless prostitute. Immediately following the rape, the transformed Sweetback (the adult) takes part in a sex show. While there are several nude women present, the scene is all about the phallus. The plot of the sex show centers on a lesbian who desperately wants a real penis with which to please her lover. She prays to her “good dyke fairy godmother” (a flamboyantly gay Black man dressed in a tutu), who grants her wish. She is transformed into a “real man” in the form of Sweetback. The ineffectual dildo transforms into a throbbing flesh and blood penis. The camera forces viewers to confront Melvin’s penis when it zooms in on the member. This is followed by a long shot from behind of his nude body. Viewers are treated to a long lingering

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8 Reid critiques the negative portrayals of women in Van Peebles’s film as opposed to the more positive representations of homosexuals. However, we see here that this critique is valid only as it relates to male homosexuals as representation of homosexual women are also problematic as it suggests that lesbians want to be “real men” with “real penises”.
perusal of Melvin's entire form. I would argue that Melvin's psychological adherence to phallocentric masculinity is revealed in his homosocial erotic praise of the male physical form, both his own and his son's.

I am interested here in what an analysis of the opening scene of *Sweetback* might reveal about homosocial erotica, the part it plays in phallocentric patriarchy. Specifically, how does taking part (acting and viewing) in the sex scene bond the father and son in phallocentric patriarchy? The homosocial bond between father and son initially takes place on the film set but it continues long after the film is released, as evidenced in the above mentioned interview. I want to suggest here that watching each other on film engenders a type of homosocial erotica in which father and son are able to reconstruct fantasies of their own success in phallocentric masculinity. Mediated by the movie screen then, the father gazes at the son as he simulates sex and the son gazes at the father as he simulates (actually has) sex with the same woman (and eventually several others). Melvin derives pleasure from watching his son because he can fantasize about Mario following in his footsteps as a patriarchal, heterosexual cocksman. Mario on the other hand derives pleasure from watching Melvin as a role model, someone to emulate in the ways of the world and women.

A similar phenomenon takes place years later when Mario makes his film and casts himself as Melvin. In *Baadasssss!* Mario's body (as Melvin) takes center stage. There are several scenes in which Mario's semi nude body dominates the screen. I should note that Mario's body is much more muscular and in turn much more commanding than Melvin's ever was. Ironically, the only scene in which Mario, as Melvin, appears fully nude (from behind) in *Baadasssss!* is during the scene in which
Melvin argues with Sandra about Mario’s appearance in the rape scene. Mario’s (as Melvin) much more muscular, taller, nude physique effectively represents several things. This body is the physical manifestation and proof of Melvin’s argument to Sandra. Mario literally embodies his father in this scene, his body becomes his father’s body and his father’s words become his, Mario’s.\(^9\) This performance gives credence to Melvin’s predictions of his son’s ability to “handle it.” Viewers can see for themselves that Melvin was right, that Mario is strong and indeed did survive the scene. Mario’s embodiment of his father continues the phallocentric masculinist fantasy similar to the one I described above. In the finished product of the film we see the success of Mario’s initiation into phallocentric masculinity. Mario, unlike his father, however, does not allow the camera or his audience a full frontal gaze at his penis. This could be interpreted in several different ways. Obviously such a scene could change the rating of the film which would in turn significantly reduce the chances of the film being seen by a wide audience. However, another possible explanation might reveal Mario’s ambivalent relationship with phallocentric masculinity and a rejection of his masculinity being equated with his penis (and his penis size), or it could simply mean that for Mario, with his very muscular, gym enhanced body, his entire body, not just his phallus, is a testament to his phallocentric masculinity.

**The Secret to Becoming a Man**

After the screening of the rape scene, the relationship between Melvin and Mario begins to change. In a following scene Melvin enters the bedroom where Mario sleeps

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\(^9\)As an actor, Mario’s embodiment of his father in this scene complicates the critique Mario the writer makes via Sandra who speaks out against Melvin’s decision to use Mario in the sex scene. The audience sees Mario acting as Melvin, saying that Mario will be ok; this in turn negates Sandra’s critique which is indeed Mario’s critique.
on the floor. Melvin’s demeanor towards his son is much different than it has been previously; he speaks to his son in an intimate and even gentle tone. Presumably Melvin wants to discuss the sex scene with his son but Mario feigns sleep. Melvin attempts to talk to his son anyway but changes his mind, he instead tells Mario to sleep on the bed and he will sleep on the coach. Mario does not respond and Melvin leaves the room, it is only then that Mario opens his eyes. At this point, one might imagine that Mario understands his role as an initiate into the cult of manhood; men do not need to discuss their feelings, especially feelings of personal pain, fear, or shame; therefore, in order to evade such a discussion, he feigns sleep. The silence continues. But the silence seems to bring the father and son closer than they were before. Mario’s move from the floor next to the bed into the bed is a sign of his shift into the realm of the patriarchal father. When he and Melvin next appear on screen together they are shown singing together, surrounded by other men, the members of the singing group Earth, Wind, and Fire, as they record the soundtrack of *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*. This all builds to one of the most intimate scenes between father and son in the film. As the pressures of editing the film and warding off bill collectors manifest themselves in Melvin through an eye ailment, it is Mario who tearfully implores his father to see a doctor. While Mario is allowed to show emotion in this scene his tears are not for himself but for his father. Paradoxically, these tears align him even more closely to phallocentric masculinity vis-a-vis his concern over protecting the father. Boys never shed tears for themselves as crying for one’s self is a sign of vulnerability.

This scene between Mario and Melvin clearly represents a change in the relationship between the two “men.” With overlapping images and narration, Van
Peebles connects three generations of Van Peebles men: Mario walks into the editing room and sees Melvin faint, after helping him up Mario hugs his father with tears in his eyes begging him “you’ve got to see a doctor. Please dad.” Melvin kisses his son on the cheek and in a voice-over he tells the audience, “And that was it, the first time my kid ever called me dad.” Immediately, another voice-over begins as the scene of Melvin and Mario dissolves into an interview scene of Melvin’s father, who states “you worry about your kids till they put you in the grave.” These scenes are meant to demonstrate the strong bonds between the Van Peebles fathers and their sons. The significance of Mario calling Melvin “dad” at this point should not be missed. Where Mario’s refusal (his silence) to call Melvin dad previously was an act of resistance against the rule of the father, against patriarchy, his decision to now name Melvin “dad” shows his renunciation of the law of the mother for that of the father; but this naming also identifies Mario’s position as son to Melvin the father, and in turn solidifies his position in patriarchy. Where Sandra’s earlier scene indicts the legacy of generational trauma between fathers and sons, with this scene, Mario chooses to support the suppressive patriarchal ideals of masculinity by conflating the trauma inflicted on sons by their fathers with filial love. Since Mario is able to face his trauma like a man, without discussion, without hysterical or feminine emotions, and accept the rule of the father, just like Melvin before him, with this scene Mario is symbolically initiated into the cult manhood.

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10 In the earlier scene where Melvin insisted the children call him dad, Megan responded with “Yes dad,” while Mario responded with “OK...” The narrative here then indicates that it is much more significant for Melvin when his son calls him dad.
From this point on in the film Mario’s initiation is complete and his and Melvin’s relationship is much closer. At the wrap party for *Sweetback* we see Mario is already emulating his father by pretending to be the director of *Sweetback* as Melvin and his father look on. Melvin addresses the question to his father: “the apple don’t fall far from the tree does it pop?” to which his father joyfully agrees as Melvin gazes into his eyes. At this point another voiceover narrative begins and the scene dissolves into an interview with the father who states “comes a point where you got to let the kids go and just be supportive of them.” This point of letting go, it seems, is only after the kids (read male children) have successfully negotiated the traumatic rites of passage. Ironically, it is after this point that viewers see more interactions between Melvin and Mario than they have before; they are virtually inseparable. Megan, Mario’s sister, who up to this point has only been an incidental character, disappears from the film all together. Mario alone accompanies Melvin to meet the potential distributor of the film. In this scene the two are dressed alike in identical Jeans outfits, and before they meet with the distributor it is Mario who “takes care” of Melvin: reminding him to remove his eye patch, straightening his clothes, and fixing his hair. Mario also accompanies Melvin to Detroit for the premier screening of the film. While Melvin convinces the theatre owners to show *Sweetback* as a stand-alone feature, Mario calculates the potential box office receipts of the film based on seat count. With the successful completion of his rite of passage then, Mario becomes Melvin’s partner, his equal, his double.

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11 Mario uses his thumbs and pointer fingers to create a camera through which he “films” Sandra and Megan who recite the line from the film: “No, we have not seen Sweetback.” Mario then calls “cut.”
In the final analysis of the film then, while Mario Van Peebles’s film provides a tentative critique of silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage into manhood, it ultimately reinscribes the very trope it begins to critique. Mario’s masculinity is never challenged and indeed is insured because he endures his trauma silently which in turn gives him entrance into the cult of manhood where he joins his father and grandfather. His position is made clear in the final scene of the film where Mario sits on Melvin’s lap as they enjoy the successful sold out screening *Sweetback*. In the final moments of the film, as Melvin and his crew watch the film in the theatre, the camera pans to the right, it slowly moves over the smiling faces of Melvin, Mario, and Sandra as they applaud the final scene of the film, the camera then immediately pans to the left until both Mario and Melvin are at the center of the screen. Sandra is effectively cut out of the scene, Melvin’s hands are on Mario’s shoulders and Mario’s hands cover Melvin’s as they both look ahead at the screen. This is a clear contrast to the opening scene where Mario sat behind Melvin; at this present position he is poised to carry on the legacy of his father. A subversive reading of this final scene, however, problematizes Mario’s position at the end of the film. His position on his father’s lap could actually make him more vulnerable to being sexually penetrated; ultimately, one might argue, following the rules of the cult of masculinity exposes the child to the possibility of being fucked by patriarchy. If I might be so bold, I would contend that hooks would argue that the acceptance of soul murder as rites of passage in the name of imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy does indeed fuck over Black men.

**Reel Jamaican Rude Bwoys**

Though they belong to different genres of film, the Jamaican film *Shottas* is similar to *Baadasssss!* in several important ways. Like *Baadasssss!*s, *Shottas* pays homage to
the films that came before it; like *Baadassss!* \(\text{}\), *Shottas* attempts to provide viewers with a “real story”; like *Baadassss!* \(\text{}\), *Shottas* is a labor of love between fathers and sons. J.R. Silvera, who plays young Biggs, is the son of the director Cess Silvera, and Carlton Grant Jr., who plays young Wayne, is the son of Spragga Benz, the actor who plays Wayne as an adult. Silvera, the independent filmmaker, writer, director, and producer could be considered the progeny of independent filmmaker forefathers Van Peebles and Henzell. While, like *Baadassss!* \(\text{}\), *Shottas* postulates an attempted critique of the ways “black men are created” in the image of a phallocentric patriarchy, it also falls short of its intended goal. And finally, like *Baadassss!* \(\text{}\), *Shottas* ultimately engages in the same problematic reinscription of silent acceptance of traumatic violence as mandatory rites of passage for young black boys into manhood.

*Shottas* is promoted as following “in the tradition of *Scarface* and *The Harder They Come* \(\text{[.]}\) *Shottas* is an unapologetic raw urban drama about two friends raised on the dangerous streets of Kingston, Jamaica” (DVD cover). In the special features interviews, director Cess Silvera and members of his cast, which includes Ky-Mani Marley, son of legendary reggae artist Bob Marley, and reggae recording artist Spragga Benz among others, all discuss the authenticity of the plot and characters of the film. “Shottas is real,” says Louie Rankin who plays Teddy Bruckshut, “[w]hat people see is a written story but it is a real story”; Spragga Benz explains that it is the authenticity of the story to the Jamaican experience that drew him to his role; and Marley asserts that he personally knows characters like the ones depicted in the film. And with a final challenge to the divide between fact and fiction, J.R. Silvera postulates that due to its veracity the film might as well had been a documentary. In fact, he continues, his role in
the film as “little Biggs” has inspired him to pursue a career as a documentary film maker.

Writer and director Silvera is of the same opinion in regards to the authenticity of the story. He suggests that the telling of this “authentic” Jamaican story is important in that Jamaican youth from the ghetto see themselves represented on the big screen; however, he points out, it is as important for the community to see him behind the camera as well. Silvera states that it gives him a great sense of pride to think that while filming in Jamaica, he may have impressed on the kids watching that one of them one day could become a director and would not have to pick up the gun; they would not have to be a Wayne or a Biggs, they would not have to be a shotta. Silvera claims that he wants to bring positive change to Jamaica and does not want people to misconstrue his intentions in creating the film: “none of us went into this movie to try to let kids emulate these characters or to impress upon kids that these are good people. These are people that were using what they had; and I am that story. I am that guy…I am Biggs, I am Wayne, I am all of those guys. But somewhere along the line I realized that I don’t like how the Biggs and the Waynes end up and I decided to take things in my own hands and try to change it.” Silvera, in the final analysis, sees his film as a story that is uniquely Jamaican which offers young Jamaican males a positive alternative to a life of crime and violence in which they find themselves immersed simply by virtue of being born in the Watershed district.

Unfortunately, *Shottas* storyline is neither new nor uniquely Jamaican. In a nutshell, the storyline follows two childhood friends, Biggs and Wayne, who grow up in the slums of Jamaica and turn to crime to raise themselves out of the ghetto; they
commit a robbery and use the money to go to America. Twenty years later Biggs is deported back to Jamaica (Wayne was deported four years prior) due to illegal activities there. In Jamaica the reunited friends continue a life of crime until a corrupt politician and murderous police officers force them to flee Jamaica. Back in Miami the two along with their henchman Mad Max proceed to extort and murder their fellow drug dealers until they are once again the “top shottas.” Despite all the claims to Shottas’ rootedness in the Jamaican experience, it is a film that has been seen many times before simply set to a reggae beat and the rhythm of Jamaican patois. Even more disturbing, this film simply recapitulates many of the very same dangerous tropes of silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage into black masculinity found in black oriented films from the US. In a November 2006 review of the film, Brent Simon suggests that

“All the tough guy talk, political corruption, criminal maneuvering and flossy, drug-runner lifestyle stuff are bits we’ve seen countless times before, from Narc, Carlito’s Way… all the way back to Scarface and Mean Streets, as well as any number of straight-to-video urban flicks who’ve found their inspiration in the same...and once [the main characters] moves back to the United States [the movie] loses any sense of distinctive personality. (Simon)


I do agree with Simon’s reading of the film and its striking similarities with many of its American counterparts, especially within the Italian-American gangster film genre. However, in addition to copying these cinematic styles, this film also constructs its representation of masculinity in similar ways to their American counterparts, a masculinity predicated on violence and a code of silence. My analysis focuses on the representation of silence and trauma, or soul murder, as necessary rites of passage into

12 Mario Van Peebles directs and stars in New Jack City
patriarchal masculinity. This instance of soul murder in *Shottas* is found in the opening scenes of the film while the protagonists are young boys in Jamaica. Though, according to Silvera’s comments, the film is ostensibly meant to critique the pathological, violent, and criminal behaviors of the disenfranchised who, due to economic oppression and lack of opportunity, engage in criminal endeavors, his film nevertheless fails to provide a significantly progressive vision of Black masculinity. In this film too, the “real black man’s” masculinity is defined through his ability to silently accept and suppress trauma and also through the very violent practices Silvera ostensibly seeks to reject. Just like in *Baadasssss!* the trauma in this film occurs during the adolescent years, transforming the Black boys into what will inevitably become dangerous Black men, rude bwoys, and top shottas.

**Generation Gap**

While *Shottas* is advertised as following in the footsteps of its predecessors such as *The Harder They Come*, there are some very important differences between the two films. Though both films tackle the issues of poverty, political corruption, and police brutality which confront young Jamaican men attempting to achieve an independent masculinity in a postcolonial Jamaica, their narrative developments are quite different. *Harder* is a bildungsroman that charts Ivan’s development from a naive country boy into a hardened “rudebwoy” antihero who is protected by the folk in the community as he symbolizes their collective struggle against an oppressive postcolonial political and economic system. *Shottas*, on the other hand, takes up the story of the rude bwoy thirty years later. But in this modern milieu the rude bwoy is no longer the resistant revolutionary figure Ivan had once promised to be; instead, with Wayne, Biggs, and Mad Max, the rude bwoy turned shotta, is co-opted by the government he once resisted. His
revolutionary potential is harnessed to oppress the community who now fear him rather than celebrate him. Where *Harder* was a film about the promise of youth being perverted and destroyed by Jamaica’s neocolonial regime, *Shottas* seem to celebrate the delinquency of the urban youth.

A comparison of the opening scene of both films makes these differences clear. *The Harder They Come* opens with a mixture of long and close up shots. The initial shot of a country bus driving along a seaside road heading into town is taken from a distance, slightly above street level. This shot situates the bus within its environment: on the road, between the ocean and the forest, and passing through villages. The next shot takes viewers inside the bus and provides close ups of the passengers as they look out the windows to see why the bus has stopped. The passengers discuss the reason for the stop, and here viewers are introduced to Ivan via a close up shot, as he fondles a mango he tells a fellow passenger is a gift for his mother. The sound of Jimmy Cliff’s hopeful and positive “You Can Get It If You Really Want” accompanies the images on the screen. This opening scene effectively connects viewers with Ivan by placing them in the bus with him. The extreme close up of Ivan’s bright smile as he looks out of the back window and waves to the driver of the convertible allows viewers to identify with him, through his innocence, even before the film proper begins. The sentiment of this opening corresponds with the bright-eyed dreams and aspirations of the country boy Ivan who is coming to the city to follow his dreams, it makes Ivan’s fall more tragic and galvanizes viewers’ support for him when he decides to fight the system.

By contrast, the opening scene of *Shottas* prevents the audience’s identification with the lead characters. The opening consists of two sections. First, clips from the final
act of the film are shown (the gun battle at Bigg’s house, with accompanying siren
sounds, gunshots, and bits of dialogue) in a mix of slow motion/regular speed/freeze
frames, black and white/color, in focus/out of focus, random characters appear on
screen (some with guns) without any context. Next, as the scene changes to a long shot
aerial view of the Waterhouse district, the soundtrack also begins; it is the gritty
“Welcome to Jamrock” sung by Damian Marley. The aerial shots also move between
black and white/color, in focus/out of focus, and between regular speed/fast forward--
moving swiftly over zinc roof homes to shanty developments to garbage strewn
irrigation canals and concrete lots, and back again. The camera quickly passes over a
group of children playing next to the refuse heap, but it never focuses on any of them.
Unlike Harder’s opening scene, Shottas’ disorienting opening creates a distance
between the viewer and the film. The initial violence, followed by erratic aerial shot
engenders a sense of hostility, voyeuristic surveillance, and unbelonging for the viewer
and a sense of entrapment and despair for those on screen; the soundtrack reaffirms
that sense of dread.¹³ Viewers remain outsiders and when the film proper begins they
are not provided with any more insight into the boys’ lives that help them to connect to
the characters.

**Men of the Ghetto**

The protagonists are introduced in a scene with several other young boys who are
playing cops and robbers. These appear to be the same group of boys who were
playing in the field in the aerial opening scene; little Biggs and his gang shoot the boy

¹³ This aerial scene is reminiscent of the opening scene of the classic (African) American film *Boyz N the Hood* (1990).
playing the police officer, followed by Wayne who shoots the “police informer.” This
dissolves into the following scene of the boys playing football; the game is interrupted
by Sando (a local shotta) who drives his car in the middle of the ‘field.’ Sando exits the
car and is approached by the boys, whom he greets, just before shooting someone, off
camera but in plain sight of the entire yard, including the boys. As the shots ring out, the
camera focuses on Biggs’ face which registers no emotion at the sound of the gunshots.
As the occupants of the yard clear the space for Sando to make his escape the camera
pans to a close up of Biggs who watches Sando leave. This scene dissolves into the
next which takes place the following day. Wayne and Biggs sit on the steps outside of a
local store playing a game of marbles. Biggs watches a delivery man who is working
directly in front of them and wonders how much money he has on his person. The two
boys then go over and effortlessly trick the driver into divulging the amount of money he
has as well as letting them know that he does not carry a gun for protection because he
is not afraid of “nothing and no one.” Upon receiving the information they desired,
Wayne and Biggs return to their marble game. Biggs, unprompted, says to Wayne “we
need a tool.” Wayne seems to inherently understand Biggs’ train of thought, without
missing a beat he responds “nuff money dat you know my yout,” he proceeds to inform
Biggs that he knows where he could retrieve a gun. The following morning Wayne
brings the gun to Biggs. With gun in hand Biggs exclaims, “Today we rich!” The boys
then lay in wait for the driver whom they had questioned the previous day. When the
driver returns to his truck Wayne runs in front of the truck and pretends to fall. The
driver leaves the truck to check on Wayne as Biggs sneaks up behind him with the gun
demanding the money. Wayne retrieves the money from the driver’s pocket, but the
boys demand the rest. When the driver refuses to answer, Biggs *unhesitantly* shoots him in the leg. Begging for his life, the driver finally reveals that more cash is hidden under the seat in the truck. As the boys run away from the crime scene, the driver mumbles to himself “fucking little tief dem.”

While the boys make their escape, the soundtrack begins; reggae artist Little John sings “In the Ghetto”: “I was born and raised in the ghetto / I’m a man, I’m a man of the ghetto/ how do you raise your kids in the ghetto? / Feed one child and starve another.” The introduction of this song here might be read in several ways. Firstly, it might be read as a critique of the inevitable outcome of poor economic conditions in the ghetto. A warning of sorts; if the options are between being the child who is starved or the one who is fed, then the boys, actions are understandable. They are, after all, fighting for survival in the concrete jungle of the ghetto. But an alternate reading is also possible, one in which the music justifies and valorizes the actions of the boys/little men. In this reading the emphasis in on the repeated “I am a man.” This act then becomes one not of survival but an act of patriarchal violence in order to establish a position in patriarchy.

This critical ambivalence permeates the entire film. Later, as the boys divide their ill-gotten gains, they discuss their future plans. Biggs decides to return to his mother in Miami. Wayne’s father also lives in America but he does not know him, so Biggs promises to ask his mother to allow Wayne to move in with them. This scene fades to black, and when the lights come up it is twenty years later. An adult Biggs returns to Jamaica after being deported from America due to his criminal activities there. Wayne, who was also deported four years prior under similar circumstances, as viewers soon learn, waits for him outside the airport terminal.
These preliminary scenes clearly posit a silent acceptance of violence and trauma as rites of passage for these black boys into manhood. Much like the child rape scene in the American film *Sweetback*, where through cinematic sleight of hand via editing, the rape begins with the boy and ends with the adult male dismounting the prostitute, or in *Harder* with the public whipping of Ivan, these scenes of trauma are also represented as transformative acts not only psychologically but physically as well. Quite literally, after seeing the boys witness a murder and consequently commit an armed assault and robbery themselves, the next time viewers see Biggs and Wayne, they are fully grown adult men. The visual narrative represents the boys’ (and Silvera’s) acceptance and performance of violent acts as initiation rites, which, successfully completed, gains them passage into the cult of manhood. In this case specifically, they become “bad men” or “top shottas.” If we analyze the scene a bit more closely we can see a compilation of violent traumatic experiences and accompanying silences that creates these men.

The first scene of the film establishes the boys as worthy candidates to enter the ranks of shottas while also introducing Sando as a desirable (or at least acceptable) example of masculinity for the boys in the hood. Sando arrives while the boys are engaged in a soccer (football) game; his arrival stops the game since his car is driven and parked in the middle of the ‘field’ (the boys are playing in the street). The other boys fade into the background of the scene along with several older men; only Biggs and Wayne are bold enough to approach Sando. On seeing the boys Sando, looking around nervously, takes the time to greet them with fist bumps. When Biggs sees Sando’s gun, he asks him what the gun is for. Sando ignores the initial question and asks them if they went to school. Wayne assures him that they would go to school the
following day, but Biggs confesses that they will not return to school since they wanted to be just like Sando. Their conversation is interrupted by Sando’s partner. He implores Sando to stop wasting time on the children and do what he came to do. Sando then exits the scene and the camera zooms in on a close-up of Biggs’ face as two gunshots are heard followed by the screams of a woman. The entire yard of men and boys seem unfazed by the shooting and only physically react to the shooting by moving out of the way in order to give Sando and his partner space to make their escape. While the adult males and other (male) children fade to the background of the scene and out of focus, Biggs and Wayne alternately remain at the foreground of this scene silently watching Sando and his partner. This scene therefore can be read as Biggs and Wayne’s indoctrination into the cult of manhood under the tutelage of a top shotta. Sando’s fist bumps with the boys act as symbolic transfer of power, a knighting of the boys; their mettle is tested through their reaction to the shooting and they pass with flying colors. It is no coincidence that the film juxtaposes the boys’ games of football and cops and robbers with the very real murder which interrupt those games. This signifies that playtime is over for the boys. They must put away childish games and move on to the real world, the world of men.

This scene is so disturbing because of the triviality in which it presents murder and the boy’s reactions to it. While most boys in this situation, given their social environment, may be expected to maintain a “cool pose” in public, they would be free to contend with feelings in private. But these boys never shed their cool pose demeanor. They never share their feeling about the violence, their proximity to it, or even the public spectacle of this particular shooting. Indeed, they seem to have no feelings about it
whatsoever. Murder, here, is represented as so commonplace that it does not even cause surprise or warrant discussion. Maybe, as they are in *Baadasssss!*, viewers are expected to read into the blank stare of the young actor and discern some emotional turmoil; however, here, besides the female's scream, there is no adult to articulate the trauma in the child's stead. Even the next day as the boys are alone playing marbles they do not mention the events of the previous evening. The silence here is defining, but this silent acceptance is imperative. It constructs masculinity. Since Biggs and Wayne go on to become "top shottas" themselves, their ability to silently endure this traumatic event is indeed the first of their test into the cult of masculinity.

An even more disturbing portrayal of silence in opening moments of the film is the way the two boys seem to intuit each other's thoughts about the robbery. The silent conspiracy posits a pathology of black urban youth as natural criminals. The boys never plan the robbery; each boy seems to inherently understand that they will rob the truck driver. From the moment Biggs fixes the driver in his gaze and wonders about the amount of money he makes, the robbery is inevitable. And to be sure, the thirteen year old boys successfully pull off an armed robbery in broad daylight. After Biggs shoots the driver and the boys make their escape, neither of them ever gives a second thought to the driver. Again, there is no discussion of the violent act; there is no fear, anxiety, or remorse over the shooting. Even the driver's reaction to his own shooting and robbery leads viewers to understand the boys' violence as a matter of course, comical, and insignificant. The driver's passive acceptance of his circumstances after the robbery by the two adolescent boys may just as well have been a reaction to a flat tire. One wonders if the driver even reported the incident to the police.
Like the driver, the target audience for this film is not expected to express horror over this scene; in fact, I would argue that the scene is presented in such a way that audiences, especially young black men, are expected to cheer on the young boys. After all, as Silvera suggests “These are [just] people that were using what they had.” And in the commentary for the film, Silvera and his cast certainly seem to cheer them on. For example, Silvera is very excited by the improvisational skills of Grant, the actor who plays Wayne. According to Silvera, Grant goes beyond the confines of the script in the robbery scene as he violently pushes the face of the driver as he takes his cash. The accompanying members of the cast which includes Spagga Benze, Grant’s father, all laugh at this element of “authenticity” and comment, “like father, like son.”

When the driver is shot, several of the commentators suggest that he (the driver) deserves another shot for not giving up the location of the cash sooner. Clearly, much of this laughing and “talk” is a part of a “cool pose” but what remains troubling is the inability of the director and his cast to move beyond this cool pose even in their admitted endeavor to guide their audience away from this type of behavior.

The filmmaker depends on what I described earlier as an “urban masculinist reading” of the film. This reading assumes an essentialized patriarchal worldview, the viewers, male or female have some knowledge (some may even have appropriated aspects) of the inner city culture, either through the media or lived experience; s/he is familiar with “street culture” and its code of silence. An urban masculinist reading assumes an audience’s familiarity with certain scenarios regarding street life. In his

14 This scene is reminiscent of the scene in *Baadasssss* where Big T praises Mario for “getting his dick wet” at such an early age.
commentary, Silvera says “the movie is for the streets and the street endorses it so we
good to go.” Silvera’s “streets” no doubt is comparable to Van Peebles’ “Brer.” Violence
is not shocking to this assumed audience since death, murder, robbery, physical and
mental abuse is all a part of life in the hood. If these boys are to survive, then they must
maintain silence in the face of trauma, “take it like men” and keep it to themselves,
because as we see in the game the boys play at the beginning of the film, “informer
bwoy must dead.” The code of silence along with the cool pose stance pervades the
narrative of Shottas as well as its commentary. While Silvea and the other
commentators attempt to criticize the young boys’ actions as inevitable yet problematic
acts of desperation due to lack of social and economic opportunities caused by a
corrupt political system which leaves the underclass enmeshed in a cycle of poverty and
violence, they nevertheless remain noticeably silent in other ways—unwilling or unable
to critique the accompanying problematic patriarchal gestures of masculinity inherent in
those actions.

Creating Monsters

At several moments in the film Silvera seems to posit Biggs as a somewhat
progressive male voice who criticizes the available models of masculinity for poor
Jamaican males and stands as a potential representation of change, but ultimately
those criticisms are nullified when even Biggs himself does not seem to take them
seriously. The first critique of the way young boys are incorporated into the realm of
masculinity occurs on Biggs’ first night back in Jamaica. On his return, Wayne hosts a
party in his honor. At the party Biggs is reintroduced to Blacka, Wayne’s little brother.
This is one of the more tender moments in the film as Biggs and Blacka greet each
other and the three men share a laugh as Biggs reminds Blacka that the last time they
saw each other Blacka was still wetting his bed. Wayne assures Biggs that Blacka is now a “Big Boy.” Nonetheless, Biggs seems genuinely surprised when he finds a gun in Blacka’s waistband as they playfully wrestle each other. Upon this discovery Biggs examines the gun and says to Blacka “You grow up for real,” to which Blacka replies, “Cyan stay baby forever.” Here, Biggs becomes almost emotional with his retort: “in a selfish and crazy way I wish you would.” Both Blacka and Wayne assure Biggs that Blacka would be fine, but Biggs remains unconvinced. When Blacka finally leaves the scene Silvera keeps the camera on a tight shot of Biggs’ face (a similar shot of his face as when he witnessed the murder as a boy) as he looks to Wayne for understanding. Wayne simply offers more assurances that Blacka will be fine to which Biggs replies: “You know say ah monsters we ah create.” This pivotal observation is shrugged off by Wayne with his response: “Come make me give you a gal.” The next shot of the film pans the length of an unnamed female’s body, finally settling on her butt.

Silvera uses the female body to dismiss Biggs’ critique of the traumatic initiation into the cult of masculinity, represented by Blacka’s gun, and his even more scathing critique of the “monstrous” masculinity itself. Biggs’ criticism is so damning because his statement incriminates himself, Wayne, and their “gun man” culture rather than simply placing the blame for the creation of these “monsters” on the corrupt government and police alone. Wayne’s response to Biggs’ insightful self analysis is to offer him a ‘gal’, the implication here is that Biggs is not thinking straight and what he needs, as a heterosexual black male, is to have sex with a woman to get his mind right. As in Baadassssss!, the female body is the location through which heterosexual black masculinity is established and (re)affirmed. The woman does not control her body
however. Her body is her man’s to control, and it is used in the service to other men. Wayne’s statement effectively dismisses Biggs’ critique of violent phallocentric masculinity and reasserts its power by establishing men’s position over women in the world of the shotta.

The world of the shotta is undeniably a phallocentric space in which women are all but invisible, and when she is seen she is either vilified or highly sexualized. Both Biggs and Wayne are represented as motherless sons; however, while neither has a biological father (Wayne does not know his father who lives in the U.S. and Biggs’ father is never mentioned), it is clear that Sando is their male role model. Interestingly, the one mother figure in the film is demonized. Biggs stays with his aunt Ms. Pauline who is first introduced to viewers on the day of the robbery; in her head scarf and moo-moo she sweeps her yard while singing spirituals. Ms. Pauline has nothing but insults for “that damn lazy boy Errol [Biggs].” She cuts her eyes and audibly mutters “crosses [troublemakers]” in his direction when Biggs exits the house. She bellows at him when she sends him to the store. When Biggs complains that he is tired of eating sardines Ms. Pauline taunts and belittles him suggesting he go back to American to his mother where he can eat steak. Ms. Pauline is thus characterized as both a comical figure to be laughed at as well as an oppressive shrew, who mistrusts and possibly abuses the boy left in her charge, a boy she should support and protect. Ms. Pauline then with her spirituals, her sweeping, and her head scarf represents the oppressed (through religion), and the domesticated (mammy).  

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15 Ms Pauline does not appear to have children of her own. She also appears non/sexual: she does not wear makeup, her dress covers most of her body, it is very loose fitting, her hair is covered, and her demeanor/tone of voice is rough — mannish.
she orders Biggs around but more importantly, she controls the household money and
dictates how it is spent. Ms. Pauline’s household represents the antitheses of the world
of the shotta: a world of men who are independent of the law (religious or social). She
represents female law—the law of the mother—which must be rejected in order for Biggs
to become the man he is meant to be. It is no coincidence then that Ms. Pauline is
introduced just before the boys commit robbery and assault. Their assault does not
simply grant them financial freedom; it also allows them to the opportunity to escape the
rule of the mother.

Ironically, the actual filmic presence of women only serves to signify their lack of
importance in the world of the shotta. While highly sexualized female characters are
present on screen to reaffirm the heterosexuality of the protagonists, the most
significant, intimate, and loving relationships in the film are clearly between the male
characters. Where the need or desire for women seems completely unnecessary for a
character like Mad Max, who claims phallocentric masculinity through hypersexualized
violence, Wayne and Biggs claim it via the bodies of disposable women. Raquel and
Abby, the love interest of the two protagonists, are only introduced after Biggs and
Wayne have reestablished themselves as the top shottas in Miami. It is the introduction
of these female characters that signals a turning point for the two protagonists. Wayne
meets Abby at the mall where she sells him and Biggs sixty-seven thousand dollars
worth of jewelry. When the sale is completed, Abby takes Wayne to the back of the
store where they have sex. There are no words exchanged between the two. Later that
night they, along with Biggs and Raquel, and Mad Max attend a party where an informer
is shot. As the three men and Raquel make their escape, Biggs asks Wayne the
whereabouts of Abby to which Wayne responds “fuck Abby.” Quite literally, Abby is just a fuck object for Wayne. There is no history, no intimacy, no mutual romantic bond between the two; this is evident in the earlier sex scene. Against a sterile white background Wayne bends Abby over a metal chair and takes her from behind. There is no kissing or caressing, Wayne rips off Abby’s underwear and mounts her, spanking her roughly as he does so. Sex with Abby not only affirms Wayne’s heterosexuality but also heighten his masculinity through his ability to conquer “pum pum.”16 This scene blurs the line between movie, music, and reality as fans familiar with the music of Spragga Benz, who plays Wayne, recall his hit songs “Backshot Me Love” and “Pum pum Conqueror.” Wayne certainly does not value women outside of their ability to provide him with sexual fulfillment.

Biggs’ relationship with Raquel on the other hand is posited as the antithesis to Wayne and Abby’s. Theirs is a loving relationship which predates Biggs’ deportation, and it picks up where it left off upon his return to Miami. Unlike Wayne and Abby, Biggs and Raquel make love. Their love scene takes place in the intimacy of Biggs’ home; coincidently, this is the first scene since Biggs’ return to Jamaica that he appears on screen without Wayne. In his home with Raquel, Biggs becomes much softer. In the privacy of his home Biggs wears a silk robe. On his way to the bathroom he informs Raquel that he is about to take a shower, she immediately joins him. On her way to the shower Raquel disrobes and the camera lingers on her nude body. In the shower, the two kiss and caress each other as the heat from the water and their bodies create a fog

16 Pum-pum is a colloquialism used in the local parlance for vagina.
on the glass doors of the shower. Raquel mounts Biggs and the two continue to face each other in an intimate embrace throughout their lovemaking. In their lovemaking Biggs is as interested in pleasing Raquel as much as he is himself. The foggy glass of the shower offers Biggs and Raquel protection from the viewers’ gaze. The setting of their lovemaking, within the domestic space of the home connotes a privacy and intimacy to their relationship that is not present in the scene between Wayne and Abby. Wayne and Abby’s sex scene is shot solely for the masculine gaze--it is a sex scene and not a love scene, the sex is all about Wayne’s pleasure, but it is also presented as a punishment for Abby, who is dismissive of the men until they pull out their wads of cash.

Biggs and Raquel’s love scene, on the other hand, appeals to a different viewership. Raquel’s presence clearly brings out a more sensitive side of Biggs. Biggs appears to value Raquel in ways that Wayne did not value Abby: he goes in search of Raquel when he returns to Miami, he takes her shopping, he makes sure she is safe during the shootout at the party, and they live together. In the scene that follows Biggs and Raquel’s love making, Wayne and Max visit Biggs’ home where Biggs greets them still clad in his silk robe. As he pours glasses of orange juice for himself and Wayne, Biggs informs his two friends of his decision to take a break from his life of crime. He plans to settle in Los Angeles with Raquel. Wayne rejects Biggs’ invitation to join him in Los Angeles and insists that Max will remain with him. While Biggs’ decision to go away suspends his and Wayne’s partnership, it is a bullet to Wayne’s chest as he is about to leave the house that officially ends the relationship.17

17 A rival drug dealer, Teddy Bruckshot, placed a hit out on Biggs and Wayne. Wayne is shot during the shootout.
The actors’ commentary on the scene set in Biggs’ house is quite revealing of the way women are valued, both in the real world as well as the world of the film. Silvera confesses that he had cast the actress who plays Raquel “for her ass.” This casting choice might explain her lack of voice (lines) in the film. In his critique of the film Spragga Benz blames Biggs’ relationship with Raquel for Wayne’s death. He sees Biggs as “pussy whipped”; or in other words domesticated. He postulates that Biggs’ announcement upset Wayne, which prompted him to leave the house and carelessly walk directly into a hit man’s line of fire. Benz goes on to hypothesize what would have happened if his character was not killed. He asserts, “if this never take place, next week me and Max woulda just kill [Raquel], yeah, and have back the thing set.” I would argue that Benz’s comments here are congruent with the mindset of the character he played. Benz, and undoubtedly his character Wayne, sees Raquel as taking Biggs away from him and the homosocial family the men have created for themselves. As the commentary continues Benz switches the blame for Wayne’s death from Biggs directly to Raquel. For his part, Silvera insists that he does not want his movie to seem unsympathetic to women “but this movie is real and in the real life of shottas there is not much room for women if they are not shottas themselves…they are what they are-- to be there and comfort and to be there.” In this world women are only necessary for the services they provide for the men in their lives. They are “there” for the men to provide

18 There is, in fact, a representation of female shottas in the scene in which Wayne’s brother, Blacka, is killed. In the scene, Blacka and Mad Max are ambushed by the police. Both men are on motorbikes and both carry female passengers. When the police demand they dismount, it is Mad Max’s female passenger who draws a gun, and the policeman’s fire, under Mad Max’s declaration: “Pussyhole fe dead.” Blacka and both women are killed. The female shotta is shot in the back, thereby protecting Mad Max and allowing him to escape unscathed. It would seem then that female shottas are as expendable as their counterparts and they too are “there” to serve their men.
comfort—read provide sex—but the real emotional connection in this world is between men. Interestingly, the very queer nature of this kind of community never dawns on any of the commentators.

Marrying Men

It is clear from these commentaries that the world these men (actors and the characters they play) inhabit is totally male centered. As Silvera posits, women are “there to comfort and to be there” in the service of men. Benz’s insight into Wayne’s mind in relation to Raquel provides insight into the ‘man centered’ society that these men have created for themselves. Despite the physical intimacy Biggs and Raquel share, it is nothing compared to the emotional intimacy—the love—he has for Wayne. This emotional bond is clearly articulated in the scene where both Wayne and Raquel are shot. Biggs’ domestic space is shattered during an attack by rival shottas. Wayne and then Raquel are shot in front of Biggs, but at the end of the attack the uninjured Biggs rushes directly to Wayne’s side. As boys they had developed a way of communicating between each other by whistling, and it is through this special form of communication that Biggs attempts to solicit a response from Wayne now. When Wayne does not respond, Biggs makes his way over to his friend’s body. This is the second intimate scene to take place within the domestic space of Biggs’ home, but this time it is between men. Upon realizing his friend is dying Biggs tearfully drags Wayne’s limp body between his legs, he cradles Wayne’s head in his lap as he attempts to revive him. It is important to note here that it is only in death that this type of intimacy is allowed between these men. In this tender moment Biggs uses the back of his hand to remove blood from Wayne’s lips. When he realizes Wayne is dead, Biggs takes a ring form Wayne’s finger and slips it onto his own. He then removes Wayne’s shades and
closes his eyes. Up to this point Biggs has not checked to see if Raquel is alive; in fact, the scene ends and he never as much as glances in the direction of Raquel’s body. Upon her death (murder), the woman he had only moments before been planning to start a new life with does not even warrant a second thought.

Silvera claims that *Shottas* presents a story that has not been seen before; I argue here that indeed we have seen this story time and again, with its narrative of soul murder and portrayal of inner city youth as emotionless, pathological, and bound to violence. Silvera, like Van Peebles, ostensibly wants to create something new yet they rely too heavily on the models of the past. Their own investment in phallocentric patriarchy does not allow them to fully disrupt its codes of silence. In the twenty first century, Black film directors, writers, and producers, both in the Caribbean and the United states, who aim to present a mimetic Black experience steeped in soul murder in order to “tell it like it is,” must go beyond a mere retelling. They must powerfully challenge those realities as necessary, and as the only possibility for young Black boys. As Robert Staples points out, “It is true that many black youth are socialized and exposed to violence in their environments and in the mass media. Whether this becomes their only concept of masculinity depends on the opportunity to fulfill other concepts of masculinity” (11). Both Denzin and hooks suggest that, “the purpose of the Black Aesthetic is to do ‘more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible’” (Denzin 155). What is possible in Black urban films across the Caribbean and the United States is a reimagining of Black masculinity that does not depend on a phallocentric masculinity that demands the soul murder of young Black boys.
The contemporary films I have analyzed here attempt to critique the silencing and traumatic rites of passage of young Black boys and the oppressive systems that create the monsters, and damaged men that some of them grow up to become. With their filmic productions, they make a step in the right direction; to some level, both Van Peebles and Silvera speak out and against the silencing inherent in the construction of these problematic models of masculinity. Van Peebles wants his viewers to read between the lines, and literally intuit the unspoken trauma in the eyes of his protagonist. Through his directorial choices Van Peebles articulates a rejection of trauma as rite of passage for young Black boys, yet in the face of his father he still unwilling to speak out against the practice. Silvera wants his viewers to decide against falling victim to the oppressive economic and political oppression that could lead to boys becoming shottas. He expresses his desire to offer a progressive model of life to his audience, using himself as an example of someone who has left the shotta lifestyle behind. Unfortunately, neither Silvera nor his protagonists seems to have been able to leave behind the notion of silent acceptance of trauma as a rite of passage for Black boys into manhood. Ultimately, both Van Peebles and Silvera’s narratives continue to laud a phallocentric imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy as desirable, and soul murder as necessary to achieve it.
Chapters Two and Three focused on filmic representation of silent acceptance of traumatic rites of passage of Black boys into the cult of manhood. I argued that the earlier films created a model of traumatic rites of passage into phallocentric patriarchal masculinity, and the later films, despite tentative disruptions, ultimately represent similar modes of phallocentric patriarchal masculinity and rites of passage. In this chapter I shift gears and focus on the literary works of Afro-Caribbean British writer Caryl Phillips. An analysis of Phillips’ oeuvre reveals the author’s preoccupation with the trope of the migrating Afro-Caribbean man and the trauma of the migratory experience. While Phillips continues to illustrate that Afro-Caribbean males are as affected by traumatic rites of passage as their counterparts in the North, he further shows how the migration experience for many Afro-Caribbean boys is another form of traumatic rite of passage that must be silently endured.

Phillips’ novels differ from the films under discussion because they challenge the code of masculinity as they speak out/bear witness to a history of the silenced traumatic experiences of migrating Afro-Caribbean males. Phillips’ protagonists express melancholia, the internalized ungrieved loss, caused by migration and its consequences. Melancholia, therefore serves as an overarching framework to discuss the psychological conditions of Phillips’ male protagonists whose migration to the metropole result in soul murder. Further melancholia engendered by migration is

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1 *The Zea Mexican Diary* 151
compounded by the loss of racial identity and masculinity as his protagonists migrate to the United Kingdom and the United States, countries that deny Afro-Caribbean men patriarchal privilege at every turn; this loss is also internalized by the protagonists, resulting in further melancholia and self alienation.

The bulk of this Chapter is focused on an analysis of Bert Williams in Phillip’s Dancing in the Dark, who I see as the melancholic par excellence. Phillips uses Williams’ personal story to highlight the enduring psychological trauma experienced by many Afro-Caribbean males engendered through their migration to the metropole. While Dancing in the Dark is a more recent work, the issue of loss and melancholia can be traced back to Phillips’ first novel, State of Independence. State of Independence, and Dancing in the Dark, are published twenty years apart, they are structurally very different, and they are set in turn of the century America and the postcolonial independent Caribbean respectively. Despite these disparities, I contend that the two novels can be read as two parts of a single larger melancholic narrative. The earlier novel, State of Independence, focuses on the return of the Afro-Caribbean male migrant to his homeland and the alienation he experiences upon this return. Interestingly, the novel is virtually silent in terms of what happens while Bertram is away. Dancing in the Dark, on the other hand, focuses exclusively on the traumatic experiences of the migrant while in exile. Bert Williams, though he had achieved the American Dream

2 Ledent for example argues that State "disappoints because it lacks the structural boldness that contributes to the complexity of The Final Passage [Phillip’s first novel], and also characterizes Phillips’s later fiction"(40). But like most of Phillips’ work these works explore issues of migration, displacement, belonging, and fragmentation, but what makes these two texts stand apart from the rest of Phillips’ oeuvre is that they both focus exclusively on a single Afro-Caribbean male protagonist. While all of Phillips’ fictions contain at least one Black male protagonist, they usually share the central narrative with a white female. All five novels between State and Dancing, from Higher Ground (1989) to A Distant Shore (2003), share this feature. It is only in the former two novels that an Afro-Caribbean born male protagonist maintains the primary focus throughout.
(becoming, at the time, the highest paid and most famous Black entertainer in America by performing in blackface), leads a miserable life, disconnected from family and friends. What readers see in Dancing in the Dark, then, is what remains unseen and unspoken in the earlier novel.

**Not Sadness But Melancholia**

My analysis of race and melancholia builds on the scholarship of Judith Butler and Anne Anlin Cheng, both investigate melancholia and its relation to identity formation as it pertains to race and sexuality. In *Melancholy-Gender-Refused Identification*, Judith Butler, for instance, uses the concept of melancholia to discuss the development of heterosexuality as the loss/refusal of the homosexual. She explains: “in melancholia, a loss is refused… internalization is the way in which loss is preserved in the psyche” (5). While loss and subsequent melancholia, according to Freud, are a part of the human condition, Anne Anlin Cheng suggests “[a]s a model of ego-formation (the incorporation as self of an excluded other), melancholia provides a provocative metaphor for how race in America, or more specifically how the act of racialization, works” (Cheng’s italics 50). For Cheng, the minority is “the object of white melancholia” (51), but the minority “is also a melancholic subject, except that what she renounces is herself” (53). Cheng explains Freud’s cogent distinctions between mourning and melancholia:

Freud posits a firm distinction between mourning and melancholia. His 1917 essay on “Mourning and Melancholia” proposes melancholia as a pathological version of mourning--pathological because, unlike the successful and finite work of mourning, the melancholic cannot “get over” loss; rather, loss is denied as loss and incorporated as part of the ego. In other words, the melancholic is so persistent and excessive in the remembrance of loss that that remembrance becomes part of the self. (50)

This concept of loss as a part of the self—melancholia—is very important in analyzing the representation of migrant Afro-Caribbean men in Caribbean
literature. Melancholia ultimately results in paralysis as its victims are unable to move forward. Migrant Afro-Caribbean men might be more susceptible to melancholia because they face a triple loss—the original loss, a loss of Africa; the second loss, that of their Caribbean homeland; and a third loss, loss of masculinity caused by immigration to countries in which racism denies Black men the fundamental privileges of patriarchal manhood. The memory of a perceived complete masculinity in the Caribbean in juxtaposition to a limited masculinity in the metropole leads to a shattered sense of self; some of these men forever see themselves as incomplete. One of the most melancholic characters in Caribbean literature I argue in this chapter is Bert Williams.

That Williams become self destructive and ultimately unable to fulfill his (human) potential is no surprise since he is victim of melancholia, which Cheng explains:

produces a peculiarly ghostly form of ego formation. Moreover, the incorporation of loss still retains the status of the original lost object as loss; consequently, as Freud reminds us, by incorporating and identifying with the ghost of the lost one, the melancholic takes on the emptiness of the ghostly presence and in this way participates in his/her own self-denigration. (50)

Both Cheng and Butler use Freud’s framework of melancholia to discuss racial constructs in the U.S. Cheng suggests that “racial melancholia serves not as a description of the feeling of a group of people but as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analyzing the constitutive role that grief plays in racial/ethnic subject-formation. Likewise, I would argue that like migration melancholia provides a useful framework for discussing migrant Afro-Caribbean men. Phillips’ characters experience melancholia as a result of migration and thus reflect Butler’s insight that melancholia results from displacement. In an interview with Vikki Bell, Judith
Butler discusses her views on the intersections between race melancholia and migration:

So to the extent that the history of race is linked to a history of diasporic displacement it seems to me that melancholia is there, that there is, as it were, inscribed in ‘race’ a lost and ungrievable origin, one might say, an impossibility of return, but also an impossibility of an essence. (170)

Caryl Phillips echoes Butler when he suggests: “One can never go back. The old Garveyite dream of returning to Africa makes no sense. A lot of the people are saying that in England now. Older folk, pensioners, have begun to understand that there is no return to Trinidad or Barbados” (Sharpe 157). This melancholic attachment to a lost and irretrievable home—and self—is evident in Phillips’ novels. Both Bertram Francis and Bert Williams develop melancholic attachments to a Caribbean home place and sense of self that they can never really return to. While Bertram Frances physically returns to his island home, his sense of loss remains with him. At the novel’s end, Bertram remains adrift on the small island. Bert Williams undoubtedly would encounter the same fate, were he to return.

**States of Mourning and Melancholia**

Bertram Francis and Bert Williams are connected through their experiences of migration and melancholia. These characters and themes can even be traced back to Phillips’ very early works. Bénédicte Ledent traces the intertextuality of Phillips’ work, explaining how his earlier plays provide the basis for his novels. Of specific interest to this chapter, Ledent shows how Albert Williams, the protagonist of Phillips’ second play *Where There is Darkness*, is closely linked to Bertram Francis of *State of Independence*. Albert, “after more than twenty years in England where he made good in material terms, is about to go back to his native Caribbean in a self-deceptive attempt to
return to a simpler way of life, while in fact running away from himself and his relational failures” (Ledent 11-12). Clearly, Bertram’s story of return is an extension of Albert’s story. But while the novel picks up where the play ends, State does not unfold into the fantasy of a paradisiacal homecoming as it is imagined by Albert. The novel ultimately exposes Albert’s fallacy and explores the more disturbing reality of return. Helen Thomas explains that Phillips “imbued him [Bertram] with some of the conditions and ambivalences characteristic of protagonists within other texts dealing with the paradoxical conditions of post-coloniality” (22).

Following Ledent and Thomas’ lead, I propose that Albert Williams of Where There is Darkness, who becomes Bertram Francis of State of Independence, eventually morphs into Egbert/Bert Williams of Dancing in the Dark. The latter text evokes the former with the repetition of Dark [ness] in its title, and the shared name of the protagonists [Al]Bert Williams signal an even stronger connection between these narratives. However, I argue here that the protagonists’ preoccupation with return (to his island home) as his salvation is the most salient connection between the texts. A reading of Where There is Darkness is not necessary in order to understand and appreciate State of Independence; likewise, it is not necessary to read State of Independence in order to understand Dancing in the Dark. However, reading these two novels as parts of a larger project provides insight into the complex concerns of migration, melancholia and Afro-Caribbean masculinity throughout Phillips’ career.

I am reading Dancing in the Dark alongside State of Independence here because I see the former as filling the silences left by the latter, specifically regarding the experiences of the Afro-Caribbean man’s experience while in exile. Both novels also
offer insight into the related condition of melancholia. *State of Independence* begins with Bertram’s return home after a relatively unsuccessful twenty years in England. It is the eve of independence, and he hopes to reconcile with family and friends with whom he had lost contact, take up residency, and start his own business on the independent island. But Bertram’s return is not greeted with the jubilation he expected; in fact, he is haunted by his past, which causes sadness and melancholia. The text offers little information regarding Bertram’s time away from home, though he returns alienated and reluctant to discuss his experiences in England. On the occasions when Bertram is asked directly about his time in England, he is either unwilling or unable to put his experiences into words. Upon his return, all of Bertram’s interactions with his mother and former friends are haunted by awkward silences. The silences are most pronounced when Bertram is asked about England. These silences around what happens in England, both Bertram’s and the text’s, are manifestations of silent acceptance of trauma as rites of passage.

As I argue in the earlier chapters, many Black boys are *encouraged* to suppress their emotions in the face of trauma. The forced suppression of emotions in these young boys psychologically crushes their spirits and inhibits their growth into emotionally connected human beings. hooks calls this process *soul murder*. In juxtaposing Bertram’s emotional *control* to that of his younger brother, it is clear that prior to leaving the island Bertram had already become a victim of the demands of phallocentric masculinity. Dominic, who at sixteen is three years Bertram’s junior, is upset when Bertram decides to go to England; he is emotional and vocal about the changes occurring in their lives. Dominic does not want things to change, but Bertram is
very practical and matter of fact about the inevitability of change. He explains to his brother: “Dominic, you and me can’t go on for the rest of our lives doing everything together…not everything can just carry on how it was…things always moving on…We must learn to move in our own way too” (47). Where Dominic can be seen as feminized by his emotions and his desire to remain a part of a team (he and his brother), Bertram, on the other hand, can be seen as masculine due to his lack of emotion and his move towards individualism.

But Bertram’s stoicism comes by way of soul murder. The product of a single parent home and the eldest male child, Bertram has had to grow up—become a man—much earlier than Dominic has. In fact, he has had to act as a surrogate father figure to his younger brother. Neither Bertram nor Dominic knew their father but hoped to meet him some day. When he was eight years old, Bertram’s mother asked him to accompany her to his father’s funeral; this was the first time she had mentioned his father to him. His mother’s casual attitude in telling Bertram the news of his father’s death and subsequent funeral is indicative of what type of behavior is expected of him. Bertram was not only expected to support his mother by attending the funeral with her, he was also expected, upon his mother’s request, to keep it a secret from his little brother. Bertram successfully maintains his silence and never reveals the secret to his brother or anyone else. Were he to grieve at all for his father, it would have to be alone and in silence. Indeed, the text does not give any indication that he does. These are the lessons of manhood that Bertram learned while at home. Given this framework for what is utterable for boys, it is no surprise that the grown Bertram is unable to speak about possible trauma he faced as a poor Afro-Caribbean male migrant in England. His
silence is symptomatic of the silent acceptance of trauma that Black boys are expected to endure to pass into manhood. But Bertram’s silencing in relation to his father’s death is not the only defining traumatic experience of his life. Despite the text’s silence, readers understand that Bertram’s migratory experience is also traumatic and defining. Clingman writes that “[t]he passage across water – as in the original Black Atlantic passage – is a place of transition, trauma, and indissoluble time: an experience that will live on forever” (Clingman 54-55). I read A State of Independence as Phillips’ exploration of the self alienation that happens when one attempts to maintain silence around the trauma of migration.

A loss of self/identity is the initial crisis encountered by many Black male migrants to the metropole. While Phillips does not describe Bertram’s arrival in England, he does depict a similar arrival in the pages of his first novel, The Final Passage. In this novel a young couple migrates to England in search of a better life. As the boat docks in England, Michael, the male protagonist, strikes “up a conversation with a group of men, three of them in panama hats and double breasted suits, the fourth in trilby and blazer and Oxford bags” (140-43). Though this conversation covers three pages, Phillips never clarifies the individual identities of the individual men as they speak. Michael, the individual, who up till this point is very distinctive, is lost among the horde of other Black men, just one in a number of others. The only thing that distinguishes the men is their dress, and even that, for the most part, is uniformed. In England, Michael becomes “the Caribbean man,” “the Negro,” or worse yet, “nigger.” I will return to this a bit later. Besides loss of his individuality, Phillips also depicts the migration to England as infantilizing for the Afro-Caribbean man. On the voyage to England, we see Leila,
Michael’s wife, mothering him. She spends most of the voyage taking care of both him and Calvin, their baby. She was continually fetching food from the kitchens, bringing Michael a small tin bowl in which to wash, assisting him in his frequent journeys to the toilet, washing Calvin’s clothes...It was often late at night by the time both husband and son finally fell asleep, and it was only then that she had some time to herself"(139).

During the journey Michael seems to revert to infancy, an indication of his social position in the “mother country.” The racism and ethnocentrism minorities encountered from the predominant population deny Black men both their masculinity and their position in patriarchy. But upon his initial arrival in the country, Michael is unaware of these challenges, and on the train ride to their home “both, father and son, dozed lightly and peacefully” (144) as Leila looks on. Shortly after their arrival in England, Michael disappears from the narrative and the rest of his experiences in England remain shrouded in silence. Bertram, who also traveled to England by boat, undoubtedly faced similar challenges of alienation upon his arrival. Bertram’s refusal to talk about England is an attempt to deny the loss his migration engendered; it is a sign of his melancholia.

Maintaining his marginal position in patriarchy for the Black man means that he must accept the rules of patriarchy, which means that trauma must be ignored, denied, silently accepted. As a result, when he returns home, Bertram never mentions the trauma he experienced while in England. In fact he often attempts to elide the trauma altogether by extolling the virtues of life in England. At one point Bertram suggests to Lonnie, a local bartender, that there are benefits to life in England, despite the cold weather: “Plenty of black people there so you never really getting out of touch” (62). Bertram’s statement here is ironic since he is clearly out of touch with his friends, family, and the local community. There is no evidence that Bertram was a part of the larger
Afro-Caribbean community while living in England. He had stopped all communication with his family and friends, so he had no idea his brother Dominic had died, he did not know that Jackson Clayton, his boyhood friend, had become a Minister and was poised to become the next leader of the nation, nor did he know that his former lover, Patsy, had conceived a child (possibly his). It is only after he returns that Bertram becomes aware of this information. Bertram’s statement to Lonnie only serves to show his own self deception/denial of the alienation he suffered while in England.

Bertram’s deceptive memories of England are reminiscent of a character from *The Final Passage*. Prior to his own departure, Michael visits Alphonse Walters, who has returned to the island scarred and penniless after living in England. While working there, Alphonse had an accident that resulted in acid spraying over his body; of the aftermath he tells Michael, “They give me £100 and tell me to go home” (101). But despite this tragic and traumatic experience, Alphonse maintains that “England be good for it going raise your [Michael’s] mind. For a West Indian boy like you just being there is an education…It’s a college for the West Indian” (*Final Passage* 101). Alphonse does not seem to conceive of his trauma as such but rather as necessary for growth into manhood. He sees the “lessons” learned in England as necessary for a boy like Michael to become a man.

Bertram, like Alphonse, does not speak of his time in England as traumatic, but those around him do sense something—I would call it melancholia—in him. Though Bertram’s scars are not epidermal like Alphonse’s, Phillips makes it clear that they are nonetheless present and noticeable. Local shop owner Mr. Carter “stared at him [Bertram] as though he could see some dreadful change that England had wrought in
Bertram’s mother tells him that people had grown “used to the fact that England had captured [his] soul” (82). She confronts him regarding his silence about England: “Why it is that you being so damn secretive about the whole thing? Even to this very minute you still don’t have the decency to tell me what happened in England” (84-85). But Bertram’s response to his mother provides no insight:

‘nothing happened…*England just take me over. New things start to happen to me, new people, like I was born again and everything is fresh*…Nothing happen to me in England…A big rich country like that don’t seem to have make any impression on me. I might as well have left yesterday…I think I am the same fellar’ (85 my italics).

This ‘explanation’ does nothing to enlighten his mother about his sojourn to the metropole. However, if one were to literally read between the lines in which Bertram claims “nothing happened,” it is clear that his migration to England is a rite of passage that totally changes him; an experience in which he “was born again.” England has made a mark on him, and those who remained on the island see a difference in him that he apparently is unable or unwilling to acknowledge. His mother finally ends their conversation, stating “[since] it is really causing you so much pain and trouble to get around to speaking with me on this subject then I don’t want to know” (85). Bertram’s mother’s dismissive comment may in fact be very insightful, and the same may be true of Jackson Clayton’s invective: “you [English West Indians] lost for true for you let the Englishman fuck up your heads’” (136). Both his mother and Clayton unwittingly point to the trauma caused by Bertram’s, and other “English West Indians’,” migration. When they return—if they ever do—they return as lost souls haunted by the loss of home and self. In other words, they suffer from melancholia.

But even when Bertram wants to discuss his experiences while in England he is unable to find the words to do so, most likely because he has suppressed the traumatic
experience for so long. After a sexual encounter, Patsy asks Bertram about his life in England, but “every time he formulated a sentence that could lead him into some kind of clarification of his life in England, his thoughts became too complex and he withdrew” (149-50). Bertram asked that Patsy not make him discuss his life in England since he feared that “it would come out upside down” (150). He eventually offers Patsy the simple facts of his stay: “when I arrived in England everything was either fascinating or frustrating or both. Things sometimes difficult …After two years they tell me I must leave the college so I take a job. Then I take a next one and so on, until my time just slide away from me” (151). Bertram’s “just the facts” report is devoid of any emotional connection to England. He has managed to dissociate himself from his time there.

When Patsy surmises that Bertram does not feel at home in England, he counters “I don’t yet feel at home back here either” (152). By maintaining the silence [refusing to fully engage in a discussion of] Bertram’s life in England, Phillips strategically brings more attention to what he must have experienced there.

Though Bertram is never able to acknowledge his loss and subsequent trauma, an analysis of his inner thoughts uncovers his psychological condition as melancholia.

During his conversation with Patsy

[h]is mind sailed back to those first few months in England…and the frustration of trying to understand a people who showed no interest in understanding him…he had felt compelled to relinquish his family photographs, for they had become a reminder of loneliness as opposed to a temporary cure…His only regret had been that he did not have a photograph of Patsy to jettison (151-152)

Bertram’s way of coping with the trauma of separation from his family and friends is an attempted eradication of all memories of them from his mind. The pain of his memories would have been too much to endure, so he chose to forget. If melancholia develops
from the inability to let go of the lost love object, then Bertram’s letting go of his
memories of home should be a more productive form of mourning. But escaping
melancholia is not so easy; Cheng points out that “Freud’s idea of a proper mourning
begins to suffer from melancholic contamination” (Cheng’s italics, 53). Cheng explains
that a healthy “letting go” for Freud requires complete eradication of the loved object as
“[t]he denigration and murder of the beloved object fortifies the ego” (53). Bertram’s
total separation from his family and friends can be read as a decision to relinquish his
lost love, an attempt to thoroughly “kill” his past and move beyond melancholia. But
Cheng points out the complexities of this position:

how different is this in aim from the melancholic who hangs onto the lost
object as part of the ego in order to live? That is to say, although different in
method and technology (the mourner kills while the melancholic
cannibalizes), the production of denigration and rejection, however re-
introjected is concomitant with the production and survival of “self.” The
good mourner turns out to be none other than an ultrasophisticated, and
more lethal, melancholic. (53)

Here, Cheng problematizes Freud’s neat divide between the mourner and the
melancholic. Ultimately, the objective of both mourner and melancholic is the survival of
self; whereas the melancholic holds on to the memory of the lost object, the “good
mourner” totally eradicates the memory of the lost object; however, the outcome of each
is the fortification of the ego in order for the subject to live.

Caught in this paradox, the Afro-Caribbean male migrant of Phillip’s novels seem
doomed to languish in melancholia. The initial loss of home place and identity
experienced after the initial migration is irreversible even after a return to the original
location. Bertram Francis’ continued alienation once he returns to the island proves the
old axiom you can never go home again. But Bertram’s experience only provides a
glimpse into the experience of migration for the Afro-Caribbean man. For a more in-
depth analysis of the complexities of migration and melancholia I now turn to Bert
Williams. While Williams’ story is set during the turn of the twentieth century and his
migration is to the United States rather than Bertram Francis’ England, I contend that
the resultant effects on both men are similar.

Invisible Life

It is not by accident that his skin is black; for black, too, is the color of his loss. 3

George Lamming

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile4

Paul Laurence Dunbar

In 1903, in his seminal text The Souls of Black Folk, W.E.B Du Bois proclaimed
that “[t]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, -- the
relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the
islands of the sea”(9). In February of the same year, the “Negro entertainer” Bert
Williams performed on Broadway to sold out audiences wearing blackface makeup. The
self-reflective melancholia of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s lyric poem We Wear the Mask
(1895) might well reflect the inner thoughts of the painfully sad and silent Bert Williams,
the protagonist of Phillips’ eighth novel, Dancing in the Dark (2005). In his self reflexive
musings Williams poses a DuBoisian question of his own: “Can the colored man be
himself in twentieth-century America?”(100).

Dancing is a fictionalized account of Williams’ life. Williams emigrated from the
Caribbean at eleven years of age with his parents and grew up to become America’s

3 Pleasures of Exile 107
4 We Wear The Mask
first Black superstar; highlights of his career include starring in *In Dahomey* (the first musical with an all Black cast to appear on the Broadway stage), giving a command performance at Buckingham Palace while touring England in 1903, and becoming the first Black entertainer to star in the Ziegfeld Follies. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Williams was one of the most popular, influential, and highest paid entertainers in America. In the preface of her study of his life, Camille Forbes writes that Williams “became one of the most important black performers in American history. A trailblazer whose extraordinary achievements created opportunities for later generations of black entertainers, he also raised the bar for comic performance among both blacks and whites” (Forbes xi). But despite this contribution to the world of entertainment, Williams lived his life behind a veil; on stage the veil consisted of burnt cork and greasepaint; while off stage, it was a veil of silence and mystery.

Despite his accomplishments and contributions to the entertainment industry, Bert Williams, unlike his white contemporaries such as W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, and Charlie Chaplin, has been all but forgotten by American entertainment industry. Williams’ almost total disappearance can be attributed to several factors: firstly, the entertainment industry has often elided the contributions of African Americans; for example, Charles Gilpin and Clarence Muse are only two of Williams’ African American contemporaries who have also been all but lost to the history books. Secondly, blackface minstrelsy remains an embarrassing fact of America’s racist past, a memory that many White and Black Americans would rather remain silenced. Thirdly, Williams’ career peaked prior to the explosion of talking *pictures*, and finally he died relatively young and left few examples of his performances for posterity; today, only three short
films and a few audio recordings remain. But again, it is important to note that Williams had a hand in his own obscurity as he seems to have intentionally sought to erase his private life from record.

Williams maintained a distance between himself and the American public by shrouding himself in ambiguity. One Williams biographer, Ann Charters, notes several contradictions in his biography. She points to the January 1918 interview with American Magazine which purports that Williams claims that his father was a Danish consul in Nassau [Bahamas] and it was there that he married Williams’ mother, but Charters challenges the accuracy of the reporting and suggests that it was Williams’ grandfather who was a Danish consul in Nassau. She goes on to argue that “A few years later Williams told a friend that he was born on November 12, 1874, in Antigua, West Indies, a son of Fred and Julia Williams” (Carters 15). Forbes writes that she found it “at times excruciatingly difficult to trace [Williams’] life” particularly because Williams cherished his privacy so deeply (Forbes xii).

Phillips states that Williams “seemed determined, during his life, to erase all personal traces of himself.” He left no diaries, journals, or letters, no “confessional material…that inner material that told you how he really felt.”5 Because “Williams remained reticent about his private life, protecting his interior world from the public eye,” Forbes was able to access Williams’ life only “through various means: joke books, songs, interviews, letters, reviews, films, and tributes.” Unfortunately, most archives, she notes, “provide access mostly to his public face only” (Forbes xii). Williams’ masking of his past was so successful that even today his birthplace is still debated.

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5 Quote taken from an October 28, 2005 interview on The Diane Rehm Show on NPR.
While some scholars such as Forbes and Phillips are confident that Williams and his family migrated to the United States from The Bahamas, Antigua still celebrates him as one of their native sons. An article in the Monday, 14 December 2009, issue of the “Antigua Sun” reports that “the [Antigua and Barbuda] US Tourism team celebrated the holiday season by honouring one of Antigua and Barbuda’s unsung heroes Broadway actor, comedian, director and composer Bert Williams.” Clearly, Williams was successful in protecting his name by not just silencing his past but to some extent, completely erasing it.

**Remembering and Reimagining His-story**

Phillips’ characterization of Bertram Francis in *State of Independence* and Bert Williams in *Dancing in the Dark* are representative of a type of fragmented, detached, melancholic Afro-Caribbean man produced by a migratory history. In order to understand the melancholic nature of these characters, it is important to understand the history in which they operated. It is no accident that Phillips chooses to construct his story around the historical moment of independence (some argue of St. Kitts specifically) or to write about the very real performer Bert Williams. Phillips’ engagement with history and public memory is purposeful. His, I would suggest, is a project of recovery and reclamation; his work is engaged in the healing of melancholia for the community of African Diaspora readers. Responding to an interviewer’s inquiry about how much of the *Dancing* is fictionalized, Phillips states:

> The very short extracts from the plays and some of the newspaper reports are totally factual— but they exist just to give a kind of tantalizing factual flavor to the novel. However, who these characters are, and how they thought, act, felt, suffered, loved and lost, all of this had to be felt and imagined...I had to keep reminding myself that fiction is one thing, and documentary something completely different. (Interview Borzoi Books)
For this project Phillips purposely blurs the line between fact and fiction, the real with
the imagined. Jenny Sharpe posits that for Phillips, the act of “memory does not [simply]
involve recovering the past” (157). On the contrary, Phillips works actively to
problematisethe ways we engage with history and the present. In an interview with
Sharpe, Phillips explains that

[that] the larger historical question regarding memory has to do with our own
collective memory of history as a community, as a society. So my way of
subverting received history is to use historical documents, use first-person
voices, digest what they’re saying, and somehow rework them. (157).

So while Phillips’ work may reference actual historical figures, locales, and events,
readers must remain aware of his active, imaginative vision of these histories. It is on
the border of fact and fiction, historical revisions, and public memory that he attempts to
provide readers with new ways of understanding their present social, political,
economic, and psychological conditions. Cultural critic Stuart Hall argues that “[w]e
cannot and should not, for a moment, underestimate or neglect the importance of the
act of imaginative re-discovery. ‘Hidden histories’ have played a critical role in the
emergence of some of the most important social movements of our time” (222). In
discussing Phillip’s A Distant Shore, Stephen Clingman argues that “the past is
irredeemably part of the present in a way that haunts, trails and intrudes—the dust and
ice in the tail of a comet that the present will never escape”(54). I suggest that this
statement is true for both the characters within the text as well as for Phillips’ audiences.
Phillip’s work forces his readers to engage with a traumatic past that some would rather
remain silenced.

Phillip’s novels perform an imaginative rediscovery of hidden histories. In Dancing
in the Dark, Phillips includes the known facts from Williams’ career along with excerpts
from newspaper articles and dialogue from Williams’ act as a starting point, but he also uses his imagination to construct the private lives of Williams and the three other main characters, which include Williams’ partner George Walker and both men’s wives, Lottie and Aida respectively. Phillips’ novel fills the gaps created by the silences of history and rescues Williams’ contribution to American culture from obscurity, but as significantly, Phillips highlights the tragedy of the Caribbean man’s existence in America. One of the most important aspects of Phillips’ novel, I would argue, is its focus on the lasting trauma of Bert’s migration to the United States from the Bahamas as a little boy.

**New Land, New Men**

Phillips begins Williams’ story in medias res; it is 1903, several years after Williams’ life changing decision to don burnt cork and perform in blackface. Bert Williams, like Bertram Francis, is already a lost soul; he is withdrawn, friendless, and uncommunicative. Williams is unable to be intimate with his wife; he is estranged from his father and at odds with his partner. Initially it seems that Williams’ decision to perform in blackface is the turning point in his life--the traumatic decision that leads to his ultimate undoing. While that decision does factor into his ultimate alienation from his family, friends, country, and self, I would argue that the initial trauma for Bert takes place long before he first puts on burnt cork. It is the initial trauma of Williams’ migration to the United States of America at eleven years old that is the melancholic memory that haunts him throughout his life and sets the stage for his inevitable self destruction.

In his seminal text, *Black Skin White Mask*, Frantz Fanon famously wrote about his own experiences with racism upon migration from Martinique to France which left him “recolored” and “clad in mourning” (113). Under the white gaze, Fanon loses his individuality and simply becomes “nigger.” In this hostile environment, he is left to
grieve the loss of the man he once knew himself to be. Likewise, Bert Williams, like other Phillips’ characters, is recolored and clad in mourning upon his migration to the U.S. Even before he literally recolors himself with blackface makeup, Williams is already recolored as “nigger” simply because he is a man of African descent in a racist United States.

At eleven Bert, loses his “island paradise” and sees his once proud father reduced to the status of a lowly “Negro” upon entrance into the United States of America. The effect of this migration and accompanying loss is undeniably traumatic for the boy. In America, Bert sees “the shocked faces of his parents staring at each other,” which leaves him “looking intently at the horizon trying desperately to repossess what his family has recently left behind” (Dancing 23). What the family has left behind is undoubtedly more complicated than they choose to remember; the Williams family’s memories of their idyllic home in the Bahamas is, no doubt, colored and viewed through the lens of nostalgia as well as the current blatant nature of American racism. While Bert was born post emancipation in the Bahamas, “the end of slavery did not mean black prosperity,” writes Aram Goudsouzian, “black Bahamians now endured a more subtle, indirect form of exploitation”(9).6 The Williams family clearly chose to leave their homeland in order to seek out greener pastures and brighter futures. Used to a featherbed racism under British rule, they were confounded by the unabashed dehumanizing effects of American racism. This experience indelibly affects the relationship between Bert and his father, for “since their arrival in America father and

6 Goudsouzian continues, The white-dominated government established property qualifications to limit the black vote. The black majority won few land grants or educational opportunities, and the Bahamas never developed a stable class of black farmers.
son seem to have found it difficult to communicate on any subject” (Dancing 14). Lack of communication, indeed, silence, permeates all of Bert’s subsequent relationships particularly the relationship with his father. This silent acceptance of trauma is clearly an example of what I describe earlier as soul murder and results in melancholia, which becomes a defining aspect of Williams’ psyche. “Williams, as Phillips portrays him, is a product of a diasporic trajectory punctuated – or dominated – by racism, variously casual, violent, and soul-killing” (Yelin 95). Indeed, upon migration many Afro-Caribbean males must renegotiate their concept of self under the white gaze in the metropole. As Reid points out, “Fanon is correct to point out that mental traumas occur when black racial Others meet with the policing agents of white patriarchy” (PostNegritude 5).

Throughout his life Williams continues to mourn the loss of both his manhood and his homeland, a loss brought about by his migration. Williams’ memories of his home in the Bahamas, which haunt his dreams, are in fact evidence of melancholia. These unrelinquished memories of home are used by both Bert and his father to construct their identities as “men” in America. Even as his star begins to rise on the Broadway stage, he is haunted by ghosts of the past. His dreams are disturbed by the memories of his lost home in the Caribbean and his subsequent loss of self due to his voyage to America. “Hot sun, that is what he remembers most about the Bahamas of his birth. Hot sun, tall trees, and the sound of the sea…and his tall stately father, who walks as though he is balancing the roof of the sky on his head and his mother, with her light skin and strange green eyes” (Dancing 22). For Williams, the Bahamas of his birth represents an Edenic past where he was connected to the land and his family. He remembers a strength and pride embodied by his father who, in this dream/memory,
recalls Atlas, who held the world on his shoulders. Nurtured in a world where his father seemed godlike, balancing the roof of the sky on his head, and his mother’s (sea) green eyes offered access to a world of mystery as boundless as the skies and seas.

However, Bert’s understanding of his place in America as limited and confined is a rude awakening. In America, the Williams family is forced to define themselves anew. Williams’ “[h]ot Caribbean past [is] undermind by cold American anxieties” (23).

In this new place they are now encouraged to see themselves as inferior...In this new place called Florida they are not treated as West Indian people who have come to America by steamship and who are keen to work; they are not viewed as migrants who are prepared to remake themselves in the new American world...In this new place they are simply Negroes (Dancing 23-24).

And who/what is a Negro? Fanon explains, that “[t]he Negro [as seen by the white French] is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly” (Black Skin 113). Offering further insight on this question, E. Patrick Johnson recalls his mother’s definition of colored: “that means you’re dumb, that you don’t know nothing, that you’re lazy and dirty and don’t deserve to be treated like everybody else” (250).7

This is the identity imposed on Williams and his family on their arrival in Florida; they are confronted and traumatized by this fact of their Blackness. In the American South, they are stripped of their “Caribbeanness,” the “quiet authority” (23) they displayed while on the island, an authority afforded them, undoubtedly, by their “light skin and his mother’s strange green eyes” (Dancing 22).

In America, the Williams’ light skin does not retain the authority it did in the islands. Neither does their “refined quality” prevent their being lumped with other

7 Johnson’s mother grew up in the American South. In the U.S. people of African descent have continued to negotiate stereotypes placed on them by a racist society. Self naming has been one means of challenging oppression; alternately people of African descent in the U.S. have been called: Negro, Colored, Black, Afro-American, and African American.
Negroes. Fanon explains the resultant psychological trauma caused by this eliding of individual identity. He recounts his own encounter with a white child and his mother while in France. Upon seeing him, the child shouts “Look, a Negro…Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” (112). Fanon analyzes the psychological effects of this child’s interpellation of him as such, “My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day” (Black Skin 113). Fanon shows here that in this foreign space, and under this foreign gaze he is no longer the author of his identity; he is always already “a Negro” and all the negative connotations that term invokes. He continues:

assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places… I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other…And the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared (Black Skin, 112).

Here Fanon describes a process that shatters the unified self, resulting in a tripling of identity accompanied by an obliteration/disappearance of self. Later I discuss this tripling of identity in relation to Lacan’s mirror stage of development. But long before Fanon, Du Bois most famously wrote about the psychological splitting of self that occurs when one is confronted by his blackness. Of his own experience with this he wrote: “it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others… shut out from their world by a vast veil” (Souls 2). Like Fanon and Du Bois’ experiences, which caused a psychological break in their self identity when blackness was thrust upon them, Bert’s notion of self is also fractured by this new identity as “Negro” upon his arrival in Florida. Many years later, an older Bert contemplates what it would take to find a voice in which to speak to his estranged wife; “He understands that in order to do
so he will have to travel west and then east and then south, and back to a place and to a time when he was not yet two people” (Dancing 127). Like Du Bois, Bert sees himself as split. However, a reconciliation of these two parts remains impossible. It could be achieved only by traveling back in time—a time before Fred Williams, the strong and proud West Indian Black man became “a boy,” a humiliated and powerless Negro in the Jim Crow American South forced to pack up his wife and eleven-year-old son and move to California. Bert understands that a reconciliation of his two selves is impossible in a racist America. Ironically, the black greasepaint Bert eventually wears as a performer becomes a physical manifestation of the psychological veil he is forced to live behind.

Neither Bert nor his father ever return to the Bahamas that haunt their memories throughout their lives in America, but Phillips makes it clear that both men cling to the idea of an eventual return to their island home. Throughout the novel, both men, through their dreams and memories, return to the moment of their loss; they internalize the loss of their home space and define themselves as men in America based on that loss. Their melancholia manifests most forcefully when confronted by their Blackness, specifically Bert’s blackface performances. This inability to give up the memory of ‘home’ and come to terms with the loss clearly affects the Williams men. theirs is an eternal struggle “to be both of the Caribbean and of the United States of America… to be coloreds and niggers, foreigners and the most despised of homegrown sons” (Phillips’ italics, Dancing 24-25), but despite their efforts to be both one and the other, neither they nor, as it turns out, their American colleagues are able to allow them to be both. While one reporter “couldn’t help but wonder just how American Mr. Williams felt” (Dancing 160), some of Bert’s colleagues, like Aida, continue to see him as a “damn
fool know-it-all West Indian, with his white heart” (italics mine, Dancing 188). During an interview, another reporter asks Bert directly whether “he feels like a Negro American. This question renders Bert ill at ease and he is unsure how to respond” (Dancing 198). The truth is Bert does not feel like a “Negro American”; it is a role he performs, much in the same way he performs the role of a “native” African from Dahomey, a “Hawaiian,” or a “real coon,” all characters he and George were asked to play.

The fact that both Bert and his father are haunted by the ghost of their Caribbean identity most pressingly when confronted by Bert’s performance of Blackness in America reveals the connectedness between migration, racial melancholia and masculinity. When his father finally sees Bert’s act for the first time, he questions whether “this real funny nigger is his son?” He wonders, “What has happened to his Bert? His Bahamian son who would sit patiently with him for hours and study the manner in which chickens threw dust behind them … [a time when] Father and son were inseparable” (Phillips’ italics, Dancing 83). Here we see that Fred, upon seeing his son perform in blackface, is besieged by the loss of their filial bond as well as his (and Bert’s) racial identity and home place. Fred understands that a “nigger” could never be a man in America, and if his son was a “nigger’ then that would make him a “nigger,” and therefore not a man. Fred’s instant reaction upon seeing Bert is a longing for an irrevocable past where he and his son were thinking men; men who would “study’ the behavior of the animals around them rather than this present condition as the “animals” that were studied. From this point on, in place of the loving relationship built upon mutual respect and admiration between father and son grows a corrosive and malignant silence that ultimately destroys both men.
Neither Bert nor his father is able to speak about his pain, his loss; not to each other nor to anyone else. Bert rationalized that “whatever frustration his father was suffering from seemed to be safely locked away inside of him, and if silence was the price to be paid for the existence of a perplexing, but loving, peace between them, then [he] was prepared to endure silence” (*Dancing* 89). But spoken or unspoken, trauma will manifest itself. Fred is repeatedly traumatized by the customers in his barbershop who would continuously complain about Bert’s performances hurting the race; on such occasions, Fred would think to himself “they cannot talk about his West Indian son and expect a big man like Fred Williams to endure much more of this discourtesy” (*Dancing* 137). Fred understands the attacks on his son as an affront to his own manhood. For Fred, a “big man” does not endure such abuse. Perhaps those conversations among his patrons, which Fred endured silently, triggered an internal conflict between competing identities for Fred: proud “West Indian big man,” as Fred saw himself, and “island nigger,” as Billy “Too Fine” Thomas (one of Fred’s clients) and arguably other Americans (both black and white) saw him, that led to his psychotic break. Billy “Too Fine” Thomas tells the story of how Fred “come unglued” and cut both him and another customer the day he closed his barbershop for good (*Dancing* 139). After the incident Fred acknowledges to himself that bringing his son to the United States was a mistake, that America had come between his son and himself; “his handsome West Indian son [had become] a stage nigger in America”(*Dancing* 144).

Fred eventually begins to contemplate a return to the Bahamas, “If I can’t talk to my Bert, and if my own son can’t talk to me, then maybe it’s time to leave my son in the fast grip of this country to which he appears to have mortgaged his soul, and head
home” (*Dancing* 159). This statement is reminiscent of Bertram’s mother’s suggestion in *State of Independence*, that England had captured Bertram’s soul. But a return home for Fred is only a dream, and indeed he never does return to the Bahamas. After cutting Billy “Too Fine” Thomas and the other customer, Fred closed down the barbershop. As they made plans to return to the Bahamas, he and his wife “moved somewhat unpredictably between their son’s house, the Harlem residence that Bert had acquired for them, and Riverside, California…Eventually a depressed Fred began to withdraw even further into himself” (*Dancing* 189). Fred’s mental unmooring manifests itself in his physical unmooring from a permanent home. He holds onto the dream of returning to the Bahamas of his past in order to find himself again, but that return is always figured as occurring in the near future; however, there is never a realistic return date in sight. When Fred dies, Lottie notices that “he appears to be strangely serene” (*Dancing* 189). It is only in death that Fred is able to escape the ghosts that haunt him in life.

Bert, it could be argued, is even more severely traumatized than his father was. Moving to the United States of America as an adult, Fred, unlike his son, would have had a stronger grasp on his identity as a West Indian man. On the other hand, it was his strong sense of self prior to moving to the U.S. that made it difficult for Fred to merge the West Indian big man identity (how he saw himself) with the Island nigger identity (how Americans saw him). But Bert, who moved during those most formative years, did not yet have a strong sense of self, which made him even more vulnerable to the trauma.
Bert decided to perform wearing blackface when he was twenty-two years old, exactly eleven years after he arrived in the US; at twenty-two he had spent exactly half of his life absorbing the indignities heaped upon him while in the United States. The family immediately moved to California due to the racism they faced in Florida. While his parents adjusted to this move, finding work in California, Bert was never accepted by the “other boys, who looked at this tall, queerly accented stranger in their midst and found it difficult to know where or how to place him” (Dancing 25). Between the ages of sixteen to nineteen he held several jobs in which he was forced to experience racism: as the only member of a traveling medicine show, as a singing waiter, as a hotel bell-boy, and as part of a four-man song and dance team (Bert being the only Black member). In each job Bert is repeatedly confronted by his inferior status as a Black man in America. When Bert partners up with George Williams in 1893, he is already scarred by his experiences as a Black man in America but also by his experience as a foreigner from “an island about which they [Americans] knew nothing, and about which they cared even less” (Dancing 25). This line too is reminiscent of a line from State in which Bertram recalls an England with “People who showed no interest in understanding him” (151).

By the time Williams meets Walker at nineteen years old, both men had suffered “all the degradations of the colored road” (Dancing 29). Once they team up, Williams and Walker continue to face indignities such as being forced to play either “southern ‘plantation darkies’ or northern ‘zip coons’” (Dancing 29), or “real savages” [African Dahomeyans]. At the time, the American theatre was only prepared to offer “Negro” entertainers very limited roles as stereotyped stage characters. Ironically, it is during
their performance as native Africans that Bert observes that “something in [George’s] spirit was being corroded by being forced to sit in a pen from sun up to sundown and have people stare and point at him” (Dancing 31). Bert does not detect the same corrosion within his own spirit, but he too is affected by the roles he is forced to play, a fact that manifests itself in his relationship with his friend. Upon meeting George, Bert was excited by the prospect of performing “in the company of somebody with whom he might talk” (Dancing 28), but only a short year after their meeting a distance began to grow between the pair. It is Bert’s decision to perform in blackface that propels the duo into superstardom, however, this decision also widens the space between himself and George, and irreparably separates Bert from his loved ones and even himself.

Phillips begins his novel with the line “If you walk down Seventh Avenue today he is a man who never existed” (italics mine, Dancing 30). This phrase is repeated later in the same paragraph. This line captures the ephemeral and ethereal nature of Williams’ life, affirming while simultaneously denying his existence. Indeed, every night of his professional career Williams would make himself disappear behind a mask of burnt cork; the light skinned handsome Bert would be replaced by a big lipped, popping eyed buffoon. While Bert Williams began to lose sight of himself with his migration to the U.S. as a little boy, it is with his adoption of blackface makeup that he completely loses himself. In blackface, Bert grows into a mystery to everyone including himself. Those closest to him do not know what to make of him, nor is he sure what to make of himself. After their first date Lottie, his soon to be wife, kneels at her bedside in prayer, momentarily bewildered as to “what to call him” (Dancing 17); Bert’s father continually questions whether the man—that real funny nigger—he sees on stage is indeed his
son; in an introspective moment Williams thinks to himself about how his peers see him
“They look at me and wonder why I am what I am” (Dancing 52); Bert even questions his
own identity the first time he wears blackface:

I smear the black into my already sable skin…I am leaving behind Egbert
Austin Williams…but just who was this new man and what was his name?
Was this actually a man, with his soon-to-be-shuffling feet, and his slurred
half speech, and his childish gestures, and his infantile reactions? Who
was this fellow? Sambo? Coon? Nigger? (Dancing 57).

While he did not know any Blacks who resemble this character, he was certain that the
audience would recognize it: “That’s him! That’s the nigger! He looks like that. And
that’s just how he talks. And he walks just like that. I know him! I know him!” (Dancing
58) The audience will recognize the character in much the same way the white French
boy recognized Fanon as a “nigger.” Bert reassures himself that he can reclaim Egbert
Austin Williams at any time; at the end of the night “with soap and water and the rugged
application of a coarse towel” (Dancing 59). But like his inability to detect the damage to
his own soul earlier in his career when “performing” as a “real savage,” Williams is
likewise misguided in thinking that he can simply return to himself after each
performance. The loss of Egbert Austin Williams, like the loss of his island home
engenders melancholia in Williams, which he faces in his dressing room mirror nightly.

The Man in the Mirror

It was 1896 in Detroit; “the first time [Williams] looked in the mirror [and] his heart
sank like a stone for he knew that this was not a man that he recognized” (Dancing 58).
The ambiguous structure of this sentence indicates that not only does Williams not
recognize himself as Egbert Austin Williams in the reflection in the mirror, but he does
not even recognize himself as a man. Bert looks into the mirror but the reflection that
stares back, the buffoon, the clown, the Nigger, is in complete opposition to the image
of manhood ingrained into his memory by his father, proud and strong enough to carry the world on his shoulders. Phillips depicts the process of applying blackface as a thoroughly alienating process in which Williams simultaneously experiences his own body as both unified and disjointed. The first time he applied burnt cork to his face Bert became hyper-aware of his entire body: he felt his heart sink “[d]own through his body…down toward those long, oversized boots [his feet]”, as he applied the paste he became aware of his “already sable skin” (58), he felt the cork “slither between his delicate, oversized fingers,” as he applied it to his “warm face” he made sure the substance met “his hairline,” “then he drew on his lips so that they grew beyond his own, swimming out toward his cheeks and down his chin” (Dancing 58). Williams seems to experience his body for the first time during this process. But while the blackface makeup only covers Williams face, his entire being is transformed by its application, inside and out. His upright stride is transformed into a shuffling drag and his intellectual acumen is transformed into dimwitted buffoonery. His awareness of the inside/outside nature of his body is replicated in his “I” but not “I” understanding of the man he sees in the mirror.

Sitting in front of his dressing room mirror is where Williams erases himself every night and every night searches, in vain, to rediscover the man he has erased. He refuses to accept that that man is lost; but a rediscovery for Williams remains impossible because of the alienation caused by the blackface; it is impossible for him to return to a unified self and Egbert Austin Williams is forever lost in the mirror.  

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8 I tentatively use the term “unified self”. As Julia Kristeva indicates in her interview with Susan Sellers “A ‘fixed identity’: it’s perhaps a fiction, an illusion – who amongst us has a ‘fixed’ identity? It’s a phantasm; we do nevertheless arrive at a certain type of stability” (133).
Williams’ application of blackface can be seen as initiating a revision of what Jacques Lacan calls the mirror stage of development.

Lacan argues the importance of the mirror stage in the development of subject formation; during the mirror stage, infants between six and eighteen months recognize the image in the mirror (the reflection could also occur through a mother or primary caregiver) as a reflection of their own bodies. This recognition results in the production of a mental representation of an “I”; this “I” becomes the foundation of an emerging selfhood. However, since the image of the “I” does not correspond with the underdeveloped body of the child, the image (imago) becomes an Ideal-I, towards which the child will strive throughout its lifetime. This stage of development will form the bases of how an individual will form relations with other people and the world at large.

Julia Kristeva explains that the process is initially confusing for the infant who initially is unable to distinguish him/herself from the mother (who is the first other); however, “in the ideal case, this finishes by stabilizing the subject, rendering her/him capable both of pronouncing sentences which conform to the rules, to the law, and of telling her/his own story – of giving her/his account” (133-34). For Lacan and Kristeva there is an undeniable connection between self recognition and language acquisition. Bert loses both once he applies blackface. It is no coincidence that once in full makeup Williams would/could not communicate with his colleagues until he had “removed his face” (Dancing 177). But even out of makeup Williams is unable to communicate effectively with those closest to him. Whereas the mirror stage during infancy provides the child with the experience and language to identify himself as the “I,” Williams’ second encounter with the mirror takes that away, it renders him silent, shattered and
invisible. The irony is not lost on Williams that when he is most visible—on stage, performing in front of an audience—he is also the most invisible. Like Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Williams is seen and unseen, known and unknown, real and unreal.

If the original mirror stage establishes a relationship between the “I” and the “ideal I,” which stabilizes the subject’s sense of self, then Williams encounter with himself in blackface disrupts this relationship by introducing a third “I” (which is the exact opposite of the ideal I) into Williams’ concept of self. On the one hand, the subject, Williams, pursues an identity he can never attain while simultaneously attempting to flee an identity he can never escape. I would imagine that this is similar to the experience Fanon describes as becoming aware of his body in a triple person (112). Facing his image in the mirror wearing blackface makeup, Williams is confronted by the “subject I,” the “ideal I,” and the “imperfect I.” The loss of the fantasy of becoming the “ideal I” engendered by the knowledge of the “imperfect I” compounds Williams’ melancholia, creating a disconnect within himself and a further distance between himself, his family, and his community. Williams’ melancholia manifests itself in several ways, most notably his inability for intimacy.

**Masquerade and Desire**

I have shown above that upon their move to the United States the Williams men experience a sense of unforgettable loss of home space, racial and gender identity: a melancholia, which disrupted their close bond. Bert’s decision to perform in blackface sets the Williams and Walker team on the road to superstardom. It was Bert’s blackface performance, however, that exacerbates the irrevocable rift in the relationship between father and son and leads to its silent acknowledgment by both men. Similarly, it is after Bert decides to perform in blackface that his relationship with George takes a turn for
the worse. But it is Bert’s relationship with his wife Lottie that demonstrates the depths of his self-abjection and melancholia. Bert meets Lottie when he is in his mid-twenties and she is a young widow in her thirties. By this time Bert is already performing in blackface on stage; however, when Lottie meets him for the first time at a photo shoot, she does not meet the buffoon, the caricature, but a tall, handsome, well-dressed, and dignified man. During their courtship Lottie considers Bert a perfect gentleman; one might say he performs the role of the “ideal I”; unfortunately, the specter of the inescapable “imperfect I” is never far behind. On the night Bert proposes to Lottie “they both hear the word ‘niggers’ fly from a horse-drawn carriage” (Dancing 17). They attempt to ignore the insult but as Phillips makes clear, there is no escape: “Were they to turn around they would still see the word hurtling around...picking up speed here, losing tempo there, as purposefully silent as a bird’s flight, yet furiously burning energy deep into the New York night” (Dancing 17). The shadow of the “imperfect I” haunts the very air they breathe. Whether he chooses to acknowledge it or not, on the night of his proposal Williams is once again confronted with the “imperfect I.” The experience of that night damages Bert and Lottie’s relationship; Louis Yelin suggests that “[I]n this episode, racist violence derails the sexual awakening of a young black man” (96). This cry of “nigger” proves that in or out of makeup, in America, Bert will always already be coded as nigger. His inability to protect his fiancé from this verbal attack on this particular night, the night of their engagement, challenges his ability as a man to protect his wife. Bert, as well as his father, understands that a “nigger” is not a man; at best he is an emasculated boy and at worst he is an animal. Judith Butler unpacks Fanon’s
statement, which addresses this paradox of black men’s exclusion from manhood and humanity.

When Frantz Fanon claimed that “the black is not a man” he conducted a critique of humanism that showed that the human in its contemporary articulation is so fully racialized that no black man could qualify as human…[it] was also a critique of masculinity, implying that the black man is effeminized…the implication…no one who is not a ‘man’ in the masculine sense is a human…(Undoing Gender 13)

When he hears the word “nigger,” Williams is once again reminded of the paradoxical position he occupies in the United States. The word robs him of citizenship, it robs him of his humanity, and it robs him of his masculinity, and finally, it robs him of his sexuality. With this scene “Phillips underscores the engendering of psychosexual pathologies by the traumas of racism and shows us how identities are formed – and deformed – in the tangled nexus of race, sex, and nationality”(Yelin 97).

The neurosis engendered by the presence of the “imperfect I,” the blackfaced Sambo, the nigger, the boy, for Williams is a psychological castration manifested in his lack of sexual desire. Beyond one kiss Bert appears to have no sexual desire for Lottie, or anyone else for that matter. This one intimacy shared between Bert and his wife occurs on their wedding day. But Bert “prefers some measure of detachment” (Dancing 87); shortly after their marriage he begins to spend more time with his colleagues at Marshall’s Lounge located below their apartment, a place he eschewed prior to his marriage. At home, Bert begins to address his wife as “Mother,” a term that effectively desexualizes Lottie and sets the tone for her role in their relationship, that of caregiver. And while the two initially share the same bed, Lottie understands that “there will be no touching” (Dancing 49). Lottie buys a house in Harlem hoping that the new space will help to light a spark of desire in her husband, but Bert chooses to sleep in a separate
bedroom, away from his wife. His isolation increases as he chooses to spend more of his free time drinking alone at the neighborhood bar.

Bert’s lack of sexual desire is highlighted all the more by its juxtaposition to George’s hypersexuality. Indeed, it is George’s unchecked libido that leads to his death; he eventually succumbs to complications resulting from syphilis. Even though married, George carried on many extramarital affairs with his fans and fellow performers, both black and white. According to Aida, George also slept with Lottie; an indiscretion, she tells Bert during an argument, she did not hold against her husband since Bert was either unable or unwilling to fulfill his wife’s sexual needs. In this last meeting, an angry Aida challenged Bert’s masculinity to the point of feminization. She exposed a breast to Bert and dared him to take her. She goaded him with insults: “you got something down there, don’t you…you ever had a colored girl? For I know you sure as hell never laid a thing on Lottie…just what kind of rusty colored gangling man are you anyway? You ever had a woman, period?” (Dancing 187). Aida’s comments effectively strip Bert naked and put his manhood on display. Her words prove that she can see behind the mask he presents of a normal heterosexual masculinity.

Bert’s arrested sexual development can certainly be ascribed, in part, to the dehumanizing racial violence against his humanity, masculinity, and sexuality produced by the epithet “nigger.” It is further exacerbated by the self alienation caused by his blackface performances. Cheng observes:

We have all heard the wisdom that women and minorities have internalized dominant cultural demands, but do we really know what that means? Where does desire come into the equation? It is a dangerous question to ask what does a minority want. When it comes to political critique, it seems as if desire itself may be what the minority has been enjoined to forget. (54)
Even in the make-believe world of the stage, Bert’s desires were controlled by the whims of the white American public. The expectations of his white audience members are that “niggers” are not capable of love. Aida explains: “Prejudice means that, of course, we can never fall in love or have a romance at the center of our Williams and Walker productions…we pretend that we have no such emotions, and we are all guilty of this pretense, all of us. We accept that the remotest suspicion of a love story will condemn us to ridicule” (Dancing 117-18). Bert’s internalization of this prejudice explains his inability to show intimacy to Lottie. Phillips’ narrative indicates that the dehumanizing racial slurs and Williams’ blackface performance engender the loss of sexual identity via the merger of self and performed self as asexual. Nevertheless, questions regarding Bert’s sexuality remain.

**Desire Interrupted**

Even before Bert adopted blackface he was unable to connect to women. He acknowledges his lack of experience with women during their courtship when he confesses to Lottie that “there has never been another girl” (Dancing 16). He attributes this lack of romance to his dedication to his career. Ironically, during their years on the road Bert would sometimes accompany George to brothels but would never entertain any of the ladies himself. Even when George paid for the “service,” Bert refused. Shortly after Bert began to perform in blackface George noticed his depression and, in an attempt to cheer him up, surprised Bert with a girl. However, the transaction only resulted in angering the prostitute, who was insulted by Bert’s refusal to engage her sexually and his insistence on attempting to “talk” to her. She called Bert and George “a pair of broke-down little boys masquerading as men” (Dancing 59). This interaction with the prostitute is an interesting juxtaposition to the sex scene in Sweetback analyzed
above. Where the former successful interaction with the prostitute (sexual intercourse) results in transforming the little boy into a man, the latter, unsuccessful interaction (refusal of sexual intercourse) results in the reversal.

While the prostitute’s reproach could easily be dismissed as the ramblings of a woman scorned, I would argue that there is some legitimacy to her reading of Bert as performing a masquerade. The masquerade he performs, the text leads us to believe, is the masquerade of patriarchal heterosexual masculinity. Aida’s questioning of Bert’s sexuality along with other cues from the text point to a queer sexuality which could also be read as latent homosexuality. For instance, Bert’s marriage to Lottie came as a surprise to the men at Marshall’s Lounge since they had never seen Bert in the company of a woman before; therefore, “they never imagined him to be a kinsman who revered women” (Dancing 40). George, who had known Bert longer than any of the men at Marshall’s, remained “steadfastly silent” on the subject (Dancing 40). The text explains that Bert’s regular presence in the Lounge after he was married was his attempt at “avoiding something; they all [knew] it, but nobody, not even George, [would] speak of this directly,” nobody asked Bert why he was not upstairs with his wife (Dancing 41).

Neither Bert nor his colleagues are able to articulate or acknowledge the implications of his queer behavior; however, they do sense his discomfort around women. In an attempt to rationalize her husband’s behavior, Lottie quite insightfully ascribed his silences and lack of sexual desire toward her as a result of melancholy of migration: “she attributes this anxiety to his having come from the island. They are a different people…and for them the problem of being colored in America appears to
engender a special kind of hurt” (*Dancing* 42). Lottie understands that the experience of being racialized upon entry into the United States has damaged Bert psychologically, the result of which, she reasons, is a nonexistent libido. Lottie sees Bert as asexual, but Phillips complicates Lottie’s reading of the situation when he writes “But there is something else troubling her husband, a torment that she cannot fathom” (*Dancing* 42). The truth of Bert’s torment then is not simply a result of his migration, as Lottie assumed, nor his blackface performance.

When Bert returns home drunk one night Lottie imagines that he speaks to her through his eyes: “there are things going on in the basement of my twenty-eight-year-old soul that I cannot talk about…Mother—they look at me and wonder why I am what I am” (*Dancing* 52). Elsewhere, when Bob Cole asks George about Bert’s strange behavior since getting married, a defensive George tells Cole, “Bert got pressures on him that you and me don’t fully understand” (*Dancing* 53). These quotes lead to three important questions: What could Bert mean by his ambiguous statement that “they wonder why I am what I am”? What pressures does Bert feel that the other (black) men do not? What secret lurks in Bert’s soul that he dares not speak? While the answers to these questions might simply be Bert’s struggle with performing in blackface, they could also allude to an unspoken, indeed unspeakable, struggle with his sexual identity.

George speaks candidly to Bert about his sexuality on only two occasions: once while on the road with their traveling show, a drunk George asks “What’s the matter, Bert, you don’t like catting for women, or you don’t like colored girls, which is it?” (*Dancing* 55) Bert laughs away the question and implies that during his first experience with a girl he caught a sexually transmitted disease. On another occasion years later, a
married Bert tells George “my wife has certain expectations that I confess I don’t feel any obligation [desire] to fulfill” (Dancing 107). The “expectations” Bert alludes to here are sexual in nature. Again, Bert blames a busy career for his inability to fulfill his wife’s desires. Bert’s conflicting stories to Lottie and George “there has never been another girl” (16) and “first time I ever went with a girl I guess I wasn’t careful” (55) are both statements used to close down discussions about his sexuality and his sexual history. Phillips’ narrative certainly marks Williams’ sexuality as queer; though it never articulates the nature of that queerness, it does leave lots of room for speculation.

**Homosocial Denial**

Interestingly, similar to Biggs and Wayne’s relationship, Bert’s longest lasting and most intimate relationship happens to be with George, his partner of eighteen years. But even in this relationship Bert is distant and the relationship ultimately becomes strained. Reflecting on his friend’s death, Bert acknowledges “without George I have no desire” (Dancing 163). This is yet another ambiguous statement by Williams which could be read in several ways. Before either of the couples were married Aida suggests to Lottie that George and Bert were “already married to their work” (Dancing 39). While Lottie initially dismissed Aida’s warning, she later reconsiders and wonders whether “Ada understands men and their ways better than she does” (Dancing 43). While Bert’s desire for George is not necessarily a sexual one, Phillips does blur this line as he juxtaposes Lottie and George during Bert’s wedding: “[Lottie] angles her face up toward [Bert’s] and he leans down and for the first time he publicly tastes those lips…He raises his eyes and looks across at George and Ada” (Dancing 40). The fact that

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9 In the timeframe of the novel Ada eventually changes her name to Aida; throughout this chapter I use the name Aida.
George is implicated in Bert’s only act of sexual intimacy cannot be ignored. As stated above, while this marriage scene between Bert and George does not necessarily indicate homosexual desire between the partners, it certainly does bring into relief Bert’s desire, perhaps for George, or perhaps for the masculinity he perceives that George embodies.

Of course, George is not the only man with whom Bert desires a connection. He is as haunted by the desire to reconnect with his father as he is to return to the island paradise he left behind for the shores of the United States of America. In fact, the desire for one seems hinged on the desire for the next. It is the loss of the filial bond between father and son as well as the loss of home space for both men that undergird Phillip’s text. Their migration to the U.S. shattered the burgeoning homosocial bond between Bert and his father, which, in effect blocked Bert’s path to manhood. Indeed, the entire novel depicts Bert’s quest to establish a homosocial bond with both his father and with George. But Bert’s ability to connect with either of the primary male figures in his life is blocked by the mask of burnt cork. Bert is never able to see himself reflected (the ideal I) in George, perhaps because George considers Bert a clown who “look[s] and act[s] like a nigger and we colored Americans no longer recognize you for we are trying to move on”(*Dancing* 100). Ultimately, George does not see Bert as a man; therefore, Bert is never able to retrieve the lost aspects of his manhood when he looks at George because what is reflected in Georges eyes is the nigger—the “imperfect I”.

Unfortunately, Bert is as unsuccessful receiving confirmation of his manhood from his father as he is from George. Throughout their exile in America, both Bert and his father held on to the memory of a time when they shared a common bond. They longed
for a return to that time and place where they were each other’s mirror; a time when Bert saw the man he would become in the reflection of his father’s eyes and Fred saw the man he once was in the reflection of his son. Before moving to America Bert’s “ideal I,” the “I” he hoped to be, was embodied in his father, god like and proud. But upon their migration that image was shattered and replaced by the image of the nigger—the “imperfect I”. It is not surprising then that Bert is incapable of desire whether heterosexual, or possibly homosexual since the “nigger” is essentially a eunuch. George and Fred provide Bert with the image of heterosexual manhood he desires; however, Bert is unable to bond with the men since they cannot respect him as a man because of his blackface performance. Ironically, the other route to acceptable patriarchal manhood, via heterosexual sex, is also cut off to Bert since the psychological effect of being defined as a nigger results in a metaphorical castration, which prevents him from concurring women sexually.

Finally, Bert goes to his death bed haunted by both the loss of home and the loss of his father. During what turned out to be his final performance in Detroit in 1922, Bert fainted; he heard “nothing except the sound of the sea rushing around in his head…the sea that brought him to this country as an eleven-year-old boy on the saltwater voyage that has been both the making and the unmaking of him” (Dancing 204-06). Laying in his sick bed Bert would ask Lottie for a mirror in which he would “stare shaken into panic by the puzzled face in the glass,” Lottie knows ‘that once the mirror is in his hands [her] husband is no longer with [her]”; Lottie knows that Bert will “spend the whole day staring into the mirror, at first tormenting himself, and then comforting his spirit with happier memories” (Dancing 207). On his deathbed Bert continues his attempt to
rediscover Egbert Austin Williams; however, he remains “puzzled” by the unfamiliar face that stares back.

In the epilogue of the novel, Phillips reunites Williams with both his father and George in death. He writes, “Somewhere in the darkness he will discover his father, and then he will discover George, who will once more be by his side…when George needs to rest, Bert alone can look back to the Bahamas of his birth” (*Dancing* 214). It is on this return that Bert reconnects with “a tall gangly eleven-year-old boy [who] let the sand ease its way between his toes” (*Dancing* 214) that he can finally find peace. What Phillips ultimately points out with this epilogue is not a call for the ultimate homosocial bond between Black men of the Black Atlantic, though an intimate bond between Black men across the Diaspora is desirable. Nor is Phillips simply positing the father – son relationship as the salvation of the Black migrant Caribbean male, though Phillips himself acknowledges the importance of these relationships. It is in encountering the loss, a return to the little boy, Egbert Austin Williams, that Bert finally finds peace. Phillips' novel allows readers to acknowledge the trauma of migration and mourn the loss it engenders. Bert’s reconnection with the “tall gangly eleven-year old boy” at the end of the text shows a reclamation of innocence, a reclamation of self, and a coming to terms with trauma. It is only through this reclamation and coming to terms that Bert is released from the “performative bondage” (*Dancing* 6) in which his migration has placed him. In the end, it is a journey that Bert must take alone; he must enter the “darkness” of his own past in order to dance with the demon of trauma, and so must we all.
CHAPTER 5
SIDNEY POITIER: WRITING A NEW SCRIPT FOR BLACK MASCULINITY

In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.

Frantz Fanon\(^1\)

The beauty of memory is how it allows us to look back at the events of our lives through the lens of different contexts and to see meaning overlooked before—revealing even more riches than we first suspected.

Sidney Poitier\(^2\)

Any discussion about the representation of Black masculinity in film and popular culture must include an analysis of the work and life of Sir Sidney Poitier. Poitier is unquestionably one of, if not the most, significant Black actors of the twentieth century. In *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (1973), Donald Bogle justifies Poitier’s overwhelming presence within his text (and a discussion of Black film as a whole), stating: “[It] was obvious to me that Poitier is such an important figure in the history of black films and black performers that he demanded extensive coverage” (xi). Similarly, Alvin Marill shows how Poitier’s career is inextricably connected to African American social and political movements. In his study of Poitier’s films spanning from the beginning to the height of the actor’s career (from 1950 to 1977), Marill aligns Poitier’s rise to prominence in Hollywood with the development of the American Civil Rights Movement. He writes, “[t]he movement, in the arts, at least, quietly attached itself to Poitier’s coattails. The struggle, in films, was to be Poitier’s alone. To the movement, however, he was to be the symbol, the first

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\(^1\) *Black Skin, White Masks* 229
\(^2\) *Life Beyond Measure* xvi
black superstar, the ebony saint, as he frequently has been called, the personification of the black man on the screen” (Marill 11). And Nelson George posits, “If you trace Poitier’s development from star to producer-director, you get a pointed view of the evolution of black filmmakers within Hollywood. Almost everything that the current crop of African-American filmmakers and actors have tried within the system was accomplished or attempted by Poitier first” (*Blackface* xiii). As the trailblazing “personification of the black man on the screen,” Poitier has had to measure up to many people’s expectations of “the Black man” both on screen and off. Poitier’s performance of Black masculinity then, one could argue, both on and off screen, has undeniably influenced the ways in which we understand the performance of Black masculinity.

In this chapter I analyze Sidney Poitier’s three autobiographical texts; it is through an analysis of these texts that we are able to illuminate counter discourse to the predominant representations of Black masculinity in American and Caribbean popular culture. While Poitier’s texts can be read as attempts to imbue him with patriarchal masculinest attributes which his critics accused him of lacking, they can also be read as challenges to patriarchal expectations of Black boyhood and Black masculinity, specifically in relation to sex and violence as modes of entrance into manhood that I analyze in the earlier chapters. Further, I read Poitier’s autobiographic collection as an intervention into the silence around Black men’s trauma. The above quote from Fanon’s influential work apropos the effects of white domination on the Black psyche serves as an apt epigraph in a discussion of an actor whose livelihood literally depends on his ability to create new versions of self on screen. Further, the second quote by the man himself, Sir Sidney Poitier, speaks to the act of *recreating* self through memory.
Specifically, Poitier recreates himself via the autobiographical text. Several readings of autobiographies inform my analysis of Sidney Poitier’s three autobiographic texts. In *Postcolonialism and Autobiography*, Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruth suggest that “[a]utobiography in its widest definition seems to provide a convenient genre to embrace the crossroad cultures from East and West and to launch an emancipator political and cultural program”(3). Poitier exploits the autobiography in order to emancipate himself from emasculated iconography that binds his legacy; through his autobiographic trilogy he redefines, reconstructs, and rehabilitates his public and private image. In his analysis of Poitier’s first autobiography Keith Harris explains:

The star autobiography is, on the one hand, a constructed, narrative self-representation; and, on the other, it is an answering to criticism of the public image, a projection of another truth claim, a true persona, to counter the film persona, the star type...In the case of Poitier, considering that the autobiography arrives some ten to fifteen years after the height of his career (as opposed to writing his autobiography in 1967 or the early Seventies), the mediation of the private/public sets of opposition perform a self-restoration of his image in certain capacities (Harris 48).

I agree with Harris’ assessment here, but would suggest that Poitier is not only interested in a self-restoration project; if he were then one autobiography would have sufficed. The penning of the second and third autobiographies indicates Poitier’s need for acceptance/understanding (*Measure of a Man*) and a dedication to a project of legacy building (*Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Great-Granddaughter*) respectively; while these endeavors are in keeping with a standard patriarchal mode of masculinity, it is in reading between the lines, as it were, that one might discover a nuanced representation of Black masculinity. In discussing Jamaica Kincaid’s autobiographic text *My Brother*, Sandra Paquet argues that “Kincaid’s unfulfilled longing for acceptance and reconnection is explained in the act of writing to the dead and for
the dead” (244). Without a doubt, Poitier is engaged in a similar project; however, he is writing to the living, and to take this comparison to its ultimate conclusion, one could argue that he is writing from the dead; since by the time his great granddaughter, to whom his third text is dedicated, is able to read and understand the words of his final memoir, Poitier more likely than not, will no longer be among the living.

Poitier’s autobiographic set cannot be considered a trilogy in which each text is focused on a specific time period, from early to middle and then later life experiences, but rather each subsequent text is a retelling of the original. Poitier’s insistence on repeating his life story indicates his awareness of his own celebrity and the implications of the narratives about himself. It further indicates Poitier’s own desire/need to work out and work through the meaning of his life experiences for himself. Undoubtedly, Poitier is aware of the discourses surrounding his image in American and Caribbean popular culture, much of which attacked his onscreen representation of Black manhood. Most notably, the one article that has raised Poitier’s rancor more than any other is the Sunday, 10 September 1967, New York Times article written by Clifford Mason. Mason’s article “Why Do White Folks Love Sidney Poitier So?” has had an indelible effect on Poitier’s perception of how he thinks the public sees him and his career. Keyser and Ruszkowski suggest that “Mason’s barbs were doubtlessly influential in shaping the development of Poitier’s career. Many of Poitier’s roles for the next few years may actually be viewed as attempts on his part to rebut Mason’s attacks and to refute the arguments of other militant critics” (122). While Keyser and Ruszkowski’s comments refer specifically to Poitier’s filmic choices, I suggest here that this statement is also true of his literary work. So traumatized by the vitriolic lambasting he received in
Mason’s article, Poitier returns to this event time and again in his autobiographies. Mason’s very public and personal attack, however, is only one of the defining moments in Poitier’s life and he in fact uses his autobiographies to remember and recreate other defining moments that create the man he has become. If we agree that Poitier’s project goes beyond a self involved superstar narcissistic endeavor of self-revision, then perhaps we can consider this a project of counter narratives in which Poitier consciously resists the patriarchal pitfalls of representing Black masculinity.

In his three autobiographical texts, Poitier reviews his life experiences from his humble beginnings in the Caribbean to his ascension to Hollywood superstardom. While his first text is a straightforward autobiographical reportage of his first fifty years on the planet, each subsequent text is a bit more reflective, analytical, and pointed. A cursory reading of the titles of each of these texts reveals what seems to be Poitier’s quest for acceptance, understanding, and validation. Poitier titles his first text This Life, an emphatic statement that demands recognition for its individuality, (This Life, as in not That Life, This Life is different, This Life is important). With this text, Poitier traces the trajectory of his life and career, from the tenuous premature baby born of poor tomato farmer parents to his migration to the United States of America, his move from overtly racist Florida to indifferent New York, from his career as a heavily accented, semi-literate dishwasher to eloquent Academy Award winning actor. Keith Harris writes: “This Life (1980), Poitier’s first autobiographical installment, is a textual nexus. This Life is a simultaneity of narratives: it is an immigrant tale, a migration tale, a testimonial, a confessional, a chronicling of the black experience, a conservative ‘picked myself up by the boot straps tale,’ as well as a liberal tale of cultural pluralism” (46). The title of
Poitier’s second autobiography, *The Measure of a Man* (2000), speaks for itself. This text covers much of the same material of the first autobiography; however, in this text Poitier seems preoccupied with defending his life and career choices, and his masculinity. Poitier does not look toward Hollywood for images of Black masculinity to follow, but he looks back to the Caribbean and the lessons he learned from his parents, father and mother, while growing up in the Bahamas. Poitier measures himself as a man based on his ability to adhere to the “dignified” standards set by his parents. In this text, Poitier consistently returns to the teachings of his father and mother, both of whom he celebrates in this text and both of whom he credits for making him the man he has become. In his last memoir, *Life Beyond Measure: Letters to my Great-granddaughter* (2008), Poitier once again revisits the material from his first two texts; this time he refigures his life experiences within an epistolary frame. This last text consists of twenty three letters, each one addressed to Poitier’s great-granddaughter, Ayele. The Poitier legacy is the focus of this text. These letters to his great-granddaughter position Poitier as a benevolent patriarch of three generations (of predominately female progeny). In this, the last of his autobiographical trilogy, Poitier positions himself as *great grandfather*, not just to Ayele, but to all of his readers. In the final chapter of this last autobiography Poitier rhetorically asks “After all, how can an old grandfather make himself available to his great-grandchildren and others after he’s gone other than to leave something of himself that he hopes will be useful?”(*LBM* 271). Poitier’s desire to transcend time and space, his insistence on being remembered, and being remembered *correctly*, is in stark contrast to the man who could be considered, at least as far as the world of entertainment goes, Poitier’s forefather, Bert Williams.
The Man Who Will Not Be Remembered and the Man Who Will Not Be Forgotten

In the last chapter, I analyzed Caryl Phillips’ fictional account of the early Twentieth Century Black entertainer Bert Williams who famously stated “Nobody in America knows my real name and, if I can prevent it, nobody ever will” (Carters 15). To this end, Williams actively sought to silence his past. Based on his secretive nature as well as the misinformation that he himself propagated about his past, it is not difficult to understand why Williams’ name and history was lost behind a mask of silence and pretense. Phillips’ novel *Dancing in the Dark* (2005), as I demonstrated, is an attempt to reveal the life behind the mask in order to understand Williams’ life and the melancholia that haunted him, despite his achieving the American Dream. Phillips’ novel presents readers with the anxieties of a protagonist either unable or unwilling to articulate his experiences to those around him and the devastating effect that silence had on his concept of masculinity and ultimately of self.

Where Bert Williams was determined to remain silent about his past and in so doing, preserve the mystique of manhood, Poitier, also an Afro-Caribbean migrant actor, has in many ways mirrored Williams’ journey and career, but Poitier is determined to bring his experiences to voice; he does this via his autobiographic texts. In his latest text he explains why he has chosen to write his third memoir: “I wanted her [his great-granddaughter Ayele] to know me in my own words, from stories not passed down but told from my lips, stories from my mind and imagination, from my philosophies and experiences—my life, as told to her, intended expressly for her and those of her generation” (italics mine, *LBM* xxv). Though his letters are addressed to Ayele, Poitier understands that his audience is much larger and it is that audience as well as Ayele
whom he hopes will “learn who [he] really was, who [he] really [is], and what life on this earth has been from [his] vantage point” (*LBM* xvi).

** Rejecting Anger, Demanding Respect, and Reclaiming Manhood Beyond the Screen **

To be sure, Poitier is not beyond the fray of the common man and he does use his texts to retaliate against his detractors. But a facile reading of his response to Mason as simple retaliation would elide its restorative masculinist imperative. With his response, Poitier reclaims his place in patriarchy, but he also distinguishes himself as consciously aware of the image of the Black man he intended to present to his audience. In his first autobiography Poitier recounts the devastating effects of Mason’s article:

> It was the most devastating and unfair piece of journalism I had ever seen. When I read it, I said to myself: This definitely signals a bad period for me. On that Sunday morning I was convinced that the brick-by-brick growth of my career was complete—it had peaked, and there was no place to go but down. In that article Clifford Mason ripped to shreds everything I had ever done. He ripped up *In the Heat of the Night*, and the character I played in particular, to show why white people thought I was so terrific, why they made me such a ‘big star.’….and then he went further back into my career and proceeded to skin me alive retroactively, I was an ‘Uncle Tom,’ ‘a lackey,’ ‘a house Nigger’—current terms for a lot of people, including some highly visible blacks who were perceived as not doing whatever they did in a way to win the applause of all their fellow blacks. (*TL* 335)

In response Poitier writes, “I was not in control of the film business. I was not even in control of my career in the film business beyond making a decision to play or not to play in a given piece of material” (*TL* 338). Poitier’s awareness of the precarious position he actually held in Hollywood at that particular time in his career does not lessen the sting of Mason’s critique, however. According to Poitier, Mason’s article stimulated a deluge of similar articles. “*The New York Times* published several more articles in which I was dumped on” (*TL* 338) he laments. He is most resentful, though,
when he is juxtaposed to actors such as Fred Williamson and Jim Brown, those new heroes of the “black exploitation films,” whose ‘macho’ films he acknowledges “were quite unlike mine” (*TL* 339). Undoubtedly, a part of the sting of these comparisons was the valorization on Williamson and Brown’s performance of Black masculinity at the expense of his own.

Where Poitier’s characters were generally seen as asexual, highly educated, overachievers working toward integration and the understanding of the white community, Williamson and Brown’s characters were hard talking, hypersexual, and streetwise; they would just as soon shoot a white man as they would have dinner with him. Physically, Williamson and Brown were quite different from Poitier. Where the latter was tall and slender, the former two, who came to acting by way of American football, were much more muscular and physically imposing. Williamson and Brown’s hyper-masculine Black power characters eclipsed Poitier’s dignified integrationist. Undoubtedly, the public’s embrace of these “macho” heroes bothered Poitier; an embrace of the new macho masculinity meant a rejection of Poitier’s more accommodating and seemingly less virile performance of masculinity. Within the text of *This Life*, however, Poitier bolsters his own masculinity when he recounts a story of an encounter on a plane with Jim Brown in which Brown thanks Poitier for opening the doors for the young Black actors who were then enjoying success (*TL* 341). This anecdote functions to support a claim Poitier makes a few pages prior in response to

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3 Poitier writes “The unavoidable comparison between me and my work on the one hand, and the new-wave offerings on the other, produced some negative comments about ‘Sidney Poitier and his films’ from time to time, but hey, I could take it. I didn’t particularly relish it, in fact I hated it, but I could take it” (*TL* 340).

4 Poitier confesses that the representation of blackness “over a twelve year period was the one-dimensional, middle-class imagery I embodied most of the time” (*TL* 338).
Mason’s attack: “I knew that however inadequate my step appeared, it was important that we make it. From one step would come another step, however overdue, and every new step would bring us closer [to full representation in film]” (TL 338). Poitier, then, establishes himself as a symbolic father figure to the valorized macho men of the black exploitation film era. The suggestion is that the junior actors are only able to perform because he has laid the groundwork; that they are walking in his footsteps.

Though he spent quite a bit of time in his first text discussing Mason’s misguided critique of his career, the shadow of the article continued to haunt him. Poitier returned to the article twenty years later in his second autobiography. He titles chapter six of the text, “Why Do White Folks Love Sidney Poitier So?” Here he acknowledges that he was attacked because he “wasn’t more angry and confrontational” (MOAM 118); he admits to the exemplary attributes of the characters he played, and shows an understanding of the implicit and problematic assumptions and questions those characters give rise to:

That black people will be accepted by white society only when they’re twice as ‘white’ as the most accomplished Ivy League medical graduate? That blacks must pretend to be something they aren’t? Or simply that black society does—of course—contain individuals of refinement, education, and accomplishment, and that white society—of course—should wake up to that reality? (MOAM 119).

Despite the attacks on his character and characters, Poitier nevertheless defends his choices, stating that “it’s all too easy for anyone not a participant in the cultural clashes of that era to unfairly dismiss films such as Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, forgetting just how revolutionary they were in the context of their times” (MOAM 119). Poitier

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5 While Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* is generally proclaimed as initiating the black exploitation film era, Poitier’s influential career may have made the acceptance of Black actors more palatable to Hollywood.
proceeds to depict himself, rightly so, as a revolutionary. As the first African American superstar he had to strike a special balance in order to maintain his dignity while simultaneously appeasing Hollywood and the American public, both Black and White.

Throughout the chapter, “Why Do White Folks Love Sidney Poitier So?”, Poitier recounts several of the difficult situations he faced even at the height of his career. He explains, for instance, the difficulties of getting the seminal interracial love story made in 1967, from director Stanly Kramer having to conceal the main plot of the film from Columbia Pictures to the company’s attempt to renege on their commitment to the film upon discovering the intended interracial love story. He goes on to describe his having to meet with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn “so she could check [him] out,” this, despite the fact that he had already won a best actor Oscar for *Lilies of the Field.* Poitier understands that such indignities would not be visited on him were he a white actor. He also understands the anger this type of treatment would cause in any man; he chooses, however, to react in what seems a contradictory manner. “As for my part in all this,” he writes, “all I can say is that there’s a place for people who are angry and defiant, and sometimes they serve a purpose, but that’s never been my role” (*MOAM* 124). Adam Goudsouzian describes Poitier’s onscreen trademark as “a cool boil…a pot of outrage on the verge of bubbling over” (1). Goudsouzian continues, explaining the cultural climate and limitations in which Poiter had to carve out a space for himself and alternately other Black entertainers:

But the powder keg never exploded. It *could not explode*…Poitier was Hollywood’s lone icon of racial enlightenment; no other black actor consistently won leading roles in major motion pictures. His on-screen actions thus bore a unique political symbolism. The cool boil struck a delicate balance, revealing racial frustration, but tacitly assuring a
Poitier’s strategy in Hollywood, then, was not simply of passive resistance but one of active rejection of anger. In his text he aligns himself with leaders such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela (whom he would later play in the 1997 film *Mandela and de Klerk*). Poitier assures his readers that he, as well as those “non violent” leaders, most assuredly were angry at some point; however, “their anger, their rage, their resentment, their frustration—these feelings ultimately mature by will of their own discipline into a positive energy that can be used to fuel their positive, healthy excursions in life” (*MOAM* 124). While Poitier respects those who chose anger and “are able to recycle that anger and put it to different uses” (124) as response to oppression, he wants to make it clear that he also understands himself. He states, “I’ve learned that I must find positive outlets for anger or it will destroy me” (*MOAM* 124). Poitier refuses to give into “[t]he injustice of the world [that] inspires a rage so intense that to express it fully would require homicidal action; it’s self destructive, destroy-the-world rage” (*MOAM* 128). Poitier’s autobiographies, then, display the self awareness of the dangers of allowing anger, the one emotion allowed the Black man in an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to turn him into another *Bigger Thomas*. In *This Life*, in a self reflective moment Poitier writes “I feel that there has always been in me this potential for violence…there has to be on the other side of my enormous effort at being likable and friendly and fair and honest and dependable…an awful fucking violent fear that if somebody makes me angry and I let go completely I might not be able to control it” (78). The ability to control this violence is important to Poitier’s sense of masculinity, but more important to the man is self knowledge. In his latest text he advises readers
that “By seeing and knowing ourselves, we are given dominion over our lives—the capacity to steer our own ships, for better and for worse” (LBM 64). Poitier’s three texts reflect his continuing journey to self knowledge.

Poitier reminds his readers that despite the limiting parameters allowed him in Hollywood in the early years, he has managed to gain the respect of industry insiders and create positive changes in the depiction of Black masculinity in film by abiding by his personal code of masculinity. In This Life, Poitier recounts his decision to turn down a role early in his career. This decision, for Poitier, represented his protest against the disempowered and undignified representations of Black manhood. In the chapter “Politics,” he explains that “The years 1952, 1953, and all but four weeks of 1954 were dry spell for me in terms of the movies and the theater” (169). With a pregnant wife and one infant at home, Poitier eked out a living working in a small restaurant he owned and ran with his partner. Despite struggling to make ends meet, he turned down the film role (and the paycheck). Poitier explains that while there was nothing wrong with the part, nothing derogatory, he felt he should not be playing parts like that (TL 174). Poitier writes that the agent who offered him the part at the time did not understand his decision to which Poitier explains “if it’s just ordinary work with no significance to it, nothing significant or special about it that sets it apart, then I can’t do it.” He continues “I knew precisely what I meant, but he didn’t” (TL 175). In this text Poitier never explains precisely what he meant; he simply concludes discussion of this episode by recounting that several months later the agent, Martin Baum, called him to tell him face to face “that

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6Poitier never names the film, but of the project he writes: “The part was that of a black father who worked in and around gambling in a notorious town called Phoenix City. The gambling element threatened the black father (for reasons that are now obscure) he ignored their threats, and they killed his little daughter and threw her body on his lawn” (174).
anybody as crazy as you are, I want to represent them” (TL 175). That was the beginning of a twenty-five year relationship between the two men. In Measure of a Man, however, Poitier revisits this chapter of his life and is much clearer as to his decision at the time: “I rejected that part because, in my view, the character simply didn’t measure up. He didn’t fight for what mattered to him most. He didn’t behave with dignity” (MOAM 66-67). Of the character’s reaction to his daughter’s murder Poitier comments “He was enraged. He was tormented. Still, he remained passive. He didn’t do shit. He left it to other people to fight his battles” (MOAM 64). Poitier juxtaposes the character’s personality with that of his father and mother who, despite the challenges they faced, always conducted themselves with dignity. Since the character did not measure up, Poitier could not play him. Poitier writes that he sees his work as “who I am” and explains that the work he “did would never bring dishonor to my father’s name” (MOAM 69). In the later text Poitier is able to articulate how he sees a certain performance of dignity as integral to his construction of Black masculinity. It is his adherence to this conviction that he sees as responsible for the success he has had throughout his career.

Poitier’s active resistance against ineffectual and undignified representations of Black masculinity on film is not only seen in the roles he rejects but also in the ones he accepts. He recalls, for instance, his initial reading of the script for the film In The Heat of The Night; Poitier reports that the original script called for Tibbs, the Northern police officer he plays, to simply walk out when he is slapped by Endicott, a Southern cotton plantation owner, whom he must question. He asserts, “That could have happened with another actor playing that part, but it couldn’t happen with me” (MOAM 136). It was
Poitier who demanded that the script be changed and the scene be shot “so that without a nanosecond of hesitation, I whack him right back across the face with a backhand slap” (MOAM 137). Given that this film was released in 1967, the image of a Black man slapping a White Southerner is arguably one of the most visually stunning moment in film. Keyser and Ruszkowski argue that this scene “was a measure of how far Poitier had come as a black star and a militant that, in the era when civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King endorsed nonviolence, Tibbs the black retaliates harshly and violently” (110). Tibbs' violent retaliation and by extension Poitier’s, who suggests that Tibbs “without a nanosecond of hesitation” retaliate violently, on the one hand, establishes both the character and the man as initiates of a patriarchy the valorizes violence as masculine. bell hooks argues that “[e]very day in America men are violent. Their violence is deemed ‘natural’ by the psychology of patriarchy, which insists that there is a biological connection between having a penis and the will to do violence” (WTC 55). However, on the other hand, the film also offers a critique of this violence when in the following scene, after walking out on Endicott, Tibbs’ partner, the racist Southern Sheriff Gillespie, says to him “Man, you just like the rest of us, ain’t ya?” This statement indicts Tibbs for harboring the same violent tendencies Tibbs is determined to punish in the local whites. However, the film simultaneously shows the potential danger of the self-destructive, destroy-the-world rage Poitier writes about. Tibbs’ hatred of Endicott actually distracts him from his detective work.

Poitier, no doubt, recounts the details of his input on this most important scene in the film to impress upon his critics his commitment to a dignified presentation of Black masculinity in film. When interviewed by Elaine Hamilton in August 1968, Poitier
explains how he sees his role in Hollywood: “As long as I’m the only Negro actor working with consistency, I certainly intend to perpetuate the hero image, until such time as there are sufficient Negroes in films so that we can afford to have good guys and bad guys” (qtd by Keyser and Ruszkowski 123). Poitier understood that to some extent he would have to play the Hollywood game from within the system, but he was also determined to play it on his terms. Poitier insists that “the true progress [his career] represented didn’t come from unbridled rage any more than it came from polite submission. Progress then and now comes from the collision of powerful forces within the hearts of those who strive for it” (MOAM 137). While Poitier’s public declaration of his part in the slap heard around the world is a clear defense of his own position in patriarchal masculinity via the character Tibbs, it is not typical of the rest of his text. Poitier seems much more concerned with a different kind of masculinity, one that rejects violence. hooks writes, “The men who choose against violence, against death, do so because they want to live fully and well, because they want to know love. These are men who are true heroes, the men whose lives we need to know about, honor, and remember” (WTC 74). In presenting himself within his autobiographic texts, Poitier not only seems to advocate hooks’ position, but he seems to style himself an example of the kind of man of whom she speaks.

**Rewriting Black Boyhood**

Poitier’s road to superstardom is one of uncertainty and trauma which started a long way from Hollywood, and indeed a long way from America. In all his autobiographies Poitier recounts the circumstances of his birth. The prophetic tale almost mystifies and mythologizes elements of Poitier’s birth. He is the child of Bahamian tomato farmers Evelyn and Reginald Poitier. In February of 1927, Sidney's
seven months pregnant mother, Evelyn, accompanied her husband to Miami, Florida, to sell their crop at the Produce Exchange. Sidney was born during this trip, two months premature. Goudsouzian points out that “Sidney’s premature arrival in Miami [rather than the Bahamas where his parents live] gave him automatic citizenship in the United States, a twist of fate that benefitted him fifteen years later” (8). Poitier explains that his father was ready to give up on the premature baby, but his mother was not. She found her way to a fortune teller who predicted that the child would travel the earth, walk with kings, and be rich and famous (TL 5). Besides introducing the myth of his birth, the first chapter of This Life simultaneously connects and separates Poitier from both the Afro-Caribbean and African American experience. He is both and neither at the same time. Piquet asserts that “more often than not, group identification and differentiation are part of a complex autobiographical process” (257). This is undoubtedly the case with Poitier. This ‘same but different’ identity is important in Poitier’s conception of his own Black masculinity. Poitier connects himself to the Caribbean and a Caribbean history and culture, but also connects himself to those of African Americans.

In the first two chapters of This Life Poitier traces his family lineage back to escaped Haitian slaves who made their way to the Bahama Islands; intentionally or not, Poitier invokes images of Toussaint and the Haitian Rebellion in the minds of his readers, leaving the impression that the same revolutionary blood may flow through Poitier’s own veins. He also presents himself as naturally drawn to adventure, and describes his near death misadventures exploring his tiny island home. Poitier was thrust into one of his most thrilling adventures before he could even walk. He recounts
the circumstances around his learning to swim; a tale he repeats in his later texts as well.

In the tenth month of my life...my mother threw me into the ocean like a sack of garbage and stood by expressionless in a dinghy boat watching me go under, sputtering, splashing, and screaming. My pitiful struggle for life seemed not to affect her: she looked calmly on while I clawed at the water, stricken with panic...she made no move to help. Suddenly, mercifully, my father’s hands scooped me up, held me above the water for a moment, then passed me up to my mother—who promptly threw me back into the ocean. (TL 9-10)

This scene is important since it implicates Poitier, his mother, and his father in accepted traumatic initiation into patriarchy. Poitier explains this initiation as necessary and even desirable “On an island that is barely 3 miles wide, it doesn’t matter where a kid lives—as soon as he learns to walk, he will find his way to the water. My parents knew I would be no exception. Therefore, when I began wandering away from home, since I had already learned to swim, nobody worried about me until it was time to eat” (my italics, TL 10). Based on his description here, this sink or swim initiation is clearly male centered; certainly young girls did not have the same freedom to roam and explore uninhibited like their male counterparts. What is so interesting about his excerpt is Poitier’s depiction of his mother as abuser and torturer and his father as beneficent savior. While Poitier insists that this exercise was a benefit to him and a safety precaution that islanders took in order to save the lives of their young children, his description helps us to understand how the processes of turning boys into men (even at this very young age) means a separation from their mothers. It is no coincidence that the mother is an emotionless, dangerous member of the ritual, while the father is the savior—even though he returns the child to the mother. But I would argue that at this point Poitier’s anger is misplaced on the mother who is only acting out her own role
within a patriarchal society. To be sure, men are not the only perpetrators of patriarchal violence; indeed, many mothers are as well; however, bell hooks explains “that such mothers in their acts of maternal sadism are really doing the work of patriarchal caretaking, doing what they were taught a good mother should do” (WTC 136). But Poitier’s language also demonstrates the possible dangers of soul murder that can accompany these initiation rites as he compares himself to “a sack of garbage,” and indicates the emotional stoicisma he is expected to mimic reflected in his mothers face. Poitier’s ‘swimming lessons’ may be his first encounter with the expectations of patriarchal masculinity, but it certainly was not the last.

There is no better way to establish phallocentric masculinity than through heterosexual sex, and Poitier certainly establishes himself as a naturally curious and willing heterosexual child. He painstakingly recounts his initial attempts at losing his virginity as a nine year old. His first and second failed attempts, partly due to his inability to achieve an erection, were with his eleven year old sister-in-law (Poitier was nine at the time) and with a wild yard chicken respectively. Later, after getting caught by his mother “playing doctor” with another family member, this time his niece, Poitier finally does lose his virginity to “an old lady” for a reasonable price (TL 26). While his text goes on to discuss Poitier’s many more successful sexual exploits as an adult, including the affair with actress Diahann Carroll which ends his first marriage, an analysis of the sexual exploits that signal his coming into manhood—his sexual rite of passage— is worth a second look.

Poitier’s sexual exploits are not the stuff of legends. His constant ineptitude in the different sexual situations and his inability to achieve and or maintain an erection in his
first sexual encounters goes a long way to dispel the image of the inherently, sexually adept Black boy postulated in many Hollywood films such as *Sweetback* and *The Learning Tree*. Of his eventual deflowering at age thirteen, he recalls that the woman was “pleasant and businesslike” and the overall experience as “very nice. Absolutely neat” (*TL* 27). Poitier does not exaggerate the sexual encounter or his prowess; nor does he postulate that having sex gained him entrance into the community of patriarchal men. In fact, his first sexual experience heightens the reader’s sense of his immaturity. Poitier contracted gonorrhea from the prostitute, but in his immature mind he thinks that the penile emissions are “prolonged ejaculation.” He eventually reported his symptoms to his father once he started to experience a burning sensation in his penis. Poitier, though, does not write that he gets a slap on his back from his father as a sign of masculine camaraderie or even a sly welcome to the world of men side-smile; he simply writes of his father’s reaction: “He says, ‘You’re going to have to go to the hospital.’”(*TL* 27). Life after sex is as mundane as it was before, and the experience does not automatically transform him into a Black hero.

Besides his failure at being a sexual stud, Poitier also fails at patriarchal violence. In both *This Life* and *Life Beyond Measure* he recounts what otherwise might be read as a typical teenage boy’s initiation into a fraternal group of brotherhood. He explains how, after his first fight, he earned a reputation in his neighborhood as the boy not to be messed with. A neighborhood bully decided to test Poitier, who had just moved to Nassau from Cat Island. “William something was looking for somebody to beat up” (*TL* 22). Poitier states that he tried his best to shift focus away from himself but to no avail. The fight that ensued consisted of one blow; William slapped Poitier with such power
that [he] went out like a light! (TL 22), he writes. It is Poitier’s older sister Teddy who then comes to his rescue. After insuring that her little brother was ok, she went in search of William and “smack[ed] him so hard his knees buckle[d], and she proceed[ed] to beat the daylight out of him” (TL 22). Poitier’s reputation as a boy not to be messed with, then, was built on his sister’s strength; rather than being embarrassed that a girl had to fight his battle for him, however, or conceive of this experience as emasculating, Poitier actually felt pride when he “overheard one boy saying to another, ‘don’t fuck with him or he’ll call his sister—and she’s mean’” (TL 23). Importantly, Poitier does not allow Teddy’s image to be fossilized as an aggressive bully. In his third text, just before he retells the fight scene, he describes a more intimate moment between his sister and himself: “and together we would just laugh and laugh until our bellies started to hurt. She would end up hugging me… Then she would hug me again and we would find some interesting game to play” (LBM 52). Poitier is sure to humanize Teddy; she is not one dimensional, not just there to protect him with violence, but she is loving and caring as well. Here again Poitier does not embellish his experience to make himself seem more traditionally “masculine.” I would argue that his decision to include his less than macho experiences demonstrates a rejection of a limiting construct of phallocentric patriarchal masculinity, a model that demands that Black boys must adhere to and excel at patriarchal sex and violence, and dominate women in order to enter the cult of manhood. Despite his rejecting the traditional rites of passage for boys, Poitier thrived during his time in the Bahamas; but by the time he was fifteen years old, he had become a petty criminal and had spent one night in prison for stealing corn. In order to save his son, Poitier’s father decided to send Sidney to Miami.
Patriarchy, Melancholy, and Migration, on the Road to Manhood

In the third of his autobiographies Poitier writes that “the road to adulthood…

began when [he] arrived in Harlem at the age of sixteen” (LBM xiii). ⁷ In his second text, in a chapter he titles “A Time of Ashes,” he describes this two year period before he found his calling as an actor with the American Negro Theatre as an “indispensable” period in his life. In this chapter Poitier likens this period to other cultural rites of passage. He writes, “In some African tribes the young boys must cover their face with ashes before their initiation into manhood” (MOAM 47). ⁸ Poitier may be right in conceiving of this period as his indoctrination into adulthood since for the first time he was actually responsible for himself, far away from the protective custody of his parents in the Bahamas or his elder brother whose guardianship he escaped when he left Miami. But Poitier is also aware of a certain kind of growth and melancholia which he associates with his migration, not just from the Caribbean to the United States but even the earlier move from Cat Island to Nassau.

While Poitier acknowledges a difference between Cat Island and Nassau, it is only when he moves to Miami that he feels threatened. He writes, “When I was comfortable on Cat Island, I was pulled out and placed in Nassau.  When I had gotten some comfort in Nassau, which took some adjusting to, I was pulled out and placed in a hostile environment called Florida.  Again and again I found myself having to leave behind the

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⁷ While Poitier left the Bahamas at fifteen to move to Miami, he only stayed in Florida for several months before he made his first attempt at running away to the North. By the time he turned sixteen, Poitier had moved to New York.

⁸ Poitier continues “In certain Nordic cultures the young boys used to sit down in the ashes by the fire in the center of the lodge house until they were ready to take on their adult role. And everybody knows about Cinderella, the girl who had to tend to the cinders and do all the other lowly chores until her true identity became known”(47).
comfort gained and move on. After a time it became a ritual” (MOAM 80). Poitier perceptively analyzes the melancholia that this kind of uprooting and migration can have on an individual. He analyzes how his move to Nassau affects him; he writes “that transition from childhood idyll to Urban launched me straight into manhood. By the age of fourteen I was no longer a child” (MOAM 33). He continues:

When childhood is aborted, it’s like aborted grief. In both cases, if you don’t go through all the stages, giving each its due, the job never gets completed. I felt that double thing: part of me said, “Yes—make the plans, do the decisions, take the responsibility, pull the load”; at the same time, I felt that there was a kid inside me who’d never got finished…The pain I felt most sharply was the loss of camaraderie, the sense of belonging. I grieved for the love, the trust, and the feel-good giggles that had once bubbled up and bound me to the friends of my childhood. (MOAM 33)

Poitier’s commentary here is an extremely important intervention in the discourse of traumatic rites of passage of Black boys into manhood as he articulates the lingering pain, alienation, and melancholia that go hand in hand with migration. He is speaking here of soul murder. Poitier describes not only a splitting of the self, where he must separate from the boy within in order to move on, but he also had to give up a sense of belonging, and his connection with childhood friends. But what I think separates Poitier from someone like Bert Williams is the fact that Poitier acknowledges and grieves for what he has lost. But even though his move from Cat Island to the nation’s capital, Nassau, was a culture shock for Poitier, nothing prepared him for his move to the United States of America.

Experiences like Poitier’s traumatic upheaval from the Caribbean to the United States are often times silently accepted by immigrants as a necessary rite of passage, in order to move from a primitive third world backwardness to a first world prosperity; alienation from the new environment is not altogether unexpected. Upon his arrival in
Florida, Poitier found himself isolated and alone in an alien environment. Though he was sent to live with his older brother and his family, Poitier could not identify with his African American family. Of his brother’s wife and children Poitier writes “I didn’t understand—and they didn’t understand me. I had come from a place seemingly as far away as Mars…communication was difficult…In fact, it was so traumatic, that whole experience, that I was never able to adjust to Miami” (TL 41). But Poitier’s alienation in Florida was not simply due to changes of location; more than anything else it had to do with race and Poitier's inability to limit himself to the construct of manhood allowed him in an overtly racist society.

When he moved to Florida, Poitier was not totally naive of racism; he remembers a white friend, Carl, in Nassau who at the age of eleven years old told Poitier that he would never have the same opportunities as Carl did because of his race (MOAM 35). Nevertheless, Poitier writes that “In Nassau, race was still a slightly ambiguous issue” (MOAM 36). Though aware of some racial inequalities at home, nothing could prepare him for what he was about to encounter in his new home in Miami, where there was no ambiguity about race. Poitier soon became aware of the ethics of living in Jim Crow America. In all three of his texts Poitier engages with the complex issues of being Black in America, and asserts his ability to reject this new sense of identity that American racism attempted to place on him. Poitier never allowed his sense of self to be

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9 Nelson George points to the complexity of the African American /Afro-Caribbean relationship from his own perspective. “Before Bob Marley and ganja and Rastafarianism put an Afrocentric, rootsy spin on the American view of Caribbean culture, I’d always viewed its transplanted natives as snobby, snotty, and uppity,” George continues, “But Sidney, whose career was built on masquerading as an African-American, successfully avoided our prejudices. The very qualities I admired in Sidney were the things that made me resent the West Indians that I knew. The irony is that a lot of the regal bearing he projected could, in another context, have been seen as insufferable superiority” (17-18).
determined by what was expected of him in the United States. One of Poitier’s memories sounds like it could have come directly from Richard Wright’s *Uncle Tom’s Children*. In the chapter “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch,” Wright recounts encountering racism throughout his youth and adolescence; through these encounters he came to understand the place of African Americans in the segregated American South. Wright explains that “Negroes who have lived South know the dread of being caught alone upon the streets in white neighborhoods after the sun has set. In such a simple situation as this the plight of the Negro in America is graphically symbolized…the color of a Negro’s skin makes him easily recognizable, makes him suspect, converts him into a defenseless target” (10).

Poitier learned his Jim Crow lesson in a span of a few short months when he moved to Florida. The most traumatic of these experiences ended with a gun pointed at his head. Poitier writes of an evening when he missed the last bus while he was in the white side of town. Poitier begins to hitchhike home when he is approached by five white policemen; the officers direct young Poitier into an alley where, Poitier writes, “the guy in the passenger seat…takes out his gun and places the nozzle of the revolver right between my eyes—on my forehead” (*TL* 47). After scaring Poitier and warning him about being in the white neighborhood at that time of night, the officers force him to walk the thirty-five blocks to his home under threat of being shot if he looked back just once (*TL* 48). This encounter with Southern police was a final indignity that prompted Poitier to head north.

Despite migrating to the United States at a young age, Poitier’s time in the Bahamas continued to affect the way he understood his place in the world. Time and
again he argues that his self awareness was formed in the Bahamas where Blacks made up the majority of the community, and relationship to American racial politics is balanced by this experience. Reflecting on the incident with the police in his second memoir, he asserts that the experiences of his early years worked “to put a certain kind of youngster on that boat heading for Florida in 1943…by then I had already fashioned my own rules—rules quite contrary to what Florida was then saying to me” (MOAM 132). He reiterates this point in his later text, explaining to his great granddaughter that “One of my few advantages in weathering the storms [of American racism] ahead was that even by age fifteen I had a core of knowledge that was going to travel with me—a sense of who I was, regardless of what the world chose to say to me” (LBM 60). While it is true that Poitier arrived to the shores of the United States with a strong sense of self, he nonetheless could not help but be affected by American racism. Fortunately, Poitier had the opportunity to acknowledge and work through the trauma of his migration and American racism, unlike Bert Williams, who silently endured his trauma.

**The Mind of the Man**

Life in New York was difficult; Poitier struggled to make ends meet as a dishwasher and eventually joined the army where he was finally able to come to terms with his traumatic past. Sixteen-year-old Poitier joined the army in order to get off of the cold New York streets. But even the army did not protect him from racism; he recalls that while in the army he and other members of his all black outfit, all dressed in uniform, being refused service in a bar because the establishment did not “serve niggers” (TL 69). In response to this insult, Poitier and the sixty men in his outfit “tore

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10 Poitier was ill prepared for the New York winters, he was unable to buy winter clothes or pay rent so he decided to join the military.
that place to absolute shreds” (*TL* 70). The incident with the racist bar owner was just one more insult to Poitier’s dignity, his sense of self, his masculinity. Besides his own traumas, while in the forces as a member of the 127th Medical Detachment at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Northport, Long Island, Poitier was routinely faced with the trauma of others. The “hospital tended to shell-shocked soldiers” (Goudsouzian 39). The irony of Poitier taking care of “shell-shocked soldiers” should not be missed here, since Poitier’s migratory experience had had a similar effect on him. Goudsouzian describes all the traumatic experiences that Poitier experienced since migrating to the United States, and explains its psychological effects of migration on many West Indians at large:

American race prejudice had pushed him[Poitier] into a bunker. The Klan march through Liberty City, the incident with the Miami police, the Harlem riot, and the Oyster Bay donnybrook had all threatened his self-worth. Like many West Indians, Poitier struggled under the blanket of race that America threw over all people with black skin. (41)

It is not difficult to imagine Goudsouzian’s words as reflecting the experiences of Bert Williams. The difference is, however, that his time in the army provided Poitier with the tools necessary for his survival; it is in the army that he first encounters psychiatry. Shortly after the bar incident, Poitier decided that he wanted out of the army, and in an effort to obtain a discharge he pretended to be crazy and threw a chair at a superior officer. He explains that he wanted to be released on a “Section 8, which means being discharged at the convenience of the government. The only way you could get that kind of Section 8 was by being declared crazy”(*TL* 72). Poitier’s ‘crazy performance’ led to five weeks of sessions with the army psychiatrist. Poitier writes of these sessions: “We talked—just talked and talked. We talked about how I felt, where I was from, what life was like where I came from” (*TL* 76-77). It is ironic that Poitier’s initial encounter with
psychiatry occurs while he is in the Army; seeking psychological help from a patriarchal perspective is usually seen as a less than masculine endeavor; men don't need help, men do not talk, and if they do, they most certainly do not talk about their feelings. Paradoxically, joining the Army, fighting for one’s country, in many cases, is accepted as a rite of passage into patriarchal masculinity. Poitier’s encounter with psychology while in the Army, however, disrupts the traditional narrative of military service which ushers young boys into patriarchal manhood via impersonal violence which builds camaraderie with other patriarchal males, by inserting the necessary work of self examination and rejection of impersonal violence. I would argue that Poitier’s encounter with psychology, thought mandatory at the time, was one of the most profound experiences of Poitier’s life. This early experience made it possible for him to seek similar help later on in his life.

The opportunity to talk, and to talk about his feelings, is one that many men do not have, and those who do seldom take advantage of it. The psychological intervention indelibly affects Poitier’s life and sense of self. Even though Poitier claims in all of his texts that his self awareness stems from his strong knowledge of self which was developed during his time in the Bahamas, I would suggest that psychotherapy also helped him to understand the insidious nature of racism and patriarchy which affected him in ways he could not begin to understand on his own. Writing about his therapy sessions in his first text, he writes, “apparently, in the discussions we’d been having, I kept repeating that I was as good as anybody. That no man was better than I was—no

11 Poitier also reflects on this incident in his other two texts. While he dedicates even less space to the discussion of his interaction with the psychologist, it clearly states that the experience was life changing for him.
man…I was not ever going to conceive of myself being less than any other man” (TL 77). What Poitier discovers during these sessions is a deep-set anxiety regarding his manhood; a manhood he subconsciously determined would “measure up” to that of his white counterparts. Of his psychologist, Poitier writes

He helped me to understand that because I was surrounded by a society that seemed to be perpetually hostile to blacks, I assumed a position, a pose, designed to say: I am not going to let you dismiss me, hostile world. He led me inside myself, where I discovered that my psychological guard was constantly up, sometimes unnecessarily (TL 77).

What Poitier discovers is that he, like many other Black men in America, had adopted what sociologist Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson call a “cool pose.” Majors and Billson explain that “adopting a cool pose…is a strategy that many black males use in making sense of their everyday lives…coolness as a strength may be linked to pride, self-respect, and masculinity”(xi). Luckily, Poitier was also able to recognize at a young age that it is not necessary to maintain this guard at all times; Majors and Billson also explain that while the cool pose may benefit those who use it, there is also the potential “to condition the black man to suppress and lose touch with all his feelings, including those that might facilitate nurturant relationships with others” (12). Poitier’s “cool pose” prevented him from becoming victim to a crippling racial inferiority complex. While the army psychologist diagnoses him as sane, Poitier questions the veracity of that diagnoses.

Who is to say I wasn’t, in fact, living through some temporary insanity through the whole period of my early exposure to America? From the moment I got off that fucking boat, I began to experience this new, different, strange, complex, crazy society. And once I became attuned to the strangeness of the racial situation in Miami, that did weird things to my head. Who knows what it did to me emotionally? I must have been terribly disoriented (TL 78).
I think Poitier might agree that he was, to some degree, suffering from shell shock during those early years in America. While his initial encounter with psychology help the young Poitier to negotiate his place as a young Black man in racist America, he would learn that he would need even more help in negotiating his interpersonal relationships.

**Poitier’s Problem with Women**

Poitier saw a psychiatrist for a period of five weeks in 1944 just prior to his leaving the Army. In 1961 he began seeing a psychoanalyst; Poitier reports that he would see her four to five times a week for nine years. (TL 268) The thirty-four year old Poitier originally sought the help of a psychoanalyst to help him sort through his emotional quandary; he was torn between staying with his wife Juanita or leaving her for his lover Diahann. He writes that he needed to work through the anxieties, pain, and confusion this caused him. Like Brathwaite, whom I mentioned in the introduction, in this chapter Poitier breaks several taboos by exposing the psychological and emotional complexities that men experience. Poitier is referred to a doctor by fellow West Indian actor Harry Belafonte, who “confessed to being, on occasion, all but paralyzed by an inability to cope with the avalanche of pressures, crises, guilt, rages, and fears”(TL 263); Poitier also asserts that Diahann Carroll started seeing a psychologist shortly after he began. By exposing these entertainers as its proponents, Poitier destigmatizes psychoanalysis as something Black people—much less Black men—don’t do.

Though Poitier entered psychoanalysis in order to work through his issues with two specific women, it eventually forced him to examine his relationship with many others, and even himself. Poitier was first reluctant to see a female psychologist, but on their first meeting he asserts that he found her to be the brightest mind he had ever met
up to that point (TL 265). While Poitier does not mention the name of his psychoanalyst, he does explain that he stays with her for nine years. During that time Poitier discovered himself in an intimate way. He says of the experience,

Slowly but surely the analyst was getting a fix on me. But, fascinatingly enough, I also was getting a fix on me. As I talked out these things, I started to ‘see’ me. Flowing out of me, my words free associating, came a series of glimpses into the early life of a little boy as he really was before he grew old enough to censor out the painful parts. I was seeing for the first time a kind of whole Sidney (TL 266).

Poitier’s description here is almost an exact contrast to the description of Bert Williams as he puts on his blackface makeup. Where Bert’s chronic silence and stifling of his feelings causes him to lose sight of himself, Poitier’s speaking his pain helps him to reconnect with the boy that he once was. Psychoanalysis also helped him to understand his latent resentment of his mother, which stemmed from “her lack of gentleness while dressing [him] when [he] was small” (TL 266). He also resented that his mother would take out her anger on him, usually with a slap to the back of the head (TL 267). Poitier describes her anger and her silence: “She was quick to anger—quick to anger. No, she wasn’t. She was volatile, not angry. But when you did get her angry, O Lord! (TL 9); in his later two texts, Poitier’s characterization of his mother is much different. In his final text he says of her, she was “not a woman of many words…not always able to articulate her thoughts and feelings” (LB 23).

Poitier’s residual anger with his mother can be seen in the way he originally described the scene in which she taught him to swim. Again, the bitter language in the paragraph seemed reserved for his mother even though his father was also taking part.

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12 Poitier writes that he held no resentment towards his father. “In those patriarchal days, my mother carried the biggest burden in all things relating to the children”(266).
in the “lesson.” But I would argue that Poitier continues to use the tools he learned during his psychoanalysis sessions; we can see through reading his autobiographies his continued efforts to understand and come to terms with his mother. Interestingly, by the time Poitier revisits the story of his learning to swim in his third text, his description of this scene is quite different.

At around ten months old or even younger, I followed family tradition by being more or less tossed into the water as the two of them [mother and father] stood close by, forcing me to literally sink or swim—rescuing me, of course, each time I became fully submerged, picking me up, and tossing me back in again (LBM 24).

Almost thirty years after his first text Poitier remembers the initiation somewhat differently. There is none of the anger leveled at his mother during his first writing, and he seems to hold both mother and father equally accountable for the initiation. Though the elapsed time between the writing of the first and third narrative may account for the differences between the tone of the first and second accounts of this narrative, it is clear that Poitier has reconsidered the roles of both mother and father in this initiation rite.

The lack of malice in the second excerpt, I would argue, is indicative of Poitier’s coming to terms with the trauma of his past and his decision to forgive himself and both his mother and father in order to heal. In his second text Poitier analyzes his relationship with his mother, questioning his desire to hurt her on the eve of his departure for Miami. He writes, “Shortly before I left, I said to her that when I got to America I wasn’t going to write to her or send her any money. That was the most hurtful thing I could say…But hurting her is what I had set out to do, getting a little bit of revenge for something that she had done—what, I don’t now recall. And separating, and teenage boys need to do” (MOAM 14). Poitier’s desire to hurt his mother in order to separate, “like teenage boys must from their mothers,” is another example of soul
murder and rejecting the law of the mother in support of phallocentric patriarchy. But an older Poitier uses his text to return to his mother. Above all he wants to know “Who was this person?” (MOAM 14). While he describes her through her domestic duties as a mom, he also acknowledges her personhood and wonders about what might have been shared between them if either of them were able to speak to each other. Later, he even takes responsibility for the silences in their relationship, “In hindsight, I might have opened up more to my mother,” he writes (LBM 61). Nevertheless, in his later texts Poitier is able to celebrate the love she gave despite the silence (LBM 15-16).

Ultimately, within the pages of this text, Poitier is able to find his way back to his mother. He celebrates her life and connects with her spirit “I feel that whatever is good in me is that energy that she was. She put it into her last child” (16). We see then that the measure of this man might be his ability to connect with the woman inside. By the end of his second text, it is clear that Poitier’s measure of a man goes beyond the traditional phallocentric patriarchal norms.

**Black Manhood beyond Measure**

No doubt Poitier’s decision to dedicate his final autobiography to his great granddaughter can be read as an acknowledgement of his move away from patriarchal masculinity. Interestingly, Poitier’s resistance to phallocentric patriarchy does not mean a break from his own father; in fact, of his father he writes, “he was my frame of reference. He was the male I knew who took good care of me, spent time with me, and talked with all of his children” (LBM 198). What we see by reading the three autobiographic texts together is Poitier’s project as an imaginative endeavor at creating a Black male self in constant evolution, not limited to stereotypical images of Black manhood. In fact, one could argue that with his autobiographic trilogy Poitier continues
the work started in that psychologist’s office all those years ago. He continues to talk, and in doing so, expresses his feelings, his pain, and his joys. While we see that Poitier may not be totally free of the bonds of phallocentric masculinity, he is nonetheless creating a model of masculinity that is progressive. From his move to find his mother and embody her spirit in his second text, to his transference of his legacy on to his great granddaughter (rather than a male heir), Poitier is the exemplar of a progressive Black masculinity.
CHAPTER 6
IN CONCLUSION: FAILING AS A MAN, A PROGRESSIVE STRATEGY?

I think failure is something that should be celebrated, I don’t want to be in a formation of black male identity where one has to hold oneself in a rigid way...even against how we might feel about ourselves in terms of our pain, our skepticism, lack and self-doubt.

Isaac Julien

In Chapter Five I suggest that Sidney Poitier, as his life is (re)imagined and (re)presented by himself within his autobiographies, can be seen as a nascent model for a progressive Black masculinity. This view of Poitier and his work stand in contrast to many of his critics and contemporaries who saw him as a failure in terms of presenting a powerful, progressive or desirable model of Black masculinity at the height of his career. On the other hand, many of these same critics praised what they saw as the rebellious nature of “revolutionary” characters like Sweetback and the imitators who came after. But many of those critics, who happened to be male and Black, denounced Poitier because he chose to reject the sanctioned (by Black cultural leaders and talking heads) performance of Black masculinity in vogue during the mid to late sixties. Poitier failed in the view of some critics because Black audiences were ostensibly unable to identify with his white middle class manner in the same way they could identify with the urban styles of Sweetback or Ivan; in other words, Poitier basically failed at adopting an effective cool pose.

However, what we now realize is that in many instances, the cool pose and its accompanying silences potentially inhibit Black men’s personal and social growth. All of the attempted critiques of patriarchal masculinity that I analyze within the above chapters fall short because in presenting Black masculinity, the black artists and their protagonists continue to maintain silence along with a cool pose even when they are aware of its dangers. We see this with Mario Van Peebles’ inability to put the words of
dissent into the mouth of the child actor playing Mario, and his insistence that viewers
decipher the truth of his emotions by looking into the child’s eyes. We see it in the
interview in which Mario and his father reminisce and joke about the infamous sex
scene, and coolly dismiss the controversy around the scene all while cruelly denigrating
the female actors involved. We see it again in Cess Silvera’s film where young Black
boys silently stand by and witness criminal behavior then coolly go on to mimic that
behavior. And again in the commentary when in one breath Silvera and his actors
denounce the lifestyle of the criminal protagonists, and in another breath negate their
earlier critique by applauding the badmanness of the child actor who demonstrates an
“innate” knowledge of violence when he improvises unscripted violence during the
scene where he robs the truck driver. The cool pose prevents these men from seriously
challenging or critiquing this sort of behavior.

With Caryl Phillips’ work we begin to see the self-conscious engagement with the
danger of silence and the cool pose. In Phillips’ novel, Bert Williams’ performance of
coolness and its accompanying silence serves to alienate him from everyone he loves
and even from himself. The cool pose and silence that he adopts to mask his pain
eventually destroys him. Silence, like cool, is a double edged sword, “it cuts both
ways.” In their text, Billson and Majors describes how cool has long been used, to
varying degrees of purpose and success, within many urban Black communities. A
juxtaposition of Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool” and Langston Hughes’ “Motto”
highlights the complexity of negotiating the politics of cool. Brooks depicts a necrophilic
relationship between urban youth and the cool pose: “We real cool. We /…Die soon”
whereas Hughes’ poem extols its life affirming virtues: “I play it cool / And dig all jive—/
That’s the reason / I stay alive.”¹³ As an African American woman Brooks’ seems to be able to critique the cool pose in ways that Hughes, an African American man is not. Highlighting the inherent ignorance and violence of the cool pose, her poem reads as a critique of the nonchalance of Hughes’ representation of cool.

While his supporters might argue that Poitier did manage a level of coolness within his performances, he nevertheless failed in the eyes of some critics because his portrayal of cool masculinity was not what was seen as necessarily dangerous to the establishment. But what I wish to posit here is the power and possibility of finding a progressive Black masculinity in Poitier’s “failures.” Indeed, in his texts Poitier innumerates his many failings in respect to obtaining phallocentric patriarchal masculinity. For example, he initially fails in his attempts to sexually concur the

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¹³ Both poems are found in the collection *I, too, Sing America: Black voices in American Literature* and are worth reading in their entirety.

**Motto**

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<td><strong>That’s the reason</strong></td>
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<td><strong>I stay alive.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Left school. We</strong></td>
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<td><strong>As I live and learn</strong></td>
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opposite sex, and he fails in establishing masculine dominance via physical violence; in fact, it is his sister who is dominant in that realm. But what does Poitier gain by displaying his failures? In an interview with Don Belton, Isaac Julien explains how our “failures” as Black men can be a powerful mode of critique.

All these things [pain, self-doubt, etc.] are as much a part of black male identity as the things we might want to parade, like toughness and unity. We have to be willing to engage in a process of thinking through our failure as black men in this society. Black masculinity has always been a “failed masculinity” in relationship to white male colonialism. Black macho discourses of empowerment will never truly reach us where we live. There is something interesting we can learn from our so-called failure, because our failure also contains our resistance. Failure to live “up” to oppressive masculinity is a part of what it means to be queer…Being black itself is seen as a failure in the white world. (Speak My Name 215).

Celebrating failure is a radical concept only in as far as one understands that there is no possibility of winning since the entire game is always already rigged against Black men. However, many Black men still insist on playing the imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy game and end up self-loathing and alienated from self and community. Through his trilogy, Poitier puts Julien’s theory into practice, but so does Phillips. By (re)presenting Bert Williams’ story, Phillips forces his readers to engage with the process of thinking through our failures as Black men in this society by thinking through Williams’ failures. Undoubtedly, Williams was and may continue to be reviled by some who see him as a traitor to his race—a Black man who perpetuated negative stereotypes by performing in blackface. But in reading Williams’ narrative we see that as an Afro-Caribbean man attempting to live up to an ideal of masculinity that did not account for him, he was destined to fail. We can learn from Williams’ failure. The difference between Poitier and Williams then is that Poitier was able to find it within himself to reject the constraints of masculinity placed on him by not just Whites but
many Blacks as well. With his autobiographic trilogy Poitier opens up the possibilities of the kinds of masculinity that is available to Black men.

Though Poitier does undergo traumatic experiences during his formative years, he does not use those experiences with trauma as the defining moments of his life. Traumatic violence as rites of passage for young Black boys into the cult of masculinity is an enduring and pervasive tenet. We see this in the mythologies Black communities creates for themselves; and while mythologies of Bad Men such as a Sweetback or Rhygin(Ivan) may have served a historical need within Diasporic Black communities, they should not serve as the only models of successful Black masculinity. But oftentimes indoctrination into the cult of phallocentric patriarchal masculinity is so insidious that even when we attempt to challenge those problematic constructs of masculinity, which have been established and bequeathed to us by our forefathers, we are unable to disentangle ourselves from its grasps and fully critique the structure.

But critique those structures we must. The hypermasculine, violent, outlaw hero most certainly serves a purpose and should have a place within our culture; however, it should not be at the expense of other models of Black masculinity. Poitier’s is only one of the possibilities for representations of a New Black Man. Gay Byron, like Julien, suggests that Black men embrace all facets of their emotional being as a way of creating new models of progressive Black masculinity. Byron writes:

Generally, masculinity is understood through the heteropatriarchal ethos that privileges the man who is married, with children, head of the household, and natural-sex oriented. But many other images would serve as useful sources for constructing progressive black masculinities. The images of humility, spiritual formation, and resistant struggle through the bold acknowledgement of weaknesses and failures offer powerful tools for engaging in a deeper level of discourse not only about models of masculinity but also about the implications for understanding larger
sociopolitical and theological questions that affect African American men.

Byron, like Julien, suggests that Black men find strength through an embrace of their weaknesses. After attempting for so long to deny and hide their weaknesses this might be a difficult task for most Black men who have been taught for so long that showing weakness is a sign of the feminine, the opposite of masculinity. This rejection of natural emotions and inevitable failures that all humans must experience leads to soul murder; to embrace our failures and weaknesses then could potentially be the answer to the alienating outcome of soul murder.

One issue about which the silence must end is queer identity and desire. While Poitier does not address homosexuality in any significant way in his texts, his model of breaking the boundaries of normative Black masculinity, not to mention his open discussion of masculinity, provides the possibility of breaking the silence and making space for queer identity. Poitier presents a queer masculinity in that throughout his autobiographic trilogy he does not seem concerned with living up to the codes of “normal” phallocentric patriarchal masculinity. To be sure, Poitier spends virtually no time discussion homosexuality and I find no instances of homosocial erotica in his work. However, his move toward a reconnection to the feminine later in life, his ability to celebrate his failures, and finally his decision to break the silence around trauma, and to seek professional help for this problem serves to open a discussion of the queer. Ironically, homoeroticism and homosociallity is much more apparent in the work of Van Peebles and Cess Silvera; however, there seems to be no space for even the discussion of a queer identity and desire to be spoken aloud. Phillips’ representation of Bert Williams also opens up a space for a discussion of queer identity and Black male
subjectivity. Williams’ sexual identity ambiguously vacillates between hetero, homo, and asexual; however, even in its nonspecific nature it allows for a demystification of Black male sexuality as only and always aggressive, hypersexual, and heterosexual. While Poitier and Phillips’ representation of Bert Williams appear to be failures in the eyes of those who advocate an imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, it might be in their failures that we can begin to find a way to discuss a New Black Man.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Craig A. Smith earned his doctorate in English from the University of Florida in August 2010. While at UF, he was a Marjorie K. Rawlings Basking Fellow and participated in many campus organizations, including two years as the Vice President of the Black Graduate Student’s Organization. Craig graduated Cum Laude with his Master’s degree in English and a Certificate in Ethnic Studies from Florida Atlantic University in 2000, upon graduating he received the distinguished Coyle Thesis Award for his master’s thesis on African-American and African-Caribbean women’s friction. His current research interest are 20th Century African-American, African-Caribbean, and African literature and culture, postcolonial theory, cultural studies (race, gender and sexuality studies), and black film studies.