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Mapping the Terrain of New Black Fatherhood in Contemporary African American Literature

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> Changing our society's representations of black men must be a collective task. […]
>
> Collectively we can break the life-threatening chokehold that patriarchal masculinity imposes on black men and create life-sustaining visions of a reconstructed black masculinity, which could provide black men with ways to save their lives and the lives of their brothers and sisters in struggle.
>
> – bell hooks (*Black Looks: Race and Representation* 113)

> But race is the child of racism, not the father.
>
> – Ta-Nehisi Coates (*Between the World and Me* 7)

I. Introduction

Entering a new phase in contemporary black masculinity studies has become possible since the 1990s thanks to scholars such as Marcellus Blount, George P. Cunningham, Riche Richardson, and Maurice O. Wallace, who were eager to search for a new, rather alternative masculinity for black men and to re-interpret what black men truly are and mean in the New Millennium. Black feminist critics such as Hazel V. Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, Athena D. Mutua, and Ronda C. Henry Anthony reinterpret traditional black masculinity as problematic, rigid, and harmful to black communities, for the traditional norm of black masculinity has blindly adopted white hegemonic masculine power. There is also a third voice that traces dominantly heteronormative values lying in black masculinity and that suggests black homosexual subjects as an alternative. Now, becoming more and larger than a contested terrain of white-dominant ideologies and social constraints and surrounded by rich,

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multi-dimensional solution-providing critiques, black male existence, or black masculinity, or black manhood, or whatsoever it is called, that ghostly figure is being vividly revived in contemporary American literature. Black men are now saleable not only in sports, music, or porn industries but also in the mass publishing market. This ontological and cerebral extension, which deserves to receive celebration, highly praises the positive representation of black manhood and fatherhood as to prove their existence in society. Yet, some black male figures are still missing, especially in classic and canonical works of literature. Eschewed by traditional, normative black manhood-searchers and being invisible to black feminists' interpretations and *un*regarded by black queer studies, there are, hidden in the shadow of stereotypes of black fathers and black men in general, a large group of invisible, yet diligent, responsible, and hard-working black fathers who kept affirming their values not only in a family but also in society at large.

In order to see the trajectories of manhood discourses and discussions in academia, first and foremost, I would like to present research on how black male's subjectivity, black manhood, or black masculinity has been discussed as a special subject in academia and how critics have mainly regarded this subject in relation to different counterparts such as black women, gay men, or others who are evidently excluding the majority of popular, general, or quotidian black men around their daily lives. By scrutinizing innocuous, caregiving father figures dwelling at home in African American novels, this paper looks back at how literary criticism and literature itself have exercised their creative power in order to give birth to "good" black men who were deemed nonexistent or insufficient before, through *re*-reading, *re*-tracing, and *re*-looking at black fathers/men in novels written by renowned literary figures from Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison to contemporary—and relatively young—authors such as Leonard Pitts Jr. and Bernice L. McFadden. In doing so, these so-called and seemingly tamed or emasculated black fathers in fiction, who cause no trouble at home or in their black community and who do their best to support their families, will be envisioned as progressive, intact black male figures having a sense of hope, positivity, visibility, and strength not in terms of physicality but in terms of morality and sustainability. Therefore, by this project of remapping terrain for black male figures, I expect to find that their presence already attains and performs this previously underplayed notion of masculinity they deserve.

Ⅱ. From Old to New: Toward A New Juncture of Black Manhood

Stereotypical concepts of submissive black men have sprung from a deep-rooted malicious history in white-dominant American society wherein the racist lens renders black fathers missing and black mothers Sapphire. Apparently, it seems almost impossible to deracinate that phantom of racism. One of the examples of stereotyped black men in literature is Friday, a tamed savage saved and civilized by the white protagonist in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) by British author Daniel Defoe.[1] Along with "Friday," the names "Uncle Tom" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and "Jim" in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) were regarded as negative epithets of servility and as signs of emasculation of men of color subservient to white masters, which were propagated all over the country under the name of literature. Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins points out that these submissive images of black men "signify castrated, emasculated, and feminized versions of black masculinity whose feminization associates them with weakness. Once this connection is made, [black] men can no longer be considered real men" (qtd. in Anthony 6). This "Disneyish gallery of Black malehood" or "mythmaking process" (6) generated by white society has constantly and relentlessly prejudiced and objectified black men in order to maintain white-dominant androcentric society colored by racism, sexism, and many different forms of bigotry to dominance. Other types of stereotypes, lazy Sambo or feral Mandingo, would dehumanize and degrade the essential representation of black men by creating the distorted myth of animal-like, brute-like, carefree, dejected, demonized, irresponsible, and lazy black men. Against this unjust, vicious discursive violence posed upon the image of black men, many black leaders, thinkers, and activists incessantly tried to recuperate their vitiated masculine image from white racist hegemonic power by claiming the same rights and privileges that white men have for their own sake. Yet,

1. Even though Friday in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is described as a Native American, Friday is considered a stereotyped character referring a submissive African American subject who is being tamed as a slave, due to multiple adaptations in films and other media. One of the most renowned works is *Foe* (1986), a novel by Nobel Prize laureate J. M. Coetzee, in which Friday is described and re-raced as a black (Barta-Smith 155). Barta-Smith, Nancy A., and Danette DiMarco, editors. *Inhabited by Stories: Critical Essays on Tales Retold*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

apparently, to debunk these kinds of myths and stereotypes is a toilsome job.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), one of the most preeminent black leaders of the twentieth century, was a tireless maker and adherent of the powerful symbolism of black manhood. In his book titled *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), his ambitious suggestion of a new form of black leading group called *the talented tenth*, or a limited group of well-educated elite black men who will be in charge of the black community, best epitomizes his ideals of black masculinity, which has borrowed much of its entity from the white counterpart. Du Bois explicitly characterizes these men (and himself) as "trained Negro leaders of character and intelligence, men of skill, men of light and leading, college-bred men, black captains of industry, and missionaries of culture; men who thoroughly comprehend and know modern civilization, and can take hold of Negro communities" (104). This phallocentric black upper-middle class group would be deemed, by Du Bois, as an effective counterpart of institutionalized racism in American society and as a potent representative of other black men who are excluded from full citizenship. In the name of racial uplift and social justice for the black community, however, black male readers frequently ignored and disregarded fellow women of color as well as other undereducated black men of low class. Contending against this ossified ideology of traditional black manhood introduced by Du Bois (and many more after Du Bois), many black female scholars have presented their different view on this critical matter of black masculinity. In her 2010 book *Race Men*, Carby criticizes the fact that black manhood has been created by a limited, gendered stance, saying: "[A] race leader is a conceptual framework that is gender-specific; not only does it apply exclusively to men, but it encompasses only those men who enact narrowly and rigidly determined codes of masculinity" (10). Carby points out that traditional masculine values for black men tracing back to Du Bois' argument has inherently and intentionally been excluded black women and therefore black men cannot represent the black people as a whole, not before they re-inspect their sexist ground of viewpoint. By failing "to incorporate black women into the sphere of intellectual equality" (10), Du Bois' intellectual and socio-political project results in deepening and perpetuating a gender gap between black men and women that thwarts racial solidarity between the two sexes. Regarding this traditional value of black masculinity, Collins purports the destined failure of any such black masculinity, for it is based upon and mimics predominantly white hegemonic gender ideology without revising or modifying it. As she states in her book *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), Collins

clarifies the ethical, logical standards of black masculinity:

> Because hegemonic masculinity equates strength with dominance, an antiracist politics must challenge this connection. Within this project, *the fundamental premise of any progressive Black gender ideology is that it cannot be based on someone else's subordination*. This means that definitions of Black masculinity that rely on the subordination of Black women, poor people, children, LGBT people, or anyone else become invalid. (Collins 200, emphasis original)

Collins highlights that this undesirable ideology of traditional black masculinity is flawed in several critical respects, fundamentally in terms of its validity and logicality, not in terms of mere sentimentalism or racial solidarity. As the malicious, infectious white masculine ideality transmitted to the formation of black masculinity will threaten not only black women but also other minorities and the disadvantaged, which ultimately betrays the mutual expectation of black men in their communities, black masculinity eventually needs to alter itself at the core.

Another black female scholar condemning strong androcentric characteristics of black masculinity, Athena D. Mutua, indicates in her book *Progressive Black Masculinities* (2006) that black masculinity readily imitated and embraced sexism and other forms of dominant oppression that had been exercised in predominantly white society as well as "[privilege for] men and certain understandings of masculinity and [the] subordinating [of] women and those marked as feminine […] [by embracing] masculinist gender and sexual domination" (4). As Mutua shares part of what Carby and Collins think of conventional black masculinity, she proposes a new term named "progressive black masculinity" that does not hurt black women but "validate and empower black humanity" (4). This ethical model of black masculinity, which is deemed liberated from white falsity and gendered constraints in society, seems a good example of the new form of black masculinity that black feminists offer to their fellow black men. In addition to this, Anthony investigates another possible form of "respectable black manhood and leadership for the twenty-first century" (152) by scrutinizing Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*. She interprets Obama's masculinity in harmony with womanhood and feminine presences. Unlike Du Bois' legacy of black masculine ideology excluding and ostracizing female presence at the same time, Obama's writing shows

a strong sense of reconciliation between black men and women. Anthony explains, "[C]oming to manhood is not based on a privileging of exclusively masculine influences, concerns, consciousnesses, and spaces, but is a journey to a consciousness and identity that seriously engages the insights and critiques of women" (152). Proposing a new black masculine ideal that contains both manhood and womanhood in balance within the masculinity, Anthony spots Obama as an embodiment of "the respectable, honorable epitome of black middle-class masculinity" (153). In sum, many black feminist critiques, including those of Anthony, Collins, Mutua, and Carby, investigate or disturb the very idea of traditional black masculine ideology that matters so much that has been sanctified in a black community for a long time, by adducing a different mode of black masculinity that might fit in the twenty-first century American society as a whole.

Along with black feminists' interpretations of black masculinity, there are vibrant debates among male black scholars regarding new directions of black masculinity. Not all are productive, progressive, and hopeful. One pessimistic example would be black Law Professor Frank Rudy Cooper's notion of vulnerability theory or bipolar black masculinity that contemplates upon good-and-bad binary norms, which clearly remain within traditional philosophical epistemology. Cooper asserts that "a Bad Black Man […] is crime-prone and hypersexual and a Good Black Man […] distances himself from blackness and associates with white norms" (qtd. in McCune 123), while Jeffery Q. McCune's oppositional view on this bipolar black masculine representations underlines that black men should "move beyond and against" this pessimistic view through transgressive, active reading of black manhood (123). McCune points out:

> Together, the inability to see black men as "good," and to disaggregate blackness from deviance, situates men who move outside the norm of demonized blackness into an "exceptional" category. As a result, we are always left with "typical vs. exceptional," "hero vs. villain," and "good vs. bad" frameworks that unnaturally situate black men in either/or existences rather than both/and positionalities. Indeed, media has enforced a racialized "script," which forces black men to carry such singular fictions. […] In essence, a "good black manhood" is a complex representation, which requires intentionally complex reading practices. Hence, it is a productive exercise to bring attention to "other" performances of black

> manhood that cannot be enveloped in the categories of bankruptcy and corruption that have become quite synonymous with the black and the masculine. (McCune 123–24)

McCune avers that people should "arrive at more transgressive reading practices [that] requires a reorientation of sorts—where we commit to seeking new knowledge about black men, in ways that afford them to be multi-layered and multidimensional" (138). His essence of transgressive understanding of black men is quite demanding, as it touches serious issues of not only how black men are gazed and looked at in contemporary society but also how *we* gaze and look at them. In addition to this, some black scholars focusing on queerness or homosexuality raise the issue that black masculinity, so far, has been overbearingly imposing its fundamental meaning upon heterosexual normative values, and there is an alternative path that will provide a new thinking of black manhood, which heteronormative visions cannot fully reach.

Darieck Scott, in his book titled *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (2010), argues that homosexual experiences of black male slaves coerced by white male slave owners in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be "an entirely new sexual encounter" for black men as it allows them to embrace the black body as abjection instead of the emasculation of black identity (128). Another critic, Rinaldo Walcott, in his article published in 2009, views black manhood as a mask of black masculinity, which can be interpreted as the gender play or race play that grants black men versatile possibilities (75), whose notion can be traced back to Paul Hoch's interpretation of dominant binary opposition within representations of masculinity (79), from Hoch's book titled *White Hero, Black Beast: Racism, Sexism, and the Mask of Masculinity* (1979). Neither rigid nor strict, Walcott's masked black masculinity allows much leeway in fluid, progressive, and embracing notions of black masculinity, which are what contemporary American society is very much in need of. Lastly, a preeminent black feminist thinker of our time, bell hooks, explicates in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) how to embrace gayness, as she states, "Challenging black male phallocentrism would also make a space for critical discussion of homosexuality and queerness in black communities. […] if black men no longer embraced phallocentric masculinity, they would be empowered to explore their fear and hatred of other men, learning new ways to relate" (112). hook's criticism against racism, sexism, and heterosexism on the black

male body renders a critical, discursive moment to rethink not only about heterosexual ideologies in both white and black cultures but also to rethink black people's attitude or mindset toward stereotyped, vitiated representations and perceptions of black men.

I would say that most of the attention in academia, from which I have presented so far, from Collins to Walcott, does not shed enough light on the working-class black male presence that certainly is the majority of black community of all time. The focus of these critics chiefly lies in black women's potentials, gay experiences, or a rare, extraordinary presence of a black leading figure such as Barack Obama—not in low wage black workers who have worked and fought for their rights. As Du Bois effectively excluded black women by lionizing the elite "talented tenth," the other nine tenths, by default, lost its significance in the black community. This specific social group of black men in America, however, is not a racial subaltern even though scholars forgot to focalize. They may not be an attractive subject to study, staying out of the limelight from academia, but they performed a critical role in the mainstream history of the Civil Rights movement. They were the so-called rioters, mass, and audience that marched following the leaders; fathers and husbands of the women many black leaders failed to harmonize; diligent laborers who went home after work every day and spent their wages to support their family; the forgotten and silenced in the mainstream. Their presence flickers from time to time. As she opens the eighth chapter, titled "Loving Black Masculinity—Fathers, Lovers, Friends," with her recollection of childhood, bell hooks recalls her grandfather' presence as always "an incredibly gentle and kind human being quiet man with no harsh words, a respected deacon of his church, [who] bestowed on me the unconditional love that provided me with the psychological basis to trust in the goodness of men" (*Salvation* 128). Adversely, her father is patriarchal, harsh man, "a stern protector and provider [who believed being] manly meant that he eschewed any concern with love" (129). Yet, he was too, a caregiver, a present, parenting father. While she demonstrates the undeniable male presence at home from her childhood memory, generations of black young men after her grandfather and father are in danger, need, and rage (133). hooks' critiques lie upon a negative side mainly, based on how people perceive and try to perceive the figuration of black males as a communal problem.

Recently, many books, fiction and non-fiction, magazines, and articles are centering on non-violent, positive black male figures, as if this is a new trend

in the twenty-first century of America. As I provided one of two epigraphs in this paper, *collectiveness* is the gist of this discursive/cultural shift: *Collective* reading by the public and *collective* writing by many authors provoke *collective* consciousness that grows from those deeds and *collective* culture of the new era. These black figures are now in the spotlight that rarely happened before. There are a wide range of intellectuals who stepped up to give a proper voice and presence to those who used to be deemed nameless, voiceless, worthless, or powerless. Parallel to the mainstream studies focalizing on the homosexual, feminist, and politicized alternative representations of black masculinity, those writers wrote books about average black fathers, single black fathers, young black college men, and other such black men. Here, I present an intriguing book as an example that shares a similar viewpoint to mine on the representation of good black fathers, which is a guidebook for African American single fathers on childrearing as well as a report on social conditions of African American families. In her book *The Best Kept Secret: Single Black Fathers*, published in 2009, Roberta L. Coles presents a "new concept" of a black single custodial father in the opening chapter. The gender and race of Coles, a white woman, are only the second thing making this book more intriguing than many others. The first thing is the subject in her book—caring, "good, loving, and motivated as any other father [whose existence and experiences] deserve public articulation" (14). As she highlights at the end of the first chapter, the aim of the book was "to let their voices, their words, paint a picture of this neglected perspective of black fatherhood." Also she gently adds that she "[hopes] this work will establish a space in the literature for future exploration" (14). Coles' literary project in the book is what I research in this paper and what recent scholars have delved into.

Pulitzer winning author Leonard Pitts Jr. wrote an article in 2008 about a 1968 strike by the Memphis sanitation workers, imbuing special significance in their act of disobedience demanding higher wages and better working conditions, refusing to be treated like "animals" and "beasts," or "like the garbage they collected" ("Four Decades"). Categorized as minor civic uprisings, such poor black working-class men organized their own strikes, as the civil rights movement passed into neglect and faded away. Pitts tried to bring public attention to lower black working-class breadwinners who always thought themselves *invisible*. His ambitious project is crucial not only in terms of the fact that he tried to report on what had been silenced in order to mediate between his readers and the protesters but also in the fact that his report will

be a public record forever in history. The following year, 2009, Pitts published his first novel, titled *Before I Forget*, a story about a black father named Mo, who suffers from Alzheimer's and his son, Trey, who gets involved in robbery and murder. Mo and Trey's journey across the country, which is self-therapeutic, entails the worthy question and enlightening answer of how black fatherhood or manhood can be empowered not by simply sticking to middle-class white family values but by creating its own, depending on their different circumstances. Mo's impending death, of both body and mind, resuscitates the bond between father and son once again as he begs forgiveness for himself and his weakness and failing. Finally, his last wish, "[being] a better man than [he] was" (Pitts, *Before I Forget* 207), sums up what the author demonstrates: Young black men have to be better than their fathers—no matter good or bad the fathers were.

Similar to Pitts' *Before I Forget* and his 2006 nonfiction *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood*, sports blogger and hip-hop lyricist Jamiyl Samuels published a book in 2011, titled *Pass the Torch: How a Young Black Father Challenges the Deadbeat Dad Stereotype*, to refute the adverse stereotypes of black men as unintelligent, irresponsible, and violent, by shedding positive light on black fathers. That same year, professor of African American studies Khalid Akil White wrote a short book, *Black Fatherhood: Trials and Tribulations, Testimony and Triumph*, defying the stereotyped myth of absent black fatherhood in African American family. In doing so, other interviewees and the author himself, who all are fine examples of being black and fathers, prove and testify that there is the vivid, undeniable presence of black father and fatherhood in America. Written by Cedric Marlow, a former janitorial worker, his autobiographic novel titled *For the Love of the Child* is, as he specifically announces, "dedicated to millions of estranged fathers around the world who strive to be an integral part of their child's life, but so often go through roadblocks of adversity and disappointment and predictable court rulings" (Marlow). In this book, Bradley's struggle to keep his daughter, Danita, from the child custody system is rather a struggle between a black man and implicit racial bias than a clash between an individual and the legal system.

With Coles, Pitts, Samuels, White, Marlow, and many other writers disclaiming and debunking moth-eaten myths of black fatherhood and manhood, the readers' attention upon new directions of black fatherhood and manhood has fully bloomed. One of the *New York Times* bestselling books in 2015, *Between the World and Me*, written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is the epitome of

this phenomenon. Hailed and endorsed by Toni Morrison, as "required reading"[2] and then rebuffed by African American philosopher and social activist Cornel West,[3] certainly Coates' book drew the worldwide, poignant attention. Through this 152-page long letter from the author himself to his 15-year-old son, Samori, to educate being black, knowing black, and living black, Coates's critique on American history to trace back to the main issue of blackness that discreetly balances between his domestic position as a father who has to teach his son a sense of reality and the public one as an author who "must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation" (53). When this book is highly praised, reviewed, and criticized, this fame and popularity (or notoriety) reflect how the black male voice has come to show a different tone in its representation as informative, innocuous, childrearing, intelligent, and beneficial. This new black male voice implies political connotations. Either mainstreamed in the worldwide publishing market or catered to the mass-market that used to be deemed predominantly white and middle-class, these male presentations now are situated within the socio-political circumstances in America, which results in this from-margins-to-mainstream phenomenon. From the police brutality, white cops vs. black suspects or black innocent bystanders, and the Black Lives Matter movement to the president-elect Donald Trump (who signifies so much a negative baggage of lethal ideologies), the turmoil of society awakened American citizens that they are in the middle of the sociopolitical, discursive, ontological war on racism, sexism, classism, nationalism, and many other frames of bigotry lurking under their everyday lives. These forms of bigotry result in a collective trauma that people have to fight against that people need healing from. Reading a book such as *Between the World and Me*, therefore, regardless of readers' race, gender, age, and class,

2. "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates. The language of *Between the World and Me*, like Coates' journey, is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive. And its examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life is as profound as it is revelatory. This is required reading" (Morrison, "Ta-Nehisi Coates").
3. On his Facebook page, West posted "In Defense of James Baldwin — Why Toni Morrison (a literary genius) is Wrong about Ta-Nehisi Coates," claiming that Coates is simply "a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power" (Kassel). Kassel, Matthew. "Cornel West Delivers Blistering Takedown of Ta-Nehisi Coates — Michael Eric Dyson Responds." *Observer*, 16 July 2015. observer.com/2015/07/cornel-west-delivers-blistering-takedown-of-ta-nehisi-coates.

connotes signing a proclamation of war saying that they stand for social justice.

The new trend spreading in the publishing market and readers' world is inspirational. No longer one-sided, scholarly discourse and public understanding on black manhood, fatherhood, and fathering are equally progressing. Beyond this rosy occurrence, still, in classical literary genre of African American literature and its criticism, these good fathers are hard to find. One of many plausible explanations for this left-out topic in the history of African American literature circle might be due to the fact that their bodily presence is not easy to trace back. Closely read in literary text, however, we can confirm that these positive, sustainable male figures have been prevalent all over — just lack of light, hue, and volume. Since the violent, problematic black male individuals such as Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) or Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* have been deemed such powerful, troublemaking attention-getters, relatively meek, banal, invisible, voiceless black male characters living the mediocre, mundane life of the low-working class are not regarded as highly notable characters, not even in the eyes of African American writers or literary critics. Ironically, these unfit black fathers and boyfriends are fit in the eyes of publishing markets: saleable, eye-catching, and raising attention and tension at the same time. Nonetheless, even though all we remember in many novels are the so-called "bad niggers," the *un*strong male characters, who are the ones whom this study seeks and tries to redeem as good men, do preexist this study and coexist with troubled, troubling, troublesome ones. All we need are the right reading glasses.

Ⅲ. Literary Exploration for Black Father Figures

With the glasses, we need to testify that such men are visible. The issue of visibility and invisibility is critical. As Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) suggests, the narrator's invisible status first is deemed debilitating, yet it later achieves subversive meanings. His partial truth is his existence of "[b]eing invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were" (Ellison 581). Though their skin color is apparently visible, they were invisible socially, politically, culturally, emotionally, and psychologically. Being visible, out of invisible space, signifies empowerment. While visibility is such a big deal, even detecting some things, or pointing a finger at them could mean a first step. "The potential frames of discourse surrounding visibility are," as black

female critic Kal Alston asserts, "incredibly rich" (306). On the direction and definition of visibility, she goes on to say:

> To remain visible, in the face of erasure, is to act against the juridical comforts of color blindness or the aesthetic comfort of assimilated familiarity. Visibility on this account is not simply a matter of allowing oneself to be an object of perception for others, but of shaping a visible subject. […] Its possibilities are, rather contained in the challenge that blackness visible poses to the processes of assigning value and the possibility of intervention in naturalized assignments of value. The claim of visibility asserts the need for something other than what has been—a new horizon, different lenses, a reformed prospect. (Alston 306)

Visibility and invisibility, therefore, both become a possible weapon of racial empowerment. For instance, the new trend in reading, writing, or even politicizing black male presence in the publishing market is another way to make their presence visible. Telling good or bad is secondary. Anyways, finding young good black men who are visible in fiction is not an easy job, because their presence in the novels is fleeting, nebulous, and ambiguous. One relatively easy way to trace the whereabouts of these male figures is to find a bad guy in counterpoint to a good one. In the two most representative and celebrated works of the African American literary canon, Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, however, finding the good is almost impossible. The violent, dissatisfied, invisible black males are too conspicuous in the text. The nameless black male narrator in *Invisible Man* has no distinctive relationship with any woman, but drowns into his own consciousness and throw himself into a dungeon, and so does Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*. Anguished, he cries out, "It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence" (Wright 23). He feels he is an outsider looking at the inside, which is space he is not allowed to be in. As the anonymous narrator in *Invisible Man* is underground, his mentality is confined in a jail cell. Accordingly, tainted and withered by an environment hostile to black people, Bigger grows systematically and inevitably more criminal. In the essay "The Fact of Blackness" (1952), Afro-Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon viewed Bigger as a symbol of young African American men of the generation. He states:

> It is Bigger Thomas — he is afraid, he is terribly afraid. He is afraid, but of what is he afraid? Of himself. No one knows yet who he is, but he knows that fear will fill the world when the world finds out. And when the world knows, the world always expects something of the Negro. He is afraid lest the world know, he is afraid of the fear that the world would feel if the world knew. […] In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. To put an end to his tension, he acts, he responds to the world's anticipation. (Fanon 107)

In Fanon's perspective, Bigger Thomas is an afraid, knowing black man who tragically surrenders to white society's anticipation — racist anticipation that black men are rapists craving white girls and are ruthless murderers. The tragedy is intensified when he kills his girlfriend, Bessy Mears, and this is the very moment both when the contorted myth of black men turns into the undeniable reality and when the black men become black women's treacherous antagonists. Many black female critics such as Barbara Christian, Barbara Smith, Sylvia H. Keady, and Miriam DeCosta-Willis felt repulsed as Bigger's murder of Bessy is out of context and his relationship to black female characters is poorly depicted by the narrator. Female characters in Wright's novel are presented as a passive, absent, and "flat, one-dimensional characters, portrayed primarily in terms of their relationships to the male characters," as DeCosta-Willis points out (540). This corresponds with Ronda C. Henry Anthony's remarks when she first read Richard Wright's *Native Son* in an undergraduate African American literature course. She confesses that she felt vexed by the author's descriptions of black female characters as "emasculators and co-conspirators with white men in the oppression of black men" and by "the hate and violence directed at women, especially black women," in the novel (Anthony 3).

Ellison and Wright cannot be vindicated from critics' negative reviews. Instead of providing further resolution or a hint of hope, Bigger Thomas and the invisible narrator in *Invisible Man* have typified one famous representation of black men in literature — angry, invisible, and victimized. The problem is that the literary representation does not remain in the book only. This is one simple way of how young black male readers in real life internalize, visualize, and project the distorted images of black men. Through this unfavorable aspect of malfunctioning empowerment of black sexuality, masculinity, and manhood in canonical black literature, although the prime and original intention of the creation was to denounce and reify what black men are truly in, black male recipients might perceive two identically different notions: negativity of

black maleness and approval of this underlying distortion. When female black readers do not identify those characters as themselves, male ones perceive these problematized male characters as one possible way of their becoming boy-to-man. While bell hooks blames the white mainstream culture and media, critics have to admit that there are not many respectable, representative male role models even in African American literature. Therefore, Bigger Thomas is not only a reflected fictitious figure on a white page but also a vivid and painstaking reality check. As bell hooks points out:

> Most black men remain in a state of denial, refusing to acknowledge the pain in their lives that is caused by sexist thinking and patriarchal, phallocentric violence that is not only expressed by male domination over women but also by internecine conflict among black men. Black people must question why it is that, as white culture has responded to changing gender roles and feminist movement, they have turned to black culture and particularly to black men for articulations of misogyny, sexism, and phallocentrism. (hooks, *Black Looks* 102)

Negative representations such as Bigger might exacerbate black male readers' gendered, sexist way of thinking as a discursive, psychological violence and patriarchal, phallocentric violence over their own and other black people—mostly black females—especially when they have no exemplary male figures around themselves in real life. Those poor images of black men reinforce what readers share of white racist stereotypes and reinforce the nonexistence of good blacks in both white and black literature, as they are surrounded by bad examples of misogyny, sexism, and phallocentrism, which hooks criticizes these books for.

One of the most significant figures alive in contemporary African American literature and the first female African American Nobel Prize Laurette, Toni Morrison, also lacks positive and progressive representations of young good black men in her fiction, as she deliberately and aesthetically connotes her intent in lyrical, sophisticated lines. Without reinterpreting and denoting, almost all of male figures in her eleven novels—Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Ajax, Jude, and Shadrack in *Sula* (1973), Milkman Dead and Guitar in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Son in *Tar Baby* (1981), Paul D in *Beloved* (1987), Joe Dorcas in *Jazz* (1992), K.D. in *Paradise* (1997), Bill Cosey in *Love* (2003), the blacksmith in *A Mercy* (2008), Frank Money in *Home* (2012), and Booker

in *God Help the Child* (2015)—are deemed traumatized, violent, unfaithful, despicable, incestuous, invisible, irreconcilable, irresponsible, or weak on the surface, to some degree, before readers' circumspect scrutinization exonerates these men from their deeds. Among Morrison's novels, there are two examples of extreme parenting of a black mother and father that stand for collective, racial, and tragic history and the trauma of black people. One is in her most famous, popular, well-received *Beloved*, in which the traumatic history of African Americans is represented by the sticking, horrifying act of love that a slave mother, Sethe, engages in by slitting her baby daughter's throat to save her from the tragic fate of enslavement. The other is in *The Bluest Eye*, which makes readers encounter a despicable, demoralized black father, Cholly, who rapes and impregnates his own child, Pecola.

In a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison demonstrates that the rape scene is irrelevant, rather than awful, since psychological and historical correlations between Cholly's traumatic past of being sexually harassed by white men when he makes love to M'Dear and his presence of raping Pecola is the real issue in her work, saying, "I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter" (Tate 125). While Morrison's statement has been interpreted and reinterpreted over three decades in the academic world with an aim toward understanding Cholly, this character, one of the most contemptible male characters in literature, who happens to be black, has exemplified negative myths and stereotypes of animal-like, inhumane black fathers, juxtaposed with Jim Trueblood in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. A story of ignorant black sharecropper Trueblood, who "brought disgrace upon the black community" (46) and mortified the protagonist (because he committed incest with his own daughter, Matty Lou), arouses the attention of the white benefactor, Mr. Norton, not in sympathy but with queer excitement, which is the consequence, because Trueblood literally and figuratively confirms the monstrosity of the stereotypical black man—a miserable brute and rapist. Therefore, among a myriad of representations of dysfunctional, immoral black fathers in fiction, Jim Trueblood and Cholly Breedlove are the two most gigantic, monstrous black fathers, who not only trespass the unwritten law of humanity but also canonize and petrify the abnormal presence/absence of black fathers in African American literature.

In *The Bluest Eye*, however, Cholly has a double named Mr. McTeer, who is the father of two girls, Claudia and Frieda, and who can be a possible candidate for one of several good, strong father figures. Mr. McTeer is in stark

contrast with Cholly when he shoots Mr. Henry for molesting Frieda (100). Many Morrison critics succeed in recognizing Mr. McTeer, comparing him to Cholly, not fully shining light on him, but they do recognize his presence in the novel. One critic and author, Therese E. Higgins, who catches a glimpse of Mr. McTeer as a good father, asserts, "Where Mr. McTeer defends his daughter against a sexual predator, Cholly Breedlove becomes his daughter's sexual assailant, raping her not once, but twice and leaving her to fend for herself against a mother who beats her for her father's crime" (Higgins 83). Karen F. Stein and A. A. Mutalik-Desai also make the same argument in their books respectively. In addition to their evaluation, Fin-chia Feng illustrates him as a warrior figure, imbuing the "sense of racial triumph on [him]" (Feng 96). Feng also avers that "Morrison creates a strong, responsible father figure who serves as a sharp contrast to the 'free' Cholly Breedlove" (96). Freedom or freeness of Cholly results in his lack of parenting skills and unfitness to be a father, which also results in the complete havoc of his family. Morrison writes:

> He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. […] But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional [*sic*] was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 159–60)

It is clear that Cholly is not just an exceptional and accidental black male figure that sometimes pops up in African American literature but rather a more sophisticated, well-grounded, and *un*dismissive character who looms up before readers to let them feel a lack, problems, angst, and residues of the deplorable, murky reality Morrison reflects. This tragic domino of malfunctioning, from manhood to fatherhood and from fatherhood to manhood, is, to a black man, a full burden that cannot be shared or alleviated by others, by black women in particular. Accordingly, Cholly is understood as another victim of the black family in America, which produces and reproduces another victim from generation to generation.

In the midst of this hopeless purgatory, Mr. McTeer is a good father, a protector, and "[a] Vulcan guarding the flames" by bringing food and coal as a breadwinning father (61), while Cholly serves none of his fatherly duties. Not only does Mr. McTeer perform as one god, Vulcan, but also he becomes another god named Prometheus by teaching his daughters "instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, […] qualities of coal, […] how to rake, feed, and bank the fire" (61). The god-like presence of a black father, as portrayed by the main narrator, Claudia, his second daughter, implies great significance not just for Claudia but also for readers holding the book. As they are so used to reading and seeing violent, absent black father figures in fiction, their first impression of Mr. McTeer may be to perceive him as a marginal character, until they brood over his presence in the novel. Mr. McTeer, indeed, is not a mere counterexample to illustrate Cholly's crimsonness or his traumatized self, but an alternative, hopeful father figure that Cholly miserably and necessarily fails to be.

Another adequate example for this newly defined good fatherhood and manhood can be found in Morrison's second novel, *Sula*. When there are many female figures — Eva Peace, Helene Wright, Hannah Peace, Nel Wright, and Sula Mae Peace — that received critics' attention, male figures were deemed troublesome, week, and irresponsible. Eva's husband, BoyBoy, is into womanizing, gambling, and deserting his wife and children; Helene's husband, Wiley Wright, is absent; Nel's husband, Jude Greene, has an affair with Sula, a friend of Nel's; Sula's boyfriend, Ajax, leaves her. In a shabby, destitute black town called Bottom, the only black man who keeps to his marriage is Helene's husband, Wiley, who also is Nel's father. Wiley is a black man who conceives so-called traditional values of woman, marriage, and domesticity. As soon as he encounters Helene Sabat, a daughter of a Creole prostitute, yet disciplined by strict Christian values, Wiley proposes marriage (Morrison, *Sula* 17). After "[taking] his bride to his home in Medallion and putting her in a lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window," he leaves to work as a cook on a ship and comes home "only three days out of every sixteen" (17). As many black male residents in the Bottom are jobless and invisible, Wiley is more than lucky. He is a visible black man in the town. Though the occupation as a cook may be deemed effeminate, this gives him a regular wage high enough to support his wife and daughter and a sense of manliness as a breadwinner in his house. Even though a ship cook is traditionally accounted one of "the worst-paying jobs," along with ship stewards (which happens to be,

coincidentally, the job of Wiley's son-in-law, Jude), many black men who had no other option occupied those positions "to maintain their masculine roles as respectable providers in the black community" (Bolster 168). Regardless of jobs, some black men would gladly do any work to support their family. Indeed, they were resourceful individuals. Of course, it is a story way before the 1968 Memphis sanitation strike breaks out.

Unemployment is one significant reason why black men become psychologically and culturally crippled. This seems to explain fairly well why all relationships in the Bottom fail but Wiley and Helen's marriage. In *Sula*, Morrison depicts a young black man named Jude, a waiter at the Hotel Medallion, exclusively for white guests. Just as Wiley, Jude has an emasculated job as a waiter that will never fulfill his presence as man. Therefore, it seems natural that he yearns so desperately for the "real work" of building a new road, "[n]ot just for the good money, more for the work itself" (Morrison, *Sula* 81). The work would give him manly, fulfilling achievement, which signifies physical, masculine, and, above all, visible. But this rare opportunity goes to Irish immigrants. Jude and other young black men do not get a chance to say, "I built that road," (82) and a chance to feel a sense of achievement or being a man. After this failure, Jude decides to get married to Nel to substitute his lack of masculine power for a new attempt of being a husband, father, and a man of the house. Their marriage, however, does not last long because Nel catches him and Sula having an affair. Such infidelity, marred by the dire, hopeless status of black men in America, would come like their destiny in time. In their book *Black Families at the Crossroads: Challenges and Prospects* (2004), which examines the various domestic problems in black families, Leanor Boulin Johnson and Robert Staples point out, "Regardless of the definition Black fathers give to their role, they cannot escape the dominant culture's message that a good father is a good financial provider" (Johnson 234). Even though we constantly try to redirect the old definition of masculinity into a broader, loose, advanced, and comforting alternative, much baggage of black masculinity and manliness is being accustomed to being dependent upon white traditional values. Therefore, while Wiley was barely able to survive as a breadwinner in his house and as a cook for the white people, Jude fails because he wanted more and his wish would never be granted. As this paper, however, tries to unearth some hidden male figures in black literature and grant special significance from the new direction of representations of black manhood/fatherhood, Wiley, an absent father but absolutely a provider, wins while other black male figures

flounder.

The next literary genius in African American literature whom this paper investigates is James Baldwin, a gifted writer, renowned critic, and insightful prophet of the black Civil Rights movement era in mid-twentieth century America, through his two works—one of his renowned novels, *Another Country* (1962), and one of his lesser known ones, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974). As Baldwin himself and his ardent literary critics have largely focused upon the quest of black homosexual male figures toward racial and sexual identity, the interracial, homoerotic relationships triangulating Rufus, Vivaldo, and Eric in *Another Country* received much of its critical attention and affection in academia. Meanwhile, the heterosexual, tragic yet hopeful Romeo-and-Juliet romance between Tish (Clementine Rivers), a pregnant black teenage girl, and Fonny (Alonzo Hunt), an innocent young black man with the soul of an artist, together as a young black couple, was deemed less attractive and received poor reviews.[4] In these two different novels, there are two different types of black fathers that show interesting distinction and comparison. The only representation of a black father in *Another Country* seems to be Rufus and Ida's father, Mr. Scott, who has a flickering presence. Far from being an important focalizer, Mr. Scott is hardly reflected in the eyes of other characters and the omniscient narrator. At Rufus' funeral, a white female and friend of Scott's, Cass, catches a man "weeping in the front row," and the reason Cass recognizes him is that he was the only one who was not silent in the chapel (Baldwin, *Another Country* 122). Cass notices Mr. Scott's presence not because he is the dead man's father but because he made some sad noise that draws her attention. Upon her recognition, finally, readers figure out two things: One, Mr. Scott has just become a tragic male figure who has lost his only heir in the kingdom of Harlem; two, Rufus had a loving father who grieves over his son's death.

Meanwhile, *Beale* has two protecting, protectable black fathers named Frank Rivers and Joseph Hunt (Joe), who are caregivers, supporters, troubleshooters, and breadwinners in their family. After Fonny is falsely

4. For further reviews on *If Beale Street Could Talk*, see D. Quentin Miller's article titled "Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson by Keith Clark" (*African American Review*, vol. 37, no. 2/3, Amri Baraka Issue, 2003, pp. 449–51) and Lynn O. Scott's book titled *James Baldwin's Later Fiction* (Michigan State UP, 2002).

accused of raping a white woman named Sharon, Frank and Joe both do their best to rescue their son and son-in-law, respectively. Ready even to commit a robbery to pay a lawyer, these two self-sacrificing black fathers represent the rare presence of good black fathers. In particular, the imposing conversation between the two reveals what other novels have dismissed, failed, and refused to show. Baldwin beautifully depicts this:

> Joseph asks again, "You ever have any money?"
>
> Frank says, finally, "No."
>
> "Then, why you worried about it now?"
>
> Frank looks up at him again.
>
> "You raised them somehow, didn't you? You fed them somehow—didn't you? If we start to worrying about money now, man, we going to be fucked up and we going to lose our children. That white man, baby, and may his balls shrivel and his ass-hole rot, he want you to be worried about the money. That's his whole game. But if we got to where we are without money we can get further. I ain't worried about they money—they ain't got no right to it anyhow, they stole it from us—they ain't never met nobody they didn't lie to and steal from. Well, I can steal, too. And rob. How do you think I raised my daughters? Shit." (Baldwin, *Beale* 124–25)

This conversation touches the core value that was hidden under most impoverished African American families. Having a more vigorous spirit than Frank's, Joe's philosophy of life sheds light on how readers can perceive poor black fathers' financial, socioeconomic competence, and incapableness without indiscriminately embracing the white standards of breadwinner. Baldwin's depiction of black fathers in *Beale* is extraordinary.

On one hand, none of them resemble Cholly Breedlove, Jim Trueblood, or familiar patterns of abusive, runaway fathers or deadbeat dads in canonical works. There are two Mr. McTeers. As the two challenge, struggle against, and win through their limits, their presence as fighters and go-getters for the sake of their children makes unprecedented space for positive, progressive, and sustainable fatherhood in African American literature. It seems, through redirecting stereotypes of black fathers marred by racist white gazes, Baldwin had, in 1970s, ahead of the curve, already succeeded in portraying alternative, progressive, and good father figures that started to emerge in the very beginning

of the twenty-first century. On the other hand, this scene is quite edifying in that Frank's delightful as well as acute critique on white male values teaches readers how to rear a child under not only financially destitute circumstances but also psychologically emasculating white hegemony. This empowering conversation between two black fathers means far more than just a good survival strategy that the two and we all need.

Fighting against the white hegemonic value that adorned the representation of white family through the national media and that erased the black one is thorny but essential, not only for sake of black fatherhood but also for childhood. In her book titled *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2003), regarding the fantasized white values that have imbued a false imagination of good fatherhood, bell hooks writes:

> In our segregated black world, as children we learned about white families from television. The white fathers we saw on shows like *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and *The Courtship of Edie's Father* were kind protectors and providers who gave their children unconditional love. They did not yell, beat, shame, ignore, or wound their children. They were the fantasy white family. The real white family, the ones where fathers were controlling, abusive, incestuous, violent, alcoholics, workaholics, or rageoholics, did not appear on our television screen.
>
> These were the family images of fathers in the fifties and sixties. […] Finally in the eighties we got our own African-American version of the fantasy dapper dad on *The Cosby Show*. Lovable, kind, a protector, and a provider, our fantasy black dad was funny; he had the ability to eliminate pain by making us laugh. (hooks, *We Real Cool* 101–02)

The white fantasy and reality with which hooks juxtaposes can lead to dangerous outcomes in both black and white families, yet this fantasy white family tends to give rise to more troubles in black families and black children by arousing emotional deprivation and internalizing racial stratification as personal problems. As hooks describes, the white, middle-class centered media reinforced the myth of black families in America and eternalized the emotional instability of black children so that they became rendered father-craving forever, whether their biological fathers were present or not. Indeed, Baldwin's two good fathers, Joe and Frank, grow into exemplary role models that were lacking in the history of African American fiction, bridging the wide and

bottomless gap between black fathers and children, spotlighted by their own presence that entails wisdom, affection, dedication, and responsibility. These black male characters convey much deeper implications when we broaden and embrace a different but rich scope of masculinity, manhood, manliness, and maleness in lieu of clinging to a narrow definition of those.

There still are many authors whom I want to discuss about. In their projects of creative writing, they dedicate themselves to reinterpreting and reconfigurating the representations of blacks in literature by shedding righteous light they deserve. As an award-winning author of ten critically acclaimed novels, Bernice L. McFadden's work is full of compelling voice and enchanting lyricism. From her first novel, *Sugar* (2001) to the latest, *The Book of Harlan* (2016), recently nominated for the 2016 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Literary Work, McFadden does not forget or dismiss the therapeutic, affirmative values of black male figures who indisputably outperform hyper-masculine, violent males that signify the erstwhile norm of black masculinity. For example, in *Sugar*, there is Joe Taylor, a veteran, caring husband of Pearl and a benevolent father of his daughter, Jude—until the tragedy sweeps in. About Joe, as McFadden describes him:

> Joe was a simple man, enjoying simple pleasures. A hearty card game with his friends, evening meeting with his Mason brothers or fishing alone on the edge of Hodges Lake. […] God-fearing and soft-spoken, all that mattered to Joe was his wife, family leading a life worthy of entering Heaven. Nobody could ever accuse this man of raising his hand or his voice in anger. He understood things about life and women that other men just couldn't. (*Sugar* 19–20)

Joe and his son Seth are such gentle, caring male figures that they do not seem possibly real. Their significance stands out against a demonic, lustful "three-quarters white" (McFadden, *This Bitter Earth* 197) black man named Lappy Clayton, who rapes and beats Sugar Lacey almost to death. Joe never let the phallocentric, misogynistic ideologies permeate his fullness. The loving relationship of two couples, Joe/Pearl and Sugar/Seth, express the salient, compelling power that enabled them to endure one destructive tragedy of the Taylors' lives—Jude's horrifying rape and untimely death. In *The Book of Harlan*, McFadden presents the "blossoming love" (27) of Emma and Sam, who are Harlan's parents. Their teenage love becomes a foundation for Harlan,

which gives the conviction that no matter how Harlan's life may come to be in a dire predicament, he will be, somehow, fine. Joe, Seth, and Sam in McFadden's world embody the new requirements of black masculinity. Without being violent and miserable and acting out, they can be visible, desirable, and manly in all senses.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

Some underdeveloped parts that time did not allow me to explain further are here. The first would be that this paper employs a heteronormative, middle-class scope. Due to pre-conceptualized and pre-materialized definitions of masculinity that depend too much on physical, old-fashioned stereotypes and white values, collective movements within American society—academia and literary circle in particular—are hovering over much the same spot. The term "same" refers to the tendency by which the writers' centering on the heterosexual, middle-class, young black men who just became fathers and do not know what to do about parenting. This centering, however, hardly results in classism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, or any other form of bigotry that people should beware of. It is more like pinpointing by narrowing the scope. The second underdeveloped part would be that it focuses on a limited number of writers and their works, yet I believe Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison (and Ta-Nehisi Coates, Leonard Pitts, Jr, Bernice L. McFadden, and other young writers) will suffice and rather be understood well enough to epitomize modern African American literature in order to trace back the representations of good fathers and follow the trajectories of their figurations by incorporating a new concept of masculinity. Good, moral, and caring black father figures are what many critics and wordsmiths have been focusing on for decades and what readers have been searching for. Consequently, there is no awkward moment when the traditional, whitened masculinity is replaced by the new and the new exercises its power over the old. Therefore, half of what this paper does here—reading canonical works written by Wright or Morrison again to unearth and unveil good fathers and good men—will be deemed meaningful as it is.

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Abstract

This paper explores the trajectories of black manhood and fatherhood in modern and contemporary American literature and literary criticism and contemplates a possible space for "good" black fathers. As we investigate how earlier discourses and discussions on black manhood have been constructed, and have remained and developed, there certainly is a change or progress in reading and creating different types of representations of black men—without focusing too much on body and sexuality—in American literature and literary criticism, starting from a ragged image considered problematic, violent, dangerous, or bereft, and under institutionalized destitution. This denigration of the black male has intensified and solidified myths of the black family—a black matriarchal family that lacks a desirable father figure, consequently leading to the effeminized, castrated black masculine presence in their communities—but has come to be questioned, leading to a somewhat hopeful, positive, and even philosophical depiction by questioning the core of defining good and bad under the dire circumstances within which African American men find themselves. By scrutinizing innocuous, caregiving father figures dwelling at home in African American novels, this paper looks back at how literary criticism and literature itself have exercised creative power in order to give birth to the "good" black men, who were deemed nonexistent or insufficient before, through *re*-reading, *re*-tracing, and *re*-looking at black fathers/men in novels written by renowned literary figures from Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison to contemporary—and relatively young—authors such as Leonard Pitts Jr. and Bernice L. McFadden.

Keywords: black masculinity, black manhood, good black fathers, good black men, positive black fathers in literature, African American literature

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