Manifestations of Manhood: Constructing Masculinity in Gloria Naylor's *The Men of Brewster Place*[1]

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Abstract: *The article explores representations of African American men and masculinities in Gloria Naylor's 1998 novel* The Men of Brewster Place, *and compares them to those in* The Women of Brewster Place *(1982). The analysis places the more recent novel in the context of literary and cultural debates about black women's agency and racial solidarity, and in the socio-historical contexts of the civil rights movement and the Million Man March. Because the novel incorporates competing and conflicting discourses on African American masculinity, Naylor's representations of men in* The Men of Brewster Place *are wrought with ambivalence, caught between a critical problematization of masculine and masculinist ideals, and a re-inscription of those ideals.*

Keywords: *masculinity—gender—representation—fiction—women writer—African American—Gloria Naylor—Million Man March—*The Men of Brewster Place*—*The Women of Brewster Place

In 1998, Gloria Naylor published *The Men of Brewster Place*, a companion novel to her acclaimed and widely read debut novel of 1982, *The Women of*

Brewster Place. Men clearly sets out to tell the other side of the initial novel set in Brewster Place. To accomplish this, Naylor reintroduces most of the male characters from the earlier novel, and they are now placed in focus and often speaking in their own voices, rather than figuring as the off-center, albeit significant, characters they were in *Women*. One character is even resurrected from the dead; Ben, the janitor of Brewster Place who was brutally killed in the original text, figures in *Men* as an overarching narrative voice or "chorus" that serves to link all the other male destinies together.[2]

There is something both interesting and disturbing about Naylor's attempt to (re)tell her male characters' stories. It is interesting not least because the novel appeared at a time when African American masculinity was clearly on the political agenda in the United States, especially following the Million Man March in 1995; disturbing partly because it seems to make certain claims concerning masculinity and truth that go against the representations of men and masculinity in the initial Brewster Place novel. In a sense, *The Men of Brewster Place* demonstrates a continuously anxious relationship between the author and her representations of men.

The publication of numerous studies on Naylor's oeuvre, which to date includes five novels and a "fictionalized memoir," signal the readerly and scholarly interest in the author (Kelley 1999; Stave 2000; Wilson 2001; Witt 1999).[3] Meanwhile, and more importantly for the present study, the growing body of scholarly work on constructions of African American masculinity—in literature as well as in American society—especially in the past decade allows for a critical re-reading at this point of Naylor's novel about the Brewster Place men (Carbado 1999; Estes 2005; Leak 2005; Mayberry 2007; Mutua 2006; Maurice Wallace 2002). Also, the continuous production of popular narratives that involve African American men doing the right thing suggests just how urgent the issue of black American manhood is today. In 2006, for example, such narratives ranged from Will Smith's

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2   In the words of Eugene Kane, however, "[t]he connection between the two novels is tenuous at best, and finally, it all ends up looking like a marketing ploy." (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* online). Indeed, Naylor herself has also signalled wariness of the dangers connected to the production of sequels, and comments self-ironically in a Barnes and Noble-arranged online chat, that "I feel total closure now. Total. There won't be *The Children of Brewster Place* or *The Pets of Brewster Place*. I have told the whole story." http://aalbc. com.

3   Naylor's novels are *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), *Linden Hills* (1986), *Mama Day* (1989), *Bailey's Café* (1992), *The Men of Brewster Place* (1998); her most recent book is the fictionalized memoir *1996* (2006).

film *The Pursuit of Happyness* to Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*, both of which—despite all other differences—focus on black fatherhood, struggle, and responsibility.

Many male voices have been raised on the issue of African American masculinity. However, as both Jeffrey Leak and Susan Neal Mayberry have noted, the various ways that African American women writers represent men and masculinity need further investigation.[4] I would add that such investigations need to closely examine the gender politics inherent in these representations.

The following analysis initially raises some of the issues connected to African American women writers' images of men. It then offers a reading of the representations of masculinity in *The Men of Brewster Place* against those in *The Women of Brewster Place*, to suggest the ways in which the more recent text is wrought with gender-representational tension, and to examine the author's stated wish to "remedy" her representations of men in the initial Brewster Place novel.[5] Naylor's representations of masculinity in *Men*, I argue, are fundamentally ambivalent, caught between critical problematization of masculine and masculinist ideals, and a seeming re-inscription of those same ideals. Such ambivalence can be explained, at least in part, by reading the novel as incorporating competing and conflicting discourses on African American masculinity. The latter part of the analysis places Naylor's representations of men, particularly the barbershop chapter and the Epilogue, and the characters Greasy and Abshu, in a context of highly publicized manifestations of African American manhood in the 1960s and 1990s, in an attempt to further argue that Naylor represents masculinity as, finally, a construction that is incoherent as well as impossible for men to embody. First, however, some questions concerning the female writer and representations of men must be raised.

In *Women*, Naylor represents men along the lines of African American masculinity discussed by Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. To put this somewhat schematically, this means that African American male identity is represented as formed in opposition to both

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4   To date, Mayberry is one of few scholars to have responded to the critical absence by providing a full-length study of Toni Morrison's representations of men, in *Can't I Love What I Criticize* (2005). Jeffrey Leak's 2005 book *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* offers analyses of eight African American authors; Morrison is the only female author in his selection.

5   See Rowell.

white men and African American women, who are often perceived by the black male characters as joining forces to dominate African American men. As a result, male-female relationships within and outside of family relations in *Women* are largely negative and destructive; men figure as overbearing patriarchs, as charming but irresponsible seducers, abandoners of women and children, rapists and abusers. They are predominantly represented as hardened and self-centered, and as unwilling to acknowledge the positive role of women in their lives. In other words, male characters typically fail to acknowledge and value the female sustenance and nurture that is at the center of representations of women in the initial Brewster Place novel.

Naylor also received some criticism for the negativity of her early representations of African American men.[6] However, as Deborah McDowell has noted concerning the androcentrism of critiques of African American women writers, "critics leading the debate have lumped all black women writers together and have focused on . . . the image of black men, despite the fact that, if we can claim a center for these texts, it is located in the complexities of black female subjectivity and experience" (84). Similarly, bell hooks has observed that there has been an imbalance in much of the criticism, which typically has failed to see that the main issue in African American women's writing is precisely women, and instead has focused disproportionately on images of men.

> Much of the debate about race and representation . . . focused primarily on the representation of black masculinity . . . writing by contemporary black women writers in general, [was] seen as anti-male, as consciously promoting negative representations. Unfortunately, most of these discussions were superficial, taking the form of an emphasis on purity, whether or not these images were "good" or "bad." Black women have been accused of acting in complicity with "the man" (i e white male systems of domination) when creating images of black men. . . . The concern is with the black male image, who will control it, who will represent it. (69-70)

In other words, because of "negative" representations of black men, Afri-

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6   One reviewer wrote that "It won't come as a surprise to readers of contemporary fiction by black women that Gloria Naylor has few kind words to waste on members of the other sex" (Dorothy Wickenden, in Gates 1993, 5). Celeste Fraser observes that "Naylor risks perpetuating the erasure of the black male" (98); Charles Johnson claims that, in *Women*, "nearly every black man . . . resembles the Negro beast stereotype described so many years ago by white racists as the brutal, stupid creature of violent sexual appetites" (qtd in Fraser, 98). For further discussion of such criticism, see for example Bobo and Seiter (32); Gates 1990; Gates 1993; Fowler.

can American women writers were accused of siding with "the man," and reinforcing white patriarchal oppression through complicity.

Clearly, female authors' fictional representations of African American men and masculinity have caused infected debates. Because of racialized power imbalances in the United States, such representations are likely to evoke criticism for inaccuracy, wrong politics, and lack of solidarity. Many of the arguments raised can be recognized from the Civil Rights movement discourse of the late 1960s, and they also resurface in current debates about the African American community. Harlon Dalton writes, in the context of the 1990s and the issue of black victimhood, that

> [A]nger at Black women who speak out is fuelled by an acute awareness that Black men have been vilified throughout American history and are especially vulnerable today. Perhaps no phrase better captures the latter sentiment than the oft-heard statement that "Black men are an endangered species." Therefore, runs the argument, we need to present Black men in the best light possible. At any rate, we certainly don't need to be tearing each other down and doing 'the Man's' work for him. (123)

What Dalton's observation points to, however, is that reasons of solidarity produce conditions that make it hard for the writer of fiction to take a critical perspective on black men. Solidarity, if understood in terms of "positive representation" makes impossible the fictional rendition not only of men's but also of women's lives as complex, and as containing both negative and positive relationships, within and across gender lines.

To get around such either-or textual politics, Mayberry helpfully appropriates a line from Toni Morrison's fiction to ask "[c]an't I love what I criticize?" Thereby, she foregrounds the idea that a critical perspective — and "critical" representation — can also be a signal of concern and involvement, which therefore can be read as written out of love, respect, and a womanist belief in the real possibilities of comradeship between men and women.[7]

Interestingly, Naylor has expressed concern both with the ways in which she created the male characters in *Women*, and with the ways in which those characters have been read by critics. While working on *Men*, Naylor claimed in an interview that "I never wanted to rough-shod a character... Even though the question of how I treated men used to come up all the

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7 Womanism is a term initially coined by Alice Walker which has been important in black feminist criticism; see for example Lovalerie King, "African American Womanism: From Zora Neale Hurston to Alice Walker."

time with *The Women of Brewster Place*, people just didn't understand .
. . But anyway, where [do] I stand with my [male characters in *Men*]? I
hope in good stead. *I hope they forgive me my past sins or whatever and
just come into my life like they need to*" (Rowell 192, emphasis added).
Naylor's statement raises questions concerning the truth claims of fictional
representation, since it suggests that *Men* in some sense should be read as
a correction to *Women* and as a response to the earlier criticism of her rep-
resentations of men.

In the same interview, Naylor also formulates what is most interesting to
her about the (then ongoing) project:

> I'm pretty sure it's going to be looking at relationships between men and their families.
> When you do get writing about black men, normally it's directed at men struggling with
> the white world for something—for dignity, for self-respect, for some gains, financial or
> psychological. Their opponent is always the white world. I would love to look at black
> men in relationship to their families. Don't take them anywhere out there to meet what's
> going on past Brewster Place, but right there—right there where they're standing. It's
> going to be interesting to see what comes out this time. (Rowell 186)

Naylor states that she will be looking at African American men in terms
of family relationships rather than relations to white America; however,
while the male characters in *Men* are often envisioned in familial contexts,
they are often also described as focused on self-definition. In the words
of Maxine L. Montgomery, in *Women*, the female characters "establish a
new cosmology, an underground world in which they are agents of their
own destiny while others—whites and men—are marginalized" (44).[8] As
will become evident, the possibility of African American community that
is so central in *Women* shifts meaning in the second, re-gendered, Brewster
Place text. Manhood, unlike womanhood, is represented as problemati-
cally linked to individualism rather than community, partly because it is so
strongly marked by a struggle for self-assertion.[9]

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8   For a discussion of female identity in *The Women of Brewster Place*, see especially Christian.

9   There are significant convergences, and equally significant divergences, between the two Brewster Place
     novels. *Women* acknowledges the difficulties and circumscriptions that impact upon human relationships
     under racism, sexism, poverty and ignorance, but it also speaks plainly about the necessity for African
     American women to take an active part in constructing their future, by whatever means available. The
     women characters are placed both within the context of racist and sexist American society, and within the
     context of the ghettoized African American community, which is marked by its own brand of sexism.
        Importantly, women in the novel are not represented as defined by themselves, but rather by the men

Like *Women*, *Men* is built up by separate stories, each one of which focuses on a certain character. While *Women* is framed by two chapters or vignettes called "Dawn" and "Dusk," which represent the birth and near death of Brewster Place, *Men* moves in reverse, from the prologue "Dusk" to the epilogue "Dawn." While on the one hand seeming to pick up where the previous Brewster Place novel ended, this narrative strategy also curiously places the stories and the male characters in the temporal space of night. Hence, the men's stories move towards the potential promise of a new dawn. The effect, however, is also to signal that male identity is "in the dark," where one cannot see clearly.

Also in line with the earlier text, *Men* presents a wide variety of characters. Some of these proceed on the course they began in *Women* and are simply "fleshed out" in the new text, for example the violent criminal CC Baker and the self-aggrandizing Reverend Moreland T. Woods. Other characters however are changed beyond recognition. The most striking examples of such change are Eugene and Basil, two characters who in the first Brewster Place novel are marked almost exclusively by negativity, above all anger and violence. Basil is described in *Women* as attractive to women, who mistake the look in his eyes for desire, when it is really "hardened apathy" (42), a characteristic that enables him to ruin and abandon his own mother. Eugene is loved by his wife Ciel, but only until the scales fall from her eyes and she sees him as he really is: "a tall, skinny, black man with arrogance and selfishness twisting his mouth into a strange shape" (*Women* 100).[10]

Sixteen years after *Women*, Naylor has constructed fuller stories about these last two male characters that ostensibly reveal the secrets behind their negative behavior.[11] The secret reason for Eugene's constant disappearanc-

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around them, to whom they are mothers, lovers, daughters, bodies, objects. However, against this male objectification and definition, the women inhabiting Brewster generally also share companionship, love, and a resulting sense of community—a community which is exclusively upheld by women for women. Although not without flaws, as emphasized especially in its failure to embrace the sexual otherness of the lesbian couple Lorraine and Theresa, this female community most often serves to sustain and support individuals against the assaults of the world.

10 In interviews, Naylor has expressed regret at her "hasty" treatment of Eugene: "Eugene was not a well-drawn character. . . . I could have given him, I think, with perhaps more skill and a bit more empathy a bit more depth than he has (Fowler 155). Also, in a published conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor asks whether she should "reveal the goodness of her male characters." Morrison encourages her and suggests that she should indeed (Naylor 1994, 580).

11 However, the new representations do not, in fact, serve to explain or clarify anything that happened in the

es from home and family is that he is gay, a fact he feels he cannot reveal to Ciel. His homosexuality can be played out in a gay bar and in a masochistic craving for punishment by the transsexual dominatrix Chino, but cannot be voiced within the context of Brewster Place, where Eugene is forced to conform to a conventional pattern of African American manliness.

Eugene himself has a clear picture of what "a black man should be: big, dark, and mean" (82). That he should also be heterosexual is a matter of course that is never explicitly voiced, but Eugene is convinced that, were he to reveal his secret to Ciel, she "would hate [him] as much as [he] hated [himself]" (82). Eugene's definition of African American masculinity is in line with what Kendall Thomas has referred to as the "heteronormative logic that conditions the ascription of 'authentic' black identity on the repudiation of gay or lesbian identity. The jargon of racial authenticity insists, as the gangsta-rapper Ice Cube has put it, that 'true niggers ain't gay'" (59). It is crucial, however, that while homophobia is a major reason behind Eugene's secrecy, he rationalizes his silence both through self-hatred and through his wife's anticipated attitude of loathing.

As with Eugene, Naylor reconstructs her character Basil in a way that could serve to temper the previous novel's strongly negative image. A recycled passage from *Women* opens the chapter on Basil, who appears doomed to failure despite attempts to do good. Staying away from his mother Mattie, he works three jobs for three years to be able to pay his debt to her, but she dies just before he returns home to remedy his mistake and achieve reconciliation. A new resolution follows: "I can't undo the past, but I would find some woman, somewhere, and make her life happy" (46).[12] In order to find this woman, Basil has a number of dates, after which he reflects that "[s]ure, maybe women had a lot of bad experiences with men to make them . . . cautious. But I saw that black men weren't the only reason for the mess

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initial Brewster Place novel. Rather, these seem to be other characters than in the first novel. As some reviewers have noted, this is unfortunate and seems to be an effect solely of the unnecessary decision to make the text an "apologetic" sequel rather than an independent novel (Schneider 18).

12 First, however, in a passage that echoes similar motifs in other fictions by African American writers (notably Cholly Breedlove's search for his father in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Basil decides to confront his own father, whom he has never met. He manages to both locate and meet his father, but during the encounter Basil's frustration mounts since the two men are unable to connect, or find any grounds for mutual understanding. In this passage Naylor seems to suggest that while women mother each other regardless of blood relations (a central theme in *Women*), in the world of men, there is an overwhelming incapacity for fathering; men cannot, and do not offer each other acknowledgment or support.

black women were in. Women yell about finding a man to settle down with; but when one comes along they put him through a lot of crap before they believe" (51). Finally, he becomes the adoptive father of two sons when he marries the young single mother Keisha. However, despite his ambition to be a good father, family relations end in disaster; Basil's lack of sexual interest in Keisha makes her give him up to the police (for the crime he committed in his youth). When he claims he must be with the children, Keisha voices her sexualized contempt: "Since when you man enough to have any kids?" (61).

Hence, the failures and losses of these male characters are often further aggravated by women's (sexual) demands on them: Eugene's perception of Ceil's expectations cause him to live a lie; Keisha's contempt and lack of morals lead to Basil's unhappiness, and in both cases a man ultimately loses his position as father. Whereas Charles Wilson argues that in *Men* "Naylor shows how women are just as responsible as men for domestic tensions" (148), it seems that women are even more responsible than men for such domestic tensions; women, here, are obstacles since they enforce notions of masculinity that the men do not want to embrace.[13]

Women's impact on men's identities has also been commented on by the author in an interview, where she states that in *Women* "[Eugene and Basil] perpetrated a certain violence against people who loved them, who had made them, in a sense, what they were." Naylor continues: "I'm not saying that single mothers are responsible for crime in the streets. But I do believe this: that they are responsible for how their sons perceive women. And perceive of themselves as men" (Fowler 153). In this statement, Naylor assigns responsibility for constructions and perceptions of gender identity to individual mothers rather than to the community within which these individuals exist, be it an African American community, or a general United

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13 As Charles E. Wilson observes, from Douglass' *Narrative* onwards, "African-American manhood has unfolded as the premier metaphor for African-American agency. In short, if African-American males could gain acknowledgment of their strength, their intellect, and their devotion and loyalty to their families, then other members of their race would achieve recognition of their humanity. Attaining manhood also entailed defying black stereotypes. From slavery to the present day, enduring and resilient black manhood has served as the mechanism by which black enfranchisement and freedom are measured" (154). It is however difficult to agree with Wilson's contention that "[Naylor's] thematic lesson in black manhood . . . also recognizes the importance of embracing womanhood in tandem with manhood. Rejecting the oppressive model that treats women as inferior beings, emergent and progressive black manhood defines as one of its primary roles the affirmation of women" (154), since such affirmation is basically missing from the novel.

States context. I will return to the gendered tensions between community and individualism towards the end of this analysis, as well as to women's agency *vis-a-vis* constructions of masculinities.

While men and masculinity are obviously central in *Men*, masculinity as a problematical (although not central) concern surfaces in the earlier Brewster Place novel as well. In *Women*, masculinity is formulated by some characters as a quality which it is possible to have, to lose, and to measure. This becomes most evident in the story of Ben, who stands powerless while his young daughter is being sexually abused by her white employer. Ben's wife Elvira is cast, not as defending her daughter, nor indeed as offering her husband support, but as corroborating the white male employer's denigration of Ben by questioning his manliness. She tells him "If you was *half* a man, you coulda given me more babies . . . And if you was a *quarter* of a man, we wouldn't be a bunch of miserable sharecroppers on someone else's land" (*Women* 153, emphases added). Hence, Elvira formulates masculinity as a quantifiable quality that may constitute less than a quarter of a biological male's personality.[14] As Montgomery points out, in *Women*, Ben

typifies the dilemma that the men of Brewster Place face because the tokens of manhood —wealth, prestige, and political power—are reserved for whites and the well-to-do . . . as spokesperson for a capitalist system in which manhood is synonymous with social, economic, and political power, Ben's wife . . . voices the emasculating sentiments that consign not only Ben but all the men on Brewster Place to a state of perpetual boyhood. (43)

In other words, some black women in the two Brewster Place novels—for example Elvira, Keisha, and Ciel[15]—formulate black masculinity as marked by lack or failure, and define black men as not being "men enough," thereby playing into the hands of hegemonic white masculinity.[16]

Interestingly, then, in their representations of male suffering at the

14 For a discussion of this scene, see also Awkward, 59.

15 Another example that I do not discuss here is Mattie Michael.

16 In *Masculinities* (1995) sociologist R. W. Connell defines the concept of hegemonic masculinity that has become central to masculinity studies. Hegemonic masculinity is linked to constructionist understandings of gender and denotes the form of masculinity (in the meaning of masculine identity/behaviour/status) which at a given time and in a given society counts as the most "normal" and hence remains unquestioned, taken for granted, while all other masculinities are "deviations" from the normative hegemonic one. For discussion of African American masculinity and hegemony, see for example Devon Carbado (1999), Maurice Wallace (2002), and Steve Estes (2005).

hands—or rather the words—of women, Naylor's novels, and particularly *Men*, in a sense echo narratives of (and conventional priorities within) masculinist anti-racist struggle, which has historically worked out of two central assumptions: first, that African American men suffer more than African American women under racism, and second, that African American women are guilty of complicity with white racist society for keeping African American men down.[17] However, such representations of female "complicity" also, simultaneously, serve in the novels as a means for complicating the notion of gendered power in the African American community, especially since the male characters are shown as themselves internalizing and perpetuating their status as "not masculine enough."

Clearly, Naylor's 1998 novel is written straight into the debates that were ongoing at the time, about the meaning of masculinity, the place of black men in families, and men's social responsibility. Also, more precisely, Naylor's representations of masculinity and of manifestations of African American manhood play upon references both to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and to the 1995 Million Man March. *Men* thus offers commentary on the socio-political work to (re)define African American masculinity in the late Twentieth Century.

What links the male characters in *Men* together despite their many differences is that they all struggle to find out how to be a man and/or to assert that they know what manhood entails. While the female characters in *Women* supposedly serve to illustrate various life trajectories available to African American women, their "femininity" is not questioned nor is it explicitly foregrounded; the women characters in that novel are seldom self-defined. Meanwhile, attempts at self-definition, and the assertion of the male self as a *manly* self, is absolutely central to the male life-stories in *Men*. Indeed, the imperative phrase "Be a Man" is included in several of the chapters. According to Marcellous Blount and George P. Cunningham, "the stabilizing of the gendered male self and the reconstruction of the black man are among the defining obsessions of contemporary racial discourse" (xii). Indeed, in the words of literary scholar Charles Wilson, "[f]rom slavery to the present

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17 Such prioritizing has been criticized not only by Michelle Wallace in her 1978 text *Black Macho*, but also by many scholars since. Among them is Kevin Brown, who discusses the Mike Tyson rape trial as an example where the foregrounding of the suffering of "another brother" takes precedence over the victimization of the rape victim, for Desirée Washington was represented as aiding the white judicial system in bringing down a black role model (Brown 1999).

day, enduring and resilient black manhood has served as the mechanism by which black enfranchisement and freedom are measured" (154). Wilson also observes that "from the transformative moment in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), when Douglass announces that he will no longer participate in his own subjugation at the hands of overseer Mr. Covey, African-American manhood has unfolded as the premier metaphor for African-American agency" (154).

It seems, then, that Naylor writes herself into the mainstream of racial discourse through her choice of focus in her most recent novel. However, her text contains several significant points of tension between affirmation and de(con)struction of African American masculinity. This may be read as a recognition that the struggle to define manhood is necessarily endless, since, in the words of Maurice Wallace, the black masculine is not "a fully cohesive construction" (15). Indeed, throughout *Men*, the impossibilities and frustrations involved in both being a black man and in asserting black masculinity are exposed, and in the next to last chapter the "Be a Man" motto is brutally demolished.

The chapter titled "The Barbershop" (unlike the rest, which carry characters' names), features the local Brewster Place barbershop, where "[i]t's clear just by the smell of the place and the look of the place that this is where men have a chance to hang out and talk" (157). The men in the area have their hair cut and act "barbershop politicians" (158) for a while; there is joking, laughter, and togetherness, however fleeting. One of the regular customers is Greasy. Previously a functioning human being who has led a regular life with "a job, a home, and a future" (159) he is now a crack addict, massively deteriorated physically and mentally, and reduced to a vocabulary of only two phrases: "I'm a man" and "I'm really trying." While the first phrase makes claims of self-assertion, the second introduces uncertainty, clearly indicates the pressure of someone else's demands, and seriously undermines the assertiveness of the first phrase. Also, by linking the two statements, Naylor underscores the performative aspects of masculinity, via this troubled character who voices the paradox that one must try to be what one, supposedly, already is.

When Greasy starts to assert that he is a man, he is not easily stopped or subdued. In a central passage, he not only repeats the first phrase frenziedly, but he also seizes and threatens one of the barbers with a razor. The other men gathered in the barbershop attempt to calm Greasy: "'You're a Man, Greasy' they kept saying as if they were cooing a baby—quiet and

smooth—'You're a Man'" (165-6), meanwhile forming a circle and closing in on him. Greasy then suddenly lets go of the barber, and instead cuts his own throat. His blood spurts onto all the surrounding men, thereby involving them in his act of suicide. By bloodying them all, the act shifts the implications of male togetherness away from the companionship initially signalled by the barbershop setting, to collective suffering and guilt.

Structurally, the barbershop scene is placed in *Men* where *Women* has the symbolically charged dream of Mattie Michael, the dream in which the women of Brewster tear down the brick wall that closes the area off from the city. While the scene in *Women* is not without its tensions, it is largely positively charged, and stresses above all visionary power, the potential for agency and change among African American women, and the importance of communal effort. In *Men*, the passage that describes Greasy's suicide in a context of a shared black male space obviously speaks in much more despairing tones concerning African American manhood and community.

The barbershop chapter, and the associations it evokes, is central to an understanding of how masculinity figures in the novel. Whereas "I am a man" in itself is a common enough phrase, it is also the message carried by the demonstrators in the Memphis sanitation workers' strike on March 31, 1968. The demonstrators, men with cardboard signs stating "I Am a Man", have been recorded in Ernest Withers' unforgettable photographs, which have been reproduced many times in various contexts, and which have lately appeared in the context of (black) masculinity studies, for example in the 1996 anthology *Constructing Masculinity* (Berger *et al*), and as cover illustration to the 1999 anthology *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Carbado); the phrase is also the title of Steve Estes' excellent 2005 study of the American civil rights movement and its links to the notion of manhood. It is probably safe to say that by now, the image, as well as the phrase, is iconic, lodged firmly in the memory of both popular and critical consciousness. Naylor picks up the phrase "I am a man" in the Barbershop chapter of her book, a chapter that serves as a transition from individual to collective, from inside the homes and families of the male characters to another, shared space where explicit references are also made to politics and activism. This together stresses a shift in emphasis towards politics and ideology on a larger scale than that of individual destinies.

The claim "I am a man" in the 1968 demonstration was voiced in a civil rights context, and was a clear critique of racist practices in the US that denied black men the human rights promised by the Declaration of Inde-

pendence. As Steve Estes notes, it was also an emphatic assertion of adult manhood against the white Southern term "boy" that was still used to address black men by paternalistic white officials at the time (Estes 136, 138). The phrase also carried particular resonances in the African American community because of its popularization in the Delta blues of artists like Muddy Waters (Estes 136). The phrase signals historic tragedies and erasure of both manhood and humanity, but also affirmation, agency, and a claim to rights. Withers' images illustrate not only the complexities involved in African American men making the claim, but also the serious threat it poses to white US society, for as the photographs show, the (unarmed) demonstrators are flanked by soldiers with bayonets on their guns.

Transferred from the 1968 demonstration to the fictional setting of Brewster Place in what may be 1998, from the silent and controlled demonstrators to the raving crackhead Greasy and the men who surround him and try desperately to soothe him, the phrase gains new meanings. In the late 20th century, the assertion "I am a man" would be readily contextualized in terms of the debates over subjectivity, identity formation and gender performativity of the past two decades especially. Indeed, claiming one's self by voicing one's self is an activity that can potentially serve to unite African American and (black) feminist struggles for subjectivity and self-definition. However, Naylor's displacement of the claim "I am a man" onto the character Greasy seems to stress above all a violence, perhaps also a madness, inherent in assertions of masculinity. Far from the joint struggle

illustrated by the image of male demonstrators in 1968, the scene in *Men* speaks not about male collective effort towards a constructively envisioned goal, but of desperation, delusion, and death, and the outcome for the other men in the scene is a sense of failure and shame; they all try to forget the event as soon as possible.

The way the novel destabilizes the imperative to "be a man," and thereby also undermines claims to masculinity, emphasizes the contextual aspects of the notion of masculinity itself. It stresses the power of social and ideological forces to form gender identity, and speaks against the notion of a "core" of masculinity; instead Naylor's representations are various and multifaceted. The novel also underscores the demands that the masculine ideology expressed in the "be a man" imperative places upon African American men to reach self-definition, but also to meet the demands of others, women as well as dominant white patriarchal culture, which notably is a culture that notoriously has refused to define African American men as men.[18] Additionally, *Men* seems to suggest that the odds that an assertive African American masculinity will result in positive social change are less certain in 1998 than they perhaps were in 1968.

Thereby, the novel can be read as revealing the dangers of trying to assert one's manhood in a culture where such a concept is ever evasive, and historically problematical especially for African American men (Belton 1995; Black 1997; Maurice Wallace 2002; Estes 2005). It can also be read as taking a womanist stance, the utopia of which is that men and women be seen primarily as people who can share the same struggle, especially since all-male contexts in the book are often finally destructive. However, this last suggestion requires some reading against the grain of the text, especially against the grain of its representations of women, as noted above. Further complications are offered by the novel's epilogue, where Naylor seems to be taking back what has gone before in a move to resurrect individualistic masculinity and American "real-manhood."

The epilogue "Dawn" re-introduces Abshu, a male character without flaws and without guilt; he is righteous, accomplished, and genuinely self-

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18 Indeed, it also raises questions about the problems attached to using "masculinity" as a critical term at all, a question that has been discussed insightfully by Jeff Hearn in "Is Masculinity Dead," (in MacAn Ghaill, *Understanding Masculinities*, 1996). For a full discussion of slavery as the source of America's continuing denial of African American manhood, see Daniel Black's *Dismantling Black Manhood* (1997).

made, and represents a seemingly unambiguous heroic masculinity.[19] His attempts to fight the hypocrisy of the Reverend Woods and to save Brewster Place from being condemned by the city council ultimately fail, however. In the final passage, alone, Abshu ponders the negative outcome of his efforts to save Brewster, and what might have been done differently:

> If he had brought five hundred to City Hall instead of just fifty? If he had brought a thousand…ten thousand? If a million men had descended on that building, would it have made a difference? Could he have saved this street? . . . He thinks not. . . . He thinks about the power of a million men; a million voices raised to a roar to say, No, this should not be. But even the voices of a million men, a million soldiers, cannot hold back the dawn. And so he will leave this street to walk into a rising sun. One man against the dawning of the inevitable. One man who is determined that this is the end of a battle, not the end of a war. And this one tired warrior is the best that Brewster Place has to offer the world. But one man standing is all that's needed—one manchild for the millennium. (172-3)[20]

In this passage, the future of African American men and masculinity, it would seem, does not lie in community or collective effort, but in "typical American" solitude and individualism; the mythical "one manchild for the millennium" will take on the task of working for a better world. Naylor's emphasis on black male victimization at the hands of United States culture in general, and at the hands of African American women, can only finally be broken by resorting to a stereotypically American rhetoric of self-made manhood standing strong against the rest of the world. But the passage is also heavily ambivalent about the power of this lonely savior, who is after all only a "tired soldier" and also a "manchild" rather than a man. Again, then, this passage destabilizes masculinity; it balances seriousness in terms of male responsibility and power, with irony—since the entire passage is a case of rhetorical "overkill"—and with doubt, too, for notions like tiredness and childhood undermine the assumed power of manhood. Notably, a certain erasure of women also occurs in the passage, for while both men and women participated in the action at City Hall, once the crowd is imagined as "a million" it consists exclusively of men; arguably, such erasure serves to question rather than confirm Abshu's vision. Moreover, as mentioned above, the reference to "a million men" in the passage serves to incorporate

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19 While in *Women*, Abshu figures primarily as the lover of Kiswana Brown, in *Men* he is single.

20 Critics have suggested that "Dawn" signifies hope (Whitt 1999, 4; Wilson 2001, 156); if not hope, then certainly circularity. However, that "one million men . . . cannot hold back the dawn" seems an ambiguous claim—what exactly does this dawn signify? Light to see? Change for better or worse?

into Naylor's text another significant and much publicized event in African American history; it also serves to expand and develop the notion of masculinity in the novel.

The Million Man March and Day of Atonement was staged in Washington DC in 1995, almost thirty years after the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis; it was another public manifestation linked to notions of African American manhood. The scale was definitely grander than it had been in Memphis in 1968, yet the political objectives were perhaps less clear. The struggle of African American men to live socially functional and responsible lives was foregrounded, but the event was not without its inherent conflicts. Initiated by Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, who explicitly discouraged female participation, the March can certainly be seen to speak for a 1990s version of Black Macho. Michelle Wallace's 1978 reckoning with African American masculinism seemed to have gained renewed significance in the context of the March and the new men's movements of the 1990s, for they were clearly attempts to define, redefine, or resurrect masculinity in the absence of women, and often also in opposition to feminist discourses and struggles.

As some critics have pointed out, the mythopoetic men's movement, the Christian men's organization The Promise Keepers, the fathers' rights movement and the Million Man March are all social forces that serve to undermine any struggle towards equality between men and women.[21] Charles Luke Harris links Farrakhan's ideas to those presented in the infamous Moynihan Report, but also to Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America" (61). He argues that "[for Farrakhan] many of Black women's problems are a result of the failure of Black patriarchy, rather than the results of patriarchal structures within the Black community—which is to say that they are problems that could be eliminated if Black men could just *take control* of the situation," which links his solution to those typically offered by mainstream white reformers and "some right-wing conservative Christian groups of the late 1990s, such as the Promise Keepers" (61, emphasis original). Furthermore, as Harris points out, the "proffering of a self-help solution to Black disempowerment suggests that the key problems that confront

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21 For further discussion of the men's movements in the 1980s and 1990s, see for example Kimmel and Kaufman 1994; Collier 1996. For exploration of African American masculinity in a late 1990s context, see for example Belton 1995; Carbado 1999; Carby 1998; Gavanas 2001; Johnson and McCluskey 1997; and Marriott 1996. For important recent contributions, see Estes (2005) and Mutua (2006).

Blacks are related to personal initiative or a lack thereof. . . . In this way . . . the March undermined the potential for Black community building" (59). Sullivan and Gaude similarly argue that the March signified a turn inward for African American politics: "The March was convened not to address the actual policies of the nation state . . . but, rather, to address Black men" (88). Hence, the March, despite its scope, functioned as a discourse on in-dividualism rather than community.

Thus, representations of men in Naylor's second Brewster Place novel are ambivalent and complicated, constructed in a tension between "reaffirmed" and "deconstructed" masculinity. The novel also incorporates references to two historical political events that, while centered on civil rights, were also manifestations of manhood, heavily involved with the (self)definition of African American men. The ways in which these extra-textual references are made in *Men* signal a conflicted perspective on such manifestations and their inherent gender politics. The novel often negates the power and value of men's collective effort and the notion of male community, and ends with Abshu—a figure who mixes a heroic image of individualism with ele-ments that seriously undermine heroism and male agency. *Men* thus opens up crucial questions about masculinity as ideology and points to the para-doxes and difficulties involved in re-constructing masculinity in the African American community.

At times, it seems that Naylor's re-vision of her male Brewster Place characters effects representations of masculinity that on the one hand echo (neo)conservative discourses that want to maintain strictly dichotomized gender positions, for example in the Abshu figure. However, the final em-phasis on Abshu's manly, even warrior-like masculinity can also be read as signifying a narrowness of alternatives available. As Susan Faludi points out in *Stiffed*, which was published just one year after *Men*, United States culture "surely . . . has not offered an alternative vision of manhood" (41), but instead clings to old ideals. Faludi further argues that "[t]he man con-trolling his environment is today the prevailing American image of mascu-linity. A man is expected to prove himself not by being a part of society but by being untouched by it, soaring above it" (10). She continues by compar-ing the ostensible male "crisis" in the 1990s to the female crisis that even-tually led to the women's movement in the 1970s, stressing the difference between the two crises: "Instead of collectively confronting brutalizing forces, each man is expected to dramatize his own struggle by himself, to confront arbitrarily designated enemies in a staged fight—a fight separated

from society the way a boxing ring is separated off from the crowd" (15). Manhood and community, or collective effort, are here envisioned as irreconcilable. At times, too, the vision offered by Naylor in *Men* seems to affirm such a stance,[22] for, seen against the love, nurture, and sense of community stressed in *Women*, there is in *Men* an overwhelming negativity, despair, and lack of community.

Nevertheless, the novel also explores the various and contradictory forces that form the context within which African American masculinity is constructed and understood, thereby foregrounding not just the incoherence of a concept like "masculinity" but its specific racialized, sexualized inflections. Naylor also, importantly, signals some of the risks tied to masculinity as a concept. Last, but not least, the novel raises the question of the place of female agency in masculinity discourses. Arguably, the relative absence of women in the novel—a contrast to the continuous presence of men in *Women*—suggests that in a culture where the focus on male self-definition becomes obsessive, women will necessarily suffer increased marginalization. Yet, at the same time, the novel offers an interested (if ambiguous) female authorial voice on black men, thereby claiming space for African American female voices to be heard on these issues.
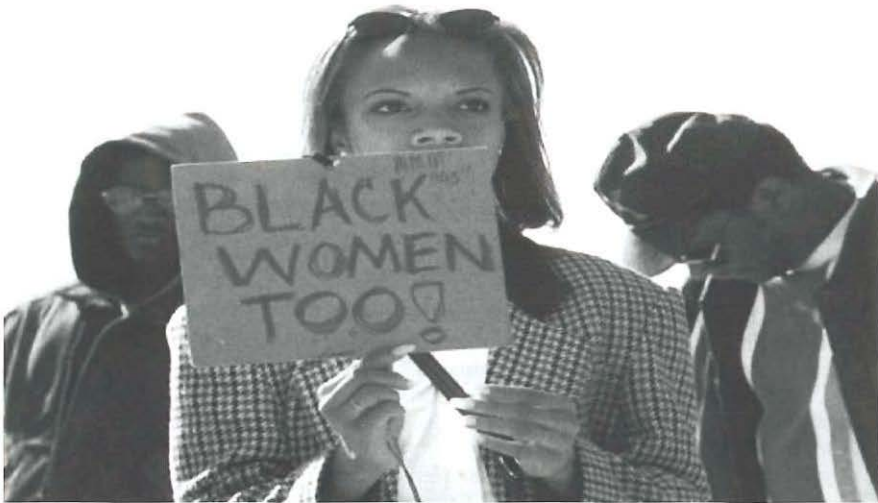
22 For further comments by Naylor on men and masculinity, see "A Conversation with Toni Morrison" (esp. 192-3; 196-7); for her comments on the then unfinished manuscript of *Men*, see Rowell (esp. 180, 186, 192).

Interestingly, then, in a picture from the Million Man March published by *Time Magazine* online, an African American woman, present at the March despite the organizers having officially discouraged female participation, holds up a small hand-written cardboard sign. The sign reads "Black Women Too;" the woman holds it before her face so that only her eyes are visible. Behind the woman we see the "real" marchers in the figures of two African American men who flank the woman although standing slightly behind her. The signals offered by the photograph are various. They include the woman's will to participate and act in solidarity with men (she is present), but also a lack of voice, an enforced female silence (her mouth is covered).[23] Finally, the image also signals female hesitancy concerning the space granted African American women in the context of defining or debating African American masculinity, a hesitancy also present in the tensions and ambivalences that mark Naylor's representations of men and masculinity in *The Men of Brewster Place*.

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23 The invisibility of black women's participation in the struggle for civil rights has been discussed for example by Estes.

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