

INCARCERATION, TRANSFORMATION AND AWARENESS IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the theme of black male incarceration in the African American novel. Black male incarcerated characters are frequently presented as the most socially aware characters in the novel, in spite of their isolation. In different African American novels, black male incarcerated characters experience a transformation as a result of their incarceration that leads to a heightened awareness of their marginalisation as black men. Because of their compromised agency in incarceration, these characters are not able to express black masculinity in traditional ways. Using novels by Richard Wright, James Baldwin, John A. Williams and Ernest Gaines, I argue that black male incarcerated characters use their heightened awareness as an alternative method of expressing black masculinity.

Keywords: African American, awareness, incarceration, masculinity, transformation

INTRODUCTION

Incarceration has been a frequent and powerful force in the lives of African Americans. Particularly, African American men experience incarceration in disproportionate numbers:

Of the two million inmates in U.S. jails and prisons at the end of 2002, black men (586,700) outnumbered white men (436,800) and Hispanic men (235,000) among inmates with sentences of more than one year. (Roberts 2004, 1274)



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More than a decade later, this trend continues. Since mass incarceration is a reality of African American history, it is also a frequent trope in African American novels. Many characters experience incarceration, in a number of forms, for a number of reasons, throughout African American novels.

Many African American authors use incarceration as a transformative experience for characters. Mass incarceration in African American communities has had a profoundly negative effect on community social norms:

By straining social networks, mass incarceration also affects communities' social norms. Drawing upon social disorganization theory, researchers have shown that weakening infrastructure threatens a community's foundation of informal social control. Disorganized communities cannot enforce social norms because it is too difficult to reach consensus on common values and on avenues for solving common problems. Because informal social controls play a greater role in public safety than do formal state controls, this breakdown can seriously jeopardize community safety. (ibid, 1285)

I claim that African American authors also explore the effect of incarceration on individual social norms by presenting incarcerated black male characters as protagonists or influential characters. Incarcerated black male characters often undergo a transformation or series of transformations during the time of their incarceration. Incarceration is a time of isolation from the social world at large, and this often provides incarcerated characters with a heightened awareness of racial and gendered social roles, and of the racial injustice that has contributed to their incarceration. Incarceration separates black male characters from their everyday life, and in doing so provides the opportunity to consider and analyse the racial dynamics of African American life from a distance. As a result of this increased awareness, incarcerated black male characters often experience incarceration as a transformative period.

I begin by defining terms like 'incarceration', 'awareness' and 'transformation' and explain how they will be used and analysed in the scope of this article. With these definitions in mind, I explore the experiences of four black male incarcerated characters in African American novels: Fonny from James Baldwin's *If Beale Street could talk*, Fishbelly in Richard Wright's *The long dream*, Boatwright in John A. Williams' *The man who cried I am*, and Marcus in Ernest Gaines' *Of love and dust*. These four novels were chosen to represent a variety of authors and styles of African-American literature across the 20th century. Lastly, I discuss the implications of this correlation between incarceration, awareness and transformation, for notions of black masculinity.

DEFINING TERMS

Before exploring the concepts of incarceration, transformation and awareness in the novels, these concepts must be clearly defined. They manifest themselves differently throughout the novels, so I want to be clear about what exactly I am looking for in my examination of each concept.

Incarceration is defined as the experience of any characters who are imprisoned. Specifically, they experience imprisonment as a penalty of the criminal justice system. The parameters of the characters' incarceration vary greatly from novel to novel. Some characters, like Fonny in *If Beale Street could talk*, are held in what one would consider a traditional prison setting.¹ Others, like Marcus in *Of love and dust*, experience their incarceration outside of a prison – he is sent to work in a plantation as his penalty. In my examination of a prisoner's incarceration, I am not taking into account his innocence or guilt. Some characters, like Moses Boatwright in *The man who cried I am*, have committed a serious crime and are obviously guilty of the crime. Others, like Fishbelly in *The long dream*, are not guilty of a crime – he has been falsely accused, so that he can be manipulated through his incarceration. Regardless of the different reasons why black men are incarcerated in these novels, I do not take into consideration each character's reason for incarceration. I acknowledge that the black male characters in these novels are incarcerated for a variety of reasons, but in this article I am interested in exploring the transformation that occurs as a result of their incarceration.

To explore awareness I look at characters' perception and understanding of the social world. While their awareness may be reflected in their behaviour, I do not analyse awareness through a character's behaviour. Awareness is connected to a character's thought process. In situations where the narrator explains the character's inner thoughts and motivations, awareness can be analysed. Specifically, I look for shifts in awareness – places where the character's eyes are opened to something he has not been able to see before. It is particularly important to consider how these shifts in awareness contribute to and shape constructions of masculinity in the novels.

Shifts in awareness lead to transformations in the character. I define transformation as a significant change in a character's value system. A character's transformation can be observed as a shift in how he interacts with the social world. This change in values can be manifested through his thoughts, speech or actions.

In this article I demonstrate that these three concepts are often linked in the lives of the black male characters in these novels. The character's incarceration often leads to a heightened awareness of the social world and his place in it. This awareness leads to a transformation in the character's value system, manifested by a shift in his interaction with the social world through his thoughts, speech and actions.

Incarceration in Baldwin's *If Beale Street could talk*

In James Baldwin's *If Beale Street could talk*, the male protagonist, Fonny, is incarcerated. He had a confrontation with a white police officer, Officer Bell, in the neighbourhood, and then was falsely accused of rape as part of the officer's revenge against him. The narrator, Tish, and the reader know that Fonny is innocent, but in the novel's present, Fonny is imprisoned as he awaits a trial, which is continually delayed.

In his incarceration, Fonny represents the suffering of black men at the hands of a criminal justice system run by white men:

Fonny is a symbol: he is the persecuted Black man, unable to find a job; the object of the white cop's hate; the symbol of the Black man's sexual attraction for whites; the victim of his Black skin; a nascent artist who, as in an act of rebellion, decides to become an artisan; he is, one suspects, the author's persona. (Burks 1976, 87)

His response, as a symbol of the persecuted black man, is one of rebellion through disengagement. For the first part of Fonny's incarceration, he makes a conscious effort to disengage from his surroundings in the prison. He does not make friends and interacts with other men in the prison as little as possible. He refuses to comply with the social expectations of the prison and is at one point placed in solitary confinement for resisting rape by a fellow inmate. The only person Fonny is willing to connect with during his time in prison is Tish. He waits for her visits every day as his only opportunity to actively engage with another person. Besides his interactions with Tish, Fonny approaches his incarceration with numbness, as a survival strategy. He refuses to have any meaningful interactions during his time in prison and instead chooses to disengage so that he does not have to deal with the atrocity of the situation.

There is a change in Fonny's attitude and behaviour, however, when Tish's mother is unable to bring Mrs. Rogers, the woman who was raped, back to New York. The trial is postponed yet again, and Fonny's eyes are opened to the reality of the situation. He experiences a new awareness that results in a transformation:

When Fonny learns that the trial has been postponed, and learns why, and what effect Victoria's disaster may have on his own – it is I who tell him – something quite strange, altogether wonderful, happens in him. It is not that he gives up hope, but that he ceases clinging to it. (Baldwin 1974, 233)

This is a turning point for Fonny, because he realises that his trial has been postponed indefinitely. Regardless of the unjust circumstances that have put him in this position, he now finds that no protestations of innocence or evidence in his favour will help him because he is operating in a system that wants to control and eliminate him through his incarceration. His incarceration was never about the crime – it was about Officer Bell seeking revenge against him, for not fully subordinating himself to the officer. Fonny's confrontation with Officer Bell was public, and at the moment where a black man was expected to back down and submit to a white police officer, he did not. During his incarceration, Fonny understands that he is being punished – not for a crime, but for refusing to meet the racialised social norms of his community. He does not give up on hope, because Tish's family and his father might still be able to get him out on bail, but he understands that the situation has become much more dire. He also understands the set of events that have led him to this particular situation, where he could be incarcerated indefinitely without trial or access to legal recourse or justice. This new awareness is reflected in his behaviour:

Now, Fonny knows why he is here – why he is where he is; now, he dares to look around him. He is not here for anything he has done. He has always known that, but now he knows it with a

difference. At meals, in the showers, up and down the stairs, in the evening, just before everyone is locked in again, he looks at the others, he listens: what have *they* done? Not much. To do much is to have the power to place these people where they are, and keep them where they are. These captive men are the hidden price for a hidden lie: the righteous must be able to locate the damned. To do much is to have the power and the necessity to dictate to the damned. But that, thinks Fonny, works both ways. *You're in or you're out. Okay. I see. Motherfuckers. You won't hang me.* (ibid, 235)

Fonny's incarceration and experience as a black man within the criminal justice system have heightened his awareness not only in regard to his own incarceration, but also the incarceration of other black men. He sees that for many prisoners, their imprisonment often has nothing to do with what they have done, but with their status in a system that seeks to control and silence black men, to portray black men as criminals. In her work on performance theory, Butler considers the way that a person's relationship to his/her label or identity. When someone acknowledges the provisionality and temporality of a label, s/he is able to exercise some level of control or agency in the performance of the label: 'In avowing the sign's strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism), that identity can become a site of contest and revision, indeed, take on a future set of significations that those of us who use it now may not be able to foresee' (Butler 1993, 312).

Fonny's incarceration is the turning point in his life that gives him this fuller awareness of the state of young black men.

Although Fonny has an awareness of the danger he faced as a black man prior to his incarceration, there are certain moments in which he acts rashly and without considering the consequences. For example, in his verbal altercation with Officer Bell, he is almost moved to react violently. It is Tish who stops him. Harris (1978, 58) notes that 'her awareness of what white cops do to black men forces Tish to take control; she realises she must emasculate Fonny in this instance in order to save him'. Fonny, wanting to express a certain construction of masculinity, is about to do so without considering the consequences. Because of his incomplete awareness of the situation, Tish must step in and interrupt Fonny's expression of masculinity. However, after some time in prison and delays in getting his case to trial, Fonny experiences a new, fuller awareness of his place in the criminal justice system.

Incarceration in Wright's *The long dream*

Fishbelly, the main character in Richard Wright's *The long dream*, is characterised by his naiveté as a child and adolescent. In his conversations with friends, he seeks to redirect the conversation away from issues of race whenever they arise. He has in particular one friend, Sam, who is distinct in his peer group because of his strong awareness of the position of young black men in the South. However, every time Sam brings up these

issues, Fishbelly joins the rest of his peer group in dismissing Sam's concerns, often in a hostile way:

'That ain't fair,' Fishbelly protested. 'Why we want to fight white folks? They ain't done nothing to us—'

'They just made you slaves one time,' Sam blocked him.

'Aw, that was a long time ago,' Tony said.

'I don't like this *race* talk!' Fishbelly was vehement. 'Sam *would* think of something like that.'

'I want to know,' Sam said, turning to Zeke to pursue his quest. 'Suppose you was a white man, what would you do with us?'

Fishbelly and Tony stared at Zeke's face, which became relaxed, dreamy. Sam waited. (Wright 1958, 105)

In these moments Fishbelly actively seeks to remain unaware of the injustice black men experience in his community. Discussing the racial politics of his community makes him so uncomfortable that he becomes hostile in his denial and tries to shut down the conversation.

As Fishbelly grows older, he becomes increasingly aware of the subordinated state of black men in his town. As this awareness increases, he also experiences a growing level of dissatisfaction and disappointment with regard to Tyree, his father. When another young black man in his town, Chris, is lynched, Fishbelly is disappointed in the way his father talks about the violence perpetrated by the white men of Clintonville:

Fishbelly's father paradoxically expresses relief that Chris Sims has been killed: 'It's a good thing he's dead... Lissen: when them white folks get all roused... when they git all mixed up in their minds about their women – when that happens they want *blood!* And there can't be no peace in this town 'less they get their *blood!*' (ibid, 71)

Tyree's fatalism is grounded in actual experience, and leads him to take on the responsibility of conferring the codes of lynch law to his son. The sight of Chris' mutilated body, Tyree thinks, will instill in Fish the fear of miscegenation and white reprisal. Yet Fish perceives a faint irony in Tyree's actions. His father is an undertaker, literally a 'body snatcher,' whose business is explicitly concerned with transforming black bodies – even Chris's – into money (Geiger 1999, 202).

Fishbelly thinks that Tyree has sold out on his values and cooperated with powerful white men for his own personal gain. Tyree's teaching is one of compliance. This has implications for Fishbelly's expression of masculinity:

Fish's emerging masculinity is thus systematically unmade in terms of a positive racial or sexual identity, for it is formed within an arena of white power which circumscribes entrance into the social world by persistently threatening the black male subject with total erasure and indeterminacy. Fearing the white woman, dismissive of the black woman, Fish is led away

from many values that might have been reinforced in a coherent and autonomous community to internalize the oppositional and contradictory values of a Southern (white) hierarchy. (ibid, 205)

Before his incarceration, Fishbelly's identity and his construction of masculinity are based in class and social privileges that are intrinsically tied to his relationship, and cooperation, with white authority, even if these relationships are indirect. He is conflicted – he does not admire Tyree for the way he complies with the expectations of white men, but finds himself following Tyree's lead as he believes it will offer him some form of protection:

Tyree teaches Fishbelly about accepting the injustices that whites commit against them and performing as the white establishment expects – something Fishbelly doesn't want to learn – but, at least for Tyree, is apparently the only way to survive. Fishbelly sees Tyree shrink in the presence of a white man and is disgusted, but later, whether he likes it or not, Fishbelly internalizes his father's example. (Colonna 2009, 49)

Fishbelly, although disappointed with the way his father responds to the white hierarchy, gradually finds himself doing the same thing as he gets older.

Fishbelly is mostly a bystander in interactions with the white community. He experiences injustice as a black man, but in most cases his contact with white men is limited. However, when the brothel which Tyree manages burns down, Fishbelly finds himself pulled into the conflict between Tyree and Cantley, the white police chief. He watches Tyree grovel before Cantley and reacts with disbelief. He is still naïve to the politics that his father plays and that he is abruptly being pulled into:

Fishbelly was transfixed. *Was that his father?* It couldn't be. Yet it was... there were two Tyrees: one was a Tyree resolved unto death to save himself and yet daring not to act out his resolve; the other was a make-believe Tyree, begging, weeping – a Tyree who was a weapon in the hands of the determined Tyree. The nigger, with moans and wailing, had sunk the harpoon of his emotional claim into the white man's heart. (Wright 1958, 250)

It is not until Tyree's death and his own incarceration that Fishbelly is able to fully come to terms with the circumstances that have led him to his current position. Like Fanny, Fishbelly is framed and accused of rape by a white police officer who uses the false accusation to eliminate him. Imprisoned for almost two years, Fishbelly is confronted with a number of interactions that significantly increase his awareness. During this time he reflects on Tyree's relationship with Cantley and how his father, as a black man, played the system as an act of resistance:

It was upon Tyree's life that he now brooded most. How had Tyree gotten along with whites for so many years while he, who had faced them for but a few days, was in jail? Until the terror of the week of Tyree's death, he could recall only one other time when Tyree had been frightened or angry, and that had been when Chris had been killed. Had Tyree feared the whites and hidden it? Yet he knew that pride would have kept Tyree from revealing his fear to him. Maybe Tyree had lived with fear so long that he had gotten used to it, could not call it by its right name? Tyree's

instinctive wisdom, a wisdom that could not be found in books, had held the hostile whites at bay. (ibid, 361–362)

He has a conversation with a black male prisoner sent to trick him into revealing information. When Fishbelly first sees the other prisoner, he immediately trusts him because they are both incarcerated black men, and because the other prisoner opens up to him. However, he eventually becomes aware of the real reason why the other prisoner is talking to him: he was sent by Cantley to spy on Fishbelly. In this moment Fishbelly has insight into something that had previously escaped him. Before, he was extremely trusting of anyone who encountered him in a friendly way. However, his time in prison has opened his eyes to people's ulterior motives. He attacks the spy, knowing that it will only cause trouble for him. The attack marks a transformation in Fishbelly's behaviour – although he previously showed resistance by not revealing the location of the canceled cheques, he *acted* as though he were in compliance with Cantley and other white men. In attacking the other prisoner, however, he breaks free from such compliance, having realised that no matter what he does, he will not be able to win:

'Why did you do it, Fish?' McWilliams asked him that afternoon.

'Mr. McWilliams, that nigger was spying on me,' Fishbelly argued. 'I went for 'im. Goddammit, I'd do it again.'

'I'm sorry Fish. I could've gotten you out at next court hearing, but now you've got to serve a year and a half. You mustn't let these people provoke you.'

'I don't care,' Fishbelly repeated. 'It ain't your fault.'

Alone again, he bowed his head and brooded. He felt hopeless, at the mercy of white men. They knew how and when to make him fight against himself. They were punishing him and they had made him heap even more punishment upon himself. He stood, trembling; then shut his eyes and screamed into the darkness:

'I DON'T CARE!' (ibid, 369)

Ultimately, Fishbelly's years of incarceration lead him to a heightened awareness of the conspiracy amongst powerful white men in his town, which aims to subordinate and eliminate the black population. This awareness leads to a transformation in his values and actions. Upon leaving prison, he decides he cannot stay in Clintonville, and opts to move to France. He can no longer participate in a community that marginalises him, and recognises that after his conflict with Cantley he can never again live comfortably in his old community. He recognises that in his old community, his expression of masculinity will always be impeded by his marginalised status:

Adulthood for a black man requires a complicated balance of agency and accepted powerlessness or at least a feigned powerlessness, a balance and acceptance of both the internal and external loci of control. Learning of the various influences on the self and their interconnectedness helps

Fishbelly with his own development, his own maturation into an adult black man and coping with the harsh reality that his life is predicated on two loci of control. (Colonna 2009, 50)

After his time in prison, Fishbelly acknowledges he cannot ever assume full agency over his life as a black man – the only solution for him is to leave. Before his incarceration, Fishbelly was somewhat content with his standing in the community. Although he occasionally acknowledged his subordinated state as a black man, he also enjoyed certain privileges because of his class, and because of the respect his father received from the community. However, Fishbelly and Tyree's class privilege and the respect they 'earned' were contingent on their compliance with the white authorities of Clintonville. It is only during his incarceration, where his class and social standing are of no use to him, that he is able to clearly see that no amount of privilege will keep him from being made subservient to the white people around him. This causes him to leave Clintonville for France, and for the reader events are left unresolved. The story ends with Fishbelly in transition, both physically and in terms of his values and masculinity:

The end of the novel, which finds Fish leaving Mississippi on a plane for France, presents Fish's flight on one level as 'running away' from the realities of the South, perhaps to enter into another long dream, but on another level – and for the first time in his life – his body is literally released from the pull of gravity, and from the constitutive identities of home and place. If the fixing of masculine identity, like that of race, is a prevailing social fiction, perhaps Fish's newfound and transgressive mobility on the very level of the body will ultimately translate into a mobile and emergent understanding of his own masculine self. (Geiger 1999, 206)

Fish's time in prison leads him to a clearer understanding of the complex system of oppression under which he operates as a black man. The novel ends with Fishbelly in the midst of a transformation – his location, and his values and understanding of the social world he lived in, are changing.

Incarceration in Williams' *The man who cried I am*

One of the most fascinating incarcerated black male characters I have encountered is Moses Boatwright in John Williams' *The man who cried I am*. Unlike Fonny and Fishbelly, Boatwright is guilty of his crime. He is incarcerated and ultimately executed for cannibalism. Max, the main character, visits Boatwright many times throughout his incarceration to report on his story. During Max's visits, Boatwright recounts the story of how he killed a white man and later ate his heart and genitals, but he also shares some reflections on his experience as an educated black man in American society:

'I have a Master's degree.'

'In what?'

Boatwright snickered. ‘Philosophy. Ever heard of a Negro philosopher?’ Max stopped writing and looked across the room at the prisoner. ‘I wanted so much to be different, special. Philosophy. Oh, I was great in it. Then I woke up one day, not too long ago, and I knew what had happened to me. They didn’t want to tell me there was no place for me, but they didn’t want to waste me either. Maybe the break might come.’

‘Negro colleges?’

‘Thank you, no.’

A snot, Max thought. ‘Why not?’

‘I didn’t want to be buried. You must know what those schools are like.’ (Williams 1967, 56)

Boatwright began his educational career believing he could be different. If he was successful in school, he was convinced he could have a different experience from other black men. However, in prison he speaks clearly of his awareness that this is not the case – that, despite his hard work and talent there was no place for him in the world of education.

Boatwright tells the story of his own transformation. He tells Max how, as a young man with a philosophy degree from Harvard, he was hopeful about his future. He thought his education would give him a different experience than other black men. However, he quickly became disillusioned and found that even in his attempts to play the politics of respectability, he was still marginalised because of his race. Boatwright was not explicitly prohibited from doing the things he wanted to, but found that he was unable to reach his goals as an academic, due to very subtle oppression. He felt pressured to perform in a certain way, but this performance did not end up helping him. Instead, his performance made him feel increasingly trapped. Butler (1993, 312) describes the role that this kind of quiet, subtle oppression plays in ascribing performances to people:

Here it becomes important to recognize that oppression works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects – *abjects*, we might call them – who are neither named nor prohibited within the economy of the law. Here oppression works through the production of a domain of unthinkability and unnameability.

Butler is here describing the extent to which oppression operates: it is much more far-reaching than an explicit set of rules and prohibitions. Rather, it is a more subtle expectation of how one is expected to *perform* one’s identity in society based on one’s race, gender, and other identifiers. Butler argues that oppression takes its form from a set of unspoken rules of engagement. It is this very oppression that Max seeks to ignore. He wishes to remain unaware of his social role and the performances that he and other people deliver. However, Boatwright, isolated from the outside world, understands and articulates it much more clearly.

In their conversations, it becomes apparent that Boatwright, in his incarcerated state, has a level of awareness that Max, a free man, does not. Max is much more naïve about the social world in which he operates:

‘Look at me,’ Boatwright said. ‘Look.’

‘I am looking.’

‘But you are not seeing—’

‘I’m starting to see, Moses.’

‘Yes, but you are not seeing precisely. I am an abomination. Ugly, black, cutting back on my thoughts so I wouldn’t *embarrass* people, being superbly brilliant for the right people. I was born seeing precisely, Mr. Reddick. There *were* times when I chose to.’ (Williams 1967, 58)

Williams demonstrates that the character with the most limited access to the social world has the deepest and most direct insights about it. Boatwright is isolated from the social world and his human interactions are very limited. However, he is much more insightful than Max about the state of society and his position in it. His conversations with Max deeply affect him and stay with him long after Boatwright is executed. Max, with his mobility and freedom, is unable to make the same connections that Boatwright can from his prison cell.

Incarceration in *Of love and dust*

Ernest Gaines presents a non-traditional scenario of incarceration in *Of love and dust*. Marcus is a teenage boy who has been sent to work on a plantation for five years as punishment for murder. There are other people on the plantation who are not incarcerated, but they all know that he is there to serve a sentence. We do not get to see much of what Marcus is like before his incarceration, so we cannot make a comparison to what he was like before and after his incarceration. However, during his time on the plantation, we see a steady change in his behaviour and values. The other workers on the plantation see Marcus as selfish, spoiled and rash. He frequently makes decisions that could be characterised as unwise and irresponsible. However, by the time of his death on the plantation at the end of the novel, the narrator reflects on the ways in which Marcus’ rash actions were acts of resistance, and is motivated to take his own steps of resistance. Marcus’ incarceration results in a transformation not only of himself, but also of others on the plantation. And although he has been on the plantation for a limited period of time, he provides insights into the inner workings of the plantation that the other black workers are unable to see.

When Marcus first arrives on the plantation, he is not prepared for the work he must do or for the way he will be treated. On his first day of work, he is not dressed appropriately for the job, and refuses any assistance or advice:

Then, as I came farther down the quarter, I saw Playboy Marcus coming out the yard. He had on a short-sleeve green shirt and a pair of brown pants. No hat – not even a handkerchief round his neck. He had on a pair of brown and white dress shoes.

‘Where the hell you think you’re going in that?’ I asked him.

He didn’t answer me; he didn’t even glance my way. He got in the front trailer because John and Freddie were in the other one. John and Freddie, in their big straw hats and khakis, were looking at him. They wanted to laugh (they were the laughing-est two you ever saw), but you could see they were afraid of him.

‘You better get back in there, boy, and put something else on,’ I told Marcus.

He didn’t move.

‘There’s a hat in my room on that armoire, Marcus,’ I said.

He still didn’t move. (Gaines 1967, 25–26)

Jim, the narrator, describes Marcus as stubborn and naïve when they first meet. He is unwilling to accept advice from those who have been working on the plantation for a long time.

Although Marcus is not on the plantation for very long, and does not have strong relationships with the other people on the plantation, he understands his place in that environment much more clearly than the others do. Because of his incarcerated state he is privy to the inner workings of the plantation in a way that often escapes the other black workers. Although Jim has worked on the plantation for years and knows Hebert, the owner, and Bonbon, the overseer, well, it is Marcus who explains to him that Hebert wants Bonbon dead:

‘That’s if I kill Bonbon for him [Hebert],’ Marcus said, looking straight at me.

‘You playing with me, Marcus?’

‘He told me that Saturday when I was raking that yard.’

I didn’t say anything – I didn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe I was hearing Marcus say it...

‘You’re lying, Marcus.’

‘Why you think he bond me out? You think he care anything for my nan-nan?... Well, you wrong, and she wrong. He got me out to kill Bonbon.’...

At first I didn’t believe Marcus, but now I did. (ibid, 196–197)

Despite his naiveté, Marcus understands the social dynamic of the plantation – particularly, the social dynamic of the white men on the plantation – in a way that Jim does not. Jim is the one who is in denial about the situation, and Marcus, with his lack of experience and stubborn arrogance, is the one who enlightens him.

During his time on the plantation, Marcus continues to be stubborn and rash. However, his presence deeply affects others. One of those most affected by Marcus

is Louise, who is married to Bonbon, the overseer. When Louise and Marcus begin sleeping together, there is a noticeable change in Louise:

Aunt Margaret told me that when Marcus came up the quarter now, all he and Louis talked about was getting away. Sitting at the table eating supper, or laying across the bed, that was all they talked about... They didn't care if she heard what they had to talk about or not. Aunt Margaret said sometimes she would hear Louise crying in the room. Before Marcus came there she had never heard Louise cry in the house once. If she got mad about something, she just clamped her mouth and locked herself up in the room... But she didn't do that any more; she cried now when she couldn't have her way. (ibid, 233)

Louise, who was previously very quiet and compliant, is transformed into a rebellious person through her time with Marcus. Before meeting him, she had been resigned to stay in an unsatisfying marriage and to life on the plantation. But her relationship with Marcus makes her defiant – she cries and expresses her discontent, where before she kept it to herself. She even plots with Marcus to escape from the plantation.

Jim is also transformed by Marcus' time on the plantation. After Bonbon kills Marcus, Jim decides to leave the plantation and start a new life. Having worked on the plantation for years, he considered himself content with his life, but after witnessing Marcus' defiance, Jim becomes more clearly aware of the corruption on the plantation. He knows now that even though Bonbon shot and killed Marcus, it was Marshall, the owner of the plantation, who orchestrated the whole series of events. He can no longer participate in the life of the plantation while knowing about the corruption of the white owner and overseer:

'Yes, you have to leave,' she [Aunt Margaret] said, nodding her head thoughtfully.

'I know,' I said, eating.

'You see, you won't forget,' she said.

'I can't, Aunt Margaret.'

'That's why you got to go,' she said. 'You'll just keep reminding him.'

'You forgot already, Aunt Margaret?' I asked her.

'Yes,' she said...

'When you live long as I done lived, you learn to forget things quite easy,' she said.

'I can't. He killed Marcus; Bonbon didn't.'

'That's what you saying,' she said.

'That's what we all know,' I said.

'I don't know nothing,' she said, looking straight in my eyes....

'But you don't know Marshall Hebert was the one who killed Marcus?'

'No, I don't know that,' she said. (ibid, 279)

Before Marcus came to the plantation, Jim displayed the same willing compliance and denial that Aunt Margaret does. But after knowing Marcus and the events that led to his death, he can no longer remain compliant. He has to leave.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NOTIONS OF BLACK MASCULINITY

Incarceration is most often interpreted as a loss of power, because the incarcerated person's agency is compromised and there is a loss of access and visibility. However, the connection between power and visibility is a gendered construct: 'Many anthropologists have implicitly reproduced and extrapolated a phallogentric logic by defining visibility and power as synonymous terms rather than as historically related positions. This is especially true in analyses of domestic and public domains' (Morris 1995, 570).

Since power and control are central to most traditional constructs of (black) masculinity, incarceration is often read as a phenomenon that compromises black masculinity. However, I would argue that in the African American novels sampled, incarceration, while undoubtedly oppressive, often provides a meaningful transformative experience for black men. Black male incarcerated characters in these novels are transformed by their heightened awareness, and their interactions with the social world change. While they experience a loss of power and visibility during incarceration, they gain awareness and adopt a stance of non-compliance.

Hegemonic masculinity is based on the domination of women and other men. It is defined through a series of actions and performances meant to secure the subordination of other people:

Rather than attempt to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives. 'Masculinity,' to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender; and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality and culture. (Connell 1995, 71)

Incarcerated black male characters are not able to exercise this domination in the same way they could as free men. They find themselves subordinated to white male prison guards, as well as possibly subordinated to other prisoners. There are usually no women whom they can dominate. In lieu of traditional expressions of domination, black male incarcerated characters' transformation leads them to non-compliance as an alternative masculine expression.

Much scholarly work has focused on connections between masculinity and incarceration. However, the connection is usually one-sided: expressions of masculinity are seen to have an effect on a person's risk of incarceration:

All data reflect that men and boys perpetrate more of the conventional crimes – and the more serious of these crimes – than do women and girls. Moreover, men hold a virtual monopoly

on the commission of syndicated and white-collar forms of crime. The concept of hegemonic masculinity helped in theorizing the relationship among masculinities and among a variety of crimes (Messerschmidt 1993) and was also used in studies on specific crimes by boys and men. (ibid, 833)

However, much less has been said so far about the effects of incarceration on constructions of masculinity. It is important to begin an analysis on the implications of incarceration for black male masculinity, because the symbol of the black man struggling against the criminal justice system has become, in some ways, a powerful representation of black racial victimhood. Carbado (1998, 344) cites the example of O.J. Simpson:

In the Black Male/White Victimhood Narrative, O.J. Simpson's gender matters but Nicole Brown-Simpson's does not. As a Black man defending himself against the criminal justice system, Simpson represents what is Black, and Blackness is essentialized to represent who and what he is. He became, as it were, 'the race' – and a symbol for racial injustice... The statement 'another Black man being put down by the system' is a male-gendered racial signification. It rigidifies the impression that this history of Black Americans is the history of Black men, not Black women, being 'put down by the system.'

The incarcerated black male has become a potent symbol of racial injustice. However, there is a lack of meaningful analysis with regard to the way black masculinity is transformed by incarceration. In these four African American novels, there is a clear pattern. Black male incarcerated characters find new outlets for masculine expression in the absence of a normative social order. When they do not have access to typical expressions of hegemonic masculinity – particularly, domination – incarcerated black male characters instead express their masculinity through awareness and non-compliance.

It is also interesting to consider the implications of black male incarceration through the lens of emasculation thesis, which I take to be defined thus:

Emasculation thesis broadly states that black men have been and/or continue to be somehow 'emasculated' through processes of racism, colonialism and Western imperialism. This forms the fundamental basis of most work by black male theorists on questions of masculinity and the position and experiences of black men more particularly. (Edwards 2006, 58)

I would argue that black male incarcerated characters experience incarceration as a kind of 'emasculated'. Many of their normative expressions of masculinity, based in the domination of women and other men, are no longer available to them. Much of hegemonic masculinity is defined by domination and control, and in prison incarcerated men find their agency compromised in a way that does not allow them to exercise domination and control in the usual ways. In the confines of prison, they find alternative ways to express their masculinity. It is in this confined state that they are able to achieve a new sense of awareness and a transformation in their masculine expression.

The black male incarcerated characters we have encountered in these novels have transformed their behaviour and values as a survival strategy. Failure to adapt to a

new expression of masculinity can have negative implications for men of colour in the criminal justice system:

This criminal justice pipeline provides young men with meanings of masculinity that ultimately influence their decisions to commit crime and engage in violence. While race affects how a young person is treated in the criminal justice pipeline, masculinity plays a role in how young men desist or recidivate as they pass through the system. One of the outcomes of pervasive criminal justice contact for young black and Latino men is the production of a hypermasculinity that obstructs desistance and social mobility. (Rios 2009, 151)

It is crucial that black male incarcerated characters adjust. When they find themselves ‘emasculated’ by their incarceration, they must find new avenues of masculine expression. In the novels sampled, this is often characterised by heightened awareness and non-compliance.

CONCLUSION

Incarcerated black males’ patterns of expression in the four African American novels studied here, display signs of heightened awareness and transformation. Despite their isolation from society, these characters’ reflections and insights are more profound than those of their ‘free’ black male peers.

Incarceration disrupts traditional forms of black masculine expression, pushing black male incarcerated characters to turn to alternative forms of masculine expression. Because of their isolation and the circumstances of injustice that often accompany their incarceration, black male characters have an increased awareness relative to their peers on the outside. This transforms their masculine expression to one of non-compliance. While incarceration is overwhelmingly understood as a disempowering experience for black men, these characters show the ways in which they were able to continue empowering themselves and to find other ways to express themselves despite racially unjust circumstances.

NOTE

1. I consider a ‘traditional prison setting’ to involve subjects who are accused of committing a crime and are sentenced to a period of incarceration in a penitentiary building.

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