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Reclaiming Black Manhood: Freedom and An Ethic of Love in Leonard Pitts's *Freeman* (2012)

ABSTRACT

Although attempts to reconstruct black masculinity can be traced to Frederick Douglass's extraordinary memoir that subverted white antebellum representations of black subjectivity, it was after an entire decade of black feminist scholarship that the first wave of the black masculinities scholarship emerged towards the end of the twentieth century (Wallace 2002). In the aftermath of Barack Obama's election to presidency (2009-2017), however, the debate on African American manhood gained further momentum. Leonard Pitts, Jr.'s Freeman (2012) published around that time takes up black manhood as a subject of study through a return to the history of slavery via the Neo-Slave Narrative genre. This article critically analyzes Pitts's Freeman through the lens of bell hooks's theorization of "an ethic of love" (2001) and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of signifyin(g) (1988) to argue that in being denied access to hegemonic masculinity, black men deploy signifyin(g) as a rhetorical strategy to redefine their manhood via an ethic of love. While previous scholarship has focused on history and community in reconceiving black male identity, this paper is unique in its focus on the power of love to reconstruct black masculinity. Critically analyzing black men's struggle with the meaning of freedom in the selected text, the paper argues that black men deploy love's transformative power as a healing strategy that allows them to renegotiate a painful past as well as redefine black masculinity by challenging black male stereotypical representations. As such, the meaning of "freedom" in the novel is inextricably tied with the emotion of love; together, they redefine black masculinity as grounded in an ethic of love.

Keywords: black masculinity, freedom, love ethic, neo-slave narrative, Leonard Pitts, Freeman

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The ghosts of slavery continue to haunt contemporary America. As the first slaves obtained their freedom from the oppressive institution, they began to revisit their experiences of slavery. Slave narratives, the autobiographical accounts of ex-slaves' journey from slavery to freedom, occupy a significant place in the archives of American history as well as the canon of American literature. Narratives written by Olaudah Equiano, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs are among the most prominent of these that have recorded the vicious treatment of slaves and its impact on their personal and collective lives. While the Thirteenth Amendment emancipated slaves across America after the Civil War, and the Fourteenth Amendment granted citizenship rights to the newly freed, the end of racial oppression and inequality was a long way to come. Indeed, over the next hundred years, African Americans continued to face racial segregation, discrimination, and violence in the form of Jim Crow Laws, Klu Klux Klan, and an inherently racialized social structure. Indeed, even after the Civil Rights Movement ended racial segregation, ushering in an era of relative racial equality, race relations in the U.S. continued to be informed by the legacy of slavery. The rise of the neo-slave narrative genre in the second half of the twentieth century thus owes to a renewed interest in returning to the history of slavery and its impact on the descendants of former slaves. Neo-Slave Narrative are "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell 1987, p. 289). These narratives represent "the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity" (Anim-Addo & Lima 2018, p. 1). Addressing the gaps in the slave narratives through contemporary accounts, neo-slave narratives foreground the centrality of the history of slavery to contemporary race relations in the U.S.

Freeman (2012) by Leonard Garvey Pitts Jr. is one such narrative. A Pulitzer Prize winner journalist and commentator, Pitts Jr. has written highly acclaimed fiction and nonfiction that extensively documents the racial, political, and cultural issues rampant in contemporary American society. One of his major focuses has been the effect of racism on the lives and psyches of black men. Indeed, the impact of slavery on black masculinity has been the subject of a number of literary and critical studies over the past few decades (Hammond & Mattis 2005; Mutua 2006; Gause 2008; Milton 2012; Rogers et al. 2015;

Pelzer 2016; Bost et al. 2019; Young 2021). Scholars have argued that "the way black/brown men's masculinity is perceived today, and the way they have been treated in society, is fundamentally linked to the history of slavery and the colonial legacy" (Orelus 2010, p. 66). This paper adds to this body of work by exploring the effects of slavery on black men in Pitts Jr.'s *Freeman* from the perspective of bell hooks's theorization of a "love ethic" (2001) and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of signifyin(g) (1988) to argue that

in being denied access to hegemonic masculinity, black men deploy signifyin(g) as a rhetorical strategy to redefine their manhood via an ethic of love. Critically analyzing the representation of black men's struggle with the meaning of freedom in the selected text, the paper argues that in renegotiating with the painful past black men deploy love's transformative power as a healing strategy that allows them to redefine black masculinity by challenging the stereotypical representations of black men. As such, the meaning of "freedom" in the novel is inextricably tied with the emotion of love; together, they redefine black masculinity as grounded in an ethic of love. This research is significant in that it not only adds to the existing body of literary research on the impact of slavery on black manhood, but it also explores the healing strategies deployed by black men to renegotiate their masculinity.

Scholarship on Black Masculinity

Starting with the pioneering works of Hazel V. Carby (1987), Mary Helen Washington (1988), and Patricia Hills Collins (1990), among others, literary constructions of black womanhood and black female subjectivity have been the object of numerous studies since the second half of the twentieth century (Sears 2010; Gammage 2015; Lindsey 2017; Alameen-Shavers & Gammage 2019; Tounsel 2022). The subject of African American masculinity and manhood, however, received relatively less critical attention as a significant area of study (Wallace 2002) until recent years. Indeed, the images of "Black degeneracy" that were "developed during slavery" helped construct a social reality after the war "grounded in a belief in White male superiority and, conversely, Black male inferiority that was to last for the next 100 years and beyond" (White and Cones 1999, p. 32). As White and Cones note:

Negative images of Black males were conveyed in stage shows, novels, movies, advertisements, newspapers, and magazines. North and South, America was saturated with images of clowning, cunning, lazy, ignorant, pleasure-seeking, childlike Black men who needed to be supervised and controlled by powerful, competent, responsible White males. (p. 34-35)
Attempts to reconstruct black masculinity can be traced to Frederick

Douglass's (1845) extraordinary memoir that sought to reject white antebellum representations of black subjectivity by redefining black masculinity as per the dominant white models. Other groundbreaking studies of the impact of slavery and colonialism on black men's identities can be found in W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) and Frantz Fanon (1952; 1961). However, the "new masculinities scholarship" would not emerge until a few decades later. Indeed, it was after a decade of black feminist scholarship that the first wave of the new masculinities scholarship took up "African American

manhood as a significant object of study" (Wallace 2002, p. 3). While some of these works in the first wave (Middleton 1992, Silverman 1992, Seidler 2003, Rotundo 1993) overlooked "the racial constitutiveness of the idealized man in America and Europe," others (Wallace 2002, p. 3; Staples 1982; Hoch 1979, Majors and Mancini Billson 1992, Madhubuti 1990, and Wallace 1979) deliberated on "the social psychological paradoxes of black masculine experience" (Wallace 2002, p. 3). The second wave proved to be more groundbreaking; works such as Saint-Aubin (1994), Mercer (1994), Wideman (1994), and Golden (1994) situated black men at the center of the theory of masculinity, thus highlighting "the white mask" of the first wave. More recently, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Hazel Carby, Devon Carbado, Philip Biran Harper, Michael Awkward, Don Belton, Patricia Hill Collins, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Maggie Montesinos Sale, and Caludia Bordsky Lacour have further added to the richness of the field (Wallace 2002, p. 4).

In general, studies have focused on the impact of negative stereotyping on black men that socially emasculated them thus creating a lack of positive self-concept (Staples 1982, p. 8). As Nagel notes, negative constructions of black masculinity reflect an attempt by White America to "defend slavery and camouflage its associated excess" (2002, p. 97). Scholars have also highlighted the intersectional aspects of black masculinities (Milton 2012; Rogers et al. 2015; Pelzer 2016). Others have dwelled on redressal strategies for the damage that negative representations have caused to generations of black men (Mutua 2006; Gause 2008; Bost et al. 2019; Young 2021). Patricia Hill Collins foregrounds the need for the subordinated group to "name one's own reality" in order to counter the "controlling images" perpetrated by the dominant discourse (2004, p. 300). Others have emphasized the significance of black history "to transcend the notion of masculinity that has been historically and socially constructed by privileged white males and imposed on them since colonial times (Orelus 2010, p. 86). This paper, however, draws on bell hooks's concept of a love ethic to understand the healing strategies that black men deploy in redefining their manhood through a critical analysis of Pitts's *Freeman*.

Compared to relatively fewer theoretical and critical studies on black manhood, there has been a consistent representation of black masculinity in African American literature. Starting with the slave narrative genre to the Reconstruction literature (Booker T. Washington, Charles Chestnut; W. E. B. Du Bois) the New Negro or Harlem Renaissance (Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen Zora Neal Hurston); the Civil Rights and the Black Arts Movement (James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Malcom X, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison), and the post-1970s Renaissance (Toni Morrison, Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler), many writers have explored the subject. Significantly, Barack Obama's rise to presidency in 2009 further ignited the debate about the status and subject position of black men in contemporary America.

Contemporary Black male writers have thus attempted to reclaim black manhood with a renewed interest in the field. Prominent among these are Ta-Nehisi Coates, Colson Whitehead, Jericho Brown, Brandon Taylor, and Leonard Pitts Jr. As an African American writer of fiction and non-fiction, Leonard Pitts's writing centers upon black male figures. Whereas Pitts's non-fiction has received ample attention, his fictional works remain mostly unexplored. *Freeman*, in particular, has not received much critical attention. Therefore, this research has selected this text to analyze Pitts's reconception of black masculinity. While previous scholarship has focused on history and community in reconceiving black male identity, this paper is unique in its focus on the "transformative power of love" (hooks 2001, p. xxii) as a healing strategy to reconstruct black masculinity. The paper seeks to argue that the meaning of "freedom" in the novel is interlaced with the emotion of love that together redefine black masculinity via an ethic of love.

Signifyin(g) and A Love Ethic

This section lays out the analytical framework of this study that draws on bell hooks's concept of a love ethic and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s notion of signifyin(g) to understand Leonard Pitts's renegotiation of black manhood. bell hooks theorizes a "love ethic" for black people in her book *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001). The book addresses "the meaning of love in black experience" and calls for "an ethic of love" as the basis "to renew progressive anti-racist struggle" and offer "a blueprint for black survival and self-determination" (hooks 2001, p. xxii). Tracing "a pervasive lovelessness" in African American community, hooks notes that although "racist stereotypes that had been used to subordinate and alienate black people" came to be "challenged" in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, "the question of whether or not black people were capable of love, of deep and complex emotions, continued to be a subject for heated discussion and debate" (p. xix). She laments the fact that the black efforts to counter dehumanization did not mention love as a source of healing, thus making African Americans contest their blackness instead of loving it. The subsequent "denigration of love in black experience" has given rise to a kind of "nihilism" that must be displaced with a "love ethic" that can allow them to "effectively resist domination" and "create meaningful, lasting personal and social change." In order to do this, black people must first learn "to love blackness" if they wish to "restore the true meaning of freedom, hope, and possibility" in their lives (p. xxii). Indeed, hooks calls love "a crucial path to healing" for black people (p. 14). For her, "the transformative power of love" can be "the only force that can solve the myriad crises" facing black America (p. xxii).

For hooks, love ethic combines care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility directed towards one's own self and then towards others around them. She rejects the contemporary discourse about material gain as significant for healing as it has diverted the attention of African Americans "away from the need for emotional growth, for us to embrace more wholeheartedly the art and act of loving" (p. 9). Indeed, this love ethic is a political agenda for hooks: "The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change" that can dispel misery and weariness of spirit. hooks believes that once African Americans select a different set of images to represent themselves and their world, efforts to heal the trauma will begin. hooks discourages black people's tendency to "normalize loss and abandonment" as it hinders "the necessary groundwork for emotional well-being that makes love possible" (p. 25). Investing her trust in the potential of love to heal the centuries-old trauma of slavery, hooks maintains that "[i]t is not too late for black people to return to love" and reconsider "the relationship between dehumanization and our capacity to love" (p. 14). hooks's theorization of "the transformative power of love" as a counter strategy is an interesting lens for analyzing Pitts's re-presentation of black manhood in *Freeman*. Drawing on hooks's theorization of an ethic of love, the paper argues that in an effort to confront racial violence and reclaim their manhood, black men in *Freeman* draw on "the transformative power of love" as opposed to white conceptions of masculinity.

In order to further probe black men's renegotiation of their manhood, this paper engages with Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of Signifyin(g) in *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988). Gates argues that when transported to the New World, Africans brought with them a whole set of cultural signs and symbols, committed to their memory, through which they attempted to make sense of the new civilization they were confronted with. These included cultural myths, music, "expressive institutional structures," "metaphysical systems of order," and different "forms of performance" (Gates 1988, p. 4) that have found expression in the black tradition of "double voiced discourse" which Gates terms "Signifyin(g)". Gates links the use of Signifyin(g) with the African American experience of slavery. Living under oppressive conditions, the slaves learned the act of signifyin(g) as a survival strategy and a mark of their Africanness. Gates draws on Roger D. Abrahams to define "signifyin(g)" as a "technique of indirect argument or persuasion", "a language of implication", which refers to the speaker's "ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or situation" (qtd in Gates p. 59).

As the "trope of tropes" (p. 26), signifyin(g) includes several other rhetorical tropes such as "metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony ...

hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis ... aporia, chiasmus, and catechreis" (p. 57). Gates contends that signifyin(g) acts like figuration whereby words and gestures combine to figuratively name things and situations. As such, the practice distances the literal and the metaphorical, creating a figurative difference "between surface and latent meaning" (p. 89) that is evident only to blacks. Gates views the act of signifyin(g) as inseparable from the African oral tradition that represents a "linguistic circumnavigation" (p. 82) between the western linguistic code and the African one, thereby distinguishing blacks as a separate speech community.

This paper thus draws on the concept of signifyin(g) together with hooks's notion of a love ethic as the theoretical framework for analyzing Pitts's renegotiation of black manhood in *Freeman*. Through a close reading of the text within this framework, we argue that the novel provides two models of manhood, a hegemonic white masculinity represented by the Western philosophical tradition and a signifyin(g) black masculinity grounded in the "transformative power of love". In being denied hegemonic masculinity, black characters resort to signifyin(g) as a rhetorical strategy to reconstruct their manhood via an ethics of love. Thus, while hooks provides a path to healing through deploying the power of love, Gates' signifyin(g) depicts the role of rhetorical strategies that black characters use to reclaim their manhood otherwise denied by the racist social structures.

Reconceiving Freedom: Manhood, Love, and Signifyin(g)

Freeman, a neo-slave narrative, is set in the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War. The novel records the journey of its protagonist, Sam Freeman, from the free state of Philadelphia through a war-torn landscape to Mississippi in the South that is reeling under the effect of the Confederate defeat. Sam walks a thousand miles on foot in search of his wife, Tilda, the "exceptional woman" (p. 10) from whom he was separated 15 years ago. Sam's journey is bound up with several other characters' journeys who are all travelling in search of some kind of fulfillment driven by their investment in love. Ben, another black man, is accompanying Sam in the hope of being reunited with his wife and daughter from whom he was separated before the war. A wealthy young white widow of a Union soldier, Prudence Cafferty Kent, is traveling from Boston to Buford, Mississippi to establish a school for freed blacks in the memory of her abolitionist father. Prudence is accompanied by Bonnie, a black girl, whom Prudence's late father had brought from the south and raised as his own daughter. Finally, Tilda is travelling out of Mississippi with her master, Jim McFarland, "shambling trash-heap of a man" (p. 68), who, unwilling to accept the Confederate defeat or free his slaves, wants to "find someplace where white men are still willing to fight back against tyranny" (p. 182) and where "a white man can be treated

like a white man" (p. 178). The fates of these travelers are intricately tied and converge on the central idea of the novel: the meaning of freedom. Their journeys are symbolic of their struggle to understand the idea of freedom and to come to terms with what it means to be free in a new social order. While each character's journey unfolds their traumatic history that continues to haunt them, what becomes a source of healing is their faith in "love" that becomes the transformative force that not only heals black men of their traumatic past but also helps redefine their masculinities as humane, compassionate, loyal, and responsible as opposed to the negative stereotypical representations.

The novel opens with the news of the end of War; however, the manner in which this end is conveyed is symptomatic of the ordeal that awaits its characters; "something heavy thudded the sky" like the "percussive boom" of the "battlefield" followed by the "pealing" of "every kind of bell there was" in "a perfect confusion of joy". The "joy" is offset by the "confusion," which is symbolic of the harrowing past that comes tumbling back with this sudden news and is reflected in Sam's thoughts of Tilda with which the text begins: "His first thought was of her" (p. 1). A free man working in the Library Company of Philadelphia after having escaped slavery fifteen years ago, Sam is unsettled by the news of the end of war as opposed to feeling any emotion of joy. Thus, he decides to leave the comfort of his life in the North to set out on a journey into the deep South in search of his wife, Tilda, from whom he was separated after his attempt to run away along with his son that cost them the life of their only son. Both the guilt of never having received the opportunity to apologize to Tilda as well as his deep, enduring love for her seems to give a new meaning to Sam's life: "he felt oddly weightless and untethered . . . He was actually going to do it, actually going to leave behind comfort and predictability—*home*, meager as it was—to go looking for Tilda" (p. 11). While Sam had escaped from the South to the North in search of freedom, he is once again returning to the South to find the true meaning of freedom. For him, freedom means a reunion with Tilda.

The attempt to escape the torments of slavery is a two-edged sword for black men. In case they fail, they are doomed to years of torture or succumb to death. Their success, on the other hand, takes them away from their families and their community, and they are forever traumatized by the torturous memories of their loved ones' shackled existence under slavery. Sam's days and nights are haunted by the memories and dreams of his beloved wife, Tilda. When he sets out on his journey to Mississippi, he comes across many other men who are undertaking similar journeys in search of their loved ones as the meaning of freedom is incomplete without the "love" that most of them have lost to the institution of slavery. The opening of the novel, "His first thought was of her" (p. 1), attests that the ravages of slavery can only be recovered through the power of love. James Baldwin contends that compared to anger and violence as possible responses to racist

oppressive structures, love remains the most powerful instrument. Love enables one to “take off the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within” (1993, p. 95). He distinguishes a “personal sense of love” from his concept of love in the “universal sense of quest and daring and growth” (p. 95). Thus, Sam’s journey into the deep South is a daring quest that will help him grow by finding the meaning of freedom.

Indeed, the meaning of freedom is inseparable from the emotion of “love” for black men. This is why most characters struggle with the meaning and the import of freedom in their lives after emancipation. When Sam learns about the end of war and the abolition of slavery, he is immediately transported into the past via the reminiscences of his first encounter with Tilda, “the very instant, he loved her and knew that he would love her always” (p. 3). Although after running away, Sam thought he had gained freedom, in reality, he had remained captive to the memories of Tilda and the guilt of his son’s death: “Sam had trained himself *not* to think of her, because thinking of her only made it hurt worse” (p. 3). Therefore, without money or the means for travel, Sam sets out on foot in search of Tilda whose companionship will complete his sense of freedom. Likewise, Ben, another ex-slave is walking on foot to Tennessee in search of his wife Hannah, and his daughter, Leila from whom he was separated seven years ago when he ran away from the plantation. Josiah, the ex-slave Sam and Ben meet during their travel, is fighting three sons of his ex-mistress to reclaim his daughter as well as his manhood for he wonders: “What kind of free man I’m gon’ be if let ‘em take my daughter away and don’t do nothin’ ‘bout it” (p. 153). Likewise, for Wilson, an ex-slave of Jim McFarland, the idea of a free life is linked with reclaiming his manhood that he wants to assert by running away with Lucretia. Referring to McFarland, he notes: “He ain’t but a man, same as me” (p. 64). It is precisely McFarland’s refusal to allow Wilson his manhood that results in the latter’s death; it is significant that McFarland first shoots Wilson only to be followed by Lucretia, leaving their bodies to rot in the field, mocking his desire to reclaim his freedom and manhood.

The novel repeatedly juxtaposes black men’s assertion of their manhood and the white world’s refusal to allow it via frequent instances of violence and brutality directed at black men. In the very first chapter, Sam is involved in a physical fight with Billy Horn, an ex-Union soldier who believes the “war” was not about “nigger freedom” but “to restore the Union” (p. 6). Sam’s son Luke, a “tall” and “strong” young man (p. 77) is reduced to “a dead thing” for his “desire” to assert his manhood (p. 80). When Sam is confronted by the Union soldier who “was spoiling for a fight”, his manhood is once again challenged. Whereas in the comfort of the library under the eye of his benefactress, Mary Cuthbert, Sam was able to defend himself against Horn, here, out in the white world, he cannot. Believing that “[h]e had a self and it was one he wholly possessed, one that was not tied to a white man who had

once considered him his property," Sam "looked the white boy quite deliberately in the eye" to tell him that his name was "Freeman" (p. 46), a name he has just come up with to assert his newfound freedom tied in with a sense of his manhood. This is obviously met with violence on part of the Union soldier who would have killed Sam but for Ben's intervention. This is followed by the rebels' brutal killing of Eli who along with his family is "waiting" for the "federals" in the deserted town of Forsyth. Likewise, the lynched body of Josiah hanging by a tree establishes his lack of manhood for his perpetrators. The efforts of Jesse Washington, Paul Cousins, Preacher Lee, and other black men to guard their school to continue black education culminate in a large-scale massacre, killing more than half of the black population of Buford while emasculating the remaining ones. This episode not only puts an end to any hope of continuing black education and uplift by dispiriting its patron, Prudence, it also conveys a message to the black people that asserting their freedom, their humanity, and their manhood is not an option in a world still controlled by the whites. Indeed, while Charles Wheaton's amputated legs are glaring, tangible proof of the Confederate defeat in the war, recurring white violence represents an unwillingness to accept the defeat.

Indeed, the text provides two models of manhood reflected in Sam's and Ben's characters respectively. One is asserted through defiance while the other is expressed through love; one draws on the hegemonic model while the other is reflective of black experience of slavery; one subscribes to hegemonic masculinity while the other signifies upon it. On account of having been educated by a mistress who believed in treating black people kindly and having worked at the library in Philadelphia, Sam is well versed in Western philosophy and history and quotes frequently from Diderot, Emerson, and de Rebecque:

Sam was a man for whom words were water and air, necessary to his very being, necessary to his very sense of self.... He had read the great books, absorbed the great ideals—not simply for the value of the ideals themselves, but for what knowing them said about him, what it told Billy Horn and Jakey the solider and anyone else who looked at him with contempt or presumed to judge him as something less because he was black: *I am here. I am a man. Your scorn and your hatred cannot diminish me.* (p. 124 original emphasis)

Indeed, he uses "words" to assert his freedom and his newfound identity not only to himself but also to white men: "Sam liked using big words, five-dollar words, on people who presumed to treat him as less than he was just because he was a Negro" (p. 7). These "high falutin' words" that Sam uses so white men "wont treat [him] like the rest of the niggers" (p. 122) end up threatening them, hence his various violent encounters.

Ben, on the contrary, is an uneducated ex-slave, who uses language including names that “put white folks at ease” (p. 48). Indeed, when the Union soldier is about to kill Sam, it is Ben who saves him with his obsequious demeanor that restrains the white men. While Sam quotes from Western philosophers as sources of inspiration, Ben dismisses his reliance on “white men” to direct their journey: “Why you always think I’m gon’ care ‘bout what some white man who wrote a book think about what I do?” (p. 124). While Sam is defiant, haughty, and confrontational, Ben is pragmatic, demure, and evasive. In order to save Sam from imminent death, Ben resorts to what Gates terms “signifyin’”: while the soldier is about to shoot Sam because the former cannot “live with ‘em treating you like there’s no difference,” Ben enters the scene with “a new voice” that says “Marse”, accompanied by a “blazing smile” with “teeth dazzling white and every last one on display” (p. 47). This particular smile, reflective of absolute servility, docility, and stupidity, that matches the stereotypical representation of black men, is signified upon by Ben each time they are faced with white men during their journey. Although Sam is “learning to hate that grin ... that idiot grin, that grin of deference and obsequious entreaties and shuffling feat” (p. 120), he soon comes to realize that his bare survival is dependent on the black practice of signifyin(g) as opposed to the white tradition of rhetoric. This is why when Sam is cornered by a gang of white men at his ex-mistress’s place who are about to lynch him, he first tries to “reach for some long and daunting word” that would make these men “realize that Sam Freeman was a free Negro man, dignified and unafraid,” however, “to his horror”, he settles for “the opposite”: he “felt his smile stretching itself across his face, unfurling itself like a flag of impotence and fear. ‘Suh, I don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no army of niggers” (p. 251). However, overtaken by absolute rage, these white men do not spare him as it is his very demise that would reassert their manhood.

Sam’s journey from Philadelphia to Mississippi is replete with experiences that lay bare the intricacies of his relationship with white people. Although Sam loses a great deal during this journey, his arm, his strength, his dignity, he also has precious moments of insight. When Ben finally meets his wife Hannah and his daughter Leila only to discover that Hannah is married to another man and Leila will not recognize him as her father, “the entire world turned upside down” for him; “all his expectations, all his hopes, spilling out on the ground like water from a broken jar” (p. 203). He admits to Hanna: “You was the only thing kept me alive.... ‘Cause I knowed I was comin’ back here to yo. Y’all kept me goin’” (p. 203). Ben is hit “with a rawness of pain” as he tells Sam: “Lord, ain’t nothin’ never hurt me that bad, Sam. Bullets ain’t hurt me that bad” (p. 205). Ben’s loss of anchor along with Sam’s own experiences finally make him realize that white models fail to explain black experience. On Ben’s query, “Ain’t you gon’ tell me what some

dead white man got to say 'bout this?", Sam responds: "You will be happy to know that I have lost a great deal of my faith in the ability of dead white men to explain what happens to us in this life" (p. 204). Sam realizes that Ben wore the mask of a trickster and allowed white men their hubris, so he could safely reach Hannah and Leila because his manhood and his freedom are tied to his love for his wife and daughter. It was the hope of meeting them that kept him going, and it is their loss that has unsettled him.

Thus, in his encounter with the gang of white men who are about to lynch him, Sam realizes that it is more important to survive and meet Tilda than boast his manhood to them. Feigning "impotence and fear" may reassert his perpetrators' superiority in this encounter, but it will also allow him to become truly free—free from viewing himself from the eyes of white men and free to be reunited with Tilda. This reunion, love, and companionship will assert his manhood and consummate his freedom. In doing so, Sam chooses to remove the mask he wears for "the white world in particular" (p. 4) and embraces his blackness. As such, his journey towards the South becomes a journey inward that restores his love for his black self as well as Tilda.

Indeed, while Sam, Ben, Wilson, Lucretia, and Josiah are passionate about freedom, Tilda is unmoved by it. When Tilda first hears of freedom, she cannot help laughing as she finds it "just the funniest thing in the world" (p. 34): "Free? The word rattles in her thoughts, untethered, unattached, unconnected to anything she has ever known or lived before" (p. 62). Each time she reconsiders the question, "*What does Freedom mean?*" (p. 62), she is unable to answer it. When she is pressed by Lucretia and Wilson to "run away", she tells them that "Freedom is just a word.... It is a dreamy flight of fantasy" while Tilda "has to live on hard shores of reality" (p. 64). Having lost both her son and her husband to the "fantasy" of freedom, Tilda accepts her fate by closing the subject: "Marse will never allow it" (p. 65). She loses a second opportunity to be free when Jim McFarland falls sick, and the two are taken in by the widow of a Confederate cavalry officer, Mrs. Lindley who assures Tilda "You could be *free*. There is no way he could stop you" (p. 145). That night when Tilda contemplates running away, "her legs shake" (p. 146); although freedom is "one step away" from her, she "cannot trust what would happen next.... And she needs that, needs to be able to trust" (p. 147). Hence, she is unable to cross the threshold of Mrs. Lindley's house. Indeed, Tilda has lost "trust" due to the loss of her son and the departure of her husband, which has turned a "brave", "sassy", "impertinent" woman into a "weak" and timid" slave. Devoid of love in her life, Tilda is unaffected by her new state, a state that steers the journeys of Sam, Ben, Wilson, Lucretia, and Josiah. However, as soon as she has a flicker of hope, Tilda wastes no time in running away. When she reads the "notice" placed by Sam in *The*

Freedman's Voice, Tilda knows that she can trust again for "Love never fails" (p. 336).

The hegemonic power structures that subjugate black men render their lives loveless and companionless. Recalling the time Sam had attempted to escape along with his son, he realizes that those were the only two days they spent as father and son. Though the escape cost Sam his young son's life, the memory brings back the jokes, laughter, and games they had enjoyed together since the two men had been able to color their otherwise loveless lives with the joy of connection and bonding in the length of those two days. While the death of Luke suspended their lives, the opportunity to come together to mourn that loss and recover from it through mutual love is what directs the journey of Sam and what effects a sudden change of heart in Tilda. Indeed, Sam's journey from the North to the South restores his faith in his black identity as opposed to vying for inclusion in hegemonic masculinity. Signifyin(g) on the latter allows both Sam and Ben to come closer to their loved ones who complete their meaning of freedom.

Reconceiving Freedom: An Ethic of Love

The text makes repeated references to Sam and Tilda's deliberation on love. As slaves, when Sam first started courting Tilda, she had flirtatiously warned him "Love is long suffering" (p. 332). This quote from the book of First Corinthians became the source of the first lesson that Tilda taught Sam in both reading and love. Throughout the journey, Sam is reminded of the long quote that comes to define the black ethic of love that the novel offers:

Love is long suffering; it aboundeth in kindness. Love is not envious. Love is not insolent: it is not puffed up. It doth not behave itself unbecomingly. It is not self interested. It is not easily provoked. It placeth not the evil to account. It rejoiceth not in inquiry, but shareth in the joys of truth. It beareth all things. It believeth all things. It hope all things. It endureth all things patiently. Love never fails. (p. 336)

The last line "Love never fails" is what Sam "had forgotten until" his conversation with the ex-slave Nick informed him that Tilda was still alive (p. 336). This is why while Sam and Prudence develop a liking for each other, Sam's true love, the woman for whom he could walk a thousand miles, beckons him once again. The text traces this new manhood, grounded in loving ties as opposed to absolute defiance, to the origins of Sam and Tilda's relationship in the times of slavery. Thus, once they reunite, they realize "there was no quest more important than to simply return to the embrace of love" (p. 355).

The final link in the journey of their reunion is Abraham Lincoln Jones, the publisher of *Freedman's Voice*. Jones's paper is the source of uniting

lovers, families, and friends, which, in turn, defines his own identity as invested in his work. His mission of reuniting black men and women through his paper is both an expression of love for his community and a means to recover from his own traumatic past. Listening to the stories of the unfortunate uncovers the layers of trauma these people have confronted and attempting to search for their loved ones provides fulfillment to his own sense of freedom. Jones is both excited and amazed each time families are reunited through his newspaper: "How, Abraham wondered, could colored men achieve those stupendous things, rise to those heights scarcely dreamt, when slavery had left so many scars upon them?" (p. 351). This perseverance of black people to take arduous journeys in search of their loved ones despite having been traumatized by slavery is what defines a black love ethic—a faith in love to restore their self, their identity, and their freedom.

Just as Sam's renewed faith in love propels him to a final reunion with Tilda, the same faith also informs his proposal to establish a black community driven by this love ethic. When the school that Prudence had established in Buford is repeatedly attacked by the white population at the instigation of Charles Wheaton and his unruly son, Vern Wheaton, black men volunteer to guard it. This assertion of power on part of black men, symbolized particularly in Jesse Washington's overly emphasized masculinity, is once again met by violence in the form of a large-scale massacre of the black population. As a result, on Sam's advice, Prudence decides to leave the town along with all the other ex-slaves still working for their ex-masters. The repeated attacks on the school are white people's way of asserting that learning and scholarship are the exclusive domains of white people. For centuries, Whites had used the power of word and religion to keep black people under control. Just as for Billy Horn, "[t]he sight of a colored man reading was a never-ending source of wonder and consternation" (p. 6), Charles Wheaton tells Prudence: "In physical deportment, intellectual capacity, and moral integrity, white men were set apart from all the other races of the world. That includes your red man, your yellow man, and most certainly, your black man" (p. 168). Because education leads to self-determination, which, in turn, is threatening for white people as it would unsettle the social order they had been accustomed to, they violently resist it. Their very resistance makes education a necessary tool for black self-assertion. However, Pitts seems to argue that while education is absolutely essential for reclaiming selfhood, it is equally important for black men to claim their manhood through self-care, romantic love, familial bonds, and communal ties.

This love ethic is what defines the new community that black people are *en route* to establishing at the end of the novel. The traumatic event of the school massacre brings the community closer, and they are able to convince all the slaves in Buford to leave the service of white people, build a

community in the name of love, and materialize their freedom by making a home away from their ex-masters who continue to govern their lives. The move is significant as it establishes the fact that for black love to thrive, white violence must be kept at bay, which is possible through the entire community's efforts. At the end, the novel's return to the potential reestablishment of the school "Freeman, Ohio" in the new community is a reminder of the critical value of education for black people; however, this must be accompanied and strengthened by the transformative power of love, which together will materialize their freedom. The novel's end with yet another journey, this time taken by the whole community, is a reminder of the long road of quest, struggle, and healing that lies ahead for black people.

Thus, in Pitts's neo-slave narrative, love, whether self-directed, romantic, familial, or communal, becomes the liberating force that heals the trauma of slavery and completes the meaning of freedom. Black men's desire in *Freeman* to relinquish their comfort and risk their lives by undertaking arduous journeys to reunite with their loved ones not only challenges the stereotypical representation of black men as dangerous criminals, sexual deviants, irresponsible partners, absent fathers, and careless lovers, it also redefines their masculinity through their investment in a black love ethic. While the potential establishment of the "Freeman, Ohio" school is reflective of the persistent need for education and racial uplift, through the use of signfiyin(g), the black tradition of "double voiced discourse", Pitts reminds his readers of the need for African Americans to return to their roots and relations to inspire their healing. Given the persistent racial violence against black men, especially the contemporary police brutality that continues to deny them any sense of manhood or masculinity, black people need to return to their African American roots to restore their humanity and reclaim their identities. This research has foregrounded that these roots, both the African communalism and the African American legacy of familial bonds despite slavery, must inform the love ethic that would become "the fundamental source of power and strength" for the unending African American struggle for freedom (hooks 2001, p. xxii).

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