

Masculinities Beyond Good and Evil: Representations of the Down Low in the Fictional Imagination of Alphonso Morgan's *Sons*

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Introduction

What is this crazy preoccupation these days with the down low? Why is it usually associated in mass or popular culture with black males? Why do people see a romance story in the illicit love between two white cowboys in the film *Brokeback Mountain*, but when black men do the same thing—namely, sleep with other men while sleeping with women, whether in film, video, or music—they are sinisterly represented as being on the “DL”? The recent hype over the DL in so much of black popular culture (the novels of E. Lynn Harris, the confessions of J. L. King's *On the Down Low*, the public disclosures and betrayal of Terry McMillan by her DL husband, a recent BET documentary on the phenomenon) is cultivating in black communities a climate of blame, victimization, suspicion, betrayal, denial, and distrust. To its cultured despisers, self-identified whistle-blowers, DL detectives, prophets to black women, and victims of HIV/AIDS from black DL men, the producers and distributors of the DL in black popular culture appear to have found a rich market for their commodity.

Few critics have examined the geopolitical and biopoetics of the phenomenon in black culture itself. That is, notwithstanding all the attention given to the DL phenomenon, the DL man is formed and not given. His black body represents internal knots and contradistinctions within the black community itself. He is a representation of a culture that regulates sexual difference among black men under regimes of homophobia throughout black communities. The regimes are many: churches and mosques, schools, homes, fraternities and sororities, and other regulatory sites of employment, law, penal systems, and government. Understanding the cultural codes that regulate the psychosexual practices of black men goes a long way toward moving the DL discussion away from the circus of blame and victimization toward a cultural understanding that sees the DL man no longer as sinister and monstrous but tragic and ironic; indeed, grotesque. This is the reading I offer in this short essay.

The Aesthetics of Grotesque Masculinities

Despite the recent foregrounding of the DL phenomenon in black popular culture, one thing is for sure: the so-called DL phenomenon has been around a hell of a long time. It's just a new name for an old set of sexual practices that in my black queer biblical imagination dates back to the intimacy displayed between David and Jonathan, upon whose death alongside his father, Saul, David laments:

How the mighty have fallen,
In the midst of the battle!
Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan,

Greatly beloved were you to me;
 your love to me was wonderful,
 passing the love of women.¹

Curiously, good Bible-believing folks (mostly black women who appear most taken over by the DL phenomenon) appear neither bothered by the practices of men loving men while loving women, as did David, nor bothered by David's creeping around with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, while setting up this innocent man to die on the front line of battle in order to marry his wife. All this seems just fine so long as we are talking about exceptional, heroic male figures within the history of salvation. After all, whatever creeping these biblical figures did, whether their incest and rapes or their adultery and fornications, all are sublimated and taken up into God's providential plans. Yes, even the sexual indiscretions of men of faith—accompanied by lying, cheating, and manipulation (all the marks of DL brothas)—are put to divine uses and purposes. But were these men of faith really that different from us? I keep wondering, where is the contempt for these heroes of the faith whose sexual practices would owe others a stoning and banishment from the community? Yet for generations, even our contemporary one, these masculine Apollonian models have formed the stories of faith. Their "humanness" is transcended by their place in God's determinate future. They stand on the path of Apollo, where the divine order of things tames the grotesqueries of the flesh and the ambiguities of the body. Under their Apollonian masks, a great metamorphosis occurs. In sacred imagination, rape gives way to marriage and lust metamorphoses into love. Such is the mask of Apollonian masculinity.

However, the DL brotha wears another mask typifying his masculinity. His is a grotesque masculinity. He stands on the path of Dionysius. Friedrich Nietzsche explicates the Apollonian and Dionysian difference:

What is the meaning of the antithetical concepts Apollonian and Dionysian, both conceived as forms of intoxication, which I introduced into aesthetics?—Apollonian intoxication alerts above all the eye, so that it acquires power of vision. The painter, the sculptor, the epic poet are visionaries par excellence. In the Dionysian state, on the other hand, the entire emotional system is alerted and intensified; so that it discharges all its powers of representation, imitation, transfiguration, transmutation, every kind of mimicry and play-acting, conjointly. The essential thing remains the facility of metamorphoses. . . .²

The Dionysian man favors the grotesque, while the Apollonian genius is represented by the heroic, decisive, ingenious, and noble. These are traits of his true masculinity, and they find their way into the social constructions of black masculinity in African American culture. The Dionysian man represents the grotesque spirit of unresolved duplicity. Here is Nietzsche: "It is impossible for the Dionysian man not to understand any suggestion of whatever kind, he ignores no signal from the emotions, he possesses to the highest degree the instinct for understanding and divining, just as he possesses the art of communication to the highest degree. He enters into every skin, into every emotion; he is continually transforming himself."³

The Apollonian and Dionysian dialectic is an appropriate interpretive play for aesthetically coming to terms with the DL phenomenon. It is especially illustrative insofar as the DL brotha discloses a grotesque masculinity. In *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, based on Nietzsche, I offered an aesthetic critique of what I called the "Cult of Black Heroic Manliness"

in black politics from David Walker to Marcus Garvey. It was my initial critique of black masculinity. There, I argued that our social constructions of black masculinity on black bodies have been reflexively constructed against the denigration of both black male and female bodies by white supremacy both during and after slavery, and that our conceptions of black manliness are in some significant sense representations of the blackness that whiteness created.⁴ Many African Americans, from David Walker to the present, have tended to define themselves in terms of the metaphysical and structural determinants of white supremacy so that black cultural practices themselves are legitimate insofar as they represent the cultural genius of the people, usually marked by traits of European cultural genius. To be never again grasped as an “ur-mensch” but “Übermensch” is the cultural longing of Apollonian black identity. This disclosure is both the motive and the “telos” of black subjectivity. Here, black subjectivity is always constructed as an answer to the negation of black manhood by the exclusionary politics of white supremacy, and black masculinity positions itself as a counterdiscourse of this exclusionary politics. A few examples will have to suffice.

David Walker takes issue with Thomas Jefferson’s claims that the failure of moral manliness and cultural genius among African Americans is a matter of nature and not of circumstances. However, Walker shows in his *Appeal* that these failures are not conditions of nature. They are consequences of the long era of degradation and wretchedness in which blacks acquired habits that disrupted their capacities to discern what is morally required of them as a people. The principal causes of their moral and cultural failures are servility, ignorance, and oppression. Yet, he argues, just as many today worry about our contemporary climate of morals among African Americans, that the social practices of African slaves and freemen themselves reflexively only buttress white people’s claims concerning black people’s lack of moral manliness. He says:

Oh! colored people of these United States, I ask you, in the name of that God who made us, have we, in consequence of oppression, nearly lost the spirit of man, and in no very trifling degree, adopted that of brutes? . . . How can the slave holders but say that they can bribe the best colored person in the country, to sell his brethren for a trifling sum of money, and take that atrocity to confirm them in their avaricious opinion, that we were made to be slaves to them and their children?⁵

Walker fears that the servility and ignorance that African slaves exhibited only confirmed the negative estimations of white people of their sense of moral worth or value. Defending the moral manliness of blacks was not the white man’s burden, Walker argues. It is the burden of African Americans, and it is a burden that is still imprinted on much of African American cultural production and exchanges today. Walker writes: “For my part, I am glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his positions for your sake; for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your own actions and not what our friends have said or done for us; for those things are other men’s labors and do not satisfy the Americans who are waiting for us to prove to them ourselves, that we are *men* before they will be willing to admit that fact.”⁶ In the social construction of black masculinity, “Moral Manliness” is not only a recurring mantra in much of twentieth-century African American cultural studies. It is architectonic. For W. E. B. Du Bois, it is the dialectical third that emerges in the negative dialectics of the American Negro’s “double-consciousness” or “twoness.”⁷ Blacks are aware that their identities emerge from and are linked to American society, and they are also aware that they are alienated from that society by the

color of their skin, by a color line. Du Bois writes: “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. . . . This then is the end of his striving; to be a coworker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. . . .”⁸ This quote expresses the typifications of Du Bois’s conception of black masculinity, and it is the countertype to compromise, which he attributes to Booker T. Washington and the Tuskegee program. Compromise represents weakness, fear, timidity, and not the manly virtues of courage, fortitude, and strategic resistance. Authentic black manhood rejects the Jesus who said: “Come on to me all you that Labor and I will give you rest; take my yolk upon [yourselves] and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and [you] shall find rest for your souls. For my yolk is easy and my burdens are light.”⁹ Rather, it requires the Jesus who said: “‘Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, that strain out a gnat and swallow a camel’—as if God cared a whit whether His Sons are born of maid, wife or widow so long as His church sits deaf to His own calling.”¹⁰

With Marcus Garvey, representing black masculinity would take its most radical turn, leaving a profound imprint on subsequent constructions of black manhood in the Civil Rights era (the New Negro), the Black Power movement (Black Militancy and Nationhood), and the New Black Aesthetic-Culture movements (Afrocentric nobility). What is the measure of a black man? He is decisive and self-determined. With Garvey, black manhood takes on a transvaluation of value in which racial pride, love, benevolence, and confraternity are no longer determined by cooperation with Europeans and white Americans. The time had come for a great reversal. “We have caught a new doctrine,” says Garvey. “The black man is saying that everything that is pure is Black; as the white man has been saying all the time that the devil is black, and God is white, we are going to say that God is black and the devil is white.”¹¹ In his construction of black masculinity, the virtues of manhood are strength and power. “There is no law, there is no justice but power,” argues Garvey. “There is no prosperity, no success, no law, no justice but strength and power.”¹² With Garvey, strength and power become the virtues or moral codes of black masculinity. Here, indeed, the Apollonian mask triumphs over the grotesque Dionysian mask in the social construction of black masculinity.

Nietzsche’s Dionysian aesthetics foregrounds the grotesque over the heroic, and the persona of Dionysius represents the traits of grotesque masculinity. The masculinity of the grotesque man, like that of the Apollonian man, is an aesthetic construction on gender or male bodies. This aesthetic construction is not the invention of Nietzsche, for like the Apollonian, the grotesquerie of the Dionysian man also has had a long career—albeit a rather repressed one in our constructions of masculinity.

What are the dynamics of the grotesque? For Philip Thomson, “the grotesque is not of course a phenomenon solely of the twentieth century, not even of modern civilization. It existed as an artistic mode in the West at least as far back as the early Christian period of Roman culture, where there evolved a style of combining human, animal and vegetable elements, intricately interwoven, in the one painting.”¹³ This short note introduces certain constitutive elements that identify the grotesque. The grotesque ought not to be thought of as a bi-opposition between two apparently diametrically opposed sensibilities. Yet it has something to do with sensibilities, dispositions, feelings, and desires that are oppositional, such as attraction and repulsion or lure and loathing. However, the grotesque seeks neither negation nor mediation between these sensibilities. It leaves them in tension. It leaves them in play, neither unresolved by negation nor mediation. According to Thomson:

The most consistently distinguished characteristic of the grotesque has been the fundamental element of disharmony, whether this is referred to as conflict, clash, mixture of the heterogeneous, or conflation of disparates. It is important that this disharmony has been seen, not merely in the work of art as such, but also in the reaction it produces and (speculatively) in the creative temperament and psychological make-up of the artist.¹⁴

The disharmony of the grotesque may be compared to that of an optical game, such as “Duck or Rabbit,” “Man’s Face or Nude,” or the infamous “Wife or Mother-in-Law” drawings. Each drawing shares elements of the grotesque that Frederick Burwick recognizes in many literary classics that are identified as grotesque. Burwick is worth quoting at length because his thick description of the grotesque is illustrative for my reading of Alphonso Morgan’s *Sons*.

Certainly, one of the major functions of the grotesque is to give us the illusion of delusion. . . . In order to create grotesque illusion, the artist turns to delusion for his subject-matter. What we often find in these paintings is the portrait of someone having a delusion complete with a depiction of the delusion. Among the most often cited examples of the grotesque are the many versions—Grunewald, Bosch, Callot—of the Temptation of Saint Anthony. Or, for literary examples, one might cite such tales as Hoffmann’s *The Sandman*, Poe’s *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Kafka’s *Metamorphoses*, Browning’s *Madhouse Cells*, told by a narrative persona who is deranged, whose view of the world is tinged with madness. It is not the content, per se, that renders these works grotesque; rather, it is the peculiar tension of dual perception which is required in responding to the grotesque. We must experience the work as illusion yet recognize it as delusion. The grotesque, then, involves an elaborate multistability of manner and matter. This was Friedrich Schlegel’s reason for defining the grotesque as a mode of irony, for he recognized in the grotesque a challenge to the mind’s instinctive endeavor to synthesize.¹⁵

The grotesque disrupts the penchant for cognitive synthesis and aggrandizing the Apollonian heroic manliness by highlighting the absurd yet sincere, the comical yet tragic, the estranged yet familiar, the satirical yet playful, and the normal yet abnormal.¹⁶

Nietzsche’s aesthetic critique of culture is an instance of imminent criticism in which the heroic is checked by the grotesque. The seriousness of forms of black masculinity constructed on the burden of black intellectuals’ apologetics against white declarations of the privation and perversions of black moral manliness is also checked by the grotesque aesthetic of black masculinity. In turning to the Dionysian aesthetic, which is at the same time a turn to the grotesque, Nietzsche admonishes “a robust pessimism.” It is “a pessimism situated ‘beyond good and evil.’”¹⁷ Echoing Zarathustra, Nietzsche says: “I would rather have you learn, first, the art of terrestrial comfort; teach you how to laugh—if that is, you really insist on remaining pessimists. And then it may perhaps happen that one fine day you will, with a peal of laughter, send all metaphysical palliatives packing, metaphysics herself leading the great exodus.”¹⁸

The grotesque decenters but does not negate the heroic, Apollonian sense of manliness and the seriousness of morals that it breeds in African American culture and relations. It opens up creative possibilities for grotesque, Dionysian representations of black masculinity in African American cultural studies that keep black cultural studies iconoclastic yet creative. Grotesque

masculinities signify a recoiling of values whereby the heroic qualities of black masculinity, represented by the Apollonian persona, are checked by the Dionysian black man. “What makes a hero?” Nietzsche asks. “Going out to meet at the same time one’s highest suffering and one’s highest hope” is his answer.¹⁹

Grotesque Masculinities in Alphonso Morgan’s *Sons*

Published in 2004, Alphonso Morgan’s *Sons* displays the complexity by which he takes up the biopoetics of sexual identity in the formation of black DL men. He moves the fictional constructions beyond their usual sites in black popular culture, namely, black professional, managerial, religious, and athletic elites. Morgan’s setting is Brooklyn and Flatbush Avenue. This particular night the street is a place of inquisition, judgment, and crucifixion. It is a violent and tragic night. Morgan turns the torture and death of Matthew Shepard into a trope on which to read the tragic existence and end of two DL brothas. This is not the night of Shepard’s nightmare, but it is the recurring nightmare that is all too real in the experience of black male youths. Their grotesque masculinities evoke all the fears, self-doubts, self-hate, camouflage, and internal contradictions that conceal the dangers and risks that “coming out” bring in a culture defined by gangsta mentality and cultural codes that produce and reproduce regimes of normalcy in the construction of black masculinity. Within this complexity, Morgan’s fictional imagination constructs the grotesque masculinity of *Sons*.²⁰

While horrific and tragic, the tropological significance of Shepard’s death travels in Morgan’s novel to urban concrete streets regulated by the normalcy of drug trafficking Jay Toriace, the Haitian, Sparks, and an unnamed cohort. It is one of their own, their “boyee,” whose transgressions lead to an urban crucifixion. The crucified one is not white and gay, as was Shepherd, but black, young, and sexually grotesque. He wears the Dionysian grotesque mask within the geopolitical cultural space constructed by gangsta regulatory practices. Twenty-one-year-old Sha’s transgressions leave him pinned up on a fence, beaten to a pulp, stripped of his clothes, stabbed, and dying. At the hands of his boys, Sha’s death concludes the tragic story of the grotesque masculinity of two DL boys.

The inquisition of Aaron, Sha’s seventeen-year-old lover, foregrounds the fears and consequences that for too many black men leave them perpetually within the duplicity, the unresolved ambiguity, secrets, and lies of the DL man, boy, son, homo, faggot, punk-ass, mothafucker. Jay Toriace performs as the grand inquisitor:

“People been telling me some funny shit about that nigga,” he said. “I want to know if it’s true.”

Aaron’s stomach tensed. He was not afraid to die. But he was afraid of this. He looked at Toriace. “I don’t know anything about it,” he said. “If you want to know something about him, you have to ask him.” Aaron’s stomach drew tighter. What you ___?” “___ You know what I mean.” Aaron’s mouth opened but there was no sound.

“That nigga never tried none of the faggot shit with you?” Jay looked over his nose. Aaron’s stomach turned over and over.

“Yeah son.” Jay Toriace smiled to himself. “That nigga’s a homo. Funny ain’t

it? I bugged out too when I found out.”

Aaron was paralyzed, frozen where he stood.

“You know,” Toriace then said, “now that I think about it, that nigga always did have a little bitch in him. Like when he walked. How he always switched his ass a little, like he was sweet.” He looked gravely at Aaron. “You ever notice that?” . . . He glared at Aaron. “Son,” he said grimly, his brows dropping into each other. “You ain’t no homo too, is you?”

Aaron’s throat closed. He could not breathe. He had been waiting to deny it his whole life. That is how it seemed to him at that moment. But facing it, and the actual words, was more than he had ever imagined. He stood staring up at him, at Jay Toriace’s crooked face, his heart flopping, his breath held. And Jay Toriace’s face changed.

“Ah hell,” he said. “Don’t tell me you and that nigga . . .” He looked at him, “Ah hell. Are you fucking kiddin me?” “I swear to God, son, that shit is disgusting.”²¹

The inquisition leaves Aaron —Sha’s little man, baby boy, “son”—in the torturous hands of his inquisitor. He is judged then punished, bashed to near death by Jay Toriace, the Haitian, and the unnamed cohort. The scene echoes the dilemma of those black young men whom Essex Hemphill laments in his ever-timely warning:

If I had read a book like *In the Life* when I was fifteen or sixteen, there might have been one less mask for me to put aside later in life. . . . There would have been one less mask for me to create when long ago it became apparent that what I was or what I was becoming—in spite of myself—could be ridiculed, harassed, and even murdered with impunity. The male code of the streets where I grew up made this very clear: Sissies, punks, and faggots were not “cool” with the boys. Come out at your own risk was the prevailing code for boys like myself who knew we were different, but we didn’t dare challenge the prescribed norms regarding sexuality for fear of the consequences we would suffer.²²

These sexually grotesque boys/men, Sha and Aaron, transgress the codes of masculinity defined by their thug existence, where drugs, violence, and menace form the regulatory codes of black masculinity. Jay Toriace, the Haitian, Sparks, and the unnamed cohort are the keepers of culture, the regulatory agents of what and what does not count for black manhood, camaraderie, and fraternity. Their rules are transgressed by the illicit love, attraction, and experimental sexual encounters between boys like Sha and Aaron. Aaron falls to his knees and succumbs to the torture of the grand inquisitor.

Then Jay Toriace hit him again, and Aaron thought he opened his eyes. He could hear their voices muffled and the blows muffled too but the outrage beneath it loud and clear and cold and specific: fuckin faggot, fuckin faggot. Aaron felt his ribs shake in his chest. His fists shot out convulsively. He opened his mouth not to scream or cry but to roar that flat unequivocal roar of someone who had simply had enough. The boys

stopped suddenly and looked down at their bloody fists. Aaron exhaled and shut his eyes.²³

As with much of the fictional literature on the DL, grotesque masculinity travels toward the monstrous. The ambiguity of these monsters, the grotesque ones, is located in bodies that are unresolved between unclean and venomous while at the same time formed by the ill fortune of molestation, sexual abuse, and exploitation. Grotesque masculinity is not only fated; it is also, in the same instance, free. The illicit desires and love of DL brothas are significations of freedom, a freedom for which they are judged scourges on the black community. They are betrayers of black women, black poison and degenerative presences in the culture of black moral manliness. In one black body, fated yet free, the grotesque masculinity of the DL brotha is signified by a “twoness” that is not very different in kind from the complexity that Du Bois describes in the *Soul of Black Folks*:

It is a peculiar sensation, the double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.²⁴

In the social construction of the DL brotha, there is a “two-facedness.” He is both agential and victim. This two-facedness is produced not given. On the one hand, it is reproduced in the cultural mappings of class consciousness (usually black upper-middle class managerial, professional elites) and, on the other, a product of sexual abuse or pathology as in the case of E. Lynn Harris’s quintessential DL brotha, Basil Henderson. In one persona, he is a highly professional sports agent, vying for recognition in the Football Hall of Fame. At the same time, he is a black man without a soul, who preys on sexual victims (both male and female). In his eyes, no one is innocent. Harris concludes *Not a Day Goes By* with Basil walking away from his engagement to the diva Yancey and her equally diva meddling mother, Ava. Basil says:

The Dawg is back!

You didn’t think that I was going to let those two demented divas have the last word, did you? On the evening, I was supposed to get married, I boarded a plane in the first-class section bound for Montego Bay, Jamaica. I played a lot of golf, went snorkeling, and roamed the beaches like a cell phone. I ate some fantastic seafood. Did some dancing at the reggae club. I made love with a beautiful Jamaican sistah on the beach and did the bump and grind with an equally beautiful Jamaican man with shoulder-length dreads on the terrace of the villa I rented. A good time was had by all. . . . I will issue to all the mothers and fathers out there, Tell your sons and daughters. I’m back, in full form. And I’m out there. Roamin. And switching lanes. . . .²⁵

In Basil Henderson, the grotesque masculinity of the DL brotha resolves into the monstrous.

Sha’s and Aaron’s masculinities are also formed within a determinate class consciousness. Aaron’s internal ambiguities are formed in a home headed by a single female parent, regulated by the routinized expectations of a working mother, an obnoxious sister, and himself a high school student. He is sixteen years old turning seventeen with his own private

domain, the basement bedroom that shuts him off from the light of upstairs rooms and a pristine kitchen. His only worry is “this thing in his body.” To him, such things as faggots are disgusting, even nasty. In a genealogical performance, Morgan takes the reader to the genesis of Aaron’s metamorphosis:

By the time he was five, he had heard one of the older kids at school say faggot on the playground, and when he asked one of the other kindergartners what it was, his little classmate answered confidently that it was a bug. When he asked his mother, she told him that it was a bad word for a boy who likes other boys and that he never should say it. He thought he understood, but a boy who liked other boys seemed unworthy of its own cussword.

By the time he was ten he knew what a faggot was and knew he wasn’t going to be one. They were those men with women’s ways, punks, sissies. Disfiguring their mannerisms and speech that made women so fluid into something else. Something that everyone hated. And he hated them too. Eventually he learned that men who were fags slept with other men. He was sure he was opposed to this. All the faggots having sex together—this was a crime, certainly. Or did they do it with other *regular* men? And if they did, he wondered, what were those other men? Fags too, or something else? And what did any of them do, exactly. Suck each other’s dicks? It seemed nasty, but he did find the bodies of men . . . interesting.²⁶

Such confusion in Aaron’s body bares radical internal ironies between disgust and attraction and lure and loathing. His grotesquerie is the unresolved twoness of a teenage black male begging for understanding, interpretation, and expression. He dons the mask of indifference to conceal his feelings and bury his desires under the garb of pants that fall off his ass, a hooded sweatshirt, Timberlands and lugv’s, and indirect greetings characterized by a slight nod of the head and no direct eye contact. He has learned the code of silence that taught him how to camouflage himself on the streets and to keep his unresolved feelings in the basement where they belong. He is a tragic youth, already dead to feeling anything at all before he has ever explored his sexual desires. His unexplored homoeroticism is to him a sickness unto death, healed only by the death of Sha, crucified on a fence.

In contrast to Aaron, Sha is scripted into a culture of black masculinity defined by poverty and fatalism. Here, kick their ass, lie, and survive by any means necessary are the significations of black manhood. In such a representational space, Morgan’s Sha is the tragic hero. His destiny is formed under the economy of a dysfunctional family life and the nomadic existence of migratory foster homes. He is redeemed only by the drug-trafficking Michael Stringfellow (Mike), for whom Sha at sixteen runs his first delivery and learns the quick path to wealth. He also has his first homosexual encounter when he is preyed upon by his straight drug-dealing patron. At the Algonquin Inn, whatever love Sha may have experienced erupting in him for Mike transforms to self-hate and his self-hate turns to silence. Maintaining his last stand for his “manhood” against his patron, Sha is pinned to a wall by his neck, choking, then stripped of his most precious possession—the last barrier between his claim to manhood and faggotry—his underwear. Released, he is thrown to the floor and left near dead.

Morgan’s story of the grotesque masculinities of Sha and Aaron—their culture of poverty, brokenness, youthful ambiguities, thug existence, and street-corner violence—might be

also read as a contemporary morality tale. In Morgan's fictional imagination, the tragic and ironic cultural formation of the DL phenomenon gains sympathetic understanding. Through his novel, one may also gain appreciation for the complexity that stigmatizes black gay and bisexual youths and men and makes their DL existence a cultural possibility nurtured in the womb of black cultural spaces themselves that define and regulate the production and reproduction of black manhood. At the heart of Morgan's story is the moral truth that "what is done in the dark will come to light."²⁷

The sermonic admonition is neither from a wise old woman nor from the expected place of the pulpit. Yet it does come from an old mother, a fierce queen and house mother with many kids or "chill-ren." Magdalena "spills the tea." She is the prophetess who knows all and sees all, who has her ear to the ground, and who looks into the darkness of Sha's heart and the death-ridden love of young Aaron. She "spills the tea" and risks her own life. Sha confronts her with the intention to silence the queen, after reading him to Aaron. She exposes their dirty secret. Despite all the masking that their thuglike existence afforded, neither Sha nor Aaron could hide from themselves the truth. In the end, no matter what they told themselves, no matter how the exchanged grinding or masturbating for sucking dicks or fucking, in the end, they were themselves what they hated most: faggots.

Sha just stared furiously, his teeth clenched, his fist tight around a pistol. Magdalena shrugged, leaning over, set her tool down on the table. She leaned forward into the mirror then and began quietly to construct the absent eyebrow.

"Honey," she said after a moment. "I don't mean to be cruel. I don't really. But there are things we do in our lives that simply cannot be taken back. Things must be tallied. Accounted for. There's no use trying to hide them away from the world, honey. No use in that at all. Because no matter how big or how small it is, or how perfectly you've tapped it down or concealed it, there's always that moment when you just have to say, 'here it is, honey. All of it. So take it or leave it.' And believe me, sugar, that moment would have come for you eventually with or without my help."²⁸

Pistol-whipped and falling to the floor, the queen speaks:

Maggie clasped her hands together. Touched them to her chin. "Oh! faithless and pervert generation . . ." she said. Breathlessly, "there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed; and hid that shall not be known."

Sha touched the cool barrel of the gun to her forehead.

"Bless them that cuss you. Do good to them that hate you. For he maketh his son to rise on the evil and on the good and sendeth pain on—"

"Fuck you."

"I speak to them in fables; because they seeing see not; and obviously hearing they hear not . . ."

"Shut up!"

"What I tell you in darkness that speak ye in light; and what you hear in the ear—"

Sha raised his hand suddenly and brought the gun down on top of her head.

Maggie's prophetic discourse is revelatory, indeed disclosive, of Aaron's dark basement room, where he and Sha turned from their thug camouflage to see themselves not as faggots but to embrace each other as lovers. This is their dark secret, hidden from the sight of everyone around them, hidden even from themselves masked under their thug masculinity in public spaces. Found guilty of violating the code of the streets in the inquisition conducted by the street regulators of black manhood (Jay Toriace, the Haitian, and an unnamed cohort), Aaron lies on the street near death. Sha is brutalized, tortured, hung on the chain-link fence, stripped of his clothes, and dies from a stab wound.

Masculinities Beyond Good and Evil

Nietzsche asks: "What makes a hero?" "Going out to meet at the same time one's highest suffering and one's highest hope." This is a reversal of the Apollonian mask culturally determinate in so many constructions of black manliness by Walker, Du Bois, Garvey, and so many other intellectuals. However, Morgan's *Sons* aesthetically represents the DL brotha as a grotesque figure. He exhibits in his body a "twoness," a "double-consciousness" or a "two-facedness" of internal contradistinctions and unresolved ambiguity. Sha and Aaron represent this complexity of sexual difference in black communities. Such a representation is tragic and ironic. The grotesque masculinity of the DL brotha is all too often vilified and demonized not only by the culture that produces and reproduces his existence. Most tragically, it internally turns back on himself as a recoiling effect of his participation in the culture heteronormativity that judges his existence monstrous. In him, the grotesque metamorphoses into the monstrous, sinister, and downright nasty. Commenting on George Jackson's dictum that "True Niggers Ain't Faggots," E. Patrick Johnson says:

Wherever there exists sexism and misogyny, homophobia is not far behind. Thus the ravings of George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Imamu Amiri Baraka, Louis Farrakhan, and other racial purists vary only in degrees of homophobia. If, as George Jackson suggests above, the black woman exists solely for reproducing the race and thus becomes the black man's possession and object of desire, then the black homosexual represents sexuality run amuck—a perversion that threatens the very essence of black heteronormative masculinity. Given the constant surveillance by whites of black bodies within the institution of the family, black heterosexual men in particular have a vested interest in disavowing any dissident sexuality in their quarters. Thus the specter of the black fag haunts the mythic cohesive black heterosexual familial unit. "He" registers what Robert Reid-Pharr refers to as a "black boundarylessness" that must be contained such that the image of the black family, and in particular that of the black heterosexual man, appears "normal" in the eyes of whites. The discursive and physical antihomosexual violence motivated by the fear of the incoherent black subject, according to Reid-Pharr, "operates in the production of black masculinity."²⁹

The biopoetics of the DL brotha under the mask of the grotesque is but one way to move beyond the essentializing politics of black manhood. His body and his desires disrupt the sexual

boundaries constructed on the Apollonian politics of law and order, heteronormativity, duty, and the morals of good and evil that authenticate black manhood. To be clear, the DL brotha is not so much a deviant as is the black homosexual. Rather, his twoness, his bisexuality, is taken for a “two-facedness.” As with E. Lynn Harris’s Basil Henderson and Sha’s drug-trafficking patron, Mike Stringfellow, the DL brotha is sinister and a menace to the black community. His body no longer grotesque, he is rendered monstrous. He becomes a puzzle: What is to be done with this monstrosity within the sexual political spaces where black bodies are constructed between the normalcy of heterosexual expectations and the abnormalcy of homosexual practices, loves, desires, and sex?

Portrayals of the DL brotha by his cultured despisers as the betrayer of black women, the father of lies, the predator of unsuspecting women and girls and boys and men, the quintessential con, and the promoter of HIV/AIDS and death in black communities dominate the contemporary hype over the phenomena. He is also ironically portrayed as the product and victim of childhood psychosexual pathologies, sexual abuse, and molestation within black families and communities. That’s an awful lot of blaming, villainizing, demonizing, distaining, and pathologizing to transfer onto one black body. The cultured despisers of the DL advance an Apollonian morality of truth, honesty, and a duty to embrace the authenticity of love but only a love constructed under the regimes of black heterosexual norms.

Rather than perpetuating a moral discourse predicated on good and evil, I argue that the grotesquerie of the DL phenomenon suggests that all identities are fluid. Identities are always in metamorphosis. This means that even the cultural codes that have morally defined black manhood are also metamorphosing. Such a metamorphosis—turning, becoming, or “boundarylessness”—is testing perceived incontestable spaces of the black family, the black church, and the black community that produce and regulate our sexual imaginations, desires, loves, acts, and identities. I would hope that such contestations between the Apollonian typifications of black manhood and the grotesque may well occasion a move beyond the totalizing sexual-gender politics of identity that define black manhood in black communities. Perhaps the representational force of the DL brotha—tragic and ironic—may also emancipate the grotesqueries, the unresolved ambiguities of “blackness” itself, and thereby keep black communities themselves open to the ways in which they are the producers and reproducers—for better or worse—of black masculinities beyond good and evil. As a man is what he eats, Feuerbach, so a community is what it produces.

¹ 2 Samuel 1:19–27 (NRSV, *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*), 442.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollindale (London: Penguin, 1968), 84.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Victor Anderson, “Categorical Racism and Racial Apologetics,” in *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995, 1998), 51–85.

⁵ David Walker, “Appeal in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble to the Colored Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly to Those in the United States,” in *Great Documents in Black American History*, ed. George Ducas and Charles Van Doren (New York: Praeger, 1970), 75.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76; emphasis mine.

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- ⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1982), 45–46ff.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Crisis Writings*, ed. Daniel Walden (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1972), 122.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.
- ¹¹ Marcus Garvey, *The Marcus Garvey Papers and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. 1, ed. Robert A. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 505.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, vol. 5, 530.
- ¹³ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), 12.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁵ Frederick Burwick, “The Grotesque: Illusion vs. Delusion,” in *Aesthetic Illusion: Theoretical and Historical Approaches*, ed. Frederick Burwick and Walter Pape (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990), 129–30.
- ¹⁶ Thomson, *The Grotesque*, 20–57.
- ¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 10.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 145–51.
- ¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, bk. 3, ¶268 (New York: Random House, 1974), 219.
- ²⁰ Alphonso Morgan, *Sons* (Brooklyn: Lane Press, 2004); use of all quotations by permission of the author.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 223–24.
- ²² Essex Hemphill, *Brother to Brother: An Anthology of Black Gay Writings* (Boston, MA: Alyson Books, 1991), xv.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 225.
- ²⁴ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.
- ²⁵ E. Lynn Harris, *Not a Day Goes By* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 271.
- ²⁶ Morgan, *Sons*, 18–19.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 206–7.
- ²⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 36–37.