

CHALLENGING THE SYSTEMIC SOUTHERN CODE: MARCUS PAYNE IN ERNEST GAINES' OF LOVE AND DUST AND SETHE IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED

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Abstract

This paper examines how Ernest Gaines' Marcus Payne in Of Love and Dust (1967) and Toni Morrison's Sethe in Beloved (1987) challenge the stratified Southern code that governed racial, gender, and social hierarchies in the American South across different historical periods. While Marcus operates within the post-World War II plantation system of Louisiana and Sethe within the antebellum slavery era of Kentucky, both protagonists confront a rigid social order that seeks to dehumanize and control Black bodies. The paper draws on literary criticism, historical context, and textual analysis to demonstrate how these characters represent pivotal moments in African American literary tradition, embodying the transition from accommodation to resistance that characterized the broader struggle for civil rights.

Key words: *identity, memory, dace, resistance, southern code*

Résumé

Cet article examine comment Marcus Payne, personnage d'Ernest Gaines dans Of Love and Dust (1967), et Sethe, personnage de Toni Morrison dans Beloved (1987), remettent en question le code social stratifié du Sud américain, qui régissait les hiérarchies raciales, de genre et sociales à travers différentes périodes historiques. Si Marcus évolue dans le système des plantations de la Louisiane après la Seconde Guerre mondiale et Sethe dans le Kentucky d'avant-guerre, les deux protagonistes se heurtent à un ordre social rigide qui cherche à déshumaniser et à contrôler les corps noirs. S'appuyant sur la critique littéraire, le contexte historique et l'analyse textuelle, cet article démontre comment ces personnages représentent des moments charnières de la tradition littéraire afro-américaine, incarnant la transition de l'acceptation à la résistance qui a caractérisé la lutte plus large pour les droits civiques.

Mots-clés : *identité, mémoire, noirs, résistance, code social du sud*

Introduction

The stratified Southern code represents a complex system of unwritten rules, customs, and legal structures that maintained racial, class, and gender hierarchies in the American South from the antebellum period through the Jim Crow era. As historian Theodore Brantner Wilson

(1965:13 -14) documents, this racial stratified system was established through Black Codes and later Jim Crow laws restricted African American freedom, mobility, and autonomy. However, beyond formal legislation, the Southern code operated through what scholars such as Andreas Müller-Hartmann (2000) and Stuart Hall (2017) term a "discourse of race" that permeated every aspect of social life, dictating proper behavior, spatial boundaries, and acceptable forms of interaction between races.

This code demanded that Black individuals perform submission to white authority, remain within prescribed physical and social spaces, and accept their designated place in the social hierarchy. For Black women, the code compounded racial subjugation with sexual exploitation and the denial of maternal autonomy. The Southern code functioned as a "panopticon" where inhabitants were constantly being watched, making transgression both dangerous and profoundly subversive.

African American literature has long engaged with the project of challenging and subverting the Southern code. From the slave narratives of the nineteenth century to the protest novels of the twentieth, Black writers have explored the psychological, physical, and social costs of resistance. Ernest Gaines and Toni Morrison emerge as crucial figures in this tradition, offering nuanced portrayals of characters who resist not through collective political action but through deeply personal assertions of humanity.

Gaines, writing about the Louisiana bayou country, depicts a world where "the old ways" provide comfort for some but suffocation for others, where the young rebels threaten not merely a social order but the foundations of people's sense of self. Morrison, by contrast, explores the psychological aftermath of slavery through Sethe's struggle to reconcile her maternal love with the violence of the system that would reclaim her children.

This paper addresses the following questions: How can the endemic violence observed within and against African American communities be understood not as a cultural pathology or individual moral failing, but as a historically determined, intergenerational traumatic response to the foundational violence of chattel slavery, which itself operated as a local manifestation of a broader racialized international system of oppression? How do Marcus Payne and Sethe, representing the oppressed community, challenge the Southern code through their actions and

choices, and what are the costs and consequences of their challenges? How do their respective historical contexts - the post-WWII plantation and the antebellum slave system - shape the possibilities and limits of their resistance, and how this rebellious attitude will impact the traditional Southern social order?

The thesis of this paper is that Marcus and Sethe challenge the stratified Southern code through deeply personal acts that assert not only their humanity and autonomy, but also the identity of their community. Marcus employs performative masculinity and sexual transgression to assert his manhood and reject the subservient role assigned to Black men, while Sethe's maternal defiance, culminating in her act of infanticide, represents an ultimate refusal to allow her children to be reclaimed by the slave system. Both characters pay a devastating price for their resistance, yet their actions create the possibility of future change.

1: The Historical and Literary Context of the Southern Code

The Southern Code is a strict system built on white power, forced labor, and racial control. In Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust*, Louisiana plantations keep the old slave rules alive through fear and unfair laws. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows how slavery destroys families and leaves deep mental scars that last for a life time.

Marcus Payne and Sethe fight against these hard rules in their own ways. Marcus acts out with anger and pride to show he will not bow down, while Sethe makes a brave and heartbreaking choice to save her children. Together, they prove that the human spirit can challenge and break the heavy chains of the South.

1.1 Historical Foundations: From Slavery to Jim Crow

The stratified Southern code has its origins in the legal and social structures of American slavery. As the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 demonstrated, the Southern code extended beyond the South itself, legally requiring officials and citizens in free states to capture alleged runaway enslaved people and return them to their masters. This created a system of surveillance and control that extended across the nation.

Following emancipation, the Southern code was perpetuated through Black Codes—laws passed in former Confederate states that restricted the freedom of African Americans and maintained the economic and

social structures of the plantation system (Foner, 1988: 50). These codes, as William A. Sinclair documented in *The Aftermath of Slavery*, sought to "regulate the behavior of the freedmen and ensure a continuing supply of cheap labor" (1905: 70). The Southern code thus operated both through formal law and through informal customs that enforced racial hierarchy.

The plantation system, as depicted in Gaines's *Of Love and Dust*, represents the persistence of this code into the mid-twentieth century. Set in 1948, the novel depicts a world where "blacks and whites occupy their old places. The whites are satisfied to dominate, the blacks to submit" (Folks, 1991: 40). Though the civil rights movement was gathering force, its impact had not yet reached the Louisiana bayou, where the old ways maintained their grip.

1.2 The Southern Code and African American Identity

The Southern code sought to define African American identity in terms of subordination. For Black men, the code demanded accommodation, submission, and the suppression of manhood. As Gaines explores in his work, "the black slave slowly starts attaining his manhood and just tries to build his life and his community," but "the overwhelming atrocities against the black community embolden the normal character to act against the incarceration" (Folks, 1991: 35).

For Black women, the code imposed a double burden of racial and gender subordination. As Folks notes, female slaves "felt the weight of racial discrimination compounded by sexual prejudice" and "actually inhabited a unique subculture, one not shared entirely by either black men or white women" (Folks, 1991: 37). This subculture shaped the experiences of characters like Sethe, whose identity as a mother was both her greatest joy and her greatest vulnerability.

1.3 Literary Tradition and the Challenge to the Code

The literary tradition of challenging the Southern code runs from the slave narratives through the Harlem Renaissance to the works of contemporary African American writers. Gaines and Morrison represent distinct but complementary approaches to this tradition. Gaines best fits into the tradition of his classic American predecessors as a writer whose interest in politics is more human and personal than doctrinal. His drama stems from the ancient rhythms of life, from growth, death, rebirth—

from people's resistance to change and its inevitable march (Folks, 1991: 40).

Morrison, by contrast, engages more directly with the psychological trauma of slavery, exploring how the Southern code penetrated the interior lives of its victims. Her portrayal of Sethe's "iron-eyed" (Morrison, 1987: 12) survival represents the psychological toll of a system that denied Black women even the most basic claims to selfhood.

2. Marcus Payne and the Challenge to Plantation Masculinity

This chapter explores Marcus Payne and his challenge to traditional plantation masculinity. It focuses on how Marcus disrupts old power structures, rejects southern rules, and acts as a bold force of resistance. He uses his fierce attitude and refusal to submit to break the strict mold of plantation life in Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust*. He shows a raw, untamed form of manhood that exposes the unfair and cruel nature of the southern hierarchy. His actions push against the expected norms of obedience and quiet suffering.

2.1 The Plantation System in Of Love and Dust

Gaines' novel is set on the Hebert plantation in Louisiana in 1948, a world that remains in many ways unchanged from the era of slavery. The plantation represents a "carceral" space, where the spatial geography of the physical world utilizes the plantation and the social geography of first slavery and then segregation to constitute the carceral for African Americans. The plantation functions as a panopticon, with its inhabitants constantly watched and regulated. "The big house had given him a horse and a whip (he did have a whip first) and they had told him to ride behind the blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could." (Gaines 1967: 26).

The social hierarchy of the plantation is clearly delineated: Marshall Hebert, the wealthy planter, occupies the top; Sidney Bonbon, the Cajun overseer, holds power over the Black laborers; and the Black sharecroppers and convict workers occupy the bottom. This hierarchy operates through what narrator Jim Kelly describes as "the southern code"—an unwritten system of rules that governs every aspect of life on the plantation (Gaines, 1987: 250). The code demands that Black individuals perform submission, remain within their designated spaces,

and accept their place, as “Them white people can do what they want with a nigger” (Gaines 1967: 118). Yet, Marcus replies to Jim’s argument regarding respect of the southern code by asking him the question “Where would people be if they didn’t take a chance?” (Gaines, 1967: 248). Indeed, Gaines sought to create in Marcus a character who would send shock waves through the system. We see Marcus’s rebellious nature overtly through his dress and behavior.

2.2 Marcus Payne: Character and Context

Marcus Payne is characterized by his refusal to accept the subservient role assigned to him. Marcus enters this world as a convict leased from prison to work on the plantation. His background is marked by violence and survival: he killed a man in self-defense and admits the crime knowing well that he would be leased to work in white owner's plantation to substitute his imprisonment. Marcus's grandmother, Miss Julie Rand, former cook on the plantation, arranges his placement, hoping to keep him out of worse prison conditions. And Against Jim’s advice, Marcus also refuses to change his city clothes for sturdy khaki work-clothes worn by plantation field hands “I’ll never put that convict shit on my back” (Gaines, 1967: 31). By refusing the uniform, Marcus announces his conviction that he is *unlike* other workers. And he is. Marcus’s constant refusal to dress like everyone makes his individuality conspicuous, and his actions are consistent with his dress.

He is a person who is a representative of the black manhood, one who appeals to the spirit of resurgence in the black man. Unlike other characters who accept their subordinate positions — like Jim Kelly, who passively accepts having his name mispronounced as “Geam” (Gaines, 1967: 258). — Marcus actively resists. He dresses well, speaks boldly, and refuses to show deference to white authority.

Marcus refuses to acknowledge any superiority in the Cajun foreman, rebelling at the idea of being subservient to a man he considers he is equal or inferior: “How could a white man—no, not even a solid white man, but a bayou catfish-eating Cajun—compete with him...” (Gaines, 1967: 5). By standing up to these heavy traditions, Marcus highlights the deep pain and control built into the southern system. His struggles prove that the old ideas of manliness on the plantation are weak when met with a truly free and rebellious spirit. Marcus expresses his visceral rejection of the convict condition and the domination they seek to impose upon

him. When Jim tries to convince him saying "You will get used to it", he violently replies "Not me, (...) If they think I'm go'n stay here any five years" (Gains, 1967: 6).

2.3 Masculinity as Resistance

Marcus's resistance to the Southern code is expressed primarily through his performance of masculinity. He proves his manhood in whatever ways he can. He tries to show everyone that he cannot be intimidated through oppression or breaking him to do menial jobs. His masculinity is not a natural attribute but a performative assertion of selfhood against a system that seeks to deny Black men any claim to manhood.

This performance involves several dimensions. First, Marcus rejects the physical labor through which the plantation seeks to break him. He endures the brutal conditions of the fields — sweltering under the heat but not breaking — demonstrating a resilience that challenges the overseer's authority. Second, Marcus engages in acts of symbolic defiance, including entering the "Big House" through the front door, an act that horrifies the older Black servant Bishop, who sees it as a violation of "The house slavery built." (Gaines, 1967: 215). Determined to living as a man, Marcus finds the most obvious way of doing so through his sexuality. Thus, he sets out to seduce the black lover of Bonbon, Pauline Guerin, who is the most desirable woman on the plantation.

Most provocatively, Marcus asserts his masculinity through his love affair with Louise, the white wife of overseer Sidney Bonbon. This transgression represents a direct challenge to the Southern code's prohibition of interracial sexual relationships, particularly those in which a Black man has sexual access to a white woman. Marcus is interested in dressing up and wooing the women and "constantly dresses up and leaves the plantation for his rendezvous" (Folks, 1991: 37), not merely for pleasure but as a form of resistance. By having an affair with Bonbon's wife and flirting with his mistress Pauline, Marcus "ridicules Bonbon and he also entices his women just to hurt him" (Folks, 1991: 37).

2.4 The Costs of Resistance

Marcus's resistance ultimately costs him his life. He is killed by Bonbon in a confrontation that appears inevitable from the novel's beginning. Yet even in death, Marcus represents something more than a failed rebellion. As Foner notes, Marcus "stays behind to fight" rather than escaping with Louise, a decision that transforms him from a selfish opportunist into a martyr of sorts. His death, as the narrator suggests, starts "something that others would hear about, and understand and follow" (Foner, 1988: 50). The ambiguity of Marcus's legacy — is he a revolutionary hero or a doomed narcissist? — reflects the complexity of Gaines's vision. Marcus's death, then, may be read not as a failure but as a testimony to the system's brutality and the courage required to challenge it.

3. Sethe and Maternal Defiance in *Beloved*

This chapter examines maternal defiance, focusing on Sethe's radical act of love and resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. It shows how Sethe redefines motherhood under the brutal weight of slavery, transforming a traditional nurturing role into a fierce political weapon against dehumanization.

3.1 The Slave System and the Denial of Motherhood

Morrison presents Sethe's choice to kill her daughter not as a surrender to madness, but as an ultimate claim of ownership over her children's bodies and souls (Morrison, 1987: 150). By refusing to let the slave system commodify her offspring, Sethe shatters the patriarchal and racial codes of the South. Her maternal instinct becomes an absolute rebellion, defying both the physical chains of Sweet Home and the lingering, ghostly trauma of the past (Morrison, 1987: 150).

Sethe's experience of slavery is defined by the systematic denial of her maternal identity. Born to a slave in transit, Sethe is displaced from her African homeland and denied even the most basic knowledge of her origins. She does not remember where she was born — Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana? — and her own mother had to be pointed out to her by another child.

The slave system's denial of motherhood takes several forms. Sethe's mother was hanged while Sethe was still a child, for an unexplained reason, leaving her without maternal guidance. More fundamentally, the

institution of slavery denied Black women the right to claim their children as their own. All slaves knew that they could be separated from their children, and children could be "moved around like checkers ... rented out, loaned out, bought up, bought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or seized"(Morrison, 1987: 27- 28).

Sethe's experience at Sweet Home, the Kentucky farm where she lived for six years, represents a deceptive exception to this system. Under Mr. Garner's ownership, the slaves enjoyed a kind of special slavery—a kind that treated them like paid labor, listened to what they had to say, and taught what they wanted know. Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage and the opportunity to mother her children (Morrison, 1987: 23). This created the illusion of stability that would be shattered when Garner died.

Ultimately, this act of killing also highlights how Sethe's fierce protection exposes the violent contradictions of a society that denies Black humanity. Her defiant motherhood demands a reckoning with history, proving that maternal love under bondage requires extraordinary, terrifying sacrifice to preserve the dignity of the next generation.

3.2 Sethe's "Iron-Eyed" Survival

Sethe's survival strategy is encapsulated in Morrison's repeated description of her as "iron-eye"(Morrison, 1987: 11). As one critic notes, this description "depicts how Sethe has had to close herself off to the world (and love) for her own survival. The "iron" image conveys toughness, strength, and unbreakability, but also dullness, emptiness, and imprisonment. It represents the cost of survival under a system that denies Black women their humanity.

Sethe's "iron-eyes" were forged early. She was "thirteen when she came to Sweet Home and already iron-eyed," hardened by her childhood separation from her mother and her mother's violent death (Morrison, 1987: 11). At Sweet Home, she allowed herself to "lean on" others, letting down "the mental walls against love she had built" (Morrison, 1987: 11). This vulnerability was exploited when schoolteacher arrived and subjected her to a brutal assault that "broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (Morrison, 1987: 11).

The assault, in which Sethe was "milked" like a cow by schoolteacher's nephews, represents the ultimate degradation of her maternal identity.

Her milk, the symbol of her role as mother, was taken from her—a violation that she experiences as more devastating than the physical beating. According to Sethe, ". . . they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay with the horses" (Morrison, 1987: 200).

3.3 Infanticide as Maternal Protection and the Haunting of Beloved

Sethe's act of infanticide — killing her infant daughter rather than allowing her to be returned to slavery—represents the most extreme form of maternal resistance in American literature. When schoolteacher arrives at Baby Suggs's home in Cincinnati, Sethe faces the realization that "her children would be taken from her and returned to a dehumanizing life" (Morrison, 1987: 156). Her response is to attempt to free them from harm by ending their lives.

Morrison presents Sethe's act not as murder but as a form of protection. Sethe explains that she "couldn't let her [Beloved, her daughter] nor any of em live under schoolteacher [but rather c]ollected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (Morrison, 1987: 192). Sethe wanted to "save her" daughter, her beloved baby, and spare her the system of slavery. So, killing her own daughter is far better than leaving her in the hands of the cruel Schoolteacher. "She had to be safe and I put her where she would." (Morrison, 1987: 200).

The act of infanticide challenges the Southern code at its most fundamental level as the code claimed ownership over Black bodies, including children, and denied Black women the right to protect their offspring. By asserting control over her children's lives, Sethe asserts the ultimate claim to maternal authority.

The ghost of Beloved, who returns to haunt Sethe's home, represents both the trauma of Sethe's act and the persistence of the past. Beloved is not only Sethe's daughter but her mother as well, representing a collective spirit of all the unnamed slaves who were torn from their homes in Africa and brought to America. Her return forces Sethe to confront the trauma she has repressed (Morrison, 1987: 200-207).

The relationship between Sethe and Beloved is ambivalent. Beloved defines herself through Sethe's experiences and actions, compelling

Sethe to face not only their collective but her own past by repeatedly asking her to tell stories about her life. This confrontation with the past enables Sethe to reclaim her selfhood, to recognize the injustice of slavery, and to direct her anger at the system rather than at herself.

4. Comparative Analysis: Marcus and Sethe as Subversive Figures

As subversive figures who challenge oppressive racial hierarchies, Marcus Payne in Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust* and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* confront brutal social codes. Both characters reject the roles assigned to them by dominant racial powers.

4.1 Strategies of Resistance: Performance vs. Maternal Defiance

Marcus and Sethe employ distinct but complementary strategies of resistance. Marcus Payne operates within a 1940s Louisiana plantation system designed to strip Black men of dignity and autonomy. By refusing to conform to the docile or submissive behaviors expected by white landowners like Marshall Hebert, Marcus enacts a fierce personal rebellion. His defiance disrupts the rigid racial etiquette of the segregated South, exposing the fragile and violent nature of white supremacy.

His resistance is performative and public: he dresses boldly, speaks defiantly, and engages in sexual relationships that challenge the racial hierarchy. When he forces his way into the plantation house, the act is described as follows: "The house his great-grandparents built. The house slavery built. He pushed his foot in that door" (Gaines, 1967: 215). This abrupt gesture symbolizes his direct rebellion against the history of slavery and white authority. Marcus's performance of masculinity is designed to be seen, to be acknowledged, to challenge the system to respond. Marcus emanates a rare personality that is confident and self-made, a quality that is really rare in a black man.

As for Sethe, she faces a similarly absolute and dehumanizing system under the legacy of slavery. Her radical subversion is most visible in her ultimate, tragic assertion of maternal ownership and protection. By claiming agency over her children's lives and freedom, Sethe shatters the property laws of a slave-holding society. Morrison uses Sethe's action to show how personal love becomes a weapon against institutional erasure. Sethe's resistance, by contrast, is primarily maternal and private. Her act of infanticide is performed in isolation, without witnesses, and its

consequences are internal and psychological rather than public and political. Yet the very privacy of her act makes it no less subversive. In claiming control over her children's lives, Sethe asserts a maternal autonomy that the slave system denied. These different strategies reflect the different positions of their characters within the Southern code. Marcus, as a Black man, challenges the code's denial of Black masculinity. Sethe, as a Black woman, challenges the code's denial of Black motherhood. Both challenges are necessary to the broader project of resistance.

4.2 The Role of Community

Community plays a crucial role in both novels, though in different ways. In *Of Love and Dust*, the Black community is divided between accommodation and resistance. Miss Julie Rand, Marcus's aunt, represents accommodation. Indeed, she understands the dynamics of the plantation and she knows that Sidney Bonbon is a brutal man who will have to break Marcus in order for him to submit to the plantation system. Thus she warns Marcus "But first he got to try you, he got to break you"(Gaines, 1967: 11). Jim Kelly represents a more ambivalent position he is disgusted by the compromises he must make but ultimately participates in the system.

In *Beloved*, the community is similarly divided. Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, represents a form of spiritual resistance that precedes Sethe's act. The community's failure to warn Sethe of schoolteacher's approach reflects its own fear and complicity. Yet the community ultimately comes to support Sethe, with the women of the community gathering to expel the ghost of *Beloved* and bring Sethe back to life.

4.3 The Costs and Ambiguities of Resistance and its Significance in African American Literary Tradition

Both Marcus and Sethe pay a devastating price for their resistance. Marcus is killed, his body destroyed by the system he challenged. Sethe lives, but she is haunted by the ghost of her dead child and ostracized by her community. Their resistance yields no immediate victory, no transformation of the Southern code. Yet their actions create the possibility of future change. Marcus's death testifies the impossibility of crossing the racial boundary and thus the unbreakable code and yet his boldness opens what Jim characterizes as a highway to something that

has remained so far unthinkable. Sethe's confrontation with the past enables her to "move on" and to rejoin the community (Haskins, 2002: 113).

This rebellious attitude towards the racialized southern system code and stratification can be found in many other characters and figures within African American literary works. For instance, Sofia in *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker radically defies racial as well as gender hierarchies by physically fighting back against a white mayor, even though she will pay for this radical boldness with brutal imprisonment. This happened When the white mayor's wife asks Sofia to be her maid and Sofia sharply replies "Hell no" (Walker, 1982: 80). The mayor slaps her, and Sofia immediately knocks him down, leading to her violent arrest and imprisonment.

In *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* by Ernest Gaines, Tee Bob and Mary Agnes tragic cross-caste romance directly challenges the unwritten Jim Crow laws and rigid social boundaries dictating interracial segregation and separation in the South (Gaines, 1971: 184 – 209).

Equally, In Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, Cora Caesar breaks the physical and legal chains of plantation bondage, while Caesar actively plots and executes a systemic subversion of the Southern legal apparatus (Whitehead, 2016: 69 – 75). Brother Jack in *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison also operates an ideological struggle against a society that stratifies and uses Black bodies as political currency. Specific thematic turning points of this struggle occur when the narrator realizes he is viewed merely as an instrument rather than a person, saying : "The world in which we lived was without boundaries. . . . I was 'brother' no longer; I became once more the narrator. . . . I'll sell them no more short-weight wisdom." [...] "They didn't change me... I yam what I yam!" (Ellison, 1952: 498)

The moments when characters are able to put aside their adherence to plantation hierarchies and recognize each other's humanity reveal the potential for future change.

Marcus and Sethe represent important figures in the African American literary tradition of resistance. They embody the transition from accommodation to defiance that characterized the civil rights movement figures like Rosa Parks and its aftermath (Sinclair, 1905: 70 - 80). They are not political organizers or protesters; they are ordinary people who refuse to accept their designated place in the social hierarchy.

Their significance lies in their humanity as Hyeon Jeong Lee notes, Gaines's interest is the archetypal human experience (Lee, 2016: 110). Morrison similarly explores the depths of human experience like love, loss, trauma, resilience. Both authors show that resistance to the Southern code is not merely a political act but a deeply human one, rooted in the desire for dignity, autonomy, love and the assertion of true black identity.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how Marcus Payne in Ernest Gaines' *Of Love and Dust* and Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* challenge the stratified Southern code that governed the American South. Marcus challenges the code through performative masculinity and sexual transgression, asserting his manhood against a system that denies Black men any claim to manhood. Sethe challenges the code through maternal defiance, asserting control over her children's lives against a system that denies Black women the right to protect their offspring.

Both characters pay a devastating price for their resistance. Marcus is killed by the overseer whose wife he seduced. Sethe is haunted by the ghost of the daughter she killed to save from slavery. Yet both characters, through their actions, create the possibility of future change. Their resistance is not political in the conventional sense, but it is profoundly subversive, challenging the Southern code at its most fundamental level. This analysis contributes to the broader understanding of how African American literature engages with the Southern code. It demonstrates that resistance takes many forms (performance, sexuality, motherhood, violence) and that these forms are shaped by gender and historical context. It also shows that resistance is not always successful or heroic; it is often ambiguous, costly, and painful.

The comparison of Marcus and Sethe illuminates the different strategies available to Black men and Black women under the Southern code, thereby highlighting two paradoxes: Marcus's public, performative resistance reflects the possibilities and limits of Black masculinity on the one hand, and on the other, Sethe's private, maternal resistance reflects the possibilities and limits of Black motherhood. Both are necessary to the broader project of resistance.

Ultimately, the practical significance of this study lies in its power to transform the response to violence from one of containment to one of restoration. Socially, it reconciles the African American identity with its painful origins without reducing it to that pain. The study also provides a blueprint for evidence-based intervention that addresses the root cause – unresolved historical trauma – rather than merely managing their symptoms. Recognizing this violence as an international trauma finally situates the African American struggle within a global human rights framework, demanding a collective, rather than a racialized, responsibility for healing.

Future research might explore the relationship between the studied characters' acts of resistance and the broader civil rights movement. It might examine how the literature of the 1960s and 1980s reflects the changing strategies of resistance to the Southern code. It might also compare Marcus and Sethe to other figures in African American literature—Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, or Milkman Dead, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*—who similarly challenge the code through acts of defiance.

Additionally, research might explore the ways in which the Southern code persists beyond the historical contexts of these novels. The racial hierarchies of the plantation system, the regulation of Black bodies, and the denial of Black humanity remain relevant to contemporary discussions of race, justice, and equality.

Marcus Payne and Sethe represent two of the most powerful figures in African American literature. Their stories are tragic, but they are also hopeful, suggesting that resistance is possible even under the most oppressive conditions.

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