Fractured Masculinity: Black Boys, Father Absence, and the Hypermasculinity-Vulnerability Duality in Gabriel Bump's *Everywhere You Don't Belong*

Sènakpon A. Fortuné Azon
Didier Kombieni
Kpatacha Essozobou Awesso
Fréjus Mahoussi Michaël Bocco

Abstract

This paper examines the impact of paternal absence, compounded by poverty and systemic racism, on the identity formation and psychological development of Black boys in the United States, using Gabriel Bump's *Everywhere You Don't Belong* as a case study. It argues that historical inequities disrupt paternal bonds, forcing Black boys into a destabilizing duality of performative hypermasculinity and excessive vulnerability. Using a psychoanalytic grid of analysis, the study highlights how fatherlessness exacerbates emotional instability, leaving boys dependent on surrogate father figures who often fail due to systemic neglect and personal trauma. It critiques media-driven archetypes that reduce Black masculinity to toxic models defined by domination, violence, and emotional detachment, exposing these postures as masks for fragility, and revealing insecurity within Black family structures through diffident protagonists. By juxtaposing these extremes, the paper challenges narrow narratives of Black masculinity and advocates for reimagining it beyond rigid binaries, emphasizing the need for systemic change to foster healthier identity formation in marginalized communities. Using the psychoanalytic theory, the paper critiques the systemic reproduction of emotional repression in African American masculinities. Its analysis, we hope, will contribute to African American literary scholarship by linking personal trauma with structural inequality.

Corresponding author:
Sènakpon A. Fortuné Azon,
Université d'Abomey-Calavi
E-mail : senakponazon@yahoo.fr
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2700-6870

Introduction

In Gabriel Bump's *Everywhere You Don't Belong* (hereafter called *Everywhere*), the themes of father abandonment and racism, hypermasculinity and emotional vulnerability, converge to create in the protagonist the destabilizing psychological effects of a fractured self. Bump uses the imagined life of Claude McKay Love in Chicago's South Side to probe the absence of paternal guidance in modern African American families, particularly those facing poverty and violence, and their devastating consequences.

Historically, the socio-economic fabric of the United States has been intertwined with systemic factors that impinge on paternal presence in Black families. From the transatlantic enslaved trade's violent separation of families to slavery dehumanization in America, from the later Jim Crow societies to the carceral state's mass incarceration of Black people, systemic racism has relentlessly eroded opportunities for a stable quality fatherhood. These structural inequities, coupled with economic marginalization and racialized policing, have created in Black families a pattern of paternal absence. Males are physically and/or emotionally disconnected from the lives of their children and wives. In response, African American communities have relied on a more sustained maternal presence backed up by communal and individual surrogate fatherhood models, where extended family members, mentors, community leaders, state-assigned guardians, fill in to perform paternal roles. While these adaptations reflect resilience in Black parenthood, they often fail to replicate the emotional depth and stability provided by genuine biological bonds. It is in this frame that the research tries to answer these questions: How does paternal absence, mediated by systemic racism, distort the psychological construction of Black masculinity in Bump's novel? How can Claude's experience of fatherlessness be related to generalized to other fatherless Black boys in building fractured masculinities?

This study argues that Bump's novel reflects through Claude the experiences of fatherless Black boys in the US. It analyzes how father surrogacy, identity formation, and emotional development intersect in those children's growth into manhood in environments shaped by systemic poverty, crime, and violence. Through Claude's example, this article reflects on the challenges faced by Black boys contending with absent paternal figures, situating their struggles within broader sociostructural inequities. Using the methodological framework of psychoanalytic theory, it examines the

perceptions of Black fatherlessness in the US in Bump's framework, making inferences on African American males, and assesses how surrogate fatherhood models fall short in addressing the psychological fractures of father absence.

I. Father Absence and its Psychological Impact in African American Communities

Fractured masculinity is a term this paper uses to describe the psychological and social fragmentation that young Black boys experience when societal expectations of rigid, dominant male roles conflict with the individual's authentic emotional vulnerabilities. Freud's theory of psychosexual development argues that in boys' socialization, at the Oedipal phase, the father is the symbolic "third" mediates and regulates social and aggressive tension between boy and mother (Trotta and Formica 3). The absence of that paternal figure in the boy's psychic development disrupts key identity-related developmental processes, belonging and role-modeling. With the loss of the father, boys lose their compass or normative sex role, gender identity, and emotional regulation in actualizing standards of manhood (Hunter et al. 6). The end result is that they grow up either hyper-masculinized, trying to confront their social fears, or unassuming and completely shattered, succumbing to the father's absence.

Self-concept in boys is usually fragmented when traditional pathways to male socialization, the relational models for integrating strength and emotionality which are often mediated by paternal presence, are destabilized, making it harder for fatherless boys to balance conflicting social expectations. In response, hypermasculinity emerges as a performative strategy to assert control and stifle perceived weakness. bell hooks argues that hypermasculinity is a performative armor of insecurity, exaggerated aggression, emotional detachment, and dominance forged by societal pressures to conform to narrow, toxic ideals of manhood. "To indoctrinate boys into the rules of patriarchy, she goes, we force them to feel pain and to deny their feelings" (*The Will* 28). Hypermasculinity refers to an exaggerated, performative enactment of stereotypically "masculine" traits like aggression, emotional stoicism, assertiveness, which contrasts with vulnerability, the capacity for emotional expression, self-doubt, relational openness, a state of psychological susceptibility to harm. Father estrangement can manifest as a father's physical

absence from a child's world or an emotional void that persists even in the father's tangible presence; both forms of absence carve profound emotional and psychological scars in the boy's self concept that linger long into adulthood. Self concept is an important issue in the life of Bump's protagonist.

Claude's journey in *Everywhere* is characterized by that fragmented sense of the self, emerging largely from his father's absence. Without a paternal figure to guide him, Claude struggles to define who he is and often feels disconnected from his heritage and community. Witnessing his friend Jonah's remarkable basketball prowess on the court, Claude McKay Love emerges from his usual depressive fog to acknowledge a profound void in his life: the absence of paternal support crucial for cultivating ambition and excellence, the one that makes boys rise high into the best self they could ever become. This stark revelation triggers his impassioned exclamation: "Jonah knows who he is, I want to know who I am" (Bump 34). Jonah has been mentored into excellence by his father. Jonah also confronts the boys' school basketball coach, Mr. Harper, and successfully pressures him to accept Claude on the team. In contrast, Claude cannot even speak out against Harper after the coach bullies him, leaving him with broken ribs. Claude's reflection on his own life, as expressed here, reveals his desire to balance the fluidly sound, not exaggerated assertive masculinity embodied by Jonah, with his own inner insecurities as a father-abandoned boy. Many experts believe that not having a father can make it hard for a young man to develop a clear identity. Howard Stevenson explains that "a father's presence provides a framework for young men to understand their roles within the family and society, offering a foundation upon which identity is built" (Stevenson 95). Since Claude does not have this support, he feels lost and cannot figure out who he really is or who he wants to be.

Throughout the story, Claude is obsessed by the meaning of manhood and often looks to other male figures in his community and popular culture for help. He tries to understand how to fit in and what kind of man he should be. When a boy has no steady socialization model of a good, respectful relationship from his father, he may struggle in his own friendships and romantic relationships. This search for a stable template of masculinity becomes a silent rebellion against the void left by his absent father, whose failure to model a good, respectful relationship condemns Claude to navigate intimacy through a fog of uncertainty, phobias, and trauma. Claude's romantic

interactions with females, particularly Tiffany ("Bubbly") and later Janice, a grieving foster sibling thrust into his home after the chaos of South Side riots, lay bare this dissonance between wanting and being unable to ask for or take. Janice, like Tiffany earlier, is in love with Claude. With both, Claude's attempts at connection falter; he cannot meet their gaze, let alone sustain a meaningful dialogue. Most of his interactions with Janice collapse into a reflexive litany of "I'm sorry," a phrase that functions less as apology than as a shield against his own perceived inadequacy. Crippled by timidity, he whispers his apologies to the world, as though his mere existence were an unforgivable trespass.

Janice is disappointed by Claude's lack of initiative and excessive shyness. Love demands courage he cannot muster. When she invites him to join her date with Chester Dexter, the novel's golden-boy athlete who radiates cocky masculinity, Claude becomes a ghost in his own life: he sits silently in the backseat of Chester's car, watching their flirtations, laughter, cuddling and kissing. Each moment of the date reflects everything Claude believes he is not. He decides to flee to Missouri, claiming Chicago's riots make him feel out of place. But one senses it is a lie he tells himself. What truly terrifies him is his love with Janice and her quiet persistence. He is struggling with the sense of belonging, normative sex role and gender identity that Hunter et al. have identified as crucial issues in fatherless boys. The evidence of this is that when Janice insists on following him, he pushes her away, not with anger but with silence, the same silence that signals pervasive insecurity. His retreat is not about geography. It's a surrender: to fear, to shame, to the crushing weight of a question he still cannot answer: What does it mean to be a man? The proof to this argument is that when he travels to Missouri, he still feels he is an outsider there.

Claude appears deeply fragmented, unable to initiate friendship or express emotional openness. This difficulty makes it harder for him to understand masculinity in terms of respect, openness, and partnership, but also in terms of courage and self-acceptance. Claude's life story is not just a struggle about shyness. It is about a boy raised on broken lessons. His quietness is not confidence. It is fear. Every mumbled apology he utters echoes his uncertainty: Am I enough? Without guidance, how can he become a man when he does not even know what that means?

Like many experts in family dynamics, Popenoe, in *Life Without Father* (1996), provides a comprehensive examination of the critical role fathers play

in family life and the wider societal consequences of their absence. Popenoe explores the significant social consequences of father absence, arguing that it contributes to numerous societal issues. He emphasizes that fatherless children face higher risks of juvenile delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy, and poverty. The lack of paternal involvement undermines children's emotional and social development, which in turn affects society by increasing crime rate and welfare dependency. He writes:

> Our societal decline can be phrased in terms of failure of social values. People no longer conduct themselves, to the same extent as prior generations, according to the civic virtues of honesty, self-sacrifice, and personal responsibility. People have become strong on individual rights and weak on community obligations. In our ever-growing pursuit of self-expression, self-development, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment, the social has become increasingly problematic. (Popenoe 13)

Claude's inability to map his psychological landscape translates into his inability to claim and appropriately navigate the South Side geographical space he inhabits. He cannot make sense of his emotions or his surrounding, which leaves him confused about where or how he fits into his Black community or into the world as a whole. His journey reflects the existential struggles many African American youths face: a profound sense of alienation, severance from family, peers and community, a sentiment crystallized in the novel's evocative title, *Everywhere You Don't Belong*. Bump's naming of his protagonist, Claude McKay Love, serves as a deliberate homage to Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay. McKay's own journey through the intersections of race, migration, culture, and political ideology, is poignantly chronicled in his autobiography *A Long Way from Home*. A long way from home is where Claude, Bump's protagonist, also stands. Furthermore, he even has no home to which he can feel that sweet emotional connection. His narrative truly resonates with the Harlem renaissance writer's loss and displacement, which is a core issue that underlies diasporic consciousness or existential exile. Born in rural Jamaica, McKay migrated to the United States, where he confronted systemic racism and anticommunism, later journeying to Europe and to the Soviet Union. His enduring rootlessness emerges from the African diaspora's legacy, the scars of colonialism, and his ideological dissonance within a capitalist America. The pervasive loss embedded in McKay's existence, dislocation and

feeling of being an outsider, not connected to his friends or community, parallel the disorientation of fatherless adolescence, a central theme embodied by Bump's protagonist.

Another most noticeable emotional effect of a neglectful father figure in Bump's novel is the irresistible feeling of abandonment that Claude experiences. Fathers are often seen by the society as figures of authority and emotional stability and their neglect can lead to insecurity, and low self-esteem in boys. Claude is psychologically affected. He does not even know how to feel: cursed or undesirable. In one poignant passage recounting his childhood depression, Claude remembers: "I cried whenever I passed our Michael Jordan portrait in the foyer. I cried whenever I sipped from my Phil Jackson mug. I cried whenever I passed our portrait of Craig Hodges wearing a dashiki, also in the foyer, above Jordan" (Bump 33). The emotional connection to a father that Michael Jordan and Craig Hodges's portraits make Claude imagine, turns his mind to what he would never have: a dignified father who provides him with support and guidance, with a map to navigate a tricky world and to connect the dots between the contradictory aspirations his society imposes on him.

Experience teaches us that, in our subjective perception, the things we long for and find absent from our lives often look like the most essential, the most exquisite, the single block we believe is needed to make the edifice of our world perfect. Despite the presence of his grandmother, the absence of this so much desired father on top of his mother, make Claude feel that he lacks guidance and emotional support. Parental support involves emotional encouragement and availability, physical care, and guidance. A parent can be physically there but emotionally distant, which can negatively impact a child's sense worth. It means that if a child sees their parent loving, encouraging, and reliable, they feel secure and confident. Bump uses this emotional void to illustrate how neglectful fathers can leave their sons feeling incomplete, often resulting in a search for validation from other sources, as Claude frequently does in his friendships.

Howard Stevenson, a psychologist specializing in African American family dynamics, notes that "children without fathers often face unique challenges in forming their identities, as they lack foundational guidance in understanding themselves and their place in the world" (Stevenson 95). This internal conflict is exacerbated by Claude's exposure to societal pressures and

expectations, which he feels unequipped to handle. Claude accidentally hears that to his parents, he was nothing more than an accident. He has to rely on surrogate patriarchal figures for guidance and emotional development. His grandmother's best friend, Paul, who happens to be the only father figure Claude has, is addicted to alcohol. Paul waves between homosexuality and heterosexuality, is mentally unstable, even often delirious, and might be homeless if he had not found shelter with Grandma. Paul's psychological profile, his emotional lack of coherence, metaphorize the nature that father surrogacy in Black families, however well intended they may be, usually turn out to break children's psychological development.

Surrogate father figures, with racism and extreme poverty as background, usually cannot provide but a shallow mentorship. Paul's advice and guidance to Claude often lack depth and consistency. Claude sees Paul as always full of stories, but never answers. Paul's inability to answer Claude's questions reflects the limitations of surrogacy. Claude, still a young child, grapples with the death of his classmate Tiffany's brother, a tragedy that prompts their school to assign the little children a homework on death. The task requires them to seek explanations about death from familial caregivers, ideally framed in age-appropriate language to soften the traumatic effect of life's most profound loss. Yet Paul, Claude's erratic guardian, responds with a callous explanation that transgresses the initial intention of the assignment, searing it deep into Claude's heart: "'One day Grandma and I are going to abandon you also.' He had his back turned to me. 'And Tiffany.' 'Bubbly,' I said. 'Bubbly and Nugget,' he said. 'And you are going to be alone'" (Bump 18). For Claude fresh from the abandonment of both parents, Paul's words come out as a warning gesture into a merciless life of isolation, layering dread on the raw, unhealed grief of his initial parents' abandonment. Paul makes him believe that everyone in his life will eventually leave. An additional destructive experience with his surrogate father which leaves an indelible mark on Claude's psyche, exemplifying the awkwardness of father surrogacy, is Paul's brutal announcement that Claude was nothing but an accident to his uncaring parents:

"Your mom wasn't like a mom," he said.

"Your dad wasn't like a dad."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You were an accident," he said.

"They never wanted you." (Bump 98)

This highlights a key problem with surrogate fatherhood: even though Paul is there for Claude, his own disappointments and sadness keep him from providing the sense of safety and guidance that a real father might. Although millions of boys succeed in life who grow up with surrogate fathers, surrogate figures may offer companionship but usually fail to provide, in depth and consistency, the emotional guidance a caring biological father will deliver. The lack of a consistent patriarchal figure in Claude's life leads to emotional disconnect and heightened vulnerability. Without a father's guidance, Claude often feels unsupported and unsure of how to process his emotions. William J. Wilson explains that "the absence of a father figure can amplify emotional vulnerabilities, particularly in marginalized communities where systemic pressures compound personal struggles" (Wilson 413). Claude's emotional difficulties align with this perspective, as he struggles a lot to run away in the wake of the riot which erupts in his neighborhood. He is incapable to find his bearings in his own community.

Conventional wisdom in developmental psychology identifies maternal care as the primary facilitator of interpersonal competence in male children, whereas paternal involvement is posited as instrumental in shaping socialization processes, environmental navigation, and sociospatial confidence—dimensions now recognized as bearing paramount significance in psychosocial maturation. Claude handles the riot that erupts in his community with a paralyzing fear. If his father were present, it would be emotionally and physically easier for him to cross the tumultuous rivers of the Chicago's South Shore riots. Oscar Barbarian argues that "non-traditional patriarchal figures, such as grandparents or community leaders, often bring unique strengths but may lack the emotional accessibility of biological fathers" (Barbarian 65). In the same vein, Roberta L. Coles observes that surrogate fathers, while often well-meaning, may lack the emotional investment or skills necessary to meet a child's psychological needs. She writes: "The surrogate role is inherently constrained by its lack of biological and emotional ties, which can limit the depth of the relationship" (Coles 730).

In Claude's case, his grandmother takes on a fatherly role but struggles to balance disciplining, a traditionally male responsibility, with female emotional support. In this situation, Grandma's strict and controlling way of handling things conflicts with the emotional support Claude needs. Rather

than listening to Claude or offering helpful advice, the old woman insists on controlling Claude's life circumstances and rejects diverging viewpoints. This shows how challenging it can be for surrogate figures to fill the complex role of a father, especially when society expects them to focus on certain traits.

For many fatherless boys, the concept of paternal responsibility is often fragmented and distributed among multiple figures, including relatives, community leaders, state-appointed wardens, custodians, guardians, and foster fathers. This diffusion of authority can dilute the influence of any single figure, leaving youths uncertain about who holds authority in specific matters. The result is a patchwork of guidance that may send mixed or contradictory messages, creating inconsistencies in these boys' upbringing. These surrogate father figures embodying differing values, parenting styles, and approaches to masculinity, lead to confusion for the child. Such disparities make it challenging for boys to form a cohesive understanding of masculinity and societal expectations. Lack of clarity may hinder their emotional development and ability to navigate societal norms effectively.

Last, one ubiquitous issue in surrogate fatherhood is child sexual abuse. While surrogate fatherhood arrangements, whether informal mentorships or official structured guardianships, carry risks of exploitation, *Everywere* sidesteps the grim reality of sexual abuse that pervades many such relationships in real-world contexts. The novel's silence on this issue contrasts starkly with documented cases where paternal surrogacy's inherent power imbalances, emotional dependency, and ambiguous boundaries enable predators to pervert caregiving roles. By avoiding this darker facet, Bump's text inadvertently mirrors societal reluctance to confront how structural vulnerabilities in fatherless households, particularly those marked by economic precariousness or fractured kinships, can normalize manipulative and abusive relationships under the guise of mentorship. Acknowledging this tension in literature is critical, as it underscores the urgent need for narratives that interrogate, rather than romanticize, the complexities of surrogate parenting. Also, negative male figures, such as gang leaders, violent relatives who, for want of a father, young boys are compelled to erect into mentors, may help boys develop dangerous understanding of maleness rooted in violence and toxic masculinity, dominance, hiding emotions, aggressiveness, male independence, that are wrongly taken as maleness.

II. Black Fatherlessness at the Crossroads of Emotional Vulnerability and Hypermasculinity

As R. Connell puts it in *Masculinities* (1995), masculinity is a configuration of practices, a set of practices that are constructed in a particular historical and cultural context, in relation to femininity and other masculinities. It often includes traits such as strength, assertiveness, emotional control, independence, and responsibility. As there is no universal model of masculinity, Black American masculinities are necessarily shaped by the intersection of racialization, systemic violence, and cultural resistance. For Black men and boys, practices of masculinity emerge not only from gendered expectations but also from the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and ongoing anti-Black racism, forces that demand resilience while simultaneously policing Black people' bodies, minds, and emotions. These masculinities often negotiate contradictions: asserting strength to survive systemic dehumanization and poor neighborhood violence, yet reclaiming vulnerability as an act of defiance and humanity; performing hypervisibility under a surveilling gaze, yet cultivating humane interiority through communal bonds.

Black masculinities are traditionally performed in the US to destabilize hegemonic norms, even if the process is sometimes tainted and ill-conducted, leading to further disorientation. The models of the successful thug, of the muscle adulator, or swift gun wielder well exemplify the profound loss of direction in the quest of manhood in poor and violent black communities, especially in fatherless households. The social journey of masculinization in Black circles anyway reveals how race, power, and history reconfigure what Connell calls the "configuration of practice."

One of the key elements of masculinity in African American communities is the expectation to suppress emotions and avoid displays of vulnerability. This cultural norm is deeply rooted in historical contexts, where emotional resilience was essential for survival in the face of systemic oppression. During slavery and segregation, Black men had no agency and were compelled, to the very best of their capability, to hide their feelings and emotions. This led to the development of emotional resilience in the form of suppression as a means of coping with trauma and hardship. Suppressing emotions such as fear or sadness helped African American men navigate hostile environments without appearing vulnerable to threats, both mental and physical.

The media and film industry have long elevated the hypermuscular African American male body as an emblem of genuine Black masculinity, unknowingly popularizing the belief that physical dominance and aggression are central to Black male identity. Blaxploitation-era icons like John Shaft (played by Richard Roundtree) and modern superhero archetypes such as Luke Cage (Mike Colter) or Black Panther's M'Baku (Winston Duke) reinforce this trope. It equates Black masculinity with brute strength and unyielding toughness. Also, today, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, through the dozens of movies and series of his long-acting career, and Michael B. Jordan's Adonis Creed, epitomize this Black body aesthetic. Their sculpted bodies symbolize Black physical power but unfortunately, put forward a narrowed popular script for Black manhood. Even hip-hop's visual narratives, conveyed by figures like 50 Cent and DMX, glorify muscularity as armor against vulnerability. They reduce Black masculinity to a performative spectacle and perpetuate stereotypes of Black men as inherently threatening or indestructible.

The novel presents a striking example of the biased masculinity construction through the character of Jeffrey, affectionately nicknamed Nugget, who serves as Claude's childhood confidant. Nugget's story highlights the psychological tension between individual identity and societal expectations. He openly acknowledges his pervasive fear, stating: "I think I'm always afraid" (Bump 15), alongside his profound generosity, a trait his mother deems incompatible with conventional masculinity. Reflecting on this, he confesses: "My mom says I have too much love in my heart. She says I cry when I'm alone because my heart is too big for one person" (Bump 16). In an effort to conform to societal ideals of manhood, Nugget pursues parachuting, a pursuit emblematic of performative bravado and risk-taking, contrary to his own nature. His tragic death during a parachute descent critiques the demands of hypermasculinity, which insist on invulnerability and suppression of emotional vulnerability. There are chances that Nuggets has got caught by his natural tendency to panicking and forgets how to operate his parachute. The narrative employs parachuting as a potent metaphor for the precarious survival strategies imposed by structural inequities, where performative resilience serves to obscure—but fails to resolve—the deep fractures within Black male identity under societal pressure. Claude himself overhears his grandmother and Paul listing his "problems": "*sentimental, no backbone*

[emphasis ours], adrift, unspectacular" (Bump 23).

The construction of masculinity in African American communities is shaped by a multifaceted blend of cultural figures from film and popular culture, alongside historical and social factors. These expectations typically emphasize physical and mental strength, silent resilience, limited verbal communication, and emotional control. However, systemic barriers, father absenteeism, poverty, and intergenerational trauma complicate the pursuit of this ideal by increasing individual vulnerability. Characters such as Chester Dexter in *Everywhere* exemplify this form of masculinity, highlighting the vulnerabilities inherent in such portrayals.

In Gabriel Bump's *Everywhere*, Chester Dexter emerges as a caricature of performative hypermasculinity, his identity defined by the bravado of a high school star athlete. With his football prowesses – one of the most violent sports that showcase hypermasculinity – with his loud confidence, sleek car, and effortless dominance, Chester embodies the toxic ideals of showy lifestyle and aggression that South Side Chicago's culture often glorifies for masculinity. He foregrounds his physicality and popularity to assert control, brandishing Janice as a trophy. Yet Chester's persona, a rehearsed blend of jock charisma and dismissive cruelty, exposes the fragility beneath the façade. Life circumstances eventually crush him into a pathetic showcase of vanity. His hypermasculinity is less a mark of strength than a brittle armor, shielding him from the same societal pressures that make Claude suffocate.

The rehearsed persona of hypermasculinity is what Paul, though clumsily, conforms to by refusing to emotionally engage with Claude and the boy's psychological loss. Claude remembers one of those moments when Paul fights back tears in a quiet battle still fraught with stoicism: "Paul wasn't crying. I could tell he was trying his best not to. He probably thought his crying would make me cry" (Bump 130). The expectation of emotional suppression illustrated by this scene has profound consequences on how Claude maps his own development, as it plunges him into confusion and creates a barrier to communication and understanding with the old man. hooks criticize this phenomenon, arguing, "Patriarchal masculinity teaches men that emotional vulnerability is a weakness, thereby depriving them of the ability to connect deeply with themselves and others" (hooks, *We Real Cool* 17). In the novel, Paul's inability to provide emotional support leaves Claude feeling isolated and confused, underscoring the limitations of this traditional

masculine ideal.

Performative masculine exaggerations often become adaptive survival mechanisms in marginalized contexts shaped by systemic inequality, poverty and gang rivalries. In Bump, these pressures manifest in the behavior of male characters who strive to project strength as a means of asserting their identity. Claude reflects on this dynamic: "The men around me wore their toughness like armor. They laughed loud, fought hard, and never showed fear. I didn't know how to be like them" (Bump 103). In one of the very scarce memories that Claude still has of his father, he remembers the latter in a street fight with a man that he subdues under his two-year son's applause. The mythology of muscle, physical violence and male domination are the ideas that the scene summons and critiques. Another character that impersonates, in all respects, street roughness, central element for the construction of maleness, is Big Columbus, the head of the Redbelters' gang. Sociologist Michael Kimmel notes that hyper-masculinity often emerges as a response to societal devaluation of Black men, stating, "The construction of aggressive masculinity serves as a counter-narrative to stereotypes of weakness or subservience, but it often comes at the expense of emotional health and relational stability" (Kimmel 89). Big Columbus's masculinity epitomizes this destructive maleness that starts the confrontation with the police and finally plunges South Side into destructive chaos. Big Columbus destroys the neighbourhood through the riot and self-destructs as he gets himself killed by the police. It is his kind of barren maleness that requires you to be calm when you feel desperate inside, smile when you feel like crying, stay calm when you feel like shouting, living day to day hoping for a brighter future with a smile on your face – which is not inherently bad, but most of all, pursuing a battle that obviously proves futile and lost in advance. These characteristics are so true for street hustlers, drug dealers, often associated to poor neighborhoods in the US. Lamar, in the same vein, tells us:

> Because the hustler acts upon strident beliefs in male dominance, his actions are also understood to be deeply misogynistic. In an effort to attain or achieve a livable Black masculinity, hustler masculinity suppresses the identities of women. The hustler has to be able to wield power over something or someone in order to fulfill what he assumes are the requirements for Black male hegemony, and he mimics how male/female relationships have traditionally functioned in the United

States. According to this particular worldview, the Black hustler defines himself against women and how they have frequently been positioned or absented from public spaces. (Lamar 3-4)

Expectations of masculinity in African American communities are often passed down through generations, creating cycles of emotional suppression and relational distance. Fathers who supress their emotions may inadvertently teach their sons to do the same, perpetuating a cycle of emotional isolation. Surrogate fathers who do so further ruin the boys' lives because these boys usually interpret their restraint as a lack of care and love, essential to a balanced, healthy growth. Black boys in educated in this way by their biological fathers not only grow thinking that a show of emotions is availability to physical, emotional, and psychological harm, worse, they feel detached from other human beings. Black boys educated by surrogate fathers are further destroyed, sometimes growing into psychopaths. For fatherless boys like Claude whose paternal model construction depend on haphazard circumstances, maturation becomes more chaotic.

In *Everywhere*, society's pressure on men to appear strong leaves little space for emotional expression. The protagonist, Claude, observes how men around him use emotional toughness to protect themselves and survive in their environment:

During the riot, everybody was angry as hell. And that anger was confusion. And confusion is dangerous when you are standing in the middle of the street and not sure if you should go with the gangs that kills people or the cops that kill people. And there's only one option. And that option is standing with your people. (Bump 65)

These ideas show a common belief that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness, especially for Black men facing systemic oppression. Not being able to express feelings like sadness, fear, or insecurity can lead to long-term stress, anxiety, and depression. African American men often deal with these problems more than others (hooks, *We Real Cool* 5) but may not ask for help because of the stigma around mental health. Manhood is reduced to a narrow construction of strength and social roles that the society dictates and young children must conform to in their relation to society, to their family and to their spouses. Claude is asked if the construct he has of his performing masculinity with his future wife complies with the traditional roles of a husband:

What will you do for your sunshine? Will you protect your sunshine from this cruel world? Will you guide your sunshine through any perils? Will you pay the bills? Will you walk the dogs? Will you take out the trash? Will you hold your sunshine when there's thunder outside? Will you rock the baby to sleep? Will you drive the kids to school? Will you bury your sunshine in the most expensive coffin? (Bump 13)

Most of those roles emphasize control and direction. While being resilient is important, showing vulnerability challenges the idea that one must endure pain silently.

The solution to the conflict between masculinity and vulnerability is to stop hiding emotions. *Everywhere* suggests that healing starts when people and communities reject narrow ideas of masculinity and choose to be authentic and open with their feelings. Claude's journey shows this change as he learns to put his emotional well-being before what society expects. The emotional costs of hyper-masculinity in African American communities come from the social pressure to toxic hypermasculinity and the human need of vulnerability. Talking openly about mental health and emotions in families can help men feel more comfortable expressing their feelings. Masculinity does not exclude empathy, emotional resilience, and the courage to be vulnerable. bell hooks makes the same observation when she thinks of the high toll masculinity exacts on Black men: "When men are freed from the constraints of patriarchal masculinity, they can begin to heal and nurture meaningful relationships" (hooks, *The Will to Change* 41).

Through Claude's fatherlessness, Bump offers us a vision of masculinity that values vulnerability as a strength, leading to healthier father-son relationships and stronger communities. However, as the reader notices throughout the novel, the fear of hypermasculine models make Claude grow into a spineless young man on whom everyone could wipe their feet without a shred of fear. It is through Claude's chaos and the failure of hypermaculine characters that Bump criticizes hypermasculinity.

Conclusion

Everywhere's focus on fractured masculinities in Black boys confronts a widespread issue of national importance caused by the absence of stable, positive paternal role models in African American families. Through Claude's

journey, Bump shows how the void left by absent fathers compels young men to navigate conflicting societal expectations, often adopting hypermasculine postures as armor against vulnerability, but sometimes too, growing into too weak individuals incapable of facing social challenges. Surrogate figures, while emblematic of communal resilience, frequently fail to provide the emotional depth or consistency needed to reconcile these contradictions, leaving boys like Claude adrift in a cycle of performative stoicism and internalized inadequacy. The novel highlights the devastating toll of structural racism, poverty and fatherlessness, revealing how systemic forces, from mass incarceration to economic marginalization, perpetuate cycles of fractured identity and relational disconnection.

Claude's struggles stand beyond individual experience and reflect broader cultural tensions between hypermasculine performance and exaggerated emotional vulnerability. Media archetypes of muscular, aggressive Black masculinity, alongside historical pressures to suppress vulnerability, narrow the scripts available for Black boys to define themselves. Yet Bump's narrative, critiquing the toxic ideals represented by the two extremes, is a gesture toward hope, but first of all a denunciation of the futility of performative resilience. The protagonist Claude suggests the possibility of healing from father absence and the wounds of parent surrogacy. The novel's core message is a call for a redefinition of masculinity that transcends the rigid social archetypes and the systemic causes of father absence. Ultimately, *Everywhere* serves as both a criticism for society to reckon with the human cost of structural neglect, and a call for help for Black boys navigating a world that too often tells them they do not belong. Future research could explore how postmodern African American fiction redefines masculinity through vulnerability and emotional literacy.

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