“Jack Boughton Has a Wife and a Child”: Generative Blackness in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and *Home*

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Abstract

Robinson focuses the action of *Gilead* and *Home* in the small town of Gilead during the Civil Rights Era even as she relegates black history and black voices to her novels’ peripheries. Blackness nonetheless lurks and frays at the edges of both narratives, at the edges of memory, remaining simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible in both John Ames’s and Glory Boughton’s remembering of the past. In this essay, I use Robinson’s companion novels to illuminate the ways in which American society’s representation of black bodies and subjectivities makes possible ways of remembering and retelling Blackness that affirm kinship between white fathers and sons and make lineage transpire between them. Robinson is not blameless of this representational strategy. She is attentive to the ways in which and the reasons why Blackness is made absent in the town of Gilead; she does not address, however, how she also utilizes that absent presence to affix genealogy to Jack and Ames, or even Jack and his biological father, but never Jack and his son.

At the end of his seventy-six years, John Ames, the narrator in Marilynne Robinson's much-lauded novel, *Gilead* (2004), ruminates on the lessons that he learned as a child, a married man, a student and a preacher in order to parse together meaningful “begats,” something more than genealogy, to leave his young son. Ames struggles to think through what is worth leaving behind, recorded on paper, and what he prefers to be left unknown. “And what else should I tell you?” he muses, after listing the names of his father and grandfather, his mother and grandmother. What unfurls from this question is the narrative of a life, the telling of memories that winds through both *Gilead* and its companion volume, *Home* (2008). While the latter differs from its predecessor in that it is not a confessional, epistolary first-person narrative, both novels pivot on the key figure of John (Jack) Ames Boughton, the prodigal son who vanishes after impregnating a girl of lower socioeconomic standing whom he has no desire to marry. In *Gilead* he is introduced as a scoundrel vis-à-vis the exacting eye of Ames, his godfather and father’s closest friend and confidant; in *Home*, we see him through the oft exasperated but always loving gaze of his sister, Glory Boughton. His confession to Ames toward the end of *Gilead*—that he has a
Black\(^1\) wife and mixed-race child—is made flesh in *Home* as both his wife and child appear in town; what becomes evident through this confession and appearance is how Blackness lurks and frays at the edges of both the novel and the eponymous town, at the edges of memory and history, remaining simultaneously invisible and hypervisible in both Ames’s and Glory’s representations of past and present. In other words, Black bodies perform in spectacular visual fashion but also, as seen through Ames’s recollection of his grandfather's ties to John Brown (and not free Blacks or Black slaves themselves), only attain articulation through the words, memories, mediations and interventions of white characters. If *Gilead* and *Home* are both narrated from the vantage point of 1956, the novels’ temporal setting nips at the heels of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the murder of Emmett Till in 1955. In focusing her narratives at this particular historical moment, how does Robinson define the status of Blackness in the United States? Moreover, what are the stakes of such a definition?

In this essay, I propose a reading of Jack Boughton, his son and his father figures as providing potential answers to these questions. Although *Home* features a female protagonist, both it and *Gilead* are ultimately novels about what fathers leave to their sons, and how the pasts of the fathers imbricate and overlap into the futures of their male progeny. During his belated return home to the small town of Gilead, Iowa, where he had imagined the possibility of making a home for his interracial family, Jack notes that Blacks, who once worshipped at “a Negro church” there, are no longer present even at the town's peripheries (*Gilead* 171). This absence of race not only marks the absence of Black bodies and communities in Gilead, but also the impossibility of a particular kind of kinship and community for Black sons.\(^2\)

\(^1\) In this essay, I capitalize “Black” because as with other disenfranchised racial and ethnic designations in the United States, it deserves and requires proper-noun status and naming. I also capitalize “Black” and “Blackness” to draw attention to the historically persistent and political moves to affirm subjectivity and self-determination made by Black-identifying individuals and communities in the United States in the face of genocidal and structural violence. As Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us, “Naming is how I make my presence known, how I assert who and what I am and want to be known as. Naming myself is a survival tactic” (Anzaldúa 164).

\(^2\) Although Jack’s son is mixed-race, it is critical to remain attentive to the ways in which racial quantifying was used as a means of enacting and justifying Jim Crow laws prior to 1956, and the de facto segregation that continued afterward. Considering that the novels take place only two years after the landmark case of *Brown v Board*, Jack’s son is likely racially coded as Black in Tennessee. If, as Adrian Piper states, “[a]ccuracy was never their purpose” in enforcing the one-drop rule, we see how racial markers are more about the anxieties surrounding a protecting of whiteness and all the powers that accrue to it, and less about visual (and other) forms of identification (Piper 28).