Silence is its own language. What is left in the absence of words is not necessarily inaudible, but rather, indistinguishable to one who refuses to hear it. Writer John Edgar Wideman defines silence in the realm of African-American culture as “not really silence” (Wideman 643) at all. On the contrary, “It’s an illusion. If we hear nothing, if one ever can hear nothing, it only means we aren't listening hard enough...The total absence of sound is never a possibility for a hearing person ” (Wideman 643). In this way, Wideman points to a defining feature of silence -- one that suggests silence is not really silence at all. Rather, that silence is a figment of one’s imagination. Therefore, to not “hear” silence (Wideman 643) is a decision that one makes intentionally. A writer’s intentionality is essential when thinking about how silence operates in texts about African-American people, specifically those that place themes of black masculinity and identity at the centre. Silence, or the silencing of certain narratives in an effort to privilege other ones impacts what stories are told, whose stories are told, and how it is in fact shared. This in turn shapes how the men in these texts establish a sense of self and belonging in the various spaces that they occupy.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, scholar Frantz Fanon defines black masculinity as “shaped by the oppressive sociopolitical structure of colonial culture” (Bergner 76). He suggests that black men have had their identities constructed for them through colonialism. To explain his point further, Fanon writes that black men have been “humiliated, mocked, beaten, raped,
assaulted, and murdered” (Vergés 582). This last quote, when contrasted with feminist scholar bell hooks’ definition of present day perceptions of black masculinity, is an important one to consider because it points to what is commonly lost in the articulation of stories about black masculinity, namely that it is complex and deeply personal to the lives of those who experience it. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks writes that black men are often perceived as physical embodiments of “bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hyper masculine assertion” (hooks 79). This “embodiment” (hooks 79) that hooks writes about becomes the only way black men are thought about both in the reality of one’s life and in the pages of literary prose. Hooks also writes that as a college student she was constantly having to read the works of white scholars that wrote about black men and characterized them as “dangerous, violent, sex maniacs” (hooks 89). This is one of the many examples of the complexities of black men and their narrative are commonly lost in literature. This is not to say that one must originate directly from a community to speak about it accurately and respectfully, but to suggest that a writer’s intention to share the piece should be examined further.

Scholars such as bell hooks and Jeffrey Renard Allen write extensively about black male masculinity, silence, and the intersection of both. In his analysis, Jeffrey Allen shares how silence can be used as a source of retaining one’s power. In Allen’s paper he writes about artist “Blind Tom,” a black slave who was famously known for performing the works of artists such as Mozart and Chopin. “Blind Tom” never spoke about his art nor gave interviews to anyone. To explain further, Allen writes:

As I see it, his protest took the form of these low-key refusals. And they took the form of silence. Cut off from his parents and siblings, and dependent on white people for his daily survival, silence was the only means of agency available to him. In place of words, he let
his hands and feet do the talking and used his voice as an instrument, leaving white people to read these displays of physical and vocal dexterity any way they wanted. He did not seek their recognition, acceptance, or praise. What he gave them for a time was performance—a making in the moment that they could not categorize or control. What he refused to give them was the self behind the act. (Allen 49)

By refraining from speech, and instead using his art as a medium to speak, “Blind Tom” emboldened this concept of silence as an interrogation of personal power. He chose to be silent and in the process asserted his own personal autonomy. One could also argue that in exchange for his identity, Tom did not have the luxury of choosing whether or not to remain silent. In other words, silence was a symptom of being a black man whose role was defined by the interests of the white people he entertained. This is why, I agree with Allen when he says that perhaps remaining silent was in fact “the only mean of agency” (Allen 49) that “Blind Tom” could exercise. In a way, the theories of Wideman and Allen intersect on this very point. Allen writes that Tom would use his “hands and feet” (Allen 49) to do “the talking” (Allen 49) for him. Allen’s theory fits in seamlessly into Wideman earlier points, mostly because he advocates for the idea that everything and anyone is always speaking but that it is just a matter of the listener deciding to hear it or not. Although Allen raises fruitful points about the power of silence, he fails to acknowledge how this impacts the other aspects of Tom’s character, namely, the perceptions he or others may have about his masculinity. It seems that by focusing only on Tom’s refusal to speak, Allen disregards how Tom can also be thought to be subverting present day ideals of masculinity by not speaking. In his analysis, it appears that Allen misses this point altogether.
In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon also writes about how black men’s bodies, minds, and identities were unwillfully stripped from them, while in *We Real Cool* hooks speaks to the intersections between maleness and blackness generally. It is important to note that the defining characteristics of what black masculinity is (if at all definable) cannot be discussed without first acknowledging the stereotypes that already persist. These stereotypes include but are not limited to the idea that black men are “bestial” (hooks 79) and “violent” (hooks 79). When considered, hooks’ definition, although not wholly encompassing of all African-American men, does in fact speak to the dangers of negative perceptions of black masculinity in North America today.

Currently, black men are disproportionately incarcerated for crimes that white men also commit in the United States. As well, today, a “larger percentage of its (United States’) black population” (Alexander 6) resides in jail than in South Africa at “the height of apartheid” (Alexander 6). These statistics are a testament to how stereotypes play a role in enacting cultural perceptions of black men that have life altering implications. Before they are considered to be people, black men are rendered an inherent threat to a society and this is because of depictions of them that do not show the complexities of their character. As a result of these stereotypes, what happens is that they become what social justice advocate Jesse Williams calls this generation’s overt overreaction to negative perceptions of what a black man is. Of course, these reductive stereotypes do not end nor begin only in black communities. Many times, communities where minority groups also exist face the perils of being non-white in a culture that privileges whiteness. To attempt to speak then about the underlying stereotypes that pervade these communities in this paper would be a disservice to the depth and breadth that such a topic requires.
The quest to define black masculinity begins with an understanding that the definition is not fixed. Author and poet Audre Lorde writes that “for Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others -- for their use and our detriment” (Lorde 45). While Lorde does not point directly to colonialism as the root of limited perceptions about black masculinity like Fanon does, she does allude to it with the use of descriptors “their” (Lorde 45) and “our” (Lorde 45). The “our” (Lorde 45) she speaks of are black men and women; however, her use of “their” (Lorde 45) is less discernable. One of the prevailing limitations in postcolonial studies is its emphasis on western colonization. The field seldom highlights the ways in which colonization -- the displacement of communities of people and forceful undertaking of land -- was orchestrated by, for example, African countries against other African countries and Asian countries against other Asian countries. Of course, this is not to say that neither colonization by Europeans or colonization by Africans of other Africans is more or less detrimental than the other; however, what this point makes potent is that various forms of colonization (not just one) have impacted society and the people in it as a whole. Therefore, to look pointedly at one form of colonization as the sole root of communicating how a community of people are now perceived would be in a way, a disservice to the complexities of history. Lorde’s use of the ambiguous “their” (Lorde 45) considers this point by refusing to name who is directly responsible for what. Her quote inadvertently broadens the scope of the conversation to include histories that are seldom told.

Black male identity and masculinity are not mutually exclusive terms. Although both play vital roles in the development of one’s character, the terms black and masculinity also exist as separate entry points to discussions about identity. Identity is defined by what makes something what they are. One’s identity is not fixed, nor can it be quantified. Prolific writer and
poet Dr. Maya Angelou writes that people “are the sum total of everything [they’ve] ever seen, heard, eaten, smelled, been told, forgot...Everything influences each of us.” Angelou’s quote is an example of how questions of identity are not always readily identifiable. One’s identity, Angelou explains, is constructed between the spaces of their experiences. Similar to Wideman’s discussion on silence, Angelou shows the possibility for one’s narrative to be told, shaped, and explained in ways other than through language use. For this reason, my paper advocates for readers to consider the limitations that definitions have in understanding a person, an idea, or even a concept. Definitions are of course helpful in many ways, but they can also limit the scope of one’s reality in an effort define feelings or circumstances that are not necessarily definable. Words can at times act as barriers to understanding the depths of one’s truth and more specifically, one’s identity. In this paper, I refer to texts like *Moonlight* and *Invisible Man*, to talk about the complexities of forging one’s identity with these other presiding issues at play. The purpose of silence then is to illuminate what is otherwise more concretely left out of the text -- the words behind the words. Categorizing silence as an essential part of these discussions on identity is part of opening the narrative to include experiences that would otherwise fail to be told. Often narratives use dialogue as a central means to communicate how a character feels and perhaps what they think about another person or situation; however, what happens when words, at least those said explicitly, are taken away? Here, I want to think about silence in much more complex ways -- more specifically as a tool for self-actualization that one employs to better understand themselves and their surroundings. *Moonlight* and *Invisible Man* are fantastic examples of how this is made possible because of the interplay between silence and dialogue to emphasize the development of their characters. In this paper, I am also interested in thinking about silence as an interrogation of power. I propose that the absence of dialogue and non-verbal
cues are vehicles for the black men in these texts to reimagine themselves -- not necessarily as better than who they were, but as true expressions of who they are. My intention with this essay is to explore and illuminate the depths of these characters, not simply as fictionalized representations of black men, but rather as living breathing humanities of African-American males whom are brothers, fathers, lovers, friends, and people.

Conceptualizations of how time and space function in accordance with perceptions of black masculinity, identity, and silence are also fruitful conversation points. In his work, spatial ontologist Edward Soja considers how “space still tends to be treated as fixed, dead, undialectical” (Guerin, et al. 367) rather than what it ought to be thought of which is an elusive and ever-changing concept. In essence, Soja says that space is not limited to a physical space, but rather, is something that is influenced by “historical and natural elements” (Guerin, et al. 367) that are political in nature and infused “with ideology” (Guerin, et al. 367). Space, Soja believes, is never stagnant. To define something as political means that it exists within a larger discourse of power. This discourse is not limited to an item that is tangible such a government structure. In fact, at one time this discourse could have included pervading ideologies about white people’s superiority to that of black individuals. One’s conceptualization of space is always shifting depending on what “historical” (Guerin, et al. 367) or “natural” (Guerin, et al. 367) elements are being considered. An example of one such “historical” (Guerin, et al. 367) element as it relates to this paper is bell hooks’ discussion on the “postcolonial body as a space” (Guerin, et al. 366), or more explicitly, black male masculinity during the era of slavery:

All black men were tormented by their inability to fulfill the phallocentric masculine ideal as it has been articulated in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Erasing the realities of black men who have diverse understandings of masculinity, scholarship on the
black family (traditionally the framework for academic discussion of black masculinity) puts in place of this lived completely a flat, one-dimensional representation. (hooks 89)

Here, hooks speaks extensively about the historical context of the black male to female relationship during the time of slavery. The excerpt clearly defines how black masculinity was about fulfilling idealized version of manhood, some of which were unattainable ideals. For example, men were expected to be both leaders of their families and pillars of patriarchal example that took care of their women and children. *This*, hooks writes, was the expectation that black women had of their black men as well. This expectation would for many be a reasonable one to make; I argue that it is not the expectation itself that is troublesome, but instead, that there was one in the first place. Of course, expectations of how to live and who to be are placed various communities of people; however, in a discussion about one’s identity formation it is important to think about what long term effects these expectations have. One should also note Hooks’ use of the term “erasing” (hooks 89) to speak about the “realities of black men who have diverse understandings of masculinity” (hooks 89). This point is especially valuable to my discussion here because it considers how black masculinity can be reconsidered and thought of us more than an expectation but on the contrary, a nuanced expression of self. By acknowledging that diversity exists in the “understandings of masculinity” (hooks 89) hooks once again speaks to Soja’s earlier points about thinking of space as everchanging. Space is not simply about what can be seen with the human eye. It exists and has bearing on the intersections and fluidity of one’s identity as well. This is why, if one is to only think of space as fixed and not something that includes more than just is physically present, how do we expect to move away from reductionist portrayals of people and the places and spaces they occupy?
Cultural theorist Brittney Cooper also believes that time, like space, is not a linear concept. Cooper says that time is not nor has never been defined simply by the numbers on a clock. On the contrary, Cooper argues that conceptualizations of time operate in distinct ways for racialized communities of people, specifically black people. In her 2017 Ted Global Talk, Cooper insists that time is “impacted” (TEDx) by things like “race” (TEDx) and “racism” (TEDx). Cooper says that “the desire to mitigate these impacts...shows up...in the ways we manage history” (TEDx). As well, she concludes with the following: “we treat time as if it is timeless… as if doesn’t have a political history” (TEDx) when in fact it does. Time does not operate for African-American people, as Cooper suggests, in the same way it does for white people. Writer Ta Nehisi Coates adds that “the defining feature of being drafted into the Black race is the inescapable robbery of time.” Examples of this “robbery” of time include the years that African-American men spend in jail, the lives taken by gun violence, one’s lost opportunity to spend time with one’s family members and the effects that slavery had on the body including the mismanagement of African-American people’s time into something that served the community as opposed to not. Similar to studies in spatial ontology, neither time or space are strictly definable categories of conversation. Time, like space, are multilayered variants that continue to have their bearing in forming one’s identity. Similar to discussions of black masculinity and questions of identity, both terms are inherently political features of the human experience because they exist within a larger discourse of power -- one that privileges white bodies and leaves other racialized groups on the periphery of this discourse. Studies of spatial ontology certainly help to mitigate this problem, mostly because scholars are interested in mapping the post-colonial body onto space, which essentially means that these scholars are
interested in reimagining space as a place for black and racialized people to exist and rewrite the narratives of their own lives.

Silence, identity, and elements of time and space are foundational elements of African-American texts that centre its prose on black men and discussions of masculinility. In this paper, I argue that these terms act as places of understanding -- themes that consider how narratives of black men are told and why, when shared, they have the power to offer new iterations of truth. I am interested in truth that refrains from typecasting people and places as homogenous but rather considers them to be what author Ayana Mathis describes as “fully fleshed out black humanities.” In an effort to illuminate my points further, I will draw on the work of Barry Jenkins’ 2016 American drama *Moonlight* and Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. On the surface, these texts are meditations on the beauty and peril of being an African-American man in a world that defines being black as inherently bad. *Invisible Man* centers on the life of a character who is trying to come to terms with his “invisibility” as a black man. In the process, he learns some invaluable lessons about his own existence. His lack of visibility affords him a certain level of freedom but it also hinders him from being recognized by society as a human being too.

*Moonlight* is a film about a young African-American man’s developmental journey with his sexuality. On his journey to discovering who he is, Chiron’s life is both illuminated and complicated by his relationship with his mother who is addicted to crack cocaine, the intimate relationship he shares with his friend Kevin, and the father figure he finds in Juan, a drug dealer he meets in an abandoned apartment building. On the surface, these stories appear to have only one thing in common: a black man’s quest for his identity; however, when read more closely, it is readily apparent where these stories converge: through their distinct realism, emphasis on one’s self-discovery, and the journey these characters must take to become self-actualized human
beings. Whether these characters ultimately fulfill this quest is dependent on one’s interpretation. What is certain is that when compared, these texts illuminate questions of identity and silence in conjunction with themes of black masculinity in deeply enriching ways.

In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison’s narrator who is nameless, write about the complexity and “invisibility” (as the title suggests) of being a black man in the United States. In the prologue of the text, the “Invisible Man” is walking along the street when a white man bumps into him and proceeds to verbally abuse him. Shortly thereafter, a physical fight ensues, and the Invisible Man takes out his pocket knife with the intention of killing the man he has managed to force onto the ground; however, upon reflection, the Invisible Man does not kill him because he realizes that the man did not seen him in the first place. The reason this man had not seen him, he decides, is because the colour of his skin has rendered him invisible. In this way, the text is a reflection, perhaps a written justification, for what the Invisible Man considers to be an African-American man’s inability to be recognized by white society. Following the incident he asks “but to whom can I be responsible and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?... Responsibility rests upon recognition and recognition is a form of agreement” (Ellison 11). Much earlier in the text he says, “light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form” (Ellison 5). His reflection is in accordance with Wideman’s points about the lack of “recognition” (Ellison 11) as the reason people are not able to understand others as well. While the Invisible Man says that the white man did not see him because he could not, I argue that the white man does not see him because he chooses not to. Eventually, the Invisible Man comes to a similar conclusion when he says “I won’t buy it. You can’t give it to me. He bumped. He insulted me” (Ellison 11). Previously, the Invisible Man writes as though he cannot help but to go unnoticed because the world has deemed him not worthy of being noticed. Before deciding that he was not the one to blame in the
situation and that it was the man who was actually responsible for vicious encounter, the reader sees the process of him becoming a self-actualized person. This is one of the earlier moments in the novel that he is able step far enough outside of the situation to recognize how he is impacted by other people. Earlier when the Invisible Man writes that “light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form” (Ellison 5) it is clear that he is still trying to come to terms with his identity. What is even more interesting to think about is whether he says this because he genuinely believes it to be true or because that is what he thinks of himself in relation to how the world perceives him.

*Moonlight* is the 2016 film adaptation of playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney’s play *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue* by director Barry Jenkins. *Moonlight* is the narrative drama of a young black man, Chiron, who is on a quest to discover who he is. The story is separated into three segments of time: Chiron as a little boy, Chiron during his high school years, and Chiron as a young man in his early to late twenties. Chiron’s sexuality is a point of tension in the film, mostly because it is through asking questions, in particular, one, that he begins the journey to self-discovery.

A defining characteristic of *Invisible Man* as it relates to his identity is that it is written from a first person perspective. In this way, readers are sutured into the text and at the same time provided with unsolicited levels of access to the character and his thoughts. Rather than having his story written for him, the Invisible Man has the agency to assert his own power, describe his own experiences, and share only what he wants the reader to know. On the contrary, one could argue that there is a caveat to reading about one’s story strictly from their perspective. This caveat could include that when sharing one’s experiences it becomes virtually impossible to remain objective. This is not an important detail for situations that are deeply personal to the
character; however, in scenarios where other individuals are involved, the inability to remain objective may hinder the story from being expressed in its actuality. The task of figuratively stepping outside oneself in order to observe their reality is not easily achieved; however, like Dr. Angelou reminds her readers, one’s experiences are not based principally on the use of words. Validity through storytelling comes from sharing one’s truth, even if that truth refrains from being said explicitly. Wideman would agree with such points, particularly when it comes to reading deeply personal texts that focus on the intimacy of one’s lived experiences. In his essay, Wideman writes that “much of this learning and unlearning occurs in silence inside your skull, in the sanctuary where you're simultaneously struggling to retain traces of who you are, what you were before this terrible, scouring ordeal began” (642). To put it succinctly: words do not tell the entire truth, but silence has the ability to fill in the gaps. Comparably, texts such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Ayana Mathis’ *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*, include the narratives of African-American men in pursuit of their quest for personhood; however, unlike in *Invisible Man*, the men are spoken for. In *The Color Purple* and *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*, the content of these men’s character is based principally on how the women in their lives define them. As a result, the complexities of their narratives are limited by a point-of-view that is not solely their own. In this instance, it becomes the reader’s implicit responsibility to look beyond the words presented and decide if the narrator’s characterization of them is a fair one to make. This not only stunts the reader to character relationship, but it does the same for the characters themselves. When one is constantly being defined by what another says it leaves virtually no room to make autonomous decisions about who they are. In essence, there is no clear and discernable way to categorize these men as one thing. They exist as complex beings with complex histories that are times inarticulable which is why Wideman’s arguments about silence
are especially potent. As a result, this lack of personal connection does not orient the reader in the same way that first person prose does. Once again, this is because in the process of trying to decide who these characters are one is also forced to mitigate their own personal biases in hopes of eventually getting to the humanity of these characters. This is not to say that such conflicts do not arise in first-person prose, but to suggest that a different set of dynamics are at play in those particular situations. First-person prose are less likely to categorize specific narratives as universal, whereas stories told on behalf of other people can be focused on trying to extend personal narratives in more general storylines.

Similarly, in *Moonlight*, the richness of Chiron’s self-discovery process is made possible through the first-person narrative. While the Invisible Man remains the reader’s one and only source of storytelling, the perspective of *Moonlight* shifts subtly between narrators but does so only to progress Chiron’s character development. The important elements of Chiron’s story come out in the scenic moments of closeup shots that focus solely on Chiron’s face and act as a central feature of his narration. The emotion and vulnerability behind Chiron’s eyes are what once again invite viewers into the text and create this first-person storytelling effect. Although his character does not say much verbally, it is though his characters’ eyes provide answers to questions that he has yet to verbalize.

Texts like *Invisible Man* and *Moonlight* are fundamental think about the themes this paper explores because they share their own stories from their perspectives. This form of storytelling is especially fruitful because it lessens the gap between the reader and the truth of the narrative. Rather than having to decipher what is actually happening in the text and considering what the character is thinking, one is told from the beginning how to interpret what is happening. Often, when such access is not warranted, opportunities for others, namely, other characters, to
describe who these people are becomes an issue. What too often happens as a result of this, is that the silencing of particular parts of their narratives and the quality of their characters begin to no longer matter. This is because, these characters have already begun to be categorized, without fail, by the actions that they make. As a result, this absence disallows the complexities of their identities to be fully known. And when these men’s identities are not fully known it leaves room, rather, it invites readers into believe that they are nothing better than the ways they are described.

In *Moonlight*, the mise-en-scene observes silence in a way that structures the formation of the characters’ identities. From the beginning, silence is implicated into the text through the use of medium shots that have the characters looking directly into the camera. For the first ten minutes of the film, Chiron or “Little” as he is called as a young boy, does not say anything verbally. The first time Little speaks is at the kitchen table when he is at Juan’s home. Little’s hesitancy to speak can be attributed to his disinterest in returning home to his mother. In Juan’s home, more specifically, Juan’s *space*, he is well fed and surrounded by two people, who upon meeting him for the first time, become the people he feels the most comfortable around. It is no coincidence then, that it is only in the comfort of Juan’s home that Little feels compelled to speak for the first time. Here, amidst his chosen family, Little is free from the school bullies who threaten to beat him up for being “different” and a mother who spends more time at work and doing crack cocaine than she does with him. Juan’s space, more than anything, is where Little becomes a self-actualized being -- one that can speak for himself and answer questions he would have otherwise felt too stifled to share. The first word Little utters at the dinner table are: “My name is Chiron. People call me Little.” This admission, that in fact other people call him Little but that his name is really Chiron, is where the tension between self and other begin to form. One should note the importance of him sharing that his name is Chiron, but in the same breath, that it
is other “people” who refer to him with the nickname Little. By saying this, Little is also indirectly speaking about his sexual identity as well. If one is to think about how silence operates in this scene it would be his choice to say who he is and then describe how other people see him. On the soccer field and at school, he is “Little” both literally and figuratively. A school, he plays soccer with the other boys, engages in juvenile activities like comparing his penis size with that of his friends, and wrestles his friends on the grass. At home with his mother however, he is essentially mute and forced into adulthood because of his surroundings at home. Once again, there is this tension between the two identities he has to assume. Such “doubleness” of character is present in W.E.B. DuBois’ work Strivings of the Negro People where he says that the “American Negro” had to, by default, “merge his double self into a better and truer self” (Du Bois 2), and in essence, “rise up” against his lowly position as a “Negro.” In this way, “he simply wishes to make it possible for (himself) to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without losing the opportunity of self-development” (Du Bois 2). Once again, this is an example of the tension that can exist between a system and a person who has their own idea of themselves.

The camera’s emphasis on the rough and tumble quality of the boys’ moments and the physicality of the young men is proof that although questions of Little’s sexuality are not readily apparent, they are still being implicated into the text. In this way, the camera guides the viewer to see what is otherwise not so readily available: that Little’s understanding of his sexuality is being shaped in these moments; however, when Little enters into domesticated spaces -- spaces of absolute rule, governed by authority and people who are “bigger” than him, for example, his mother’s house -- he retreats into himself and does not say a word. Once again, there is an obvious distinction between who he is at home (silent and unassuming) and who he is at Juan’s
house, which is a vulnerable little boy who has questions about who he is. At the end of first chapter of Little’s story he asks Juan if he is a “faggot.” Space once again matters here because Little would never consider asking such a question at his mother’s house. Juan’s home, with its bright colours and welcoming atmosphere, gives Little the impression that he can be himself here even if the outside world does not believe it so. What also deserves to be noted are the walls in Juan’s home. While everything else in Juan’s home is decorated and seemingly “complete” with decor and other furnishings, the walls of his house have not been finished painting. On the surface, this detail seems minute; however, on the contrary, it stands to be one of the most important features of his house altogether. From the beginning, Juan is the father that Little has never had. He teaches him how to swim, gives him money, and offers him advice. The only “flaw” in Juan’s character then is that he also happens to be a drug dealer -- one of whom’s clients is Little’s mother. The unfinished paint on the walls of the house that serve as Little’s sanctuary is telling of who Juan is and perhaps hints at Little’s own journey towards navigating his identity. Like the unfinished walls, Juan too is “unfinished.” He has managed to establish himself as a kind man with a beautiful home and partner; however, the unfinished walls point to the growth that Juan has yet to do. This minute detail is an example of how the process to becoming a fully self-actualized being is one that is never truly over. There are always other parts to help a person continue to grow, but that growth is an ongoing process. In his 2014 TED Talk appropriately titled “The Danger of Silence,” researcher and social justice advocate, Clint Smith says that “validation doesn’t need words to endorse its existence” (TEDx). In a way, Juan’s unfinished wall is exactly the validation that Little needs.

The quest to discover one’s identity is an arduous journey -- one of which requires a meaningful introspection into the self. The characters in Moonlight and Invisible Man fruitfully
pursue this journey. Through silence, evolved perceptions of time and space, and a deliberate
defiance against societal perceptions of their own capability, these men become newer iterations
of themselves. They learn to navigate their surroundings through trial and error, and in the
process reign triumphant.
Works Cited


