A Trajectory Towards Racism: Vraisemblance and Masculinity in T. C. Boyle’s The Tortilla Curtain.

Emma-Sofie Söderlund
Bachelor Degree Project
Literature
Autumn term 2014
Supervisor: Joakim Wrethed
Abstract

Racism is undeniably an interesting and important theme in *The Tortilla Curtain* by T. C. Boyle, but exploring how the novel establishes *vraisemblance* and motivates the progression of events reveals another significant theme. Relying on assumptions about gender and masculinity the narrative juxtaposes the different spheres of men and women, and as the narrative shifts its focus between the different characters of the novel, their respective domestic roles are scrutinised and compared. The narrative establishes and depends on the idea of a binary opposition between the sexes in order to highlight the marginal position of Delaney Mossbacher’s expressions of masculinity. Through locating Delaney’s performance of masculinity on the perimeters of the normative male role, his crisis of identity and sense of disorder are explained. Furthermore, by linking scenes where Delaney Mossbacher’s male role is threatened with scenes that depict his descent into racism the novel establishes the logical connection between Delaney’s disadvantaged position and his increasingly racist outburst of hatred and violence thus rendering them *vraisemblable*.

**Keywords:** *Vraisemblance*, masculinity, male role, racism, gender, dominance, racism, power
When it was first published in 1995, T. C. Boyle’s *The Tortilla Curtain* received much attention because of its controversial content. Not only does it challenge the notion of the American Dream, it also depicts a California divided by racist prejudices and social injustices. Moreover, it draws on the often violent history of the U.S–Mexican border and the continuous tension between the two nations. Alluding to the Iron Curtain of the Cold War, the title suggests a parallel between an ideologically divided post World War Europe and the narrative’s structuring conflict between American citizens and Hispanic illegal immigrants. Furthermore, it relates to a particular incident in the history of the region when, in 1978, builders were contracted by the INS\(^1\) to erect a new fence along the border. It soon became known that the fence was to be fortified in such a measure that it would severely injure anyone who tried to scale it. The plans were met by an international outcry and were subsequently suspended and the incident became known as “The Tortilla Curtain Episode” (Martinez 263–266, 270). With this historical backdrop in mind Boyle situates the narrative on the outskirts of Los Angeles in a fictional private community called Arroyo Blanco and centres on the lives of the wealthy white middle-class couple Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher, and the poor and struggling Hispanic immigrant couple Cándido and América Rincón.

This essay examines the underlying structures of *The Tortilla Curtain*. The theoretical framework for this analysis is narratology from a feminist perspective. The core concepts treated here are *vraisemblance* as defined by Gerard Genette in “*Vraisemblance* and Motivation”, the binary opposition of gender and gender as a

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\(^1\) The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service
performative practice as discussed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, and sex role theory as it is outlined by Raewyn Connell\(^2\) in *Masculinities*. Treating issues such as middle-class values, illegal immigration, poverty and xenophobia it is hardly surprising that literary critics up until now seem to have focused primarily on situating Boyle within what Heather J. Hicks calls “the tradition of American novels about race” (44). Hicks argues convincingly that white identity locates itself in relation to the racialized “Other” within the novel and that the novel functions principally as a comment on whiteness (47–48). Paul Heike regards *The Tortilla Curtain* as a novel of manners and examines it from a perspective of the “immigrant experience” narrated by “white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class writers” (249, 259). His analysis focuses on xenophobia and the “contested American identity construction” concluding that “[u]ltimately the immigrant presence bears the burden of representing all that is ‘wrong’ with a highly self-centred and narcissistic white American Southwest microcosm” (260, 263). Gregory Meyerson offers yet another reading. He regards the novel as a comment on the “racialized political economy of urban sprawl” (1–2). Regardless of what angle, racism seems an almost unavoidable concept for any interpretation of *The Tortilla Curtain*, and undoubtedly racism constitutes an important theme of the novel. As the narrative oscillates between the different voices of the Mossbachers and the Rincóns, pitting the powerful against the powerless and the ‘haves’ against the ‘have nots’, it aptly highlights this prominent subject. However, in focusing so fixedly on this aspect, another important theme has remained neglected and overlooked. It is from this position I put forth my reading placing the concept of masculinity in the focal light. Examining the chain of events of the narrative from this perspective reveals how masculinity constitutes an important theme of the novel and illuminates how assumptions and presuppositions about masculinity motivate the action and render the narrative *vraisemblable*.

**Vraisemblance, Gender Performativity and Sex Roles**

With his essay on *vraisemblance* and motivation published in 1968, Genette defined *vraisemblance* as a device of narratology:

> What defines the *vraisemblable* is the formal principle of respect for the norm, in other words the existence of a relation of implications between the particular behaviour attributed to a given character and a

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\(^2\) *Masculinities* is written under the name R. W. Connell, however in this work she is referred to as Raewyn Connell as this is the name she uses today.
given general maxim. The relation of implication also functions as a principle of explanation—the generality determines and thus explains the particular, so that (for example) to understand a character’s behaviour is to be able to refer it to a general maxim [...]. A *vraisemblable* narrative is thus a narrative where the actions answer, as so many applications of particular cases, to a body of maxims accepted as true by the public to which the narrative is addressed; but these maxims, due to the very fact that they are accepted, most often remain implicit. The relation between the *vraisemblable* narrative and the system of *vraisemblance* to which it is attached is thus essentially silent: generic conventions function as a system of natural forces and constraints, which the narrative follows as if without perceiving, and *a fortiori*, without naming. (241–42)

This “relation of implications” bridges the universe of the narrative with the real world outside of it. Genette likens the maxims with ideology noting how they “[constitute], simultaneously, a vision of the world and a system of values” (240).

Through the textual evidence provided in the novel, the reader subconsciously assesses the believable cause of action for a certain character by linking actions to maxims. In this way, the reader’s presuppositions and assumptions form a basis for evaluating the cause and consequence relationship of the action within a given narrative, and act as “natural forces and constraints” upon it. As Menachem Brinker notes, it is a fundamental trait of works of literature to “attempt to persuade us that they have been constructed upon the foundations of actual behaviour” (571). Thus examining how *vraisemblance* functions within a given narrative can highlight those attempts as it forces us to define and express that which is invisible and silent.

It is my claim that what has remained invisible and silent in earlier readings of *The Tortilla Curtain* are the presuppositions that constitute the logical undercurrent of the novel. These are fundamental for understanding the narrative and for comprehending how the novel establishes *vraisemblance*. The narrative relies on assumptions about gender in general and about masculinity in particular. Gender is portrayed within the novel as either male or female and all the characters adhere to a heteronormative paradigm. The narrative relies on a binary opposition where male and female constitute two antipodal facets of gender defined in and by their relation to each other. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler discusses the “binary frame for thinking about gender” (2540). Quoting Mary Douglas she highlights how “[i]t is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (2544). The binary opposition of male and female as presented by the characters thus outlines an
important ordering structure of the novel. Butler moreover understands gender as a performative practice: an identity that “by repeated acts” structures itself as gender “which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief” (2552). Butler explains that these “repeated acts” are “at once a reenactment and [a] reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (2552). For the narrative to represent gender it must then, according to the theories of vraisemblance, portray a reenactment of socially established meanings that the reader can discern. Although Jonathan Culler cautions that gender performativity should not be viewed as a role one simply puts on (104), for the purpose of this essay it is fruitful to examine sex role theory and how it relates to The Tortilla Curtain.

In Masculinities, Connell cites Pleck who severely critiques sex role theory stating that it “exaggerates the degree to which people’s social behaviour is prescribed” and how it “at the same time, by assuming that the prescriptions are reciprocal [. . .] underplays social inequality and power” (25). “For all these reasons” she states, “‘role’ has proved unworkable as a general framework for social analysis.” Connell does however recognise that “[i]t is apt for situations where (a) there are well-defined scripts to perform, (b) there are clear audiences to perform to, and (c) the stakes are not too high” (26). Whereas sex role theory might be unworkable in social analysis due to its limitations, in analysing The Tortilla Curtain, it is functional because of them. The novel imposes restrictions on the narrative when it situates the characters within a binary opposition of male and female—an ordering structure that furthermore entails expectations on how the characters perform gender. Moreover, the limitations of the narrative, as described by Genette, also impose constraints on the characters actions:

Having written, “The Marquise, desperate, . . . ,” the narrator is doubtless not as free to follow with “ordered a bottle of champagne” as with “took a pistol and blew out her brains”; but in reality, things do not happen in this way: when writing “The Marquise, . . . ,” the author already knows whether he will end the scene with drinking or suicide, and thus it is as a function to the end that he chooses his middle. Contrary to what the reader’s viewpoint suggests, it is therefore not “desperate” that determines the pistol, but rather the pistol that determines “desperate.” (251)

In relation to the binary gender structure and the expectations on gender performance that are linked with it, by necessity, the characters’ actions follow well-defined
scripts. What is more, the evidence of the popular demand for sex role studies and literature that focus on sex differences\textsuperscript{3} suggests that there exist general assumptions about the binary opposition of masculinity and femininity and of innate biological differences between the sexes outside of the narrative that this ordering structure can validate and cater to. This is the “relation of implications” that Genette speaks of that links the universe of the narrative with the real world outside of it and links reader expectation with a \textit{vraisemblable} progression of the narrative (241–242). Therefore, I consider sex role theory an effective perspective from which to examine the performance of masculinity within \textit{The Tortilla Curtain}.

The novel centres on the lives of the Mossbachers and the Rincóns. Although the point of view recurrently alternates between Delaney, Kyra, Cándido and América, for the purpose of this analysis I have identified Delaney Mossbacher as the main protagonist and focalizer of the narrative. There are several reasons for defining Delaney as the main protagonist. Firstly, as Heike notes, it is Delaney’s point of view that quantitatively dominates the narrative (261). Secondly, it is Delaney who observes and formulates comments about Cándido whereas Cándido does not observe and comment on Delaney. Thirdly, it is Delaney’s actions that instigate the narrative and what is more, it is his progressively racist thoughts and actions that propel the narrative forward. Moreover, Delaney is the only character who experiences a significant change over the span of the narrative. In fact, he undergoes a radical change transforming him from a mild mannered man into an aggressive full-blown racist. In accordance with the theories of \textit{vraisemblance} this change must draw its believability from the assumptions the reader forms about his character.

In this essay I show how Delaney is situated in relation to the binary opposition of male and female and how his performance of masculinity relates to other characters in the novel, i.e. Kyra Mossbacher, Cándido Rincón and Jack Jardine. I draw attention to how the masculinity Delaney expresses deviates from the norm within his community and how Delaney’s performance of gender thus can be claimed to be marginal. Furthermore, I highlight how his marginal position and his low status masculinity solidify him as a polluting person. Moreover, I show how Delaney tries to regain control by aligning with the normative masculine role, as it is expressed within

\textsuperscript{3} E.g. through books such as \textit{Men are from Mars – Women are from Venus} by John Grey. It sold 6.6 million copies in the period between January 1990 to March 1999 which made it, at the time, “the highest-ranked work of non-fiction” (CNN).
his social circle, when he experiences destabilizing events. In addition, I trace the repeated structure of how scenes that depict Delaney’s low social status and challenged male role repeatedly are placed in close adjacency to his increasingly racist outbursts.

**Delaney and Kyra Mossbacher.**

The narrative of *The Tortilla Curtain* depicts a heterosexual norm where men and women inhabit different spheres and fill different functions. This separation of the male and female domain dates back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the ideal of the middle-class man emerged (Nixon 299). Sean Nixon outlines how the “authority of the middle-class men was defined through their power over a range of dependants” and how the “middle-class men’s masculinity was not only different form middle-class femininity but was also defined in a position of dominance over it” (300). These variables: power over a range of dependants and position of dominance over the middle-class femininity, are present within the narrative and help situate Delaney on the margins of middle-class masculinity described in the novel because Delaney neither exerts power over his dependents nor is he in any position of dominance.

In comparison with other members of their community the Mossbachers have chosen to structure their lives differently. In their family it is Kyra who inhabit the public sphere and shoulders the role of the family provider whereas Delany inhabit the domestic sphere and assumes the role of the family nurturer. The descriptions of their daily life depict Delaney as a submissive husband and it is within the setting of their home his untraditional male role becomes most noticeable. The Mossbachers live in a private community in a Spanish Mission style house together with Kyra’s son Jordan, her two terriers and her Siamese cat (30). Delaney has assumed the responsibility of the household and the care of Kyra’s son and her pets (30–35). He enjoys staying at home and finds delight in household chores making them into a game (31, 41). While Kyra prepares for a day of business, Delaney prepares her breakfast:

On this particular morning, the morning Cándido Rincón began to feel he’d lost control of his wife, Delaney was up at seven, as usual, to drip Kyra’s coffee, feed Jordan his fruit, granola and hi-fibre bar and let [the dogs] out into the yard […]. At the moment, his attention was

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4 Quotes taken from *The Tortilla Curtain* are henceforth cited only with page number.
focused entirely on getting through the morning ritual with his customary speed and efficiency. […] Typically, he stole a moment out in the courtyard to breathe […] after which he would dash round the house gathering up Jordan’s homework, his backpack, lunchbox and baseball cap, while Kyra sipped her coffee and washed down her twelve separate vitamin and mineral supplements with half a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice. Then it was time to drive Jordan to school, while Kyra applied her makeup, wriggled into a form-fitting skirt with matching jacket and propelled her Lexus over the crest of the canyon and into Woodland Hills, where she was the undisputed volume leader at Mike Bender Realty, Inc. And then, finally, Delaney would head back home, have a cup of herbal tea and two slices of wheat toast, dry, and let the day settle in around him. (30–31)

It is “the morning Cándido Rincón began to feel he’d lost control of his wife” (31). The fact that Cándido begins to feel like he has lost control of his wife suggests that, in marriage, one can either be the person who controls or the person who is controlled and whereas Cándido begins to feel out of control, Delaney is depicted as never having been in control of his wife at all. “As usual” he gets up early to prepare for the welfare of the family, “dash[ing] round” making sure that each and every one is cared for. He makes Kyra’s coffee, prepares breakfast for Jordan and caters to the pets; juggling chores according to a tight schedule—in between tasks he steals a moment to himself, before he takes Jordan to school and can “finally” return to his own projects. Kyra, on the other hand, presides at the table immersed in her morning paper, drinking coffee, not unlike the stereotyped middle-class father figures of popular culture, and when Delaney is busy taking care of the family, Kyra focuses solely on taking care of herself as she prepares for a new day of business. When Delaney drives his stepson to school, Kyra propels her powerful and expensive car to a working place where she is “the undisputed volume leader” (31). In comparison with how men and women, and their different functions and domains, are portrayed within the narrative this description of Delaney and Kyra overturns the normative image that is described in the novel. Delaney is portrayed occupying an untraditional position where he has accepted—not the responsibilities of an authoritative father, but those of a nurturing mother. This mother-role is further accentuated by the verbs that describe his actions:

he was used to cajoling Jordan over his breakfast. He tiptoed across the room to hover behind the boy, who was playing with is spoon and chanting something under his breath. […] “No looking now,” Delaney

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warned, seductively tapping a foil-wrapped bar on either side of the boy’s thin and wilted neck, “—right hand or left?” (34)

Delaney cajoles Jordan. He is used to it. He tiptoes and hovers. It is “seductively” that he tentatively tries to convince Jordan to eat and when Jordan does not respond to Delaney’s meek attempts of persuasion, it is the stern “Eat” from his mother that settles the argument (35). This cements Kyra’s role as the head of the family and illustrates her position within the family hierarchy.

The unorthodoxy of their role reversal is also highlighted by the different spheres they inhabit. Their home functions both as Delaney’s workplace in his role as a housewife and in his role as a writer. A small study serves as his office where he writes a column for a wildlife magazine. The home is thus solidified as his primary domain, effectively isolating him from society and situating him within a sphere that is often stereotypically considered a woman’s place. Moreover, it stresses Delaney’s other emasculate traits. Delaney spends the majority of his day caring for his family. He has only a few hours to himself when he can work on his writings. The articles he writes give him great pride. He feels like the writing sets him apart from “his fellow men and women” because through it he can prove “that he [sees] more deeply and [feels] more deeply” (32). Delaney’s writing is described as “[creeping] into the womb of language” and provides him with a sense of safety and self-worth. However, it excites feelings of depressions as well: “[t]here were days when he worked himself into such a state he could barely lift his fingers to the keys.” (32) Delaney is sensitive and emotional. Kyra, on the other hand, does not let herself be caught up by emotions:

You didn’t move property with a long face and you didn’t put deals together if you could barely drag yourself out of bed in the morning—especially in this market. Nobody had to tell Kyra […] she never let her enthusiasm flag no matter how small the transaction or how many times she’d been through the same tired motions. (68)

Kyra is the chief provider of the family. She works excessively and sacrifices time with her family for the sake of her career. She has “forty-six current listings” and when she inspects them she “feels like a queen” (70). In Female Masculinities Judith Halberstam claims that “[m]asculinity […] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” and that “the shapes and forms of modern masculinity are best showcased within female masculinity” (2–3). Kyra’s performance of gender falls closer to the descriptions of high status masculinity as it is expressed by the male characters represented in the novel. Her performance of
gender thereby provides a backdrop that the reader can assess and from which the reader can form assumptions about Delaney’s masculinity.

Kyra is athletic, assertive and decisive and while she inhabits the outer realm of society and power Delaney inhabit the inner realm of the household and nurture. He reflects:

He did the little things for her –out of love and consideration, sure, but also in acknowledgment of the fact that she was the chief breadwinner here, the one who went off to the office while he stayed home. Which was all right by him. He had none of those juvenile macho hang-ups about role reversal and who wore the pants and all of that. (35)

This reflexion on the family hierarchy emphasises the unconventional family structure of the Mossbachers. Delaney recognises her dominant position in the family as she is unquestionably “the chief breadwinner”. The relation of power suggested by Cándido’s reflection on control and loss of control emphasises Kyra’s dominant position and Delaney’s subordinate role. Delaney even uses the word “role” when he thinks about their family structure. Furthermore, he recognizes that this structure deviates from a norm. Moreover, Delaney himself makes a connection between ‘wearing the pants’, that is: to be a man, and to be a “chief breadwinner”—to be the head of the family. From this dominance it must follow that whatever Delaney contributes to the household cannot be equally important but must remain a side-line hobby of sorts. The assertion that this is “all right by him” because he has “none of those juvenile macho hang-ups about role reversal” seems to suggest that, *au contraire*: he *ought* to be concerned about reversing the normative family order.

The Mossbachers do not adhere to the dichotomy outlined by the narrative regarding gender roles and Delaney’s performance of masculinity, despite its antipodal position to Kyra’s expression of femininity, is equally portrayed as antipodal in comparison with other male characters. Connell builds on a binary demarcation between the sexes when she delineates masculinity as that which is not femininity (Qtd. in Resic 17). This entails that, although Delaney’s expression of masculinity is markedly different to Kyra’s expression of femininity, since it is also markedly different than the expressions of masculinity portrayed by Delaney’s male peers it must fall outside the normative. Connell outlines several “masculinities” and notes that some are seen as more prestigious than others (79–81). The superiority of one ideal is “achieved within a balance of forces, which requires the existence of ‘others’ to which to be compared and ascend over” (Pitt and Fox 158). Quoting
Douglas, she notes that within this balance of forces the margins become vulnerable and should thus be “considered dangerous” (2545). Moreover, she notes that these margins could constitute possible sites of “pollution and endangerment” (2545). The narrative emphasizes the binary opposition of male and female and of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, it accentuates the separate roles of the four main characters, the functions they hold and the domains they inhabit. Delaney, falling into the category “Male” he can be expected to act within the perimeters of the masculine. When he is attributed with a role, a function and a domain which fall outside these perimeters his low status expressions of masculinity are emphasized. Moreover, because his performance of gender is more closely linked with femininity in the narrative he appears to deviate from the norm the narrative has established. Delaney can therefore best be understood as what Douglas describes as “a polluting person”. The polluting person “has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed”, she explains, and the “displacement” she warns can have disastrous consequences (Qtd. in Butler 2544). Delaney’s alternative expressions of masculinity can thus be seen as endangering the social order of his community, and by endangering this order Delaney himself can constitute a polluting person. It is in the role of a polluting person that Delaney’s progression towards a violent full-blown racist is anticipated—the “disastrous consequences” Douglas speaks of are foreseen and made vraisemblable.

**Delaney Mossbacher and Cándido Rincón**

Delaney is a liberal white upper-middle-class male who lives a very comfortable life, can afford fine dining and has time and energy to care for the environment and charities. Moreover, he enjoys the privilege of working part time without any infringement on his or his family’s wellbeing (Boyle 3, 37, 103). On his way to the recycling station Delaney Mossbacher comes face to face with Cándido Rincón after accidentally having hit him with his car. The scene introduces the first destabilising event after which Delaney for the first time in the narrative makes a racial slur. Delaney, whose instinctual response to problems is to “write his congressman” or to “call the sheriff” finds himself in a predicament to which his normal behaviour offers no solutions. He reacts by turning the initial feelings of pity into “anger, to outrage” (11). The displacement Delaney experiences becomes apparent in light of this car accident. It leaves him feeling vulnerable. It also leaves Delaney with a sense of
insecurity and a conflicting self-image. In spite of privilege and good intentions he has found himself acting out of self-interest when faced with having hurt, perhaps lethally, another person.

To his shame, Delaney’s first thought was for the car (was it marred, scratched, dented?), and then for his insurance rates (what was this going to do to his good-driver discount?), and finally, belatedly, for the victim. (4)

Although he fears that he might have killed another person it is “belatedly” he thinks about the victim. His thoughts, and the discrepancy between his conduct and his self-image that they reveal, leave him with a painful realization—he has put his own petty and selfish interests before the life of another human. Climbing out of his car, almost paralyzed with fear, he has to “fight the urge to run, to heave himself into the driver’s seat and burn up the tires” (5). What he really wants to do is “leave the idiot to his fate and deny everything” (5). He tries to reassure himself by repeating that he wants to do what is right, but instead of insisting on taking Cándido to a hospital or staying to make sure that he will be alright he pays him off with 20 dollars expecting the matter to be settled (6, 9). When he calls Kyra after the accident he is initially consoled by her voice, but her interrogation triggers something: he feels “hurt, put-upon, ready to let it all spill out of him” (14). When she questions him about the 20 dollars he justifies his actions by snapping at her: “he was Mexican” (15). The accident functions as a destabilising event which initiates Delaney’s sense of disorder—not only as a result from the chock of having hurt another person, but also as a result of what the incident has revealed about himself. This scene is the first in line of many that connect Delaney’s displacement and hurt masculinity with his racist outbursts.

As the narrative progresses Delaney’s position as the family caretaker is compared with Cándido’s position as the family provider. Here, the novel plays on notions of the civilized white male and the savage “Other”. Cándido becomes the symbolical bearer of a stereotypical Hispanic macho culture and a racialized male role. The subordinated and marginalized masculinity which Cándido represents is essential to the construction of the white upper-middle-class masculinity of which Delaney is a representative (Connell 80–81). Because “[m]asculinity [. . .] becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” Cándido’s performance of gender, just like Kyra’s, becomes a backdrop to Delaney’s expression of masculinity (Halberstam 2).
Cándido’s self-worth originates from his ability to take care of and provide shelter for his wife América and the baby they are expecting. He describes himself as “an old man […] with grey in his moustache” and her as “a young girl” only “seventeen years old” (24, 29). To be provided for by América is, in his mind, unthinkable. When his injuries prevent him from working and she sets out to work in his place he feels disgraced and humiliated (26–28). The novel portrays his feeble state and his inability to maintain his position within the family as the direct cause for his violent behaviour towards his wife. Even though their survival depends on it, Cándido tries to forbid América to leave their camp. When she eventually leaves, he hurts her (49, 80). The thoughts of América reveal the normalized nature of this conduct: “he was too much the boss, the man, the patron” but “[s]he understood his frustration, his fear, and she loved him, she did, to the bottom of her heart” (55, 80–81). “[H]is frustration” comes from a place of “fear”. He is frustrated because he cannot play his role as man—because he cannot fulfil his obligations, and he is afraid what this might entail. América understands. When their situation grows increasingly desperate and América continues to challenge his male role Cándido’s violent behaviour escalates:

he was drunk and angry and he wanted to hurt her, wanted to hurt himself […] Seventeen years old, and she was the one who’d found work when he couldn’t, […] he knew how it had to be, knew he would follow her into that hut and slap his own pain out of her, and that was so sick and so bad he wanted nothing more in that moment than to die.

(181-182)

Cándido recognizes the force of the male role that governs his behaviour: “he [knows] how it [has] to be”. But at the same time he also recognizes the perversity of his actions: “that was so sick and so bad he wanted nothing more in that moment than to die”. Through this latter recognition that the narrative come to question the normative order of gender that it has set up.

By contrasting the Rincón family structure, the exaggerated machismo that Cándido expresses and the servility and understanding expressed by América with the Mossbacher family structure, Delaney’s lack of masculine attributes and Kyra’s masculine expressions of femininity Delaney and Kyra’s relationship come to appear more civilized. Cándido and América becomes the “‘others’ to which [Delaney and Kyra can] be compared and ascend over” (Pitt and Fox 158). But, moreover, it also makes the Mossbacher family structure appear more abnormal as it contrasts
normative sex roles, as they are expressed within the narrative, with their role reversal. It also highlights Delaney and Kyra’s marginal position in relation to how their performance of gender relate to the norm established by the narrative. This marginal position help explain the vulnerability of their family structure and the implications of Delaney’s “displacement”—the *vraisemblance* of his transformation (Douglas, qtd. in Butler 2544).

**Delaney Mossbacher and Jack Jardine**

The link between the displacement Delaney experiences, his threatened masculine role and his racist outbursts becomes increasingly transparent as the novel progresses. It is evident in Delaney’s interactions with his male peers and particularly noticeable in his relationship with his friend and neighbour Jack Jardine. Delaney’s interactions with Jack illustrate the expressions of low and high status masculinities and exemplify the negotiations of power and dominance within the narrative. Jack’s representation of masculinity is not separate from the “white male middle-class body” like Kyra’s and Cándido’s, yet it still functions as a contrast to Delaney’s expressions of masculinity and help the reader differentiate between his position of powerlessness and Jack Jardine’s position of power (Halberstam 2). Jack works as a lawyer and presides as “the president of Arroyo Blanco Estates Property Owner’s Association” (14–15). He has a prestigious and demanding job in the public sphere and holds a respected position within his community. Athletic, “cool” and demanding he is everything Delaney’s is not (45, 101–2). In this way he also becomes a symbol for an unattainable male role—“a norm that can never be fully internalized” (Butler 2552).

Delaney and Jack’s interactions also provide motivation for Delaney’s racist transformation. Shortly after Delaney has failed to save one of Kyra’s dogs from an attacking coyote Delaney is forced to wait for his turn to speak at one of the neighbourhood meetings that Jack chairs. Delaney is emotional and agitated. Frantically he tries to communicate to his neighbours the dangers of feeding wildlife in the area.

“I just want to know”, he began, but before he could gather momentum someone up front interrupted him with a cry of “Louder!” He cleared his throat and tried to adjust his voice. His heart was hammering. […] “I’m sorry, Delaney” Jack Jardine said, leaning into the microphone, “but we have a pending question regarding construction and maintenance of a gated entryway, and I’m going to have to ask you to speak or yield the floor.” (45)
Whereas Jack exhibits a confidence that demands attention Delaney’s insecurity quickly causes his audience to lose their interest. His heart is hammering, he struggles to make himself heard and before he has even begun making his point he is interrupted. He is faced with the ultimatum to “speak or yield the floor”. This challenge causes a strong reaction in him: he “was angry suddenly, angry for the second time that day, burning furious” (45). Not only has Delaney failed to protect his family from an attacking coyote, now he has to suffer the humiliation of being ignored and of being called down from the stage. When Delaney later recalls the incident it is with embarrassment: “[l]ooking back on it, [he] had a nagging suspicion that he’d made a fool of himself” (100). It is through the contrast between Jack’s self-assurance and Delaney’s lack of control and power that Delaney’s marginal position within his social circle becomes traceable. Representing a high-status normative masculinity, Jack’s position as an alpha-male establishes the internal hierarchy between the two men.

Connell explores the relation of dominance, alliance and subordination between masculinities and claims that they delineate what is “inside from the outside or the empowered from the powerless” (Pitt and Fox 157). [B]y exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, [.. .] a semblance of order is created” (Douglas qtd. in Butler 2544). The Tortilla Curtain describes a society and a community where the established order is threatened by a social change. Simultaneously it portrays the shattered order of Delaney Mossbacher’s own personal life. It is through the efforts to retrieve this “semblance of order” that Delaney’s transformation can progress. The strategy he employs is a compliance with gender expectations within his social setting. Strategy, Butler explains, “better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs” and “as a strategy of survival within compulsory systems, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (2551). These “punitive consequences” point to the prize and punishment of the binary gender system. Adhering to gender expectations will offer Delaney a means to restore the order, but to oppose them will result in disadvantages, perhaps even punishment, as the norm always carries the potential power to “exclude those who don’t conform”(Culler 103–4 and Hall 258). The few attempts Delaney makes to oppose Jack are futile and only seem to push Delaney into compliance.
The two friends represent two different standpoints regarding turning their community into a gated community. When they meet in a supermarket the topic of Hispanic immigration soon surfaces. Here Delaney tries to refute Jack’s racist standpoint and defend the immigrants’ right to settle, but regardless of his attempts, Delaney finds himself defeated, at which point he can only smile weakly at Jack and “[get] in line beside him” (99-103). The physical extent to which Delaney concedes to Jack is striking. He literally positions his body beside him and his smile is weak, powerless. At this point Jack apologizes for his “lecture” on the topic (104). Like a benevolent father who gracefultly dispenses his lectures Jack exercises his male dominance; thus he asserts his own position and ensures compliance from Delaney. This incident triggers Delaney to take yet another step towards racism. When Jack and Delaney step out from the store and see how Cándido is harassed on the other side of the street, Delaney’s hate is stirred. “[h]is impulse was to intercede, to put an end to it, and yet in some perverse way he wanted to see this dark alien little man crushed and obliterated, out of his life forever” (105). The frustration Delaney has experienced he is now ready to unleash on someone else and when Jack makes a racist remark he is no longer contradicted by Delaney. Delaney has begun to see Cándido as a “dark alien little man” and he wants him destroyed. Once more the structure of scenes depicting Delaney’s low status masculinity in close adjacency to his increasingly racist outbursts is repeated rendering the progression 
raissemblable.

Jack also becomes a symbol for the brotherhood of men and the socializing agencies within the community they inhabit. The force of this socialization becomes noticeable when Delaney accompanies Jack to meet a small circle of friends whose agenda it is to turn the Arroyo Blanco Estate into a gated community (186). Unlike the community meetings where everyone can participate, this meeting is a rendezvous for a few select people and Delaney is there by special invitation only. The absence of women at this meeting further strengthens the idea of a male dominated power structure within the narrative as the male peer-group is described as the true locus of decision-making and power.

There was a portentousness to Jack’s tone that put Delaney off—he was manipulating the room the way he manipulated a courtroom and Delaney resented him for it. Was this what Jack had brought him for—to get him on his team? […] Delaney heard his own voice plunging into the gap: “So what do you mean, Jack? Isn’t the gate enough? Next thing you’ll want to wall the whole place in like a medieval city or something—” Delaney had expected laughter, a murmur or two of
assent, anything to confirm the absurdity of the proposition, but he was met with silence. Everyone was watching him. He felt uneasy suddenly, all the spirit of camaraderie dissolved in that instant. (189)

When Delaney opposes Jack in front of this group of peers he expects a supportive laughter and “a murmur or two of assent”—the amicable ambiance and the informal setting have lulled him into a false sense of security. He has believed himself among friends. Instead of encouragement he is met with an ostracizing silence. Suddenly he feels himself on the outside, in the cold. The “duress” he experiences by this treatment highlights the unspoken threat of “punitive consequences” (Butler 2551). Delaney feels “uneasy” and the incident causes him to once more recollect his attempts to make himself heard at the community meeting and the thought makes him blush indignantly. He asks himself “[h]ow many of these men had been present at the meeting the night he’d made such an ass of himself?” (191) Once again, his marginal position within his societal group is emphasized. The polluting characteristics he displays triggers “punitive consequences” in the form of “exclusion and domination” by his peers (Butler 2551 and Douglas qtd. in Butler 2545). The repercussion he suffers when he steps out of his place in the masculine hierarchy is immediate and serves as a warning: get in line and stay in line; once more his threatened male role is linked to his increasingly racist thoughts. When Delaney shortly thereafter thinks about the illegal immigrants it is in terms of war:

where were these people supposed to go? Back to Mexico? Delaney doubted it, knowing what he did about migratory animal species and how one population responded to being displaced by another. It made for war, for violence and killing, until one group had decimated the other and reestablished its claim to the prime hunting, breeding and grazing grounds. It was a sad fact, but true. (193)

By now, Delaney does not reflect on referring to another group of people as “migratory animal species”. He foresees a future where it will come down to waging war predicting “violence and killing, until one group [has] decimated the other”. He sees it as a logical chain of events returning to a natural order where Man reinstates his rightful “claim to the prime, hunting, breeding and grazing grounds”. Using those words, he draws on imagery of prehistoric warriors and hunters who are more animal than male and by stating that it is “a sad fact, but true” he legitimizes the male dominance and the violence he envisions. In this way Delaney has started to assimilate Jack’s views on the Hispanic population and comply with the structures of hierarchy within his peer-group. When he contemplates the building of the wall it is
with the concession that “he was part of it now, complicit by his very presence here, and he might as well enjoy it” (193).

As Delaney starts to subordinate himself to this hierarchy he also begins to feel more at ease (193). It is at this point the Mossbachers experience yet another destabilizing event. Despite a high, new fence a coyote once again breaches the perimeter of their home and snatches Kyra’s remaining dog away. Delaney acts instinctively and lunges after the animal, but in vain:

Despite his headlong rush, despite the quickness of his feet and the hard-honed sinewy strength of his legs, despite his rage and determination and the chorus of howls from his wife and son, he was impotent. (194)

In reflection of his compliance to the power structures of the community and his newfound sense of security, Delaney is described more assertively: he has a “quickness to his feet” and his legs are “hard-honed” and strong. He is enraged and determined and enjoys the support of his family who cheers him on. Yet despite all his powerful attributes described in this his actions serve to nothing. He is “impotent”. Regardless of all the effort and nurture he has invested caring for pets who are not his and a son he has not fathered he is ultimately unable to shoulder the most exalted of male roles: the role of the protector. Incapable of protecting his family, his home and his property, his masculinity soon suffers another blow when Kyra publicly displays her dominance in front of their neighbours at a Thanksgiving party. Once more the wall is discussed—this time from the perspective of pest control:

Jack was grinning, his lips ever so slightly drawn back to reveal a strategic flash of enamel. Delaney recognized the expression. It was sceptical, faintly ironic, meant to convey to judges, jurors and district attorneys alike that the issue had yet to be decided. “So what is it, Delaney—should we bring back the traps and quotas or not? You have lost two dogs, and many others have lost pets too?” He made a sweeping gesture to take in the room, the house, the community at large.

“That’s right,” Kyra said, slipping up behind Delaney and taking hold of his arm, “and that’s where we had our falling-out over the wall—or actually, it was, war, full-on, no-holds-barred.”

Jack laughed. Erna laughed. Delaney managed a rueful smile as greetings went round and the string quartet built to a frenzy in the con fuoco. “But really,” Kyra said, unwilling to let it go, “don’t you feel safer now, all of you—Jack, Erna, Delaney? Don’t you? She said, turning her face to him. “Admit it.”

Delaney reddened. Shrugged again. The beer glass in his hand was heavy as a cannonball. “I know when I’m licked”. (265)
As Jack’s dominance becomes more evident over the course of the narrative, Delaney’s resentment increases. (42). Almost like a predator Jack grins wolf-like, baring his teeth and Delaney recognizes the significance of his alpha-male behaviour. He is not lured by the seemingly jovial atmosphere. At the same time Kyra “[slips] up behind him”. The gesture resembles an attack and the “hold of his arm” resembles a physical assault. She refers to their disagreement regarding the wall as “full-on, no-holds-barred” combat and when the others laugh she forces Delaney to admit defeat. Moreover, she wants him to admit that it is she that has assured their safety by lobbying for the wall. “[D]on’t you feel safer now”? “Admit it.” Like a wounded dog he shrugs and says “I know when I’m licked” acknowledging that he has been defeated. When Jack eases the tension with a joke Delaney feels “something [uncoil] inside him” and he laughs uncontrollably (266).

Shortly after this incident, another crisis occurs. A wildfire is spreading in the valley and in the ensuing moments of paralysis the family turns to Delaney for guidance: “they were all watching him, his wife, her mother, the maid and Jordan, looking for signals, waiting for him to act, seize the moment, take the bull by the horns”(270). Here, the women and the small boy who watch him accentuate the failings of his role as a man as he is unable to take charge over those who depend on him. His chance to act and assume his power is soon lost. Kyra hears the call for evacuation on the news and reacts instinctively: ‘Load up the cars!’ she cried” (270). On her orders they start to pack up the car and get ready to leave. In the succeeding argument with her, Delaney once again feels bested: “Delaney watched her go. She was throwing it all on his shoulders, making him the scapegoat, and he felt put-upon, and misunderstood, felt angry, pissed off, rubbed raw” (285). As the community members meet up at the bottom of the hill to speak with the police, Delaney experiences a sense of hopelessness and resignation: “[w]hat next? he was thinking, what more could they do to him?” (285–86) At this moment one of his male acquaintances appears (286). The man offers him a symbolical representation of the support of his male peer-group in the form of a bottle of liquor. This sign of friendship and inclusion is welcomed by Delaney and when he notes two men of what he thinks is Hispanic origin making their way from the valley Delaney’s racist transformation comes to a completion.

Something clicked in his head [...] and he didn’t try to correct himself, not now, not ever again—amazing how the scum comes to surface [...]

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he felt as much pure hatred as he’d ever felt in his life [...] he was excited now, beyond caring—somebody had to pay for this. [...] Delaney was right there, right in the thick of it, Jack at his side [...] this time Delaney didn’t flinch, didn’t feel guilt or pity or even the slightest tug of common humanity. (286–288)

The destabilising events and the compiled transgressions and violations on Delaney’s male role and his masculinity have finally taken their toll. At this point he does not feel remorse nor does he feel guilt or pity. “‘Fuck you’, Delaney roared” and had to be held back (289). The progression from mild caretaker to an aggressive racist is completed and the trajectory towards racism established by the narrative has come to a full stop.

To conclude, the narrative is structured around Delaney Mossbacher’s transformation from a humanitarian liberal into an aggressive bigot. The novel relies on a binary frame for thinking about gender and sex roles that positions masculinity and femininity as diametrical opposites in order to render this transition vraisemblable. It is these assumptions and presuppositions that constitute the logical undercurrents of the novel. Through locating Delaney’s performance of masculinity on the perimeters of the normative male role, his marginal position among his peers is highlighted. Situating him at the margins in this way points to the possible threat his low status masculinity potentially entails. The destabilising events Delaney encounters trigger feelings of inadequacy that relate closely to his male role. These in turn lead to feelings of hurt that prompts an increasingly aggressive and racist behaviour, but it is because of the need of the narrative, “as a function to the end”, that Delaney’s racist behaviour determines those feelings of hurt (Genette 251). The repeated structure of placing scenes depicting Delaney’s low social status in close adjacency to his increasingly racist outbursts motivates the chain of events of the narrative. Hereby the trajectory towards violence is anticipated. Unable to adhere to the prescribed male role and to construct his masculinity according to the normative model, Delaney can be expected to adapt his masculine performance to attempt to fulfil the expectancies on his male role in order to assert his dominance. In this sense, Delaney’s challenged male role functions as a device that propels the plot forward and logically motivates his racist actions and renders his hateful and violent behaviour vraisemblable. This demonstrates how the performance of masculinity effectively functions together with the structure of the narrative to motivate the chain of events. Furthermore, it demonstrates that masculinity constitute an important theme of the
novel. Moreover, if what Genette claims is true: that “[a] *vraisemblable* narrative is [. . .] a narrative where the actions answer, as so many applications of particular cases, to a body of maxims accepted as true by the public to which the narrative is addressed” it must follow that, if the progression of the narrative is regarded as *vraisemblable*, the views on gender and the male role can be claimed to exist as general assumptions, not just within the narrative, but outside of it as well (241).
Works Cited


