

It's Time to Tell: Abuse, Resistance and Recovery in Black Women's Literature

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Candice Linette Pipes

Graduate Program in English

The Ohio State University

2010

Dissertation Committee:

Valerie Lee, Advisor

Adeleke Adeeko

Debra Modellmog

Copyright by  
Candice Linette Pipes  
2010

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

## Abstract

This project examines how black women writers, specifically by writing scenes of violence, explore the sociopolitical, racial, economic, and gender exploitation through the abuse of black women within their texts. Part of the goal of this project is to reclaim the literature of black women from the clutches of a black masculinist understanding and reject these superficial readings in an effort to make sense of the black-on-black violence documented in the works of black women authors. To be more specific, the intent of this study is to investigate the ways in which collective emotional trauma and individual physical and sexual abuses against black women exist as power performances. These violences enacted against black women in black women's writing serve as a way for socially, economically, and culturally disempowered bodies to claim power by overpowering a body even more marginalized. The extensive pattern in the work of black women writers who write about the violence experienced by black women prompts a series of questions: Why do texts written by these black women overwhelmingly contain scenes of emotional, physical and sexual abuse? What purposes do black women authors have in constructing these scenes of abuse predominantly at the hands of black men? How complicit do these authors suggest that the black community is in allowing acts of violence to occur? How effective are these texts in breaking the silence of abuse beyond any fictional realm, and what kind of power does this attainment of voice give

African American women readers of these texts? Can we read these texts' exposure of violence against black women as resistance narratives? What is lost or gained through such a reading?

Scenes of emotional trauma and of physical and sexual abuse proliferate in each of the primary texts chosen for this study: Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Sapphire's *Push*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. These black women authors attempt to break the silences inherent to abuse, silences accentuated by the subordinated position of racial minority in order to expose the terror inflicted on black women and girls because of their marginalized place in society. These women not only indict the individual action of abusers, but examine the larger social implications of power relations in this country where the marginalization of black skin and female sex are systemically and politically maintained and reproduced. Ultimately, the texts used in this study depict black women victims of violence to implicate the role abuse plays in exposing and manifesting the multiple oppressions inherent to the position of double jeopardy black women occupy, indict the role that black women play as scapegoats for the anger black men feel as a result of their societal emasculation, reject the invisibility of the abused black female body, and resist the "soul murder" of black male patriarchy (King 16).

## Dedication

So that my daughter and all other little black girls might be a little safer and a little stronger.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my dissertation committee for their encouragement, feedback, and intellectual nurturance. I would like to thank my father who was the first to read every page and provide candid, honest help. I would like to thank my mother and sister for their unconditional love and support. I would like to thank my husband for his never ending belief in me and my daughter for her smiles. Lastly, I would like to thank The Ohio State University for an amazing experience. Go Buckeyes.

## Vita

June 1994.....Decatur High School  
1998.....B.S. English, The United States Air Force Academy  
2003.....M.A. English, Louisiana Tech University  
2007 to present .....Graduate Student, Department of English,  
The Ohio State University

## Fields of Study

Major Field: English

## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Dedication .....	iv
Acknowledgments .....	v
Vita .....	vi
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: "This is Not a Story to Pass On": Cultural Trauma and the Abused Black Female Body in <i>Dessa Rose</i> and <i>Corregidora</i> .....	25
Chapter 2: Exploded Dreams: An Examination of Rape in <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf</i> and <i>The Women of Brewster Place</i> .....	87
Chapter 3: Exposing the Black Girl-Child Victim of Incestuous Rape in <i>The Bluest Eye</i> and <i>Push</i> .....	151
Chapter 4: "Don't Explain Me": Violent Resistance to Abuse as a Means of Self- Actualization in <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> and <i>Eva's Man</i> .....	215
Conclusion .....	274
References .....	288

## Introduction

*We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of “mainstream” culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation).*

- Toni Cade Bambara

When Toni Cade Bambara edited *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, a collection of essays, poetry, and short fiction in 1970, she unwittingly began what some have called The Second Renaissance, a movement of black women writers motivated by an intense desire to write themselves into existence and resist the oppression and limitation of racial and gender subordination as the above quote taken from the first lines of the anthology's Preface demonstrates. Comparable to the impact Alain Locke's *The New Negro* had in formulating and shaping the Harlem Renaissance,<sup>1</sup> Bambara's anthology also delivered a prescription for emerging black women writers to introduce socio-sexual platforms until then thematically underdeveloped and/or untouched by black women. The anthology presents black women as activists willing to speak out against the systematic oppression

---

<sup>1</sup> Noted Harlem Renaissance scholar, Arnold Rampersad, in his Introduction to *The New Negro* calls it the “Bible” of the Harlem Renaissance because of its attempt to “in a fairly ambitious, expansive way...offer a definition of this cultural movement” (ix).

of black women living in a white male-dominated society, while acknowledging the objectified position of black women within the black community itself. Struggling for liberation on multiple fronts, these black women began to reject the silencing of the past and refused to submit to the prostration of the black woman in patriarchal social reformation projects like those often associated with the Black Power Movement. In doing so, these women began the process of artistic creation by answering a call to expose the truths of the black woman's existence. This project will examine how black women writers, specifically by writing scenes of violence, examine sociopolitical, racial, economic, and gender exploitation through the abuse of black women within their texts.

The black women authors in *The Black Woman* anthology began the work of resisting what Patricia Hill Collins calls the "controlling images" of black womanhood by asking the question: "How, on what terms, and by whom is the black woman to be defined?" Significantly, a critical element to answering this question is acknowledging and claiming the abuse black women suffer, even the abuse suffered at the hands of the black men they love. For this reason, several of the essayists in this collection broach the subject of black women's abuse. Abbey Lincoln asks, "To whom will she cry rape?" (98). Frances Beale accuses black men of using black women "as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men" and points to the governmentally sponsored sterilization of non-white women as "outright surgical genocide" (116). Toni Cade Bambara condemns the silence of the black community, revealing how, "we rap about being correct but ignore the danger of having one half of our population regard the other with such condescension and perhaps fear that half finds

it necessary to ‘reclaim his manhood’ by denying her her personhood” (125). Lastly, Jeane Carey Bond and Patricia Peery ask, “Is the Black male castrated?,” and detail the problem with excusatory statements: “for the duration of their lives, many Black women must bear a heavy burden of male frustration and rage through physical abuse, desertions, rejection of their femininity and general appearance” (146). In this respect, the essays mentioned foreshadow the myriad of black women-authored texts written since 1970 that foreground violence against black women.

Although Zora Neale Hurston documents domestic abuse scenarios between black men and women in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937 (a novel arguably well ahead of its time in many ways), it is not until the 1970 publications of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the story of a black girl raped by her father, and Alice Walker’s *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* where repeated acts of domestic abuse end in the murder of a black woman by her husband, that the abuse of black women at the hands of black men becomes a central thematic concern. These authors along with others—Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Sapphire, to name a few, expose the abused black female body, insisting on revealing the truth of rape, incest, physical and sexual violence suffered by black women. In doing so, they refigure these women as subjects, acknowledge the resulting trauma of these brutalizations, and advocate various methods of resistance. These texts are, because they break the silence of the black community, literary efforts which speak the unspeakable.

These revolutionaries, however, were often criticized for their “airing of dirty laundry” and exposing of the nasty secrets locked deep within the closets of the black

community. Calvin Hernton in his book, *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers* (1987), dedicates an entire chapter to the history of black men's literary lynching of the work of black women by black male writers, specifically the work that challenges the normative structure of black male patriarchy. Part of what black male authors are responding to in the works of black women, Hernton suggests, is these women's audacity to write themselves into history as, "black men have historically defined themselves as sole interpreter of the Black Experience" (41). During periods such as the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, black women were sidelined in an almost ritualistic sacrifice to allow the masculinist presence of black male writers to dominate. The oft-told story of the dinner meant to honor Harlem Renaissance novelist Jessie Fauset in 1924 that instead turned out to serve as an unveiling of the New Negro project serves as a case in point. Fauset was slowly pushed to the back of the stage while young black men, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Countee Cullen, to name a few, stepped forward to shine as the face of the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset, as a result, has been all but forgotten to everyone but black literature scholars.

Hernton, along with other black feminist writers like Michele Wallace, Toni Cade Bambara, and Candice Jenkins, points to the failure of black men to include and recognize black women as possible contributors to the 1960s Black Power Movement. Michele Wallace defines this black male masculinist self-concept as "Black Macho" and articulates its destructive sexist premise: "Black Macho allowed for only the most primitive notion of women—women as possessions, black women as the spoils of war, leaving black women with no resale value. As a possession, the black woman was a

symbol of defeat, and therefore of little use to the revolution except as the performer of drudgery” (68). This “sexual mountain” that Wallace describes and Hernton defines is what politicians in recent conversations would liken to the “glass ceiling,” and is what black women have struggled to scale in an attempt to achieve gender equality within their own racial community.<sup>2</sup> It is an obstacle that becomes no less substantial as black women in unprecedented numbers began to write themselves into existence in the 1970s.

As previously mentioned, in 1970 the Black Women Writer’s Renaissance was ushered in by the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and also Maya Angelou’s autobiographical work, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, three works with explicit scenes of violence suffered by black women at the hands of black men. In response to these depictions, the black male literary elite (Stanley Crouch, Ishmael Reed, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver and others) exploded into action, condemning these works as “castrating” and spewing forth a litany of accusations at their black sisters, calling them male bashers, dykes, and anti-revolutionary. Hernton best details this clash of the sexes in a passage that deserves lengthy consideration:

Black men write a lot about the “castrating” black female, and feel righteous in doing so. But when black women write about incest, rape and sexual violence committed by black men against black females of all ages in the family and in the black community at large, and when black women write that black men are

---

<sup>2</sup> Hernton’s “sexual mountain” also works as an allusion to Langston Hughes’s “racial mountain” that he describes in his seminal essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” as: “the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.” In this sense, Hernton figures the sexual mountain as also standing in the way of true African American art.

castrators and oppressors of black women, black men accuse the women of sowing seeds of “division” in the black community; the women are accused of promoting animosity not only between the sexes in general but between males and females in the black family itself. In other words, when the women tell the truth about men and refuse to accept the blame for what men have done to them, the men get mad as hell. They get “hurt.” They try to discredit and invalidate the women. (*The Sexual Mountain* 46)

Using a tactic similar to that employed against Zora Neale Hurston by black male authors like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright in the 1940s and 1950s, which reduced her work to relative obscurity, these black men hoped to squelch these outbursts of black womanhood and agency and relegate these works to anonymity. Thankfully, the growing number of black feminist scholars and scholarship and the expanding group of black woman-centered authors stood their ground and achieved in the next two decades a level of literary production unmatched by black women writers to date.

Part of the goal of this project is to reclaim the literature of black women from the clutches of a black masculinist understanding and reject these superficial readings in an effort to make sense of the black-on-black violence documented in the works of black women authors. To be more specific, the intent of this study is to investigate the ways in which collective emotional trauma and individual physical and sexual abuses against black women exist as power performances. These violences enacted against black women in black women’s writing serve as a way for socially, economically, and culturally disempowered bodies to claim power by overpowering a body even more

marginalized. To paraphrase Fanon, the black male writer becomes legitimate as he renounces himself and the black woman as an extension of his self—to the degree that he strives to be, he disavows that she is. Fanon writes, “in the man of color there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence...the attitude of the black man toward the white, or toward his own race...often frequently border[s] on the region of the pathological” (60). Thus, the black man claims power by further disempowering the black woman. He acquires voice by silencing her. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, “these violent acts are the visible dimensions of a more generalized, routinized system of oppression” (146). The extensive pattern in the work of black women writers who write about the violence experienced by black women, prompts a series of questions: Why do texts written by these black women overwhelmingly contain scenes of emotional, physical and sexual abuse? What purposes do black women authors have in constructing these scenes of abuse predominantly at the hands of black men? How complicit do these authors suggest that the black community is in allowing acts of violence to occur? How effective are these texts in breaking the silence of abuse beyond any fictional realm and what kind of power does this attainment of voice give African American women readers of these texts? Can we read these texts’ exposure of violence against black women as resistance narratives? What is lost or gained through such a reading?

Scenes of emotional trauma and of physical and sexual abuse proliferate in each of the primary texts chosen for this study: Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* and Eva’s Man, Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have*

*Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Sapphire's *Push*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. My project, while limited to texts written by black women, explores scenes of violence across a range of black women writers and across a range of abuses. Although the majority of works used in this study are published post-civil rights era in the 1970s and 1980s, I include *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a novel well ahead of its time, recognizing Hurston as the muse for Alice Walker's womanism decades later, and Sapphire's *Push* (1996) as work that exists as part of the conversation started by Toni Morrison in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye*. These black women authors attempt to break the silences inherent to abuse, silences accentuated by the subordinated position of racial minority in order to expose the terror inflicted on black women and girls because of their marginalized place in society. These women not only indict the individual action of abusers, but examine the larger social implications of power relations in this country where the marginalization of black skin and female sex are systemically and politically maintained and reproduced. Ultimately, the texts used in this study depict black women victims of violence to implicate the role abuse plays in exposing and manifesting the multiple oppressions inherent to the position of double jeopardy black women occupy, indict the role that black women play as scapegoats for the anger black men feel as a result of their societal emasculation, reject the invisibility of the abused black female body, and resist the "soul murder" of black male patriarchy (King 16). The twenty-year period of time beginning with 1970 provides a unique amalgamation of societal, political, gender and racial intersections by existing at the end of the civil rights

movement, but at the beginning of the feminist movement creating a perfect storm for black women writers to emerge challenging the status quo.

A reading of BarbaraNeely's 1990 short story, "Spilled Salt," might help further explain this project's intentions. "Spilled Salt" is the story of a mother, Myrna, forced to reunite with her son, Kenny, who has just been released from prison after serving a sentence for raping a girl, Crystal, in the back of his car. Myrna struggles between her identities as a woman and mother when confronted with the reality of her son's brutal act of violence. Significantly, BarbaraNeely supplies the reader with no racial indicators, only offering that Myrna and her son share "large brown eyes and freckled faces," phenotypical attributes not exclusive to one racial group (289). That BarbaraNeely avoids racializing her characters highlights the woman-centeredness of the story. For Myrna, it is not her racial identity that defines her, but rather her gender.

The narrator, one that is centralized in Myrna's thoughts and actions, injects that the conflict Myrna's son's rape case poses to her gender identity is not the first she has had to face. Myrna's husband and Kenny's father physically abused Myrna. She remembers "the crippling shock of Buddy's fist in her groin" and how he "punched her around" (291-292). In adding this subplot to the story, BarbaraNeely acknowledges the cyclical nature of violence as possible rationale for Kenny's later act of battery. Myrna leaves Buddy, choosing the gender identities of woman and mother over the identity of wife, and for a time is satisfied that this choice has not only saved her but saved her son as well. When Kenny admits to rape, Myrna recalls these scenes of violence and uses them to blame herself for her son's action. She asks herself: "What harm might she have

done out of ignorance, out of impatience and concentration on warding off the pains of her own life?,” and fears her son might correlate his act to her failure and “ask her what there was about her mothering that made him want to treat women like a piece of toilet paper” (291). Myrna understands the raped body of Crystal for what it is to Kenny—a disposable object—yet even as she empathizes with Crystal’s objectification, she re-victimizes herself by dredging up her past physical abuse, turning it into emotional anguish. The narrator goes as far as to offer evidence that Kenny’s rape of Crystal is duplicated when Myrna becomes convinced of his crime. Myrna, then, is also raped by Kenny, and consequently responds as many rape victims do, by “avoiding all social contact with men. With sex” (291). Kenny’s return home does not just recall Myrna’s feelings of failure as a mother, but spills salt into the re-opened wound of her own victimization both by Kenny and his father.

Myrna is ultimately torn between her sense of womanhood and her duty as a mother. What Myrna is unable to reconcile is the image of the raped body of her son’s victim, “the wound on her neck where he held his knife against her throat to keep her docile” (289). The language describing Kenny’s act reflects the forced subordination of his unwillingly “docile” prey, yet when first presented with this image, Myrna looks for ulterior explanations for the accusations. She first believes that the police framed her son, BarbaraNeely’s only hint that this text is informed by a racial context by suggesting that the legal system at times wrongly targets black men. Myrna also wants to blame the girl for falsely accusing her son, falling into the societal trap of dismissing and silencing the woman’s voice. Only when Kenny is forced to confess after telling “the wrong lie”

does Myrna fully accept the brutality of her son's act—an act of violence that she suggests would have gone unpunished if the right lie would have been told. Recognizing the authority of any man's voice in a patriarchally-governed system, Myrna realizes that Kenny would have gone free and Crystal would have been twice victimized if Kenny could have just made up a story that covered “the semen, fiber, and hair evidence” found in his car (289).

Kenny's wrong lie gives Crystal's voice an opportunity to be heard and she victoriously tells her story to a jury who “leaned toward her” as she spoke—significantly—listening (292). Crystal's testimony is an act of agency that recovers her self and sends Kenny away to jail—an act mirrored by Myrna at the end of the story. Ultimately, Myrna privileges her womanhood, her sense of self, over her role as mother and leaves Kenny with a note that reads, “I just can't be your mother right now. I will be back in one week. Please be gone” (293). Myrna refuses to perpetuate her own victimization based on duty-bound gender identities and in doing so, for the second time, rejects patriarchal control over her life. BarbaraNeely's notion that womanhood is separate and distinct from the socially prescribed roles of wife and mother forces a paradigmatic shift and uncovers the depth of self buried in too shallow idealizations and ultimately resists monolithic categorization.

As is evidenced by my reading of “Spilled Salt,” I am interested in exploring the relationship between acts of violence suffered by black women and the materialization of a new black woman's voice—one that is both racially and gender-marked. The undercurrent of much of the work of post-civil rights era black women responds to white

feminist exclusionary practices and black male sabotage. Because of this, black women's voices emerge in these texts, uniquely powerful and resistant to both ingrained racial bias and patriarchal domination. The bifurcation that happens along gender lines is caused by competing social and political platforms. As white feminism flourished with ideals of equal labor, independence and a severing of intimate relationships with men, black women intellectuals increasingly realized that "feminism" was not about them and was in fact dominated by white, middle class discourse. Black women intellectuals understood that the white women dominating the feminist realm had "little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state" (hooks 133). Black women, then, began creating their own black feminist discourse in order to provide direction for black women as they endeavored to define a black womanhood within American culture and create a unique identity. The black women's literary intraracial battle, however, was arguably more combative and defining.

The writing of black women distinguishes itself from the black male-authored masculinist-discourse that tends to objectify women, whether intentional or not. Richard Wright's *Native Son* offers the black woman as the expendable concubine-whore while Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* hyper-sexualizes white women prostituting themselves for power, status, and the fetishistic fulfillment of desire for the black male phallus while de-sexualizing black women as voiceless procreators or mammy-figures. More contemporary male voices are often overtly satirical and parodic, articulating anti-feminist rhetoric. For instance, Ishmael Reed's and Percival Everett's texts fail to resist

banal stereotyping and cast black women as oversexed Jezebels, sexless care-takers and/or emasculating feminists.

Whereas many black male-authored texts are content to lock black women into the dominant narrative's controlling images, black women-authored texts work to secure subject status—humanity and personhood—for those struggling to survive an oppressive sociopolitical racist and sexist culture which facilitates the dual subjections of race and gender. Houston Baker recognizes the gendered voice of black women authors. One such voice, he offers, is first manifested in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Baker argues, "the implied domain of sexual victimization (so briefly represented in male narratives) becomes the dramatically foregrounded topos of the woman's account" (*Blues* 54). Baker points to the "subtextual dimensions of African American narrative that receive full voice only in the psychologically perverse motivations of the patriarch-as-rapist, the female slave's manipulation of a sexual and financial partnership outside the boundaries of the master's power and the strategy of retreat that leads to commercial advantage and physical freedom" (*Blues* 55). In this sense, Baker seemingly agrees with Helene Cixous' premise that "women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (2039). Cixous defines this type of writing as inherently resistant, "a *new insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carve out the indispensable rapture and transformation in her history" (2043; author's emphasis). In invoking Cixous, I am not suggesting a kind of formulaic feminine writing, but rather a black feminist positionality possessed by black women

writers—one that dictates content that centers on the abused and battered body of the black woman, the suppression of voice by patriarchy, and the suffocating limitations of prescribed notions of race and gender. Ultimately this project attempts to document the transformation of a new generation of black women and black women's struggle for autonomy (most specifically through their relationship to violence), as Audre Lorde explains, from “silence to language” (qtd in Collins 113).

In her essay “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelyn Hammonds differentiates between the “politics of silence” and the “politics of articulation” arguing in favor of the latter by demonstrating how “the goal cannot be merely to be seen: visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen” (494). Hammonds advocates a greater need for black women's voices, and part of this includes vocalizing unpopular and seemingly contrary realities to the racial uplift project in order to confront the truth in a way that allows real progress. Hammonds use of the word “politics” is significant because it offers silence and articulation as sciences of manipulation and opportunism, and so, what is distinctive between the two is not the intent so much as the method—a move from passivity to action.

As Baker alludes to in referencing *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, violence suffered by black women begins a move from silence to articulation with the publication of slave narratives. Harriet Jacobs as Linda Brent details her sexual violation by her white slave master and her subsequent self-torture to escape the horrors of slavery.

Frederick Douglass remembers watching the disfigured black body of his aunt lying lifeless because of the white slave master's whip. Post-Reconstruction narratives like Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* hint at the rape and sexual exploitation of slave women while Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* revolves around the tale of a mulatto woman sold into sexual slavery by her white uncle. Participating in the racial uplift project, these works acknowledge the abuse and battered black female body, but only so far as to critique the violence occurring at the hands of white men. In fact, many of the slave and post-Reconstruction narratives clearly position "good" white men against polished, educated "new negro" men as suitors for undeniably beautiful mulatto women showcasing the woman's choice of honor, strength, and racial solidarity the black man provides. Even black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance submit to the racial uplift agenda. Jessie Fauset's Angela ultimately rejects the financial and social stability of her white lover for a mulatto husband, and Nella Larsen's Helga Crane resists her eroticization by denying her white, Scandinavian painter-suitor, and marrying instead a black, Southern preacher.

Although the Harlem Renaissance women writers are much more explicit in their critiques of sexism and the black bourgeois middle class' performances of community and progress, the reality of abuse black men enact against black women remains untouched—a profound silence. Not until Hurston publishes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* at the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance are black men overtly named as complicit to the continued subjectification of black women. The literary scholarship of black women's literature too often mirrors the work of early black women novelists and leaves

black men out of it. For this reason, my project is primarily concerned with the violence documented in black women's novels that involves the intimate relationships of black men and black women. Ultimately, I suggest that what these women do by actively identifying black men as a subject in the criminal abuse of black women is put an end to the perjury characteristic of the silence that disavows the existence of the abused black woman.

Ultimately, this project recovers the black women-authored texts previously named as resistance narratives for three primary reasons: 1) black women authors create a black feminist discourse that rejects both white feminist exclusion and black masculinist rhetoric, 2) these texts make speakable the unspeakable by breaking the silence, making visible the violence suffered by black women at the hands of black men, 3) these texts offer varied ways for black women to claim agency and, in some cases, overcome their abuse to survive as active subjects rather than perish as defiled objects. I have already discussed the significance of the first two ways these narratives resist. The third reason, I argue, is tied intimately to the idea of voice. After all, it is no coincidence that many of the works used in this study are first-person narratives—self-actualized bildungsromans tracing the process of moving from victim to survivor.

Perhaps the biggest vocal shift in African American discourse is the black-woman centered conversation that is born from the literary progress witnessed during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. From these movements and their establishment of strong, forceful African American voices divested of shame and fear came a need to use these voices to expose and protest the silences yet uncovered, silences

that destructively hush the brutalization of black women past and present. This is why the proliferation of black women's writing beginning in the 1970s offers two major trends, both discussed further in depth in this project—the neo-slave narrative, a reaching back to the past to tell the untold stories of slavery, and the beginning of what I've been calling the Black Women Writer's Renaissance with the emergence of authors like Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange who, in Shange's words, "refuse to be a part of this conspiracy of silence...tired of living lies" (qtd in Collins 158). Ironically, the process of moving from silence to articulation often involves violence on the part of the black woman. Confronted with many unsuccessful attempts to speak, black female protagonists often resort to violence as a kind of literalization of their vocal protestations. Where the (in this case) passive verbal expressions are revealed as futile, the violence gives them agency. And so, part of what these authors struggle with is how to resist the abuse of the black female body while also resisting the cycle of violence that inevitably victimizes black women.

Before briefly describing the following chapters, I would first like to mention three works of scholarship that this study is indebted to. First, Saidiya Hartman in her book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, considers how scenes of violence in slavery otherwise understood as malignantly destructive work within slave narratives to perpetrate violence, "under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property" (4). Her project of "defamiliarizing the familiar" by studying scenes of unrecognized violence in slave narratives provides a model for the kind of work this project intends to do. Unlike Hartman, my study centers

on more overtly violent scenes of subjection making the objective of “defamiliarizing the familiar” all the more necessary. Second, Kimberle Crenshaw’s seminal essay, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” is foundational to my understanding of the sociopolitical, economic, cultural, racial and gender intersections informing these black women authors’ choice to articulate violence in their works. In Crenshaw’s words, “the violence that accompanies this will to control is devastating, not just for black women who are victimized but for the entire black community” (361). Lastly, Ryan Eyerman’s study of cultural trauma in his work, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, is critical to my understanding of the influence and impact of slavery on contemporary black writing. Working from Eyerman’s notion of collective memory as memory that “specifies the temporal parameters of past and future, where we came from and where we are going, and also why we are here now,” I was able to formulate the premise of my first chapter.

The first chapter is the only one that does not only examine the violence black women suffer at the hands of black men, but instead serves to examine the legacy of physical and sexual violence black women suffered as chattel in an effort to understand how this abuse helped to shape contemporary pathologies of black men and women—pathologies that serve as the foundation for the black-on-black violence examined in later chapters. Using two neo-slave narratives, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Sherley Ann Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, Chapter 1 explores the violence of the transgenerational injury of slavery and the impact of that injury on the intimate relationships between black men and

women and the relationship between the black woman and herself. These texts are representative of two methods contemporary authors use in their attempts to fill in the gaps actual slave narratives leave: 1) by exposing the politics surrounding speech and 2) by uncovering the collective trauma of the unspeakable. This first chapter also attempts to contextualize the primary scene of the black woman's abused body as not just physical, but always already sexual while explaining the root of the black man's emasculation in American society—both key elements in my observations of rape, incest, and domestic abuse in later chapters. The choice to use neo-slave narratives to discuss the violence suffered by black women during slavery is purposeful. As Harriet Jacobs herself admits, “[her] descriptions fall far short of the facts” (1). Both the distance from slavery and the fictional element of these two novels ironically allows for a recovery of facts too often missing in historical scholarship—that the abused black female body existed within slavery and the memory of her still haunts black women today. I begin with a study of neo-slave narratives because I believe that the historical violence of slavery these novels document serves as a perpetual undercurrent consistently informing modern black experience, and so, each of the proceeding chapters needs to be read with an understanding of the pathology these texts suggest the legacy of slavery creates and how novels centering the modern black women suggest she is affected by it.

The second chapter investigates black women authors' portrayal of rape as the original scene of black patriarchy through an analysis of Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Rape is commonly understood as an act of domination and

control, and these two texts significantly provide insight into two specific types of rape. In *The Women of Brewster Place*, the black male aggression expressed in the act of rape is complicated by the lesbianism of the victim while the rape as a gang rape represents sexual violence as a performance of hyper-heterosexuality. *For Colored Girls*, on the other hand, rejects the myth of the “stranger” black male predator rapist by exposing the arguably more damaging reality of date rape. These works vehemently disagree with Trudier Harris’ too literal assertion about African American history that, “black women, though equally powerless, and equally dehumanized by rape, did not have a part of their anatomy comparable to a penis physically taken from them. Though they were raped, that act itself did not immediately conjure up images of death for them,” by writing into existence the literal and figurative deaths of the black woman and her raped and dismembered body (188).

The third chapter examines sexual violence of incest experienced by young black girls in two novels by black women and the ways in which these novels each problematize commonly held notions of the innocence of childhood and the safety of the domestic space. More specifically, it considers Sapphire’s *Push* as a rewriting of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. While Morrison’s novel resists the romanticism of the victorious victim, Sapphire attempts to define a process for self-actualization—a process intimately tied to literacy and an understanding of the power of language and writing as a way to secure voice. At the level of the scene of incest, Morrison conflates brutality and tenderness in an effort to demonstrate the complexity of the event while Sapphire more graphically exposes the violation of the black female body. Each novel also allows for

differing determinations of the black male perpetrator. Morrison in her Afterword of *The Bluest Eye* offers, “I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse” (211). While Morrison is careful to provide explanations and motivations for both the abuser and the complicit black community, Sapphire attempts to resist too easy excusals, but ultimately falls into similar traps by “copping out,” avoiding tackling the horror of incest head-on. Ultimately, both texts figure self-erasure as the penultimate response to incest and resist by suggesting methods of how to first reclaim the raped girl-child body and then reclaim the self.

The final chapter, “Those Who Kill,” positions Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gayl Jones’ *Eva’s Man* as the black woman writer’s Ur-resistance novels. Both protagonists not only achieve their own autonomy by killing off their black male abuser in a symbolic gesture that extinguishes the power of black male patriarchy, but each woman also, in the end, verbalizes her process of coming to subjecthood to another woman, thus passing on her victory over self, inspiring another to release herself from her binding chains. Significantly, both texts also deal intimately with the legal system, exposing the failure of a racist and patriarchal institution to uphold justice for those not considered human within its boundaries. Janie is acquitted by a white jury only after she becomes non-black through the rejection of her black community while Eva is wrongly incarcerated in a madhouse, the white authority not able to understand her act as anything but insane. By both acknowledging the ultimate act of resistance and its inherent sacrifice, Hurston and Jones articulate the opportunities and limitations of black women’s resistance.

## Methodology

Several scholars have published work focusing on how trauma works in the novels of black women writers. J. Brooks Bouson's seminal text, *quiet as it's kept: shame, trauma, and race in the novels of Toni Morrison*, explores how, "Morrison represents the speechless terror of trauma in recurring scenes of dissociated violence," and how, within these scenes, characters "experience the inarticulateness and emotional paralysis of intense shame" (3-4). Suzette Henke examines trauma in the life-writing of Audre Lorde and Lorde's re-invention of herself out of the trauma violent experiences cause through her life-writing (115). Other authors have done work on violence in African American texts. For instance, Jerry H. Bryant's book, *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*, documents the legacy of violence suffered by the black community from slavery to the contemporary period, but he never explicitly mentions the unique violence suffered by black women or the role gender plays in complicating the black and white notion that "violence against blacks produces victims" (2).

Where my project differs from other studies involving trauma and violence in African American literature is first by de-centralizing trauma as the focus while centralizing the scene of violence and the black woman as the receptor of that violence. My understanding of trauma is as a response to an event that at the moment of experience cannot be explained in language possessed by the victim even once the moment has passed. This definition is informed by trauma scholar, Cathy Caruth, who explains, "the pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event

is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experienced it” (4). For the purposes of this study, understanding the violent event and the trauma as separate, I will, in effect, be reading backward from the trauma to the act of violence ending with an understanding of the social environment which serves as a catalyst for such events. Although this is not a trauma study per se, the trauma suffered as a result of the violent event will be necessarily considered. I submit, however, that centralizing the act of violence and analyzing the authors’ portrayal of the act re-claims the abused black female body as the Ur-image of these texts. With this approach, the black female body is revealed as object—one discarded and unprotected. As a thing without personhood, the black female body’s brutalization resists the sentimentality offered within the texts and allows for a clearer understanding of its objectification and domination and of the movement into voice and subjecthood. In the end, my method of reading as black woman-centered ultimately mirrors the authors’ own woman-centered design.

Nearly four decades later, what Toni Cade Bambara said in 1970 remains true: “Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be obvious—Black women are individuals too” (5). What is implied in Bambara’s statement is the need for black feminist writers and scholars to claim the black woman’s subjectivity, name her humanity, and speak out against what endangers her self. The black women authors I use in this study along with thousands of other black, brown and yellow women do this through language, and my mission is simply to show how and make clear why it is a matter of life and death that we listen.

My focus on black women's writing is, of course, personally motivated. As a bi-racial black woman I first found in literature a voice that could speak to me in the novels written by black women. Toni Morrison's *Sula* is the first novel I can remember reading by a black woman author and its power to feed the contradictions of myself spurred my passion for black women's literature. Fortunate to be studying black women's literature after the publication of The Schomburg Library's Nineteenth Century Black Women Writers series and the recovery of texts like *Their Eyes Were Watching*, *Quicksand*, *Passing*, and Fauset's novels, I benefited from a growing canon and legacy of black women's writing. And even as this legacy emerges clearer with every new text discovered, it strikes me that the period of black women's writing that begins in 1970 with *The Black Woman: An Anthology* is a particularly significant era of black women's thought. Responding to the silencing tactics of the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Arts Movement and the Black Power Movement, and the rejection of the white feminist movement, black women emerged with voices strong and resilient to write themselves into existence. My focus on black women writers, then, is an honoring of their courage and rebellion, an acknowledgment of these texts' power to inspire and uplift.

## Chapter 1

“This is Not a Story to Pass On”: Cultural Trauma and the Abused Black Female Body

in *Dessa Rose* and *Corregidora*

*This is not a story to pass on*—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

*As the travelling men told it, she just refused*

*to let him touch her so brutally ever again.*

*She found in herself emancipation*

*that let her act in a way that was*

*hard for her to choose or she might have killed him*

*sooner, a year or two sooner. Or a day.*

*But as soon as somehow*

*she saw a self in herself, she refused*—Thylas Moss, *Slave Moth*

Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, details (using the pseudonym Linda Brent) Jacobs’ confrontation with and resistance to sexual abuse. She depicts her unrelenting self-sacrifice demonstrated by her survival of years in a matchbox attic space in order to keep her children a safe distance from the slave master’s clutches and bide time for her eventual escape to freedom. In the process of avoiding

sexual violation by her master, Jacobs chooses to have sex with a kinder, less predatory white man with whom she has two children. That Jacobs chooses a white lover is an act of agency and self-protection that many scholars now understand as a defining moment in black feminist literature, making *Incidents* what Angelyn Mitchell calls, “the Ur-Narrative of Black Womanhood” (23). Yet, even while acknowledging the radical nature of Jacobs’ narrative, we cannot discount that many of the details of Jacobs’ sexual harassment/abuse and of her subsequent affair with another white man are left out. In fact, Jacobs clearly accounts for such gaps in her story during her Preface, writing, “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (1). Jacobs recognizes that her narrative is bound up in the power of whiteness and fears it. Jacob’s fear is warranted as is signified by the mandated legitimizing authorship documents which bookend the narrative and symbolize an overarching control of her story. Because of this, we will never really know how aggressive and intrusive Jacobs’ master’s sexual advances were or what agreement she and Mr. Sands had as Jacobs acted as his concubine. We are left to ponder instead questions such as the one Catherine Clinton asks, “is the suitor who allows Jacobs to be seduced into thinking she might be free herself and any subsequent children any less brutal to her master who relentlessly pursued her?” or even the question of whether Jacobs was, like so many black women of the time, raped (210). What we must acknowledge is that these narratives are full of gaps that are politically, socially, racially and gender motivated, so we must read as Hortense

Spillers suggests, “between the lines of [Jacobs’] narrative,” in order to reach the truth (474). To preserve white superiority, to repress mongrelization, to dispel certain facts, truths had to be omitted or at least left unsaid.

It is this acquisition of truth that this chapter focuses on and my use of the neo-slave narrative works to identify slavery as a “site of memory” for black women authors (Eyerman 30). Angelyn Mitchell offers that *Incidents* “begins a dialogue about the nature of Black womanhood in America to which the contemporary novelists respond” (18). Even more specifically, contemporary novelists’ use of the neo-slave narrative not only responds to the unspeakable blanks left by their foremothers, but uses their writing as a bridge linking the past to the present to ensure a future. As Mitchell puts it, these neo-slave narratives are “a means of encoding memory and creat[ing] for us a space for meeting and for understanding a different time and seeing [which], in turn, allows us to better understand our own” (17). The neo-slave narrative becomes for the author a truth-seeking mission into the past that uncovers hidden travesties and unspeakable horrors, but also a spirit of undying courage and opposition. This chapter will focus on the ways that Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* identify the cultural trauma of slavery as ongoing and revise slave narratives like Jacobs’s limited by time and place by reclaiming the abused black female body and offering resistance as a fundamental essence of the black woman. Other black female authored neo-slave narratives could have worked for this study. For instance, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, or Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* each offer black woman-centered texts that expose the abused black female body. I chose *Dessa Rose* and

*Corregidora* specifically for the graphic imagining of the abused black female body these texts present that I believe foregrounds the black female body in its objectified state with the purpose of counteracting this image, and for the value both place on the verbalizing of the abused black woman's personal archive of trauma through a narrative of self-discovery.

These two neo-slave narratives represent two perspectives authors use to respond to slave narratives and fill in the gaps left by virtue of circumstance: 1) they address the politics around who could speak and on what terms, and 2) they examine the very nature of trauma as a result of events that are too hard to speak about (in this case the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of black women). These narratives, then, become a mediation of narration by uncovering sociopolitical limitations and restrictions, what Toni Morrison articulates as the dynamic of "popular taste" that discouraged the writers from dwelling too long or too carefully on the more sordid details of their experience" and by offering a voice to violences which up until this point has had no way of being expressed ("The Site of Memory" 90). As Ashraf Rushdy suggests, these narratives "situate themselves as belated participants in an earlier cultural conversation," and in doing so become narratives of retelling and, at times, of (re-)constructing the self (*Neo Slave Narratives* 17). For the two works discussed in this chapter, this acquisition of self is tied closely to the attainment of an autonomous voice and it is significant that in both cases, using two distinct methods, the female protagonist must first speak the unspeakable in order to set herself free. We can, then, also define these narratives as healing, as Keith Byerman submits, "potentially therapeutic in that [they] insist on revealing the fullness of the past,

in all its ambiguity and ugliness and complicity, which means that [they] compel survivors (and we are all its survivors) to face the truth” (6).

*Dessa Rose* works most effectively to address the first issue of who could speak about violence against black women during slavery, and on what terms. Sherley Anne Williams explains in her Author’s Note that “Dessa Rose is based on two historical incidents. A pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising on a coffle” and “a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported to have given sanctuary to runaway slaves”(5). Williams combines these two incidents and intersects these two women’s lives in an effort to “make a place in the American past [she (Williams)] could go to be free” (5-6). The novel also exists, in part, as a response to William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner*, a relationship I will discuss in greater detail later in the chapter. After her lover and father of her unborn child is killed by their master, Dessa, a slave, is brutally mutilated in and around her private parts and branded on her inner thigh. Dessa attempts to revenge his death by strangling her mistress, an unsuccessful attack that leaves her newly disfigured and still bleeding pregnant body locked in a sweatbox until the slave trader comes to sell her off. She and the other slaves on the coffle successfully revolt, killing some of the white traders, but Dessa is eventually caught and made to await the birth of her son before being hanged during which time a white aspiring author, Nehemiah, interviews her as his key witness for his pamphlet *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them*. Dessa escapes Nemi’s appropriation of her story and her impending death with the help of slaves from the coffle uprising who return to rescue her. The remainder of the novel focuses on Dessa’s

physical healing and process of self-affirmation that provides her a voice with which to pass her story on in her own words.

*Corregidora*, a novel further removed from slavery in its setting, but very much centered in slavery through its haunting of Ursa, the novel's protagonist, with ancestral testimonies of slavery, specifically the abused black woman's body, is most effective in demonstrating the collective trauma of slavery and addressing the process of recovery from events yet unable to be expressed through language. Ursa lives not only her past generations of mothers' abuse at the hands of slave masters, but her own as she is the victim of a brutal act of physical violence at the hands of her black husband that leaves her unborn child aborted and her uterus taken from her. Ursa's story, too, is one of recovery as she heals physically and emotionally, for a time resisting her destiny of abuse by divorcing her husband and pursuing her career as a blues singer. Ultimately, Ursa and her husband reunite in an ambiguous twist that leaves the reader wondering how successful Ursa is in expressing the trauma of her and her mothers' past. To prepare for an in-depth discussion of these two texts, I first will outline the neo-slave narrative genre in great detail and identify how this genre relates specifically to the concept of cultural trauma.

#### The Neo-Slave Narrative and Cultural Trauma

Ashraf Rushdy defines the neo-slave narrative best when he names it a "palimpsest narrative" (*Remembering Generations* 5). Like a palimpsest, the neo-slave narrative writes a new version of history atop an ever-fading narrative. The utility of this metaphor is the visual connection it makes between what was written before and what is

written now, how the past and the present blend into inseparable and, at times, undecipherable elements of a singular, changing narrative of slavery. Rushdy offers that “the palimpsest shows the complexity of representation” and that these neo-slave narratives specifically center on “the problematic of contemporary subjects who need to discern a sometimes unknowable, always hidden, past in order to live a fuller and healthier present” (*Remembering Generations* 8, 19). The palimpsestic quality of these narratives connects the past to the present and acts as a conduit, a bridge for the future, connecting temporal severing into a kind of wholeness—a wholeness that extends out of time to the individual selves represented within the texts. In this way, the neo-slave narrative is as Angelyn Mitchell calls it, a “liberatory narrative,” one that is focused not so much on the “experience of enslavement, but more importantly, on the construct we call freedom,” and because of this “the liberatory narrative can effect a release of this historic pain and shame” (3, 21). Significantly, Mitchell differs from Rushdy in that she genders her understanding of the neo-slave narrative focusing on black women authors’ retelling of slavery and their black female protagonists’ journeys from slavery to freedom, from chattel to free self. These black women authors of neo-slave narratives recognize the futility, like Sethe does in *Beloved*, of “beating back the past” and instead determine to remember the past, specifically slavery, and write the black woman’s pain into existence through their revisions (Morrison 86).

Perhaps the most significant result of the neo-slave narrative explosion of the 1970s and 1980s is the revelation of slavery as a cultural trauma and more explicitly as an experience still traumatic to African Americans today. Ryan Eyerman explores how this

cultural trauma of slavery has shaped and continues to shape the identity of African Americans, arguing that slavery exists as a “collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people”—an identity forever interlinked with the promotion of white superiority and the indoctrination of black inferiority (1). The presence and power of slavery as identity forming, however, is often not acknowledged and even discounted. It is no accident that slavery is often talked about in ghostly terms; for example, as the ghost of slavery “haunt[ing] the peripheries of the national imaginary” (Jenkins 10). Part of the reason for this is the pain and shame Mitchell refers to, and for the black community this pain and shame is compounded by a dominant discourse of slavery that misrepresents the black slave as stupid, ugly, and a willing participant in their own victimization as demonstrated in novels like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in minstrel shows, and in the grotesque caricatures of blacks popularized post-slavery. The dominant narrative of slavery works in this way to continue an emotional, social, and political enslavement evidenced by the absence of alternative representations of slavery up until the 1970s. This silence is addressed by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who suggests that his “is the first generation of black people in America who can afford to be this open,” answering in part why the necessary revisionist work of the neo-slave narrative takes so long to manifest (“Lifting the Veil” 149).

Trauma scholars recognize the need of two critical elements for a victim attempting to process a traumatic event: 1. The language with which to articulate the traumatic event, and 2. An audience willing to receive and believe the victim’s reconstruction of the event. Only after the uplift movements of the post-Reconstruction era

and the Harlem Renaissance along with the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s are Americans, black and white, victims and audience, ready and willing to revisit the poltergeist of slavery. Part of the project of the neo-slave narrative, then, is to recover the event of slavery as traumatic not just for its immediate victims, but for each generation since. The neo-slave narrative becomes a way of gaining control over a narrative historically appropriated by white men, and as such serves as an act of agency and recovery. Black women authors, two of whom are represented later in this chapter, not only re-appropriate the history of slavery, but add the her-story of slavery by explicitly originating the black woman's body as a site of violence and abuse during slavery. For this reason, it is critical to understand the neo-slave narrative as a kind of traumatic memory that informs and makes possible the recovery of the other kinds of abuses I discuss later in this study.

The importance of understanding the neo-slave narrative as a traumatic memory lies in the outcome of this approach. *Corregidora's* Ursa is, for example, taught at an early age that the retelling of the traumatic event serves as evidence of the abuse suffered. As such, the traumatic memories bear witness to the traumatic event and transform it into "a coherent narrative that can be integrated into the survivor's sense of self and view of the world, but also be reintegrating the survivor into a community, reestablishing connections essential to selfhood" (Brison 39-40). Both *Dessa Rose's* and *Corregidora's* black female protagonists bear witness to their own suffering and the suffering of other women in order to progress from spaces of both literal and figurative imprisonment to freedom. If it is, as Susan Brison suggests, that traumatic memories "are more tied to the

body than are narrative memories,” then both these texts support her claim as they construct the abused black female body as the central image of violence and violation (42). Using the abused black body as the essential image allows authors to reclaim this body in an effort to connect it to a sense of humanity and ultimately to an understanding of self. By exposing the abused black female body through individual characterization as self-defining, these authors both caution and challenge their black women readers to confront their own abused bodies, to examine the inscriptions written upon them, to question their source in an effort to heal. Imagine the abused black female body as a cocoon that at once entraps the caterpillar, but with the proper conditions allows a butterfly to emerge. The abused black female body can exist as a prison, as a den of oppression, but can also work, when acknowledged and accepted for what it is, as a source of strength and identity. For this reason, the abused black female body is given center stage in my project of understanding how these novelists reach back to slavery in an attempt to uncover truths and retrieve not just the abused black female body, but the black woman’s whole self. I don’t want to suggest that all neo-slave narratives are as successful as *Dessa Rose* and *Corregidora* at conveying collective traumatic memory through the figure of the abused black woman. Indeed, some neo-slave narratives fail at this project, as my next section, which compares Styron’s *Confessions* to *Dessa Rose*, will demonstrate.

#### *Dessa Rose* as Rewriting of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Sherley Anne Williams in her Author’s Note to *Dessa Rose* alludes to her rewriting of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* as a secondary goal of her novel stating, “I

admit to being outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner” (5). Most of the scholarship connecting *Dessa Rose* to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* focuses on the power relationship between the witness and the transcriber, in these cases the black slave accused of revolt and murder and the white male charged with documenting the incident. While Styron’s novel conflates the accused slave and the recorder’s tale and deals little with the inherent power dynamics consummate within the master-slave dialectic, Williams explicitly challenges the appropriation of the slave story and reveals how these privileged historical documents can always exist as nothing more than a reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating the ineptitude and carelessness with which these narratives were transcribed, Williams portrays Nehemiah, Dessa’s interviewer, as a dreamer who although, “he hadn’t caught every word” of Dessa’s speech, “often ... puzzled overlong at some unfamiliar idiom or phrase, now and then losing the tale in the welter of names the darky called” as he “reconstructed in journal” Dessa’s story, “as if he remembered it word for word” (18). Williams’s project is partly, as Mitchell suggests, “to connect these discursive betrayals by reclaiming African American history, agency, and subjectivity,” and Williams chooses the slave revolt plotline in part to highlight Styron’s failure to resist the dominant narrative’s discursive practices and the dominant culture’s controlling images of blacks.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> In doing this, Williams challenges the idea of history as fact implying that history is only recoverable through a reconstruction of existing texts—texts which are imperfect and flawed.

<sup>4</sup> The dominant narratives discursive practices, more specifically, refer to how white’s, defensive in their superiority, frame events to justify and protect this notion.

Ashraf Rushdy provides the most comprehensive study linking Styron and William's texts in his book, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, devoting a chapter to each work. Rushdy goes beyond simply identifying narrative appropriation as Williams's predominant critique of Styron's text, but acknowledges that *Dessa Rose*, "was not meant to be a thorough revision of Styron's text, nor did she attempt to establish a consistent formal intertextual relationship" (136). While I agree with this, I would still argue that there are other significant ways in which Williams addresses Styron's novel beyond the circumstances of Nat Turner's interview and the appropriation of his story. Williams's text comments on three other critical aspects of Styron's text which are each linked in some way to the black body and black sexuality: 1) by rewriting the rape scene of Nat's mother, 2) by contrasting Styron's imagining of the black male as rapist with alternative representations of black manhood, and 3) by writing into existence black women's efforts of resistance and acquisition of an autonomous black female voice.

Styron devotes only two paragraphs to describing Nat Turner's mother's rape. Perhaps because of this, many scholars neglect this scene. Rushdy is critical of such neglect, reading it as an act of "ignorance and omission...symptomatic of a more general social problem, in which public intellectuals and cultural commentators on American society discount the significance of violence done against African American women" (*Neo-slave Narratives* 70). Rushdy's disappointment stems not only from the scarce attention Styron gives to the rape but also from his problematic portrayal of it. She is accosted in the kitchen while tending to her daily duties by a white man who enters

saying, “There, God damn, ye’ll have a taste of my big greasy,” and attacks her (147). Nat, watching this from under the stairs, sees them wrestling and notes “the broken neck of this bottle glinting in a shaft of sunlight, clutched in McBride’s hand and flourished like a dagger at my mother’s neck” (147). From this we understand as Nat seems to that his mother is resisting this violation and attempting to fight back. It is a curious addition on Styron’s part, then, to transform Nat’s mother’s obvious resistance to her rape to pleasure as Nat witnesses “a kind of shudder passes through my mother’s body, and the moan is a different moan, tinged with urgency and I do not know whether the sound I hear now is the merest whisper of a giggle (“Uh-huh, aw-right,” she seems to murmur)” (147). Rushdy asks, “What precisely is Styron saying by showing us a slave woman who enjoys her rape to the extent of achieving orgasm and embracing her rapist?” (71). I think what Styron is saying is that he cannot understand the black woman as anything more than a body, an object to be manipulated and coerced by the wiles of white men. As Nat’s mother’s “brown long legs go up swiftly to embrace his waist, the two of them now joined and moving in the same strange and brutal rhythm” it seems clear that Styron does not acknowledge the white master’s use of the black female body as rape (a body that Styron sexualizes even in the midst of describing this scene of rape), but rather views white male penetration of the black female body as a mutually beneficial gift the slave master bestows upon the slave. The black woman is reduced to her body lacking that element of humanity that would allow her to be capable of rape, to feel the physical pain and soul-murder of rape.

Williams contests Styron's notion of the un-rapeable<sup>5</sup> black woman by writing into her narrative scenes of rape and by alluding to the thousands of other rapes evidenced in the plethora of mulatto slaves populating the novel, some nearly white. Dessa's remembering of the plantation is laden with references to sexuality, signaling the constant negotiation slaves faced as a part of their survival process. While male slaves faced the emasculation of studding, black women faced forced sex with both their slave brethren and with white masters. Dessa recognizes her privilege of having been chosen by her lover, Kaine, and the luxury of a mutual, shared love. Dessa's girlfriend, Martha, addresses the ever-present issue of slave rape by admitting that she would willingly sleep with her master arguing, "Why not? Least that'd be one man can't be sold way from you" (78). Martha, like Harriet Jacobs, recognizes that choosing to have sex with a white man can be an act of empowerment, an act of agency that claims possession of the body and prevents further suffering of the self. Ironically, it is Martha and not Dessa who is ultimately raped by a white man. Dessa remembers Martha's testimony, "'All he had to do was ask,' after Master's brother forced her in the fields one day" (176). Clearly, Williams asserts that it is choice that makes the difference between consensual sex and rape complicating even more Styron's simplistic representation by suggesting that even a slave woman who has considered the option of sleeping with a white man is rapeable and suffers from the violation.

The other scene of rape detailed in *Dessa Rose* is on the coffle. The rape, or more exactly this black woman's resistance to rape, is what incites the revolt. Linda, one of the

---

<sup>5</sup> I will discuss the concept of the un-rapeable black woman more in depth in the next chapter. By this I mean that the black woman-as-object's sexual violation is not understood as rape, therefore, she is unable to be raped in the sense that a woman-as-subject is.

slave women on the coffle, is repeatedly raped by the white male slave traders: “Every night since Montgomery, one of the white men had taken Linda into the bushes and they had been made wretched by her pleas and pitiful whimperings” (61). Williams’s description of Linda’s suffering distinctly differs from Nat Turner’s mother’s pleasurable moaning. Significantly, her pain is not private, but public in that although it is her body the white men defile, all the slaves experiences the de-humanization as they bear witness to her abuse and are impotent to stop it. In contrast to Nat’s mother’s seemingly willing participation, Linda, in this final instance of abuse, fights back and bludgeons her attacker with a rock. She emerges victorious from the woods, “the bloody rock still clutched in her manacled hands” (78). The rest of the coffle answers her call by killing as many white men as possible. Williams’s insertion of this rape scene responds to Styron’s by offering the possibility of an alternative. She secures ownership of the black female body within the black woman and insists that rape “is never a form of violence that can be mistaken for pleasure” (Rushdy 162). Instead, the pleasure resulting from this scene is the act of agency that destroys the usurper of the black female body and restores it to its proper owner.<sup>6</sup>

The black female body is not all that Williams recovers from Styron’s wayward pen; she must recover the black man as well. As mentioned, Styron covers the rape of Nat Turner’s mother in two paragraphs. He, however, dedicates much larger portions of his narrative to Nat’s lustful imaginings of raping white women. In these multiple

---

<sup>6</sup> Williams also makes explicit that sexual violation is the same for black women as it is for white women. Ruth, the white woman who Dessa meets after her last escape and who helps the runaway slaves gathered on her plantation to reach freedom, is sexually assaulted by a white man and, with Dessa’s help, is able to escape. This incident is what inspires the first real connection between the two women—their rape-ability becomes a place of solidarity.

instances Rushdy suggests, “Styron was superficially repeating all the clichés of an older, and still residual racial-sexual politics, evincing a hardly subtle fascination with the stereotype of the black rapist and its corollary, the black penis” (65). Styron goes so far with Nat’s daydreams of rape as to suggest that Nat’s desire to ravish white women is more of a motivation for his revolt than the litany of oppressions less conspicuously noted, these more noble justifications muted alongside Nat’s bestial intentions. Nat first recalls seeing Major Ridley’s fiancé enter town and is overcome by his own desire, “I conceived not of any pleasure I might cause her or myself, but only the swift and violent immediacy of a pain of which I was complete overseer, repaying her pity by crushing my teeth against her mouth until the blood ran down in rivulets upon her cheeks” (265). In another scene Nat fantasizes again, this time more brutally, about raping a white woman, “the rage I had at that moment to penetrate a woman’s flesh—a young white woman now, some slippery tongued brown-headed missy with a sugar-sweet incandescent belly who as I entered her cried out with pain and joy” (347). And yet another, even more violent scene, “I could throw her down and spread her young white legs and stick myself in her until belly met belly and shoot inside her in warm milky spurts of desecration” (367). In this scene, Styron shows no more deference to the white woman’s body than the black woman’s. She, too, is sexualized in the midst of her rape and manipulated to pleasure, ultimately succumbing to her violator’s desire. But in doing this, Styron reduces Nat to the object of the black phallus via his fixation, while ironically equating Nat’s desires to that of the white slave master who earlier violated Nat’s mother. Styron offers no alternative for black male sexual desire and ignores the fact that Nat Turner was married

to a black woman, a woman who sacrificed her body in an attempt to save him (Rushdy 60). The black man is left in Styron's narrative overpowered by violently aggressive sexual lust, a beast.

Williams responds to Styron's stereotyping of the black male as rapist in several ways, but I will focus on her suggestion of an alternative black male/white female sexual relationship.<sup>7</sup> Nathan, one of Dessa's fellow coffle revolvers who returns to rescue her, successfully seduces Ruth, the white woman providing refuge for the runaway slaves. Dessa walks in on Ruth and Nathan still naked after making love and reacts violently, responding personally to Nathan's decision to couple with a woman outside of his race, "White folks had taken everything in the world from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them. And to see him, who had helped me, had friended me through so much of it, laying up, willowing in what hurt me so" (172-173). Dessa's possessiveness of Nathan reflects less a desire to lie with him herself and more the pervasive insecurity black women (and even more so a black slave with disfigured genital parts) felt with regards to white women. On the level of the body, this incident causes Dessa to question her legitimacy as a woman. Dessa accuses Nathan of "just liking [Ruth] cause she white," recognizing the racial hierarchy that not only places higher value on the white female than the black within the dominant culture, but that pervades the psyche of black men as well (173). About black men Dessa asks, "Was this what

---

<sup>7</sup> Williams also responds to Styron's stereotype of the black male rapist specifically of white women by presenting black men as loving, caring partners and friends who freely choose black women to share themselves with. Styron fails to represent any type of black familial structure in his narrative accepting that black men and women internalized the controlling images of blackness to the point of their own dysfunction and detriment.

they thought of us? Mules” (183). In Dessa’s viewpoint Nathan’s choice to sleep with a white woman is a betrayal of her own humanity and ultimately her womanhood.

Conversely, Nathan understands his choice as empowering. Whereas Styron depicts Nat as a prisoner to his uncontrollable lust for white women, Williams shows a deeper interiority which reveals Nathan’s action as an act of resistance, a rejection of the master-slave dialectic. Nathan rationalizes his seduction of Ruth as a rebellion against white privilege, arguing, “If you mean that I’m getting something that the white man always kept for hisself, well yes, I likes that too” (173). For Nathan, the white woman exists as a metaphor for death, and to possess her and survive is equally as self-affirming as to escape a slave coffle and be free: “if climax, as some men said, was like death, then a nigger died a double death in a white woman’s arms. And [Nathan] had survived it” (158). Nathan assumes power by possessing the white woman’s body, a more useful power than Nat’s fantasies of instantaneous gratification allow. Notably, Dessa, in anger, wishes Nathan had in fact resorted to the violence of the white master and raped Ruth as a act of retribution, “Nathan should have raped her or at least knocked her around a little since this what he was going to be cused of anyway” (178). Dessa acknowledges the limitations of Nathan’s act of agency within the parameters of a racist slave system. Williams’s authorial choice, however, to write Nathan and Ruth’s sex as consensual and mutually satisfying rather than violent and destructive elevates Nathan above the violence of the slave master and the violent concoctions of Styron’s Nat Turner. In contrast to Nat’s forceful penetrations, Nathan “eased between her thighs, entering that nameless

deep, filling that lovely cavern” becoming one with Ruth’s whiteness, equal and free (155).

The last way in which Williams rewrites Styron’s narrative is perhaps the most obvious, and why it is so often left undiscussed. Whereas Styron’s narrative is centered in a masculinist discourse where women (black and white) exist solely as victims, Williams genders her telling of a slave revolt in a woman-centered approach that privileges the actions and the voice of the slave women. Linda resists her rape, murdering her attacker and incites a coffle revolt. Dessa, heavy with child, jumps on the back of a slave trader, “like a burr to a saddle, knocking him all upside the head with her bare hand,” fighting as if possessed, earning her the title “devil woman” (143). Dorcas, Miss Ruth’s mammy, manages the plantation far better than Ruth’s gambler husband and builds a workforce of runaway slave labor which turns the farm into a productive and profitable enterprise. And in the end, it is Dessa who is able to tell her story, “from her own lips,” free from the misreading proffered by the dominant discourse, yet still aware of her scars—“what it costs to own ourselves”—as she testifies to her children with the hope of protecting them from the same fate. Whereas Styron’s narrative disallows women’s voices of both races, Williams not only writes these voices into existence, but gives them power.

#### Reading Dessa’s Abused Body

Part of the project of black women’s writing from its inception is claiming the black women’s body from the clutches of a racist, sexist dominant narrative that doubly exploits and distorts the body of the black woman. Black women first attempted this

recovery by re-defining the black female body as pristine and worthy of the Victorian standards of womanhood applied to white women in the sentimental literature of the nineteenth century. Works like Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* accomplished this. Later, black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen sought to expose the exoticization and sexualization of the black female body, inevitably and sometimes ambiguously resorting to marriage as a space of safety. Beginning with the Black Arts Movement, a shift occurred as black women authors became engaged in "a project of re-imagining the black female body" from wanting to equate it to its white counterpart (this, an act, almost, of erasure), to deciphering the already written inscriptions on it (Griffin 521). The neo-slave narrative with its reaching back to slavery, unearthed the buried black female body and resurrected it in all its truth and horror. As Adeeko puts it, it was a "struggle to elevate her material body out of the tomb of social death" (168). So, this project of re-imagining the black female body must first confront the body's reality in all its splendor and awfulness before reconstruction can occur.

For this reason, Sherley Anne Williams exposes Dessa's scarred body throughout the text and describes in graphic detail Dessa's bodily suffering displayed in its gruesome deformities. Many scholars have pointed to the significance of "slavery's violent ritual of inscription" evidenced on Dessa's body (Adeeko 170). Mae Henderson's reading of Dessa's abused body in her essay, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Women's Literary Tradition," is the most thorough and oft quoted of these studies. Henderson submits that the violence Dessa's body suffers is dehumanizing: "Seeking to

inscribe black female subjectivity, the white male, in effect, relegates the black woman to the status of discursive object, or spoken subject...an attempt to inscribe the sign *slave* in an area that marks her as woman” (26). Similarly, Mitchell points to Dessa’s marking as retribution for envisioning herself outside of slavery, “literally, this ‘writing’ on her body alters Dessa as text since she is now marked with the consequences of her liberatory actions” (73). But, even more fundamentally, Williams’s graphic descriptions of Dessa’s abused body work in the same way as the slave master’s R branded into her inner thigh does, to burn the image of the abused black female body into the grand narrative of slavery.

We are first introduced to Dessa’s injury as an economical decision made by her master. Scarring her body in “private” areas, “places only the most careful buyer was likely to inspect,” allows for Dessa to be adequately punished while her slave-value is protected, a useful tactic for slave owners which Williams suggests “bespoke a history of misconduct” (21). The narrator asks the question, “How many others on Wilson’s ill-fated coffle had carried a similar history writ about their private parts?” (21). Williams makes this question rhetorical, never answering with an exact number, but what the text makes clear is that Dessa’s injury is not exceptional. Rather, Dessa’s horrific genital mutilation is representative of the always-linked physical and sexual violence suffered by slave women generally. Even with her corporeal disfigurement, Dessa “was spared much that others suffered” (176). Williams’s careful mentioning of this “history of misconduct” within the first twenty pages of the novel serves to universalize the abused

slave woman's body described in more detail later in the text even as Dessa is individually named as victim.

The full scope of Dessa's abused body is revealed gradually throughout the text and in a way that indicts the reader of the same de-sensitized dehumanizing voyeurism of Rufel and Nehemiah's desire to look under Dessa's skirt in an attempt to acquire evidence of her injury. Dessa's scars, in this way, define her; they are what mark her difference, as for example, the spots on a cow. Just as Rufel "had to see the goods before she would buy the story," the reader, too, must be shown Dessa's abused body for the reality of its existence to manifest (189). Significantly, while presenting both Rufel's and Nehemiah's desire to look under Dessa's clothes, Williams uses the rhetoric of the slave auction block. In both cases Dessa's body is referred to as "goods" to be protected for later sale. When trying to fend off Nehemiah's debased gaze, Dessa cautions the sheriff, "Ware of the goods!," signaling her status as possession and preventing anyone but her owner to touch her (222). The desire to look at and touch the naked slave body reverberates with sexual intonations. The sheriff calls Nehemiah's looking a "peep show" while Rufel blushes after "her hand reached to draw back the covers from the darky's body" in her effort to expose Dessa's body (222, 139). Nehemiah and Rufel's unwanted gazing upon Dessa's body is figured as a kind of attempted rape—an act of violence that ties together intimately the physical and sexual in its violation of the victim. Yet, even as Williams acknowledges the objectification and perverted sexualization that Dessa's bodily "inspection" incurs, she recognizes the disclosure of Dessa's body, in its complete nakedness and truth, as a necessary step in the process of recovery.

Williams, therefore, satisfies the reader's guilty curiosity and reveals Dessa's abused body in all its truth. First, Dessa's body is described generally as "the horror that scarred her inner thighs, snaking around her lower abdomen and hips in ropy keloids that gleamed with patent-leather smoothness" (58). Later, Nathan witnesses Dessa's abuse, telling Miss Ruth, "they lashed her about the hips and legs, branded her along the insides of her thighs," continuing in greater detail, "they'd just about whipped that dress off her and what hadn't been cut off her—dress, drawers, shift—was hanging round her in tatters or else stuck in them wounds" (134). Wanting to convince Ruth of Dessa's suffering, Nathan keeps going, "her face was swolled; she was bloody and dirty" (134). Ruth is able from Nathan's word pictures to imagine Dessa's violated body, and yet she still doubts, "To violate a body so. That's if it happened, she told herself" (135).<sup>8</sup> Perhaps answering the reader's own doubt of such a grotesque portrait of abuse, Ruth unintentionally catches a glimpse of Dessa's body while she changes clothes, "her bottom was so scarred that Rufel had thought she must be wearing some kind of garment...The wench's loins looked like a mutilated cat face. Scar tissue plowed through her pubic region so no hair would ever grow there again" (154). Compiled, these graphic descriptions paint a vivid picture of Dessa's physical abuse and also serve to highlight Dessa's body as captive.

Wanting to underscore the captivity of the slave often acknowledged but misread, Williams more explicitly uncovers Dessa's captivity by placing her in a box as part of her punishment. Kept in a sweatbox, "a closed box they put willful darkies in, built so you

---

<sup>8</sup> It is after Nathan's description of Dessa's abuse that Ruth attempts to look under Dessa's covers to see for herself. Nathan's words, in all their detail, are not enough proof—only Dessa's body can act as the evidence of her abuse.

can't lie down in it or sit or stand in it," Dessa describes how, "laying up there in [her] foulment made me know how low I was" (132, 191). By figuring Dessa as doubly enslaved, as at once slave and punished slave, Williams evokes the particular ramifications of captivity Hortense Spillers outlines in her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," a passage that deserves extended reference:

- 1). The captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality,
- 2). The captive body reduces to a thin, becoming being for captor, 3). In this absence from a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness," 4). As a category of otherness, the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness" resonating through various centers of human and social meaning. (457)

Spillers further connects the abused body and its captivity through the visual evidence left on the body, "the undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (458). Williams's exposing of Dessa's abused body, then, acts to decipher the hieroglyphics scarred into her flesh, pulling back the veil to make visible her existence, a visibility that is inherently empowering. Williams lets Dessa out of the box in an effort to restore subjectivity and re-consider the source of her powerlessness.

For this reason, Ruth's glimpse of Dessa's naked, mutilated body is necessary to Williams's larger project of recovery. Ruth's visual witnessing acts like the legitimizing documents prefacing slave narratives, to validate through whiteness the abuse of the

black female body that neither the black man nor the victim herself can successfully and/or believably articulate with just words. With Ruth's unintentional verification of Dessa's wounds, (a verification we, the reader, share), Williams moves to investigate Dessa's own interaction with her deformed body. Less descriptive in detail, Dessa's relationship with her abused body is emotional and psychological. She understands her body as evidence of her lack of humanity, "I was like an animal; whipped like one; in the dirt like one....And I had the marks of that on my privates" (191). Dessa feels "crippled as Dante" by the ever-present remnants of her abuse, a dead woman walking (191). By exploring the interiority of Dessa and her association with her body, Williams is able to begin the shift from understanding the abused black female body as object to understanding the abused black body as part to a greater whole. This merging of body into wholeness is part of the recovery and healing process Williams's text ultimately aspires to. But before I explore further Williams's reclamation of Dessa's abused black body, I first need to investigate briefly the role of the abuser and specifically, the white woman's role in Williams's text in the destruction of the black female body.

Although Williams indicts the white male as slave master, rapist, and brutalizer, perhaps the text's most interesting contribution to its exploration of the master-slave dialectic is its refusal to let white women off the hook and instead figure these women as accomplices, if not direct contributors, to the maiming of the black female body during slavery. Significantly, Williams's inspection of the relationship between white and black women during slavery reveals that the racial -and gender-induced insecurity black women feel with regards to their sexuality and womanhood by virtue of the powered

structure of the master-slave dialectic is, in fact, reversible. The black woman's sexual relationship with her master (whether willing or unwilling) exists as an act against white women, "an affront to white womanhood," and, so, actually (and ever-so slightly) empowers the female slave (Williams 42). In this sense, the black female body is read as a weapon to be used against the white female body. It is no coincidence, then, that not only does Nehemiah misread Dessa's abused body as a sign of her participation in a sexually-motivated tryst with her master, but both her mistress (her master's wife) and Ruth do the same. Dessa remembers her mistress's accusation of her, thinking Dessa is bearing her husband's child. She first slaps Dessa in the face, "it must be Terrell, that how she call Massa, Terrell, say it must be his'n" (41). Ruth, in searching for justification for Dessa's abuse, mirrors the mistress's thoughts, "I bet she was making up to the master; that's why the mistress was so cruel. I bet that's what it was" (136). Dessa's mistress misreads Dessa's body and, thus, decides to sell Dessa and her unborn child to a Southern slaveowner—an act meant to demonstrate the limitations of the black female body as weapon and defuse it, an act meant to exert power.

Dessa's bodily injury occurs at the point where she rejects this limitation imposed by the slave system and attempts to use her body as a physical weapon against Young Mistress. Dessa links this attack to her lover's murder as a kind of retaliation, but Mary Kemp Davis suggests the attack also connects to Dessa's earlier misreading by her mistress: "Dessa resents the mistress's impugning of her character. Dessa attacks her, and her mistress, in turn, has her brutally punished before she sells her to a slave trader" (552). Dessa recollects the attack, "the four red welts in the suddenly pallid face, the

white spot where her thumb had pressed at the base of the neck,” and enjoys a moment of ecstasy re-imagining her act of agency. Dessa’s attempt to claim ownership of her self is ultimately what incites her vicious penalty, but it is the white woman’s interpretation of her own powerlessness that inspires the genital mutilation recorded upon Dessa’s flesh. The mistress’s intention is to destroy Dessa’s sexuality, remove any sense of her womanhood in order to restore her own. That Dessa is innocent (like the nameless other victims of rape and other sexual violence) is inconsequential. Dessa’s humanity is never questioned because it is never established. Like Ruth, Dessa’s mistress understands Dessa as solely a “dark body” that threatens her power and control (Williams 154).

It is possible that Williams also uses the dynamic tension between white women and black women in the text as a metaphor for commenting on the increasingly estranged relationship between white and black feminists in the mid 1980s. By the time of the novel’s publication, black feminism had been defined as a distinct entity in part due to the failure of the predominantly white feminist movement to recognize the fight against racial oppression as a necessary counterpart to the fight against gender oppression. Williams, by revealing both the more extremist side of this argument as manifested in the slave mistress and the moderate side through Ruth, who ultimately seeks friendship from Dessa and shares her body with a black man, suggests that ignoring race and privileging gender unequally balances the power dynamics of the feminist movement, re-instituting a kind of master-slave dialectic. The more moderate stance, in contrast, leads to productive and profitable ends. In either case, Williams leaves the fate of the abused black female

body not in the hands of white women, but in the heart of black men and the voice of black women.

The project of exposing the abused black female body is a dangerous one that risks re-victimizing the black woman. Williams resists this revictimization by offering an alternative reading of the abused black female body. In Dessa's case, Harker, one of her rescuers and eventual lover and life partner, revises the meaning of Dessa's scarred body by reversing the dominant narrative, "It ain't impaired you at all...It only increase your value" (191). Farah Griffin argues that it is the "act of heterosexual intercourse [that] makes Dessa consider herself desirable and worthy," but I disagree (530). Beyond the physicality of sex, it is the love thoughts of Harker that validate Dessa as more than a body to be used for squelching sexual desire, but as a whole person of which the body is only a part. Griffin questions Williams's use of auction block rhetoric citing Harker's use of "value" as "an instance where the discourse of the novel collapses into the very discourse it seeks to counter" (531). I, however, argue that Williams does not fall into the dominant narrative, but rather manipulates it, revising and reshaping the text of the abused black body in the process. Harker appropriates the master's language and redefines the word "value," replacing its negative connotation with positive meaning. Instead of "value" determining Dessa's viability as a slave, it determines her humanity; instead of being self-erasing, her "value" becomes self-affirming. In this way, Williams recovers the abused black body from the clutches of the slave master and the dominant narrative and re-imagines it as a site of strength and power. Significantly, Harker's appropriation of the master's language mirrors Dessa's earlier appropriation of whiteness

when she claims as her mantra the white master mentality of “cause I can” to inspire her resistance.

### Dessa's Resistance

A close examination of *Dessa Rose* reveals a myriad of slave resistances large and small, ones heavily documented in the scholarship surrounding the novel. The slave revolt and the accompanying murder of white men stands as the most apparent example, but Williams interweaves practices of abortion and contraception along with the trading of mandated sexual partners as evidence that resistance existed as a daily and necessary part of slave life and survival. As scholars generally note, Dessa's acquisition of voice and her telling of her story, particularly in the final section of the novel, serves as the ultimate resistance. According to Melvin Dixon in his essay, “The Black Writer's Use of Memory,” “When Dessa is able to preserve her name and her memory from further violation in history, she becomes a metaphor for the way a black woman's story remains her own” (23). Dessa's verbal testimony, her passing on of her story in her own words, resists the racist, patriarchal dominant narrative and celebrates a self that is independent and free. Beyond what I have already mentioned, two factors are critical to Dessa's overcoming her slave status and emerging fulfilled in her subjecthood: 1) how she appropriates the slave master's “cause I can”-rules of governing, and 2) how her pregnant body serves as a site of resistance in the novel.

Nehemiah, in his interview of Dessa, asks her why she revolted on the coffle and killed white men to which she responds, “I kill white mens cause the same reason Masa kill Kaine. Cause I can” (20). Ironically, Dessa's relationship with Kaine not only

nurtures her self through Kaine's self-affirming love, but nurtures her understanding of the slave's powerlessness within the slave system. Dessa comprehends "the power of Master as absolute and evil" (57). The slave is totally without rights, lacking recourse—chattel, property, possession. Kaine, exhausted from his own failed resistances, makes clear to Dessa their plight and acknowledging both the futility of overt resistance and the need for simple joy in daily survival, rejects the birth of their unborn son and the plausibility of escaping north. In his words, "Nigga can't do shit. Masa can step on a nigga hand, nigga heart, nigga life, and what can a nigga do? Nigga can't do shit" (38). When Kaine does "do," his master breaks Kaine's banjo, his only link to his homeland, simply because he can. Kaine responds by fighting back, an act that costs him his life, and Dessa answers his call to action, continuing his assertion of self through her own.

Dessa understands Kaine's resistance as an act of writing himself into existence, "White men existed because they did; ... And a nigger could, too. This what Kaine's act said to her. He had done; he was" (58). Dessa reads Kaine's death not as a failure, but a success—a moment of freedom and agency that defines him beyond the chains of slavery. As Adeleke Adeeko makes clear, "for slaves to attack the person of the master 'cause [they] can," is to question the slave owner's fundamental right to exist as master" (163). Kaine's attempt to appropriate whiteness by enacting his will inspires Dessa's choice to do the same. Dessa's acknowledgement of self-worth through Kaine's display of will allows her to value freedom over life and risk death in order to exist in the world as whites do, as human subject capable of exerting and implementing individual choice. Significantly, Dessa's initial appropriation of the master's "Cause I can" ideology mirrors

the savagery and brutality of the master as well. In this sense, Williams seems to suggest that the master's tools of domination and objectification (namely captivity and violence) can in fact be used against him with positive results (namely freedom). Williams, however, also recognizes the acquisition of selfhood as a process of which gaining physical autonomy is only a part. Dessa, at the end of the novel and at the end of this process, tells her story to her children still working within the context of the "cause I can" mentality, but by this point her attitude is no longer tied to whiteness. As Harker re-defines our understanding of "value," Dessa re-defines the possibility of her own existence through her appropriated mantra. "Cause I can" ultimately transforms from a war cry to a call to life.

Even beyond Dessa's will to exist, there is one other factor in her survival that cannot be ignored—her pregnant body. Of the real-life woman on whom Dessa's character is based, Williams says, "she was sentenced to death; her hanging, however, was delayed until after the birth of her baby" (5). The judge's decision to spare this woman's life temporarily was inspired not by a sense of humanity, but by the desire not to lose two pieces of property simultaneously. The unborn child exists as chattel and ultimately replaces some of the capital lost in the hanging of his mother. Whereas in this case the black female body participates in literally reproducing slavery, Williams's rewriting offers the pregnant body as a site of resistance. Dessa's pregnant body buys her critical time which ultimately allows for her rescue. If Nehemiah represents the will of the Father, Dessa's pregnant body allows her to overcome his patriarchal control. Significantly, Williams's use of Dessa's pregnant body also works to challenge Kaine's

attempt to assert patriarchal control over Dessa's body, possibly the only time in the novel that Williams questions the black love relationship. Kaine explains to Dessa why he wants her to abort their child, rationalizing that their children are never really their own, "Dessa, where your brother, Jeeter, at now? ... He be gone, sold south somewhere; we never do know" (46). Dessa shares Kaine's fears but is unwilling to kill the baby, "This our baby, ours, us's. We make it. How can you say, kill it? It mine and it yours" (46). Kaine ultimately asserts his authority over Dessa wielding the final word, "You don't see Aunt Lefonia, I see her for you" (47). Dessa never does do as she is told. Her act of individual will (perhaps foreshadowing her later revolt) claims her body as her own, an initial step that ultimately leads to her freedom.

Ultimately, Williams's re-writing of the slave narrative concludes that the black female slave could in fact speak and exposes the varied manifestations of her voice. The abused black female body is encrypted with inscriptions testifying to the horror of slavery and the strength of the slave. The sorrow songs sung invite participation in resisting the domination and objectification of the slave system, an oral tradition that lives through Dessa's retelling of her story. Andree-Anne Kekeh asserts that "*Dessa Rose's* subversive power clearly derives from an oral tradition and a shared black cultural heritage," a truth that is shared by all black-authored neo-slave narratives (223). As I will show in the next section, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* also centers itself within the oral tradition of slave songs and testimonies in an effort to explore the collective trauma of slavery, the abused black female body's role in that trauma, and the possibility of expanding the healing power of the oral testimony demonstrated by Dessa to the lyrical soul power of the blues.

### The Role of Intergenerational Trauma in *Corregidora*

While Sherley Anne Williams situates her neo-slave narrative during slavery with the purpose of addressing the sociopolitical restraints impacting the black female body and her voice, Gayl Jones removes her protagonist, Ursa Corregidora, from the bonds of chattel slavery by nearly 100 years in order to explore the lingering trauma of slavery on the black woman's psyche. *Corregidora* begins in 1947 with the announcement of Ursa and Mutt's marriage. It is a marriage, we quickly learn, plagued by possessive control and physical violence mirroring Ursa's haunting memories of her maternal ancestors' slave experience as prostitutes for and concubines to the family patriarch, Old man Corregidora. Ursa's dilemma, then, is how to reconcile the intergenerational traumatic memory passed to her through her maternal ancestors, a collective memory that threatens to overwhelm her own personal narrative of trauma. Gayl Jones explains Ursa's conflict in an interview with Charles Rowell in 1982, "Ursa wants to make sense of that history in terms of her own life. She doesn't want to be 'bound' by that history, but she recognizes it as important; and she accepts it as an aspect of her own character, and present history...her story is connected to theirs but she also wants her own choices and acts of imagination and will" (15). Jones notes Ursa's desire for autonomy, but carefully resists making a final assertion of Ursa's success in this process of self-discovery. Part of Jones's ambiguity stems from a notion that is clearly presented in the novel—that transgenerational trauma and the passing on of collective memory are necessary evils that work at once as evidence of a forgotten past, but contradictorily present their own type of enslavement in the process.

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the connection between the neo-slave narrative genre and cultural trauma—how reading neo-slave narratives with a recognition of their palimpsestic structure is necessary to understanding these works as counter-narratives working toward liberating the truth of the African American experience from the annals of “official” history. *Corregidora* works within the tradition of the neo-slave narrative as a representation of cultural trauma by more specifically documenting the legacy of trauma passed through generations of African Americans via what Ryan Eyerman calls “generational trauma” (10). Intertwined with Eyerman’s notions of cultural and generational trauma is the concept of collective memory. Hershini Bhana Young imagines collective memory as “interventionist praxis in the public sphere, as a ‘thought picture’ that one bumps into, constituted and accessible due to particular historical forces and their constitution of our social bodies” (*Haunting Capital* 89). Both scholars connect generational trauma and collective memory directly to identity formation (or lack thereof). While Eyerman argues that “cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning,” Young understands collective memory’s ability to shape identity suggesting, “accessing collective memory not only helps ensure survival in the present, but enables a consolidation of identity that are always more expansive than biological determinism” (4, *Haunting Capital* 90). Notably, these scholars and other trauma experts discuss generational trauma and collective memory as already striving to be public discourses whereas the intergenerational trauma experienced by Ursa through the vehicle of collective memory exists predominantly in the private sphere of familial testimony.<sup>9</sup> It

---

<sup>9</sup> Cathy Caruth’s collection of trauma essays details the connection that trauma scholars make between traumatic testimony and recovery. Dori Laub suggests that “Repossessing one’s life story through giving

is, perhaps, for this reason that Jones seems to accept both Eyerman's and Young's assessment of the relationship between the passing on of a traumatic history and identity.

For Ursa, the collective memory of her mothers' past simultaneously extracts any sense of an individual self while inescapably determining who she is, a consequence suffered by Ursa's mother. Ursa explains, "It was as if she had more than learned it off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the *Corregidora* women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her private memory, or almost as strong" (129). Ursa is, in fact, surprised at the realization that her mother owns a private memory. This recognition comes for Ursa only after she has experienced her own personal abuse and feels compelled to add to the collective memory of her ancestors, but without knowing how to carve a space for her self within the strict repetition of their (and now her) narrative. Ursa details the process of building the collective memory, "My great-grandmama told my grandmamma the part she lived through that my grandmamma didn't live through and my grandmamma told my mama what they both lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (9). Ursa exists for the explicit purpose of serving as witness to her foremothers' trauma and, in doing so, risks foregoing a testimony of her own, "always their memories, but never [her] own" (100). *Corregidora*, while emphasizing the roles that cultural memory and testimony play as evidence of a forgotten history, also posits the question of

---

testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation," later offering that "once the link to the listener has been reestablished in his mind, once no longer alone and without witness, he is able to stop the death machine in his dream without having to wake up" (70, 73). I think Jones understands the importance of collective memory as testimony, but also questions the effectiveness of keeping this testimony closed within the walls of the private sphere. Slavery and all that comes with it, she seems to suggest, needs a larger audience of listeners to be effectively dealt with.

what happens if the progression from the private (familial) sphere to the public memory so necessary to healing and recovery never fully occurs? Eyerman hints at the difficulty of moving traumatic memory from a private to a public space acknowledging that “if a collective memory is rooted in a potentially traumatic event, which by definition is both painful and open to varying sorts of evaluation, it may take a generation to move from group memory to public memory” (15). Eyerman underestimates, however, the pathological control of such intergenerational sharing of collective traumatic memory and fails to consider the public space as a hostile one. What *Corregidora* asks is: Given that recovery from trauma requires witnessing, how do we recover from a cultural trauma that has been essentially erased from the public memory?

The private, familial space, then, is the only safe space for maintaining an archive of traumatic experience. This is why Ursa is willing to risk self erasure (like her mother before her); she understands the necessity of her collective memory standing as evidence. Ann Cvetkovich defines “trauma’s archive” as “personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals” (7). She, too, understands this process of documenting trauma as evidence-gathering, offering that “trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to have no records at all” (7). Tadpole, Ursa’s second husband, recognizes the social impotence a lack of records perpetuates, “they ain’t nothing you can do when they tear the pages out of the book and they ain’t no record of it” (78). The collective memory intergenerationally passed down, then, is the evidence, but also offers the victim of trauma a subversive power, an ownership of her own history.

Judith Herman, author of the seminal text *Trauma and Recovery*, relates the conflict inherent to the intergenerational passing down of collective memory, arguing, “the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting” (9). If the memory is not kept alive, then the forgetting begins, and this is what Ursa’s maternal ancestors most feared—to forget would be to nullify their trauma, their pain, and their resistance to their enslavement. Great Gram explains this to an incredulous Ursa when she is five years old: “Because they didn’t want to leave no evidence of what they done—so it couldn’t be held against them. And I’m leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up” (14). For Great Gram the day of reckoning awaits, and on this day the victimizers will go on trial and be held accountable, “And when the ground and the sky open up to ask them that question that’s going to be ask. They think it ain’t going to be ask, but it’s going to be ask. They have the evidence and give the verdict too. They think they hid everything. But they have the evidence and give the verdict too” (41). For Great Gram, the collective memory exists as the ultimate resistance. Judith Herman helps to explain the significance: “secrecy and silence are the perpetrators’ first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens” (*Trauma and Recovery* 8). Great Gram has found a way to circumvent the perpetrators panoptic control by ensuring the survival of her trauma through private testimony of her collective traumatic memory. Whereas the mutilated cat face on Dessa’s genitals serves as her testimony, Great Gram

understands the collective memory as the Corregidora women's inscription of abuse, "They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood" (72). In doing this, in keeping this otherwise forgotten history alive, Jones warns that there are inherent dangers and limitations that work as a double-edged sword whereby the possibility of an autonomous future might be eclipsed by the perpetuation of the violence experienced during slavery.

Part of what the Corregidora women fail to realize is that the transmission of their collective traumatic memory through generations is only part of the process of self recovery and that each new generation that bears witness to the trauma also suffers from that trauma and is, therefore, in need of healing and recovery. Herman identifies three stages in the process of recovery: 1) the establishment of safety, 2) remembrance and mourning, and 3) reconnection (*Trauma and Recovery* 155). As already discussed, enclosing the collective memory in the private space of family acts as a safe haven for both the victims and the evidence produced within the testimony. The second stage refers to the act of vocalizing the traumatic event. As Herman articulates, "the survivor tells the story of the trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life" (*Trauma and Recovery* 175). This step is where the Corregidora women become fixated and fail to progress. Too consumed with ensuring the story of the Corregidora women's collective trauma is told and remains as evidence, these women are

unable to move past the trauma to a point of healing and recovery. To the Corregidora women, to move past the trauma means to forget, and to forget means to erase the only remaining proof of their abuse.<sup>10</sup> In the third step and perhaps the most critical step, Herman maintains, “the survivor faces the task of creating a future. She mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self” (*Trauma and Recovery* 196). Here the Corregidora women fail as well, as evidenced by the strict repetition of the traumatic memory passed down through generations, their inability to live outside of the past, and the inevitable loss of self that plagues the later generations who experience the trauma only by way of reconstruction.

Ursa describes how Great Gram’s repetition of her traumatic experience through testimony transcends memory, becoming a re-living of the event, “as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory” (11). Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg attributes this neurotic repetition as expressive of a body not overcoming pain, but still in the midst of pain. She asserts that Great Gram’s repetitive narrative “indicates what I will call a *pained present*, symptomatic of the representation of a body still in pain rather than of a traumatized subject attempting to grasp a pain which sustains itself upon living memory” (447; author’s emphasis). This distinction is important and is clearly expressed through Great Gram’s physical distress, her sweaty palms clutching Ursa’s legs as she again testifies to her ongoing pain (11). What Goldberg’s reading suggests is that although Great Gram’s narrative effectively serves the purpose of constructing a traumatic archive, it does not

---

<sup>10</sup> And since this abuse is self-determining, progression also then means an erasure of self—to erase the existence of the Corregidora women all together.

work to recover Great Gram's self from the traumatic experience. Rather than actively remembering her past in order not to forget, Great Gram is participating in actively re-living her experience through the repetition of her traumatic memory. Great Gram's struggle is similar to what Ashraf Rushdy submits is Ursa's flaw, "Ursa does not act on the tale; she repeats it, and is thereby disabled from realizing the pragmatic benefits of narrating an oral-familial tale" (*Remembering Generations* 39). By not acting on the memory, or perhaps more accurately, by not reacting to the narrative, Ursa (like her great grandmother) remains trapped within the narrative, living enclosed in a traumatic past. Even Ursa's blues songs (discussed in further detail later in this chapter) exist as a re-telling of the traumatic past, as her way of maintaining the evidence of her ancestors' abuse.

Ursa, healing from her own physical trauma, reflects on how the collective memory of her foremothers enchains her to the past, "Stained with another's past as well as our own. Their past in my blood. I'm a blood" (45). Hershini Bhana Young cites this all-consuming connection to the past as a destructive force, arguing that "the novel is also a warning against collective memory with its continual reinscription of trauma" (*Haunting Capital* 93). Significantly, this reinscription of trauma is seemingly triggered by Ursa's own individual experience with trauma, an act of denial of her own private memory of trauma as she represses her own abuse with constant remembering of the already established and, thus, better known trauma of her maternal ancestors. Tadpole, bearing witness not to Ursa's collective memory, but to her physical distress while re-living the memory, pleads with her to let the past go, "Get their devils off your back. Not

yours, theirs” (61). Tadpole makes the distinction that Ursa later accepts between the collective memory of her family legacy of trauma and a personal, individual narrative of trauma. What Tadpole fails to recognize in his insistence that Ursa release herself from the past’s chains is the strength of the metal binding. What Ursa and the rest of the Corregidora women know is what Morrison’s Sethe<sup>11</sup> quickly figures out, that the project of beating back the past can work for only so long. Ursa’s friend Cat best articulates the futility of escaping the legacy of ancestry, “your roots are where you was born and you can’t pull them up, the only thing you can do is cut yourself away from them but they still be there” (73). As Jones’s commentary on Ursa suggests, Ursa desires a certain amount of severing from the shared memory of her ancestry, but I submit that Ursa is, in the end, too consumed by her collective past to create enough distance within which to construct a private memory of her self.

Collective memory can work to enslave witnesses of the trauma to the past, and Jones suggests the ultimate danger of this imprisonment is the loss of self that accompanies the burden of carrying the evidence of a forgotten past. Young offers that “their narratives show us what happens when collective memory becomes all too encompassing, when collective memory *consumes* instead of exists dialogically with individual memories” (*Haunting Capital* 118). Ursa is able to retrieve her mother’s private memory, but significantly resists sharing her own even as her mother acknowledges what she already knows exists, “I said nothing. She was telling me she knew about my own private memory” (122). Ursa’s act of self-silencing is what Stephanie Li warns is the destructiveness intrinsic to collective memory: “As language

---

<sup>11</sup> From Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

becomes emptied of meaning, Mama and Ursa are silenced by a narrative that is not their own. The younger Corregidora women experience a collapse of history such that their present reality appears as an overdetermination of their foremothers' memories" (134). Ursa is unable to answer Tadpole's question, "What do you want?," and even as she understands her mother's sharing of a personal traumatic memory as a victory, she questions her ability to do the same, "I was thinking, what had I done about my *own* life?" (22,132). Unable to or unwilling to fully acknowledge her own personal trauma, Ursa continues to be overwhelmed by the collective memory of her ancestor's enslavement, a memory equally enslaving. As Rushdy comments, "Mama's example reveals to Ursa the familial narratives of enslavement, when the oral-familial tales assume such prominence in the psychic life of the subject as to cause her to submerge her identity and lose her own to the dominant ancestral voice" (*Remembering Generations* 41). A critical consequence of Ursa's loss of self is her repression of her own physical trauma (a repression I would argue mirrors literary scholars' neglect of her abuse), and so, it is necessary to first recover and then examine Ursa's abused body in order to fully comprehend the connections Jones makes between the physical and sexual trauma Ursa's foremothers experience during slavery and the trauma Ursa herself suffers.

#### Ursa's Abused Body

The first page of *Corregidora* announces Mutt and Ursa's marriage in 1947, and by the second page the honeymoon is quickly curtailed as Ursa is figured as a victim of domestic violence. What we come to understand is that Ursa is thrown down a flight of stairs by a psychotically jealous and controlling Mutt Thomas, an event that causes her to

miscarry her unborn child and ultimately lose her womb altogether because of a necessary hysterectomy. By foregrounding Ursa's experience of abuse Jones privileges Ursa's trauma over that of her maternal ancestors even as Ursa and her foremothers do not.<sup>12</sup> As Gloria Wade-Gayles maintains, *Corregidora* exists as "a symbol of the evil that is peculiar to the reality of black women: they are bodies to be used and abused" (154). Significantly, most literary scholars of *Corregidora* fail to locate the significance of Ursa's abused body within the text. Even as these scholars discuss the ending of the novel, where Ursa reconnects with Mutt, her abuse at his hands is often dismissed if not ignored.

Hershini Bhana Young's essay, "Between a Push and a Fall: The Politics of Re-Memory in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," exists as the most thorough examination of the site of Ursa's abuse and the significance of Ursa's abused body. Young attempts to account for Ursa's "movement from 'fall' to 'push'" and questions how her transforming understanding of her own abuse "raises the debate that lies at the heart of the novel—how to remember the violence that is constitutive of black women's identity" (*Haunting Capital* 95). Young's assessment of Ursa's progression from self-blame to agency-seeking, recovering victim is, perhaps, too simplistic. Ursa's understanding of her own victimization does not follow a straight-lined progression along a continuum of healing, but rather seems to be more of a sine-wave as she attempts to process her feelings of guilt, anger, hate, and love. The first time Ursa mentions the scene of her trauma she

---

<sup>12</sup> In saying this, I do not intend to dismiss the link Jones makes between Ursa's contemporary abuse and her maternal ancestors' abuse. I do submit, however, that Jones's foregrounding of Ursa's trauma highlights the contemporary abused black female body—a strategy she uses to speak to her contemporary black female readership while exposing the parallels between the past's abuses and the present.

accepts the blame, “that was when I fell” (4). Notably, this statement is part of the larger narration of her story which is significantly temporally removed from the event. One could argue that Ursa’s narration occurs more than twenty years after this act of violence, after her reconciliation with Mutt, a re-unification that perhaps signals a regressive sense of her own victimization rather than a progressive movement toward self-actualization. The next time Ursa mentions the circumstance of her bodily injury she is in the midst of a conversation with Cat just weeks after the abuse occurred and at this time she blames Mutt, “From the day he throwed me down the stairs we not together, and we not coming back together” (25). Significantly, Cat defends Mutt and writes Ursa’s abuse off as an “accident,” but Ursa adamantly rejects Cat’s dismissal of Mutt’s behavior while identifying Mutt’s sense of denial, “You sound like if he was sitting here what he be saying. ‘Aw, honey, I was drunk. Aw, honey, it was an accident. I didn’t mean to do it. You know I wouldn’t’ve done it. You know I’m sorry’” (25). Ursa refuses to accept Cat’s coy reading of Mutt’s abuse just as she refuses Mutt’s excuses. At this point Ursa seems determined to survive her violation and escape the cycle of abuse.

Ursa continues in conversation with Cat to come to terms with her abuse. At the end of another argument where Cat seems to want to take Mutt’s side, Ursa screams, “If that nigger love me he wouldn’t’ve throwed me down the steps” (36). But Jones suggests what Farah Jasmine Griffin articulates beautifully, “the healing is never permanent: it requires constant attention and effort...of course, the body never can return to a pre-scarred state” (524). Still in the process of physical recovery, Ursa, in what is a mix of narration and re-memory, continues to question the details of her abuse. She details her

internal battle with herself, “Is it more his fault than mine? Naw, when you start thinking that way. Naw, that nigger’s to blame” (41). And yet the internal fight continues. Having already asserted that Mutt does not love her as evidenced by his act of violence, she asks, “Is that the way you treat someone you love?” (46). She then proceeds to remember how her “clenched fists couldn’t stop the fall,” simultaneously accepting part of the blame for her injuries while linking Mutt to Old man Corregidora as the originator of the Corregidora women’s trauma, recognizing “it wasn’t him. No, not Corregidora” who pushed her down the stairs (46). Within this jumbled melting of narrative and memory, Ursa’s identification of Mutt as a type of Old man Corregidora seems to be enough to regain her initial strength to resist re-victimizing herself through self-blame. She again rejects the cycle of abuse telling an imagined Mutt, “You can’t kiss where you scratched anymore,” invalidating the once seductive mixture of pleasure and pain shared between the two by concluding, “you don’t treat love that way” (46).

Reading Ursa’s understanding of her victimization as more complex than a strict progression toward self-agency enables us to see what Jones is ultimately revealing about Ursa’s testimony. Young argues that Ursa “is left without words, an abject body whose self-articulation is comprised by the penetrator of violence speaking through her injury” (*Haunting Capital* 95-96). I disagree. Ursa’s words are her narration of her abuse combined with her re-telling of her ancestors’ traumatic memory. And where we see Ursa’s successful acquisition of self is not within the parameters of the story told, but in the telling itself. As mentioned, Ursa’s first narration of her physical abuse (a telling removed from the event by decades) attributes the blame to herself, “that was when I fell”

(4). Her last narration, however, is much different. Near the end of the novel Ursa again returns to the site of her abuse and this time her description identifies her abuser, “I finished out the show. Mutt kept peeking in, the mean and hateful look on his face, his collar pulled up. And then it was when I was on my way home, he knocked his piece of shit down the stairs” (167). Significantly, Ursa’s narration recalls her initial verbal expression of her abuse articulated in screams and curses while in the hospital, “You got your piece of shit now, ain’t you? You got your piece of shit now” (167). Ursa seems, through the course of giving her testimony, of narrating her story, to have regained a sense of self that first showed itself at the time of her abuse. She is able to distinguish between Mutt’s defining of her as a “piece of shit” and her own anger at being reduced to waste. This reading obviously impacts how the ending and Ursa’s reunion with Mutt is interpreted. The question that must be posited is, “Does Mutt ever recognize Ursa as anything more than a disposable object?” I will consider this question along with the fluidity of Ursa’s self-recognition when I address the ending later in this chapter, but in order to understand fully the complexity of the ending we must first examine Ursa’s bodily injury as its own kind of testimony.

The abused black female body is a central image in the text. Not only are the Corregidora women sexually abused through rape and forced prostitution, but the black woman’s genitalia are exposed as a site of particularly violent bodily harm. Part of the larger testimony of Ursa’s maternal ancestors is the abuse all black women’s bodies suffered at the hands of their slave masters, “the Portuguese who fingered your genitals. His pussy. ‘The Portuguese who brought slaves paid attention only to the genitals.’

Slapped you across the cunt till it was bluer than black” (54). Great Gram describes how Old man Corregidora punished her by torturing her vagina, “and then he was squeezing me all up in my pussy and then digging his hands up in there” (125). By centering Ursa’s physical injury also within her genitals, Jones makes clear the connection between Ursa’s ancestors’ abused bodies and her own—Mutt’s digging into Ursa’s vagina occurs as a result of his violent act and the ensuing removal of her uterus. Each abused body exists as its own text, as Young explains, “the black body thus not only enables one to bear witness but also is a living breathing text that testifies, in and of itself, to the injury of blackness” (*Haunting Capital* 110). Yet even as these bodies have inscribed on them the evidence of their abuse, the bruises and scars, the text is hidden. Like Dessa’s lashing of her inner thighs is meant to protect her slave-value, the abused black female genitalia are hidden from view making the oral testimony of the collective memory even more necessary. Significantly, the ability to transmit the collective memory is produced at the site of abuse through the making of generations. Great Gram’s assignment to Ursa, then, can be read as a reclamation of the possessed and abused black female body for subversive means. Great Gram urges Ursa, “the important thing is making generations. They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious, Ursa” (22). As Stephanie Li suggests, “by instructing Ursa to make generations to preserve the memory of their sexual abuse, Great Gram and Gram convert the female body to a form of documentation” (132). Using the abused body to produce new witnesses to the collective trauma counters the silencing intended by the mutilation of a covered genital area.

The resulting consequence of Ursa's abuse, the loss of her ability to make generations, complicates Great Gram's notion of how the abused body can be used subversively to produce evidence of a forgotten history of violence<sup>13</sup>. Keith Mitchell comments that "Jones is very careful in paralleling contemporary forms of black women's oppression with similar historical moments...[and] makes clear that there is not much difference between oppression of contemporary black women and their historical counterparts" (166). Arguably, Jones presents the possibility that the black male patriarch is a more destructive and harder to resist enslaver than the white masters of slavery itself, that the modern-day violence of the black man against the black woman is a more insidious violence than that enacted during slavery. Whereas Great Gram and Gram are used as holes, that is, as vessels for white man's power and desire, Ursa is, in fact, reduced to a hole, emptied of the power her ancestors employed to resist. Ursa experiences her hysterectomy as a loss of self, a removal of what she has come to know as the source of her womanhood, "feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out" (6). Ursa's loss is greater than that of her ancestors and yet somehow more excusable, in part due to Ursa's literal freedom and choice of Mutt, her black male partner turned abuser. Part of Jones's project, I would thus argue, is to expose Ursa's abused body as symptomatic of the destructive potential of a contemporary, more dangerously subtle possession of the black female body occurring in the silent texts of black women's lives. What Jones explicitly makes clear is that Ursa's reduction to a

---

<sup>13</sup> Ursa's loss of her ability to make generations, then, becomes the catalyst for her telling of her "I"-story, her first-person narrative that we as readers receive as the novel. The novel, rather than the blues serves as her public testimony, a testimony that allows for the survival of Ursa's ancestral testimony to survive and her own testimony to emerge as a part of a larger legacy.

hole, to an empty space, happens well before she is ever pushed down the stairs and continues well after.

Ursa, remembering parts of her early relationship with Mutt long before the push recalls, “I sang to you out of my whole body” (46). At this moment, Ursa is a whole self and chooses to sing to Mutt as an expression of desire. But Ursa’s desire is quickly perverted by Mutt and later by Tadpole as “both reduce women’s entire being to their genitalia. Sexual dominance is the focal point of everything that matters to them” (Mitchell 164). Ursa’s whole self is reduced to a hole as both Mutt and Tadpole understand her existence as woman as equivalent to sexual object. Ursa recognizes with frustration the inherent subordinate position of the female body, “A man says I want to fuck, a woman always has to say I want to get fucked” (89). Mutt and Tadpole view their penetration of Ursa’s body as not only self-defining, but critical to Ursa’s ability to define herself as woman. The role of man and woman, in their consciousness, remains archaically simplistic: I am man because I can penetrate holes and you are woman because you are a hole I fit into. Mutt and Tadpole echo each others’ articulation of this to Ursa at separate times saying, “I want to help you, Ursa. I want to help you as much as I can...Let me get up in your pussy...Let me get up in your pussy baby...Damn, you still got a hole ain’t you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck” (82). This scene is repeated later as Ursa conflates what Mutt’s and Tadpole’s abusive use of her body, “Let me get up in your hole, I said. I want to get up in your goddamn hole” (100). Both men think that using her hole will in some way restore a whole Ursa, unaware of their destructive reductionist vision of the black female body. Goldberg offers that, “the

construction of Ursa's sex as a 'hole' by both Mutt and Tadpole is metonym for the overarching violence done to Ursa's 'soul and spirit'... [and] circles back to the rape of Ursa's ancestral mothers, whose genitalia were similarly figured as empty vessels to be filled by men for profit and/or pleasure" (452). Instead of Mutt's and Tadpole's use of the female body's 'hole' being restorative, their failure to understand the hole as part to a larger whole victimizes Ursa through episodes of brutal sex that reenact the raping of her maternal ancestors.

Ursa describes one particular sexual experience with Mutt that is reminiscent of rape, "Whenever he wanted it and I didn't, he'd take me, because he knew that I wouldn't say, No, Mutt, or even if I had, sometimes I wonder about whether he would have taken me anyway" (156). Another episode, what should have been an innocent slow dance, is instead depicted as an attempted rape:

I didn't like what he was doing now. He was getting up really close to me, more like you see people doing in back alleys than on the dance floor, even though there were other people dancing pretty close. But what he was going made me think of what people did in the bedroom. He kept making me feel him hard against me, and trying to fit himself in my crotch, and I kept moving to the side.

"Be still woman."

"Mutt, please."

He was holding my shoulders tight, so that even if I hadn't been too embarrassed To move away from him, I couldn't have. Each time he would try to fit himself between my legs, I would move to the side. (162)

Mutt's objectification of Ursa enables him to act toward Ursa the way Old man Corregidora acted toward Ursa's ancestors, behavior that indicates their desire for power and control more than their lust for the female body. Mutt and Ursa's sexual intimacy reflects the master-slave dialectic, "while it is *consensual*, it also resembles the kind of sexual encounter under slavery, the very essence of which depended upon a *lack of bodily consent* doubled by the woman's status as slave" (Goldberg 453, author's emphasis). This need for control of the female body, Li submits, "re-inscribes hierarchies of power" (141). In this way, "Mutt threatens to assume the role of slave master and thereby enters the destructive narrative that has already wreaked havoc upon Ursa's sense of self" (Li 141). Mutt's manipulation and controlling attacks on Ursa's body works to silence her desire, demanding that she, instead, echo his, "What am I doing to you, Ursa...I'm fucking you, ain't I? What's wrong? Say it, Urs...I'm fucking you, ain't I? Say it?" (153). Goldberg describes the relationship between Mutt's articulation of his desire and Ursa's forced denial of her own as a kind of interrogation, explaining, "it would seem that male pleasure depends upon that quite specific female articulation of what is being done to her" (455). Ursa's subordination as "always getting fucked" and then having to verbally confirm this fact is indicative of her status as possessed. Mutt seeks to transform Ursa from whole self to slave, and when she resists, he pushes her down some stairs to fully claim his power over her.

Most scholars agree that Ursa's career as a blues singer allows her a certain amount of economic freedom and subjectivity that initially positions Ursa as a feminist representation of black womanhood. Jones privileges Ursa's autonomy, yet in the same

way Ursa is pushed down stairs, she is pushed from this self-directed lifestyle by a controlling and power-wielding masculinist presence. Rushdy documents the inherent complexity involved with Ursa's profession as a blues singer, a performance-oriented occupation that in offering economic and even sexual liberation also works to exploit and commodify black women's labor capacity, and I would argue further, the black female body (*Remembering Generations* 63). Mutt, resistant to both his wife's economic independence and the underlying sexual expressiveness of her work wants her to stop. Ursa's autonomy is challenged within the first lines of the novel. She details Mutt's emerging patriarchal control explaining, "He didn't like for me to sing after we were married because he said that's why he married me so he could support me" (3). Ursa resists Mutt's control even as he declines into an obsessive possessiveness, lingering at her shows dressed as a cartoonish private investigator, a protective stance meant to ensure the safety of his goods.

What must be made clear is that Mutt's relationship to Ursa's labor and free-will derives from his objectification of Ursa as body, a body that for him (and for Old man Corregidora) is not only meant for personal pleasure, but also holds an economic value. Both Mutt and Old man Corregidora refer to the black female vagina as a "gold piece," a description preceded by the possessive "my" (10, 60, 124). As representations of patriarchal oppression, these men dictate ownership and place value judgments on the black female body. As Amy Gottfried concludes, "a woman's vagina equals her economic value and that economic value equals her essence...the text reinforces her identity as an abused 'piece' of goods" (560). Perhaps the best indication of this abuse

beyond the rape and attempted rape of the black female body is when Mutt threatens to sell Ursa in a scene reminiscent of the slave auction block. Significantly, Mutt's intention is to sell not Ursa as a whole being, but rather Ursa's hole, "One a y'all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale. That's why y'all wont, ain't it? Piece of ass. I said I got a piece a ass for sale, anybody wont to bid on it" (159). Mutt's threat re-enacts the scene that Great Gram describes when the Portuguese slave holders fingered the genitals of prospective sex slaves. Mutt's play-auctioning of Ursa's body positions her at once as his property and his concubine. Ursa's mother is also made a whore by her ex-husband, Martin, whose anger is in response to his inability to sexually control his wife, "Go on down the street, lookin like a whore. I wont you to go on down the street, lookin like a whore" (121). Ursa's and her mother's (the two women not directly abused by Old man Corregidora) forced transformations from woman to whore fulfills the collective memory of their foremothers' trauma while engaging in a perpetuation of the cycle of abuse that these black women seem to be trapped within. Rushdy reads these men's action as part of a larger conversation Jones foregrounds through the novel, "Black community discourses, relations between black women and men, and among black women alone, have bought into the racial schemas formed on the plantation and re-enacted in contemporary state apparatus" (*Remembering Generations* 291). What Jones suggests is that part of Ursa's (and her mother's) modern traumatic experience is her inability to escape her own objectification and the objectification of her maternal ancestors experienced during slavery. Ursa walks away from Mutt and his threat to auction off her body to the highest bidder, but for this act of defiance and

resistance she is punished by Mutt throwing her down the stairs. Jones suggests that what, in part, determines Ursa's value as a "gold piece" is her acquiescence; otherwise she is just a "piece of shit" to be discarded.

Jones infers that what further validates the patriarchal objectification of the black female body is the lack of consequences faced by the perpetrators of violence against black women. Ursa considers how Mutt is able to walk away from her violation with impunity, "He can go out and give other women babies. What kind of consequences he got?" (35). Mutt, although named as Ursa's abuser in an act that could be described as attempted murder, is never charged by the legal system meant to serve and protect its citizens. In this way, Jones figures Ursa as a non-citizen, her black female body as not constitutive or deserving of that level of humanity which allows citizenship. Mirroring the legalized enslavement and sexual exploitation of the black female body that enables the abuse of her maternal ancestors, Ursa's violent subjugation is condoned and authorized by the overarching societal silence which accompanies the absence of consequences her violation incurs. This lack of consequence is, of course, reserved for the dispenser of patriarchal power as Ursa's consequences for her liberatory actions are well documented in her personal trauma archive.

Too often, Ursa's abused body, the proof of her attempt to assert agency over her self, is read as symbolic of a lack of desire. Ursa's seeming reluctance to engage in sexual activity along with her mother's unwillingness to disrespect the collective memory of sexual abuse haunting her home by sleeping with her husband seem to validate this claim. As Young articulates it, "the idea of consent or desire to have sex is thus

enmeshed in complex systems of punishment, coercion, and humiliation. The very possibility of black female desire becomes almost unthinkable, foreclosed by the weight of collective memory” (*Haunting Capital* 120). What Young and other scholars hint at, but do not explicitly say, is that the abused black female body is never hers; it is always someone else’s possession until reclaimed in a process of self-actualization. And to an extent, I agree that the black women’s body is never hers unless fought for through resistance efforts. Exhibiting sexual desire can be a part of this resistance, a significant step in the process of becoming one’s own. Acknowledging this we must concede that there are moments when Ursa does express sexual desire, but her desire is perverted by Mutt’s appropriation of it to aid his need to control. On at least two occasions Ursa verbalizes her desire, “I wanted him again,” and “I did want it,” and both times her desire is left unfulfilled, an agent of torture rather than pleasure. Indeed, the collective memory of her maternal ancestors’ sexual trauma impacts Ursa’s relationship to sexual intimacy, but I argue that it is not the shared memory of trauma that rids Ursa of her sexual desire, but rather the lack of possession (read control) over her desire that recalls her ancestors’ trauma and defuses her want. The difference, then, is that Mutt stands as the primary cause of Ursa’s sexual inhibitedness not Ursa herself, and this distinction is an important one. Without understanding the role that Mutt’s (and Old man Corregidora’s and Tadpole’s) patriarchal control over the black female body plays in the transmission of black female desire, the possibility is left for, as Gottfried does, blaming the victim. She argues, “the Corregidoras’ agenda severely limits their sexual identities, a limitation which in turn provokes domestic violence,” and later adds, “their [sexual] frustration

leads to domestic violence against their wives” (559, 564). The point I want to make clear is that neither Ursa’s abuse nor her lack of desire is her fault. She is a victim on several levels to the patriarchal misuse of power, a subjugation Jones ultimately suggests is not easily overcome.

### Ursa’s Failed Resistance

Most scholars locate the blues as the primary site of resistance in the novel, offering Ursa’s singing of the blues as liberatory testimony, an expression of pain and a vocalization of trauma that is ultimately healing in its nature. Ryan Eyerman recognizes the blues as agency-producing, a testament to the progress of the black collective post-slavery: “it is the memory of slavery, the state of unfreedom with regard to labor and love, which allows the emotional expression of liberation seep through in the raw tones and words of the blues...the blues also gave expression to black subjectivity” (119). Rushdy submits that Ursa resists her objectification by finding a voice, “by singing the blues, and her singing the blues is likewise a sign that she has learned to overcome the horror of being bound to the past or, better, that she has found a way to translate into a cultural artifact the oppressive history of the Corregidora women, to create from her ancestors’ and her experiences a ‘song branded with the new world’” (*Remembering Generations* 42). Stephanie Li understand Ursa’s blues singing as a movement from passivity into action, “from passive recipient to active storyteller, “ a move which allows Ursa to resist the destruction of self caused by trauma warrants by developing “a unified self through the articulation of trauma and the struggle for agency” (138). Although I understand the desire to place Ursa’s blues singing within the legacy of early black

feminist lyricists like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, who first expressed a new conception of black womanhood and in doing so performed a freedom from racial and gender oppression, Ursa's blues fall short of existing as a resistance narrative to her own personal traumatic memory. Instead, her songs exist as a re-articulation of the Corregidora women's collective memory, as a means of self-protection.

Ursa fundamentally understands her singing of the blues as her expression of the collective memory of trauma the Corregidora women share. She says to her mother, "I'll sing it as you talked it...let me give witness the only way I can" (54). Ursa's project of "explain[ing] it, in blues" is demonstrated in the partial lyrics of two songs she offers as evidence of her testimony to the collective memory, lyrics that document the sexual abuse of her maternal ancestors, "You do not come to visit You do not come to see me to visit You come to hear me sing with my thighs," while suggesting resistance, "Fore you get this booty you gon have to lay down dead" (67).<sup>14</sup> For Ursa, her songs are not a choice, but are mandated by her responsibility to preserve the collective memory of the Corregidora women as evidence. She explains to Mutt, "they squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return" (103). Ursa's blues songs allow her to purge temporarily the burden of her history while simultaneously re-experiencing it, a vicious cycle of victimization that leaves little room for the creation of a personal trauma narrative.

Ursa's blues songs are used to substitute for memory just as Great Gram's words are (11). Ursa critiques her mother's hiding behind the collective memory in this way by

---

<sup>14</sup> Notably Ursa's suggestion of resistance here is immediately followed by a critical passage in the novel defining the two alternatives for enslaved women: to acquiesce or to die. The woman who resists as the song suggests, is hung with her husband's penis stuffed in her mouth and this resistance is ultimately determined to be futile.

identifying that “she’d speak only their life,” and yet she acknowledges her failure to step beyond the chains of the collective memory asking herself, “What about my own? Don’t ask me that now” (103). As Keith Mitchell suggests, “her performances also act as a screen, for, while the blues help to tell her story, they also conceal the deeper horrors of her matrilineal burden” (159). I would suggest that even more than that, Ursa’s inability to escape the memory of her ancestors’ collective trauma works to conceal her personal trauma, and so her songs exist both as expressions of traumatic experience and denial of it. For this reason, Madhu Dubey resists simplistic notions of how the blues work in this text arguing that a central feature of the blues is its “‘model of disequilibrium,’ the blues presents ‘conflict as norm,’ as an ongoing process rather than a problem to be resolved” (81). Significantly, Ursa details this conflict and vocalizes a desire to progress further in the process of her own self-actualization, understanding her need to testify to her own personal trauma as a critical step in the process. She declares how she “wanted them to see what he’d done, hear it. All these blues feelings,” and recognizes the need for a new song to express her abuse, “I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world” (50, 59). Ursa desires a braiding of her collective history and individual past in songs that reflect a self not solely determined by an ancestral legacy of violence, but also influenced by her own experience. Ursa’s success in attaining this melding of narratives, and, hence, self is left uncertain. No lyrics are offered as evidence that Ursa makes this shift, and Ursa’s desire seems, once again, unfulfilled. I offer that Ursa’s singing of the blues is not her victory and that the true site

of her resistance is the written narrative we, the reader experience as the novel. The problem with this reading is that so much is left unexplained by the text and instead we must infer that a process of self-recovery happened between her reunion with Mutt and her telling of her story. Perhaps, the process of writing her narrative is where she succeeds in finding her self. Perhaps, it is through her written articulation of her own trauma that she recognizes her trauma as worthy of its own song.

Where she does not succeed is in her reunion with Mutt Thomas. Scholars are generally split on how to read the ending of *Corregidora*. In the last four pages of the novel, Ursa and Mutt reunite, a reunion that is consummated by Ursa pleasuring Mutt orally for the first time. Ursa's act of fellatio mirrors what she comes to know as Great Gram's moment of resistance enacted while giving Old man Corregidora oral sex: "in a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was, and I think he might have known too. A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin" (184). Great Gram bites Corregidora's penis without biting it off. Ursa does not bite, but rather swallows Mutt's semen having brought him to orgasm.

Critics who read the ending favorably view Ursa's act of fellatio as an act of agency, a choice to "exercise a feminine power outside the reproductive system" (Dubey 80). Her reunion with Mutt is interpreted as symbolic of healing: "Ursa's final act toward Mutt suggests that she has come to terms with certain aspects of her traumatic past; she both communicates the ambiguity of her desire to Mutt and claims a subject

position fraught with issues of power and bondage” (Li 147). Rushdy reads the final scene as a “blues duet” in which, “they together work at defining the relationship between the past and the present as it affects their relationship” (55). Significantly, each of these scholars neglects critical aspects of the text that, when considered, tend toward a much less generous understanding of the ending. Their need for the text to be restorative also works contradictorily to expose a subconscious desire to excuse or at least justify the black male’s abusive behavior, which, in turn, removes agency from the black woman.<sup>15</sup> We are not able to imagine an alternative possibility where Ursa is strong enough to define herself outside of this man and his abuse of her.

Ursa, in the process of healing from her bodily injury at the hands of Mutt asserts, “Mutt doesn’t change,” and no evidence is provided that he does (89). In fact, the last lines of the novel detail a reinscription of the cycle of abuse narrated by Ursa throughout the novel. Mutt shakes Ursa “till [she] fell against him crying,” and then “held [her] tight” (185). Nothing has changed. Ursa and Mutt’s intimacy is still plagued with the perverted dichotomy of pleasure and pain of which Ursa is the recipient of the pain and Mutt the pleasure. Even the act of fellatio itself is an act of subordination and self-silencing. Whereas Great Gram attempts to mediate the two alternatives offered earlier in the text (to acquiesce or die) by resisting incompletely, Ursa fails to resist at all (67). Rushdy maintains, “it is important to note that Ursa casts this epiphany into a gradation...describing various options from emasculation to harmless nibbling, because it alerts us to the fact that Ursa is choosing among possibilities” (*Remembering Generations* 53). If we follow Rushdy’s analysis further and play within the spectrum of resistance

---

<sup>15</sup> Consider whether we would be so eager to excuse Corregidora for his abuse.

that Ursa's narrative creates, the woman on the plantation who cuts her master's "thing" off with a razor exists as the extreme example of resistance and Ursa's sucking as passive with Great Gram's biting down falling in between. Notably, the woman on the plantation dies, hanged with her husband's penis stuck in her mouth while her Great Grandmother is forced to run for her life. So, for Ursa it is a decision between life and death, and she chooses life and its abuses over death and its finality. Still living in the "pained present," Ursa prostrates herself, falling to her knees at Mutt's feet, and accepts the demands she knows still apply, "He'd demand different kinds of things. But there'd still be demands" (183). Ursa is literally unable to speak, unable to share in any blues duet with Mutt as his penis inserted into her mouth prevents her from vocalizing any expression of desire of her own. Dubey insightfully offers that, "even at the very end, Ursa can only say what she does not want in a heterosexual relationship" (81). Ursa's reunion and rekindled sexual intimacy with Mutt is for her a regression, a relapse into the cycle of violence that is seemingly only overcome in the process of her testimonial, the narration of her personal trauma.

In both novels, *Corregidora* and *Dessa Rose*, slavery works as a "site of memory" and the genre of the neo-slave narrative allows each author the opportunity to revisit this site as an integral force in shaping not only the modern black community, but contemporary black womanhood. As bridges between the past and the present, these novels work to recover the unspeakable violence of slavery, centering the abused black female body as the Ur-representation of that violence. By reading and translating the brutal inscriptions written on the abused black female body, these texts seek to reveal

deeper truths regarding the brutality of slavery and the continuation of violence demonstrated by the patriarchal reinscriptions of power and control. Ultimately, both Williams and Jones recover the abused black female body from its destructive objectification and suggest methods of resisting oppression while simultaneously acknowledging the complexity and difficulty in emerging beyond an objectified body into a whole self. However difficult, these authors propose that central to the process of self-actualization is the exchanging of the trauma narrative, the process of finding a voice and giving a testimony, the passing on of both the historical collective memory of trauma and the individual personal experience of abuse as evidence that the black female body has been so used and as a call to resist further violation.

Ultimately, these texts beg the question, “On how many fronts does the black woman fight?” They show us that from the beginning she fought for her personhood, for sexual control, against the abuse of white men, black men, other women. The neo-slave narratives studied reveal the historical legacy of the black woman’s fight, their fight to reveal the crimes portrayed upon their bodies. Understanding the black woman’s collective traumatic memory of violence against her body, of self-erasure and her contradictory pathology—one at once beaten down and always resistant—will help us, much like the palimpsest of the neo-slave narrative itself, examine the abuses suffered in the fiction involving contemporary black female protagonists in the chapters to come—stories which never fully escape slavery’s legacy of abuse of the black woman.

## Chapter 2

Exploded Dreams: An Examination of Rape in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered*

*Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* and *The Women of Brewster Place*

*And what was Joanne supposed to do for*

*the man who declared war on her life*

*Was she supposed to tongue his encrusted*

*toilet stool lips*

*suck the numbers off of his tin badge*

*choke on his clap trap balls*

*squeeze his nub of rotten maggots and*

*sing god bless America thank you for fucking my life*

*away*

*This being war time for Joanne*

*she did what a defense department will do in times of war*

*and when the piss drinking shit sniffing guard said*

*I'm gonna make you wish you were dead black bitch*

*come here*

*Joanne came down with an ice pick in*

*the swat freak motherfucker's chest*

■ Jayne Cortez, "Rape"

The premise of John Edgar Wideman's 1973 novel, *The Lynchers*, is that four young black men decide to frame and lynch a white policeman for the rape and murder of a black female prostitute. Their hope is that the spectacle of lynching a white man will mobilize an otherwise complacent black community to resist the systemic oppressions it faces on a daily basis. What is most interesting to me about the scenario Wideman poses is that in order to frame the white cop who is literally pimping out the black woman marked for death, the black men must rape and murder her, discarding her body like trash in the street.<sup>16</sup> In this plan, the black female body exists as collateral damage, an acceptable loss in these men's masculinist attempt to avenge a racialized wrong. Like Bigger Thomas of *Native Son*, the rape and murder of the black woman is an assumed right, her body a possession owned and used by the black man at his will. Black male authors like Wright and Wideman often work, as Catherine Clinton suggests, to "portray black women as virtual black slates upon which males inscribe their desires" (213). As evidence of this, during the multitude of discussions planning the lynching, none of the four black men considers the ethics of raping and killing the black woman—it is never not an option. None questions his ability to execute such an act of violent malice on the black female body of one whom, in 1970s rhetoric, is positioned as "sister,"—blood and family. What Wideman makes clear as the details of the lynching emerge is that the black woman as human being does not exist, rather she exists as object—as body,—and this body is maneuverable at the whim of man (both black and white), ultimately

---

<sup>16</sup> The white cop pimping out the black woman is symbolic of the legacy of the master-slave dichotomy which has defined male/black female relations in this country since slavery. Wideman purposefully positions the white man in a job of social and legal authority to demonstrate the myriad ways the black woman is trapped in her subjectivity.

dispensable—its violation and desecration warranted for the means of completing the masculinist agenda to acquire power. Saidiya Hartman’s stance helps to clarify this point. She submits that Frederick Douglass “establishes the centrality of violence to the making of the slave and identifies it as an original generative act equivalent to the statement ‘I was born’” (3). I argue that these representations of the rape of black women by black men, function as one type of assertion that “I am man.”

Sadly, such treatment or rather mistreatment of the black female body is not limited to the realm of fiction. In Eldridge Cleaver’s much celebrated 1968 prison narrative, *Soul on Ice*, he admits to raping black and white women as “an insurrectionary act.” He shamelessly details his emergence as a rapist: “To refine my technique and *modus operandi*, I started out practicing on black girls in the ghetto—in the black ghetto where dark and vicious deeds appear not as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day—and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out white prey” (33). Cleaver, without acknowledging his dismissal of the black woman, positions the black female body as worth less than its white counterpart. Pamela Barnett articulates Cleaver’s treatment of black woman as “careening from vituperative denigration to disregarding silence to a plastic attempt at empathy and reconciliation” (2). Part of what Cleaver provides as his rationale for his rape of black women is the pathologizing of the black man as inferior and emasculated due to white male racial oppression, an oppression that centrally figures sex and the possession (or inability to possess) of white women’s bodies as demonstrative of masculinity and power.

Because of the racial oppression of the black man, Calvin Hernton figures all black men as rapists: “I think now that, at one time or another, in every Negro who grows up in the South, there is a rapist, no matter how hidden. And that rapist has been conceived in the Negro by a system of morals based on guilt, hatred, and human denial” (*Sex and Racism* 67-68). Hernton and Cleaver along with novelists like Wright and Wideman use the oppression of the black man as an excuse to justify the violent abuse of the black female body, a tradition that bell hooks submits has transformed into “‘a dick thing’ version of masculinity that black male pop icons like Spike Lee and Eddie Murphy promote as a call for ‘real’ black men to be sexist and proud of it, to rape and assault black women and brag about it” (“Seduced by Violence” 353). The fact that Cleaver continues to be heralded as one of the leaders of the black revolutionary movement proves hooks’ point. Not only do Cleaver’s violent manifestations of self-hatred embodied in his rapes of black women and so brazenly detailed in his memoir demonstrate a disconnect in his understanding of the black woman as body rather than being, but the social response to his confessions—he was never charged with raping a black woman and his sentence for rape was commuted early—serves to position Cleaver as not guilty.<sup>17</sup> The rape of a black woman is, under this logic, not a crime.

Abbey Lincoln’s essay, “To Whom Will She Cry Rape?,” foregrounds the abuse of the black woman at the hands of black men while highlighting the double jeopardy of black womanhood. She posits how, “raped and denied the right to cry out in pain, she has been named the culprit and called ‘loose,’ ‘hot-blooded,’ ‘wanton,’ ‘sultry,’ and

---

<sup>17</sup> One could argue that Cleaver’s sentence’s early commutation for raping a white woman does suggest a kind of social progression for the black man as his masculinity seemingly trumps his race in this case, and the value of both white women and black women suffers accordingly.

‘amoral’” (98). Lincoln ends her essay with several rhetorical questions pertaining to the survival of the social construction of the rapeable black woman: “Who will assuage her indignation? Who will keep her precious and pure? Who will glorify and proclaim her beautiful image? To whom will she cry rape?” (101). In part, these are the questions that black women novelists attempt to answer as they write the modern rape of the black woman into existence. I say modern rape because what is traditionally and historically thought of when the rape of a black woman is represented in fiction is the legacy of sexual violence the black woman suffered at the hands of white men during slavery and after. In fact, the historical rape of the black woman by white men has been represented in black literature and scholarship since the slave narrative and has provided a platform of solidarity upon which black men and black women could stand united against white masculinist power.

But by the 1970s, the dynamic of the rape of black women had changed. Although the black woman remained more vulnerable, six times more likely to be raped than a white woman,<sup>18</sup> rape was increasingly, even predominantly an intraracial crime (Clinton 206). Susan Brownmiller cites a study conducted in Philadelphia where “rape was found to be an intraracial event especially between Negro men and women,” a statistic that continues to be supported by current research along all racial lines (183). Michelle Wallace accounts for this shift in the black woman’s victimization from white men to black men through her idea of the black macho as “an emotional interpretation...used by the contemporary black man to justify his oppression of the black woman, to justify his getting ahead by walking over her prostrate body” (18-19). Even

---

<sup>18</sup> Some estimates claim as high as 8 times more likely.

Calvin Hernton is forced to acknowledge “a more specific crisis in the relations between Negro men and Negro women” in the modern era (*Sex and Racism* 168). This specific crisis refers to the black on black violence where the black woman is most often the victim and where rape figures as a tool of domination wielded over the black female body. This modern rape of black women is systematically ignored for the most part and when written within a black masculinist discourse, as I have already accounted for, dismissed as a necessary evil to the larger black revolutionary project. Black women authors work to challenge this masculinist, sexist discourse by representing the rape of black women as central to the establishment of the black patriarchy. The two texts I have use to explore this situation, Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* and Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*, use the raping of black women to address black male performances of masculinity while complicating controlling images of both black men and black women which continue to make black male rape of black women a nearly un-prosecutable crime. These texts work to reclaim the black female body from its socially determined status as un-rapeable to something worthy of protection and resistance, ultimately answering Lincoln’s call by crying rape.

#### Rape and The Black Woman

Susan Brownmiller suggest, in her 1975 seminal text *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, that the act of rape is loaded with a history of domination and power beginning with the first male/female relationship. Brownmiller positions rape as the originary sin of man, one that predates even slavery and locates rape as the primary

weapon men wield against women to assert control. In fact, Brownmiller would agree with Catherine McKinnon's naming of rape as the originary act enslaving women at any given historical period. She maintains that, "female sexual slavery is present in ALL situations where women or girls cannot change the conditions of their existence; where regardless of how they got into those conditions...they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation" (qtd in Rich 1770). Although Brownmiller resists defining rape as a sexual crime instead labeling it as an act of power, she is unable to escape the element of sex inherent to the crime and connects rape to demonstrations of masculinity. She argues, "his forcible entry into her body, despite physical protestations and struggle, became the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood" (14). In this sense, to be raped is to be feminized and to rape is to prove masculinity. For this reason, Tonya Horeck understands rape as the "primal scene of feminism," "a scene through which images of femininity and masculinity and racial and gendered identity are imagined" (20-21). Feminism works to reclaim the un-rapeable female body<sup>19</sup> through paradigmatic shifts concentrated on restructuring the socialization of sexuality, gender, and race. To an extent, feminists (particularly white feminists) have been successful in marking the white female body as rapeable, meaning society no longer accepts (when forced to acknowledge) the white raped female body as collateral damage, but rather accepts the still un-rapeable black female body as scapegoat.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> A body so objectified that its sexual violation is not connected to a larger sense of humanity making the act not rape.

<sup>20</sup> In one sense I am naming that black female body as un-rapeable, meaning she is not given the human status which would determine an act of sexual violation on her body to be understood as rape. On the

But what is rape? Brownmiller makes the distinction between the male (read legal) definition of rape and the female, citing the female definition as: “if a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape” (18). She later expounds upon this definition, adding that rape is, “a sexual invasion of the body by force, an incursion into the private, personal inner space without consent...[which] constitutes a deliberate violation of emotional, physical and rational integrity and is a hostile, degrading act of violence” (376). Susan Brison imagines rape as an act of torture because of its physicality by explaining that rape, “reduces the victim to flesh, to the purely physical. It is as if the tormentor says with his blows: you are nothing but a body, a mere object for my will (44). The physical act of rape, then, is an attack upon the body, an attack most likely to be waged against the female body, and of which the black female body persists as the most accessible. Whereas the white female body has been covered under the protection of socially constructed standards of womanhood which present the white female body as pristine and untouchable, the black female body exists within a narrative that defines it as irresistible, as not only touchable, but always desiring of touch.

Socially, rape is a violent method of attaining power. Central to Brownmiller’s and most feminist notions of rape is that the idea that rape is experienced not only individually, but also collectively; rape is “violence aimed at preserving and perpetuating social dominance” (Barnett xiv). Judith Herman explains that with rape, “the purpose of the attack is precisely to demonstrate contempt for the victim’s autonomy and dignity,”

---

other hand, as I (and the texts I discuss) acknowledge the black woman’s subject status she becomes rapeable and lives unprotected in contrast with white women.

adding, “the purpose of the rapist is to terrorize, dominate, and humiliate his victim, to render her utterly helpless” (*Trauma and Recovery* 53, 58). Rape is a violent demonstration of control and authority that ingrains subordination and subjectivity in its victims. As Pamela Barnett articulates, the social power of rape is housed within its method of “gendering or racializing violence narratively mobilized against homosexuality, miscegenation, androgyny, emasculation, or interraciality” (xv). Barnett neglects the intraraciality of modern rape, an omission Traci West counters by suggesting that all rape is inherently racial. Addressing the racial implications of rape, West specifically links rape to blackness, “to be raped is to be denigrated. Denigration is a form of humiliation defined as blackening someone. The symbolic and literal meaning in our language as well as cultural stereotypes inextricably bind shame with blackness” (70). Beyond the physical violation which subordinates the female body beneath the male literally, West suggests that the act of rape is inherently bound to socialized racial hierarchies which privilege whiteness and mark blackness as inferior. To be raped is not to just be sexed as female (and thus helpless), but to be raced as black (and thus powerless).

Because this chapter focuses on the literary representations of black men raping black women, we must understand the complexity of intraracial rape and its rootedness in the social hierarchies of race and gender. First, an examination of the pathology of the black male rapist is necessary. My intent here is not to excuse the black man for raping black women, but rather to contextualize the emotive response to the black man’s socialization enacted as the violent sexual abuse of the black female body. Perhaps it is

best to begin from the perspective of the black male in the words of one attempting to examine his own rapist pathology. The following passage is taken from Eldridge Cleaver's "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs," and it helps to explain, if not excuse, the black male rationalization of his abuse of black women:

The Omnipotent Administrator conceded to the Supermasculine Menial all of the attributes of masculinity associated with the Body: strength, brute power, muscle, even the beauty of the brute body. Except one. There was this single attribute of masculinity which he was unwilling to relinquish, even though this particular attribute is the essence and seat of masculinity: sex. The penis. The black man's penis was the monkey wrench in the white man's perfect machine. The penis, virility, is of the Body. It is not of the Brain: the Brain is neuter, HOMO MACHINE. But in the deal which the white man forced upon the black man, the black man was given the Body as his domain while the white man preempted the Brain for himself. By and by, the Omnipotent Administrator discovered that in the fury of his scheming he had blundered and clipped himself of his penis (notice the puny image the white man has of his own penis. He calls it a 'prick,' a 'peter,' a 'pecker'). So he reneged on the bargain. He called the Supermasculine Menial back and said: 'Look, Boy, we have a final little adjustment to make. I'm still going to be the Brain and you're still the Body. But from now on you do all the flexing but I'll do all the fucking. The Brain must control the Body. To prove my omnipotence I must cuckold you and fetter your bull balls. I will fetter the range of your rod and limit its reach. My prick will excel your rod. I have made a

calculation. I will have sexual freedom. But I will bind your rod with my omnipotent will, and place a limitation on its aspiration which you will violate on pain of death....I will have access to the white woman and I will have access to the black woman. The black woman will have access to you—but she will also have access to me. I forbid you access to the white woman. The white woman will have access to me, the Omnipotent Administrator, but I deny her access to you, you, the Supermasculine Menial. By subjecting your manhood to the control of my will, I shall control you. The stem of the Body, the penis, must submit to the will of the Brain. (193-194)

Cleaver makes two distinctive assessments in this tale. First, that the black male pathology is predicated on his subordination to the white man, and, second, that the black woman exists as a physical reminder of the black man's subordination. Physical intimacy with the black woman is figured as punishment, as a constant reminder to the black man of the white man's power over him—the white man's access to white women that the black man is denied. The black female body as object remains the only body over which the black male can exert possession. Significantly missing in this narrative is any consideration of choice on the part of women, black or white. Each is reduced to the body with the black female body clearly positioned as worth less than its white counterpart and the black male body figured as castrated.<sup>21</sup> Calvin Hernton further explains the manifestation of the black male eunuch with similar reasoning to Cleaver's: "the taboo of the white woman eats into the psyche, erodes away significant portions of

---

<sup>21</sup> This is an ironic castration. The white man fears the power of the black penis and so must remove its power in order to maintain his own. This is particularly evident in lynchings when white men cut off the black penis as part of the death ritual.

boyhood sexual development, alters the total concept of masculinity, and creates in the Negro male a hidden ambivalence towards all women” (*Sex and Racism* 58). He continues, “because he must act like a eunuch when it comes to white women, there arises within the Negro an undefined sense of dread and self-mutilation. Psychologically, he experiences himself as castrated” (*Sex and Racism* 59). As previously mentioned, Hernton considers all black men as potential rapists, but he means rapists of white women—the rape of white women being a performance of masculinity meant to reject the white man’s omnipotence and castrating authority. Following Hernton’s logic, it seems that the violation of the black female body, then, is figured as rape only so far as it is the black man’s symbolic violation of himself, an act of acquiescence that signifies self-hatred and an admission of his castration rather than an act of dominance and power. This understanding explains why Cleaver’s practicing of rape on black women was never really rape. Within the black male pathology, the black female body is un-rapeable.

The consequence of this black male pathology is what Michele Wallace calls the Black Macho. She explains, “Black Macho allowed for only the most primitive notion of women—women as possessions, women as spoils of war, leaving black women with no resale value. As a possession, the black woman was a symbol of defeat, and therefore of little use to the revolution except as the performer of drudgery” (68). Consider how it is entirely plausible that black women were raped, and understood this bodily violation and inevitable silence as part of their role in the revolution. As a symbol of defeat, the black female body becomes the objectification of the black male’s castration, and it is for this reason that the harm of the black female body seems to be central to the black male’s

choice, in the context of modern rape, to rape black women. The black man's rape of the black woman is symptomatic of larger racial and gender conflicts. The rape is at once an expression of racial self-hatred and an expression of gender self-worth, a denial of blackness as valuable and an assertion that masculinity deserves power. The black male rape of the black woman exists as a schizophrenic act of violence that's cultural rationalization is embedded in the black man's racial subordination and gender authority. Ultimately the black male pathology allows for the violation of the black female body without any consideration for her body as an extension of her self, and inescapably his self.

The black male's formulation of the black female body as un-rapeable robs the black woman of her humanity and objectifies her as collateral damage in his fight for power. In contrast, I argue that the female body is inherently rapeable, and that the black female body exists as the most rapeable of all, meaning the black woman's body stands as the most susceptible to rape. Gloria Wade-Gayles explains this phenomena by assessing that "black women are more physically vulnerable because they are perceived by the larger society, and more tragically, their own men as devalued sex objects" (238). But understanding the black male's raping of black women is not as simplistic as saying that black men and women find themselves on opposing ends of a spectrum delineating black womanhood and subjectivity. Candice Jenkins's concept of the "salvific wish"<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Jenkins explains that "the term 'salvific' is related to the word 'salvation,' which, due to its religious connotations has significant linguistic resonance in African American communities. In the Christian religious tradition, spiritual salvation for all human beings is won through the sacrifice of the 'lamb' of God, Christ—a voluntary scapegoat for the sins of the world. The salvation alluded to in the term 'salvific wish' also depends upon voluntary sacrifice, but in this case that sacrifice is political and social, and the scapegoat black women themselves" (13).

can help complicate the nature of black intimacy and thus the issue of intraracial rape. Acknowledging the black woman's role as scapegoat, Jenkins explains, "According to the salvific wish, black women could pay with their bodies, or rather with the concealment and restraint of those bodies, for the ultimate "safety" of the black community as a whole" (13-14). Jenkins recognizes the demand placed upon the black woman by her community and its patriarchal regime to present herself as un-rapeable to white men, her duty to limit the access Cleaver's aforementioned story refers to, to the black man. Implied in the salvific wish is a requirement that black women preserve the black community at the expense of their own desire and ultimately of their own "safety." By this I mean to suggest that black women, to an extent, take part in their continued sexual victimization as part of the project of community uplift—an assertion I will more explicitly detail as I discuss the literature later in this chapter. This combination of the black woman's understanding of her body as rapable, of her rape not warranting the criminal naming of rape due to its necessary sociopolitical benefit to the black man, and of her duty as defined by the salvific wish work to create a black woman pathology which works in concert with the black male rapists' agenda.

Central to the pathologizing of the black woman as rapable is the normalization of the act of rape itself. Saidiya Hartman discusses the normalization of violence during slavery as being central to the pathologizing of the black body, a means of reading violation that I think can be applied to the pathologizing of the black female body through the act of intraracial rape. Hartman asserts that as "violence becomes neutralized and the shocking readily assimilated to the normal, the everyday, the bearable...the

circumscribed recognition of black humanity itself becomes an exercise of violence” (34-35). In this same manner, the limited attribution of black womanhood allows for the justification of acts of violence against the black female body on an abnormal level. As Wallace concludes, “the black woman has been rendered invisible,” an invisibility that translates to self-hatred and self-blame. Like James Weldon Johnson’s unnamed narrator in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, who after witnessing a lynching, rejects his black self rationalizing “that it was not necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead...I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals,” the black woman recognizes her humiliated and maligned status, but is unable to so easily escape her plight (499).

Significantly, lynching provides an interesting point of comparison to rape. Trudier Harris’s intensive study of lynching weighs the act of lynching as more damaging to the black community than rape. Mindful that Harris primarily addresses interracial rape during slavery, she also participates in questionable assessments of the consequences of rape which work to promote the black woman’s pathology. Harris claims, “Black women, though equally powerless, and equally dehumanized by rape, did not have a part of their anatomy comparable to a penis physically taken from them. Though they were raped, the act itself did not immediately conjure up images of death for them; they could envision a future after such a brutalizing experience” (187). Harris even goes as far as to suggest that the rape of black women during slavery produced, through the process of reproduction, beneficial consequences arguing that, “when black women were raped, they

were psychologically warped, but the violation led to a tainted addition, not a subtraction from their persons” (188). Harris grossly misrepresents both the physical damage suffered by the black female body and the black woman’s psychological response to that damage. I do not think it is too far of a reach to submit that black feminists and black women authors writing black-on-black rape into existence represent the black man’s rape of the black woman as a modern-day lynching. Even Wideman conspicuously plays with this paralleling of lynching and rape by interconnecting the two and acknowledging their interdependency. After all, the black man’s rape of the black woman serves the same agenda as the lynching of black men served—to solidify patriarchal control and instill preventative fear. Establishing the severity of violence and destructiveness of rape as existing in the same vein as that of lynching is critical to the project of recovering the black female body from its inherently un-rapeable status by acknowledging the black woman’s pain. As Debra Walker King suggests, “images of bodily destruction in black women’s literature bring into sharp focus that which postmodern attitudes and black historical mandates have successfully disassociated with any possibility of sociocultural meaningfulness—our pain” (114). Significantly, black women authors’ representations of intraracial rape differ from predominantly masculinist interpretations of rape in their attempts to expose the pain of rape as a kind of murder, and to claim the black woman as worthy of the title “victim.”

Trudier Harris’s commentary on rape unwittingly participates in a collective tendency to minimize the crime of rape because, in most instances, rape victims remain physically alive, and presents the challenge of navigating between the corporeality of

literal death and the meta-physicality of symbolic death. Perhaps a new way to conceptualize the experience of rape as a kind of death (because parts of one's self do, in fact, die as a result of rape) is to use Debra Walker King's concept of "soul murder." King appropriates Neil Irvin Painter's idea of "soul murder" as "spiritual brokenness" and defines it in terms of the black community's cultural experience of pain as, "the death of personal will, everyday living, and consequently life" (39, 16). To phrase it differently, to experience soul murder is to remain physically alive while emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically dead—a dead woman walking. I do not want to make an argument so far on the other end of the spectrum that it seems I am not discerning the difference between "Death" in the literal sense as the finite end to life, and "death" in a figurative sense, which offers the possibility of recovery. But part of my and these black women authors' point is that because the black female body exists as un-rapeable, she is limited from recovery. Unless the rape of the black female body is approached with the same regard for life that anti-lynching activists combated the lynching of black men (and women), then little possibility for recovery exists for the black woman.

Elaine Scarry in her influential text, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, frames all experiences of physical pain as figurative deaths. She argues that, "physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution" (31). Critical to our understanding of the victim's interpretation of her pain is Scarry's theory that "the person in great pain experiences his own body as the agent of his agony" (47). The body as the site of pain becomes confused as the inflictor of that pain. Laura Tanner explains this further, arguing that the body

maintains a strained duality, “the material connected to but never fully owned by a human subject who may use the body but who is also used by it, for whom the body is both an extension of the self and an exposed receptacle for pain” (3).

The significance of recognizing and acknowledging the objectification of and the pain felt by the black female body cannot be minimized. The violated black female body in literature exists as both symbol and metaphor for the black woman’s modern day experience of social oppression and physical hurt. As Tanner understands it, “the body’s susceptibility to pain lends the violator power over a victim whom he attacks not just as body but as subject, the victim’s body becomes the material extension of vulnerability, its susceptibility to pain rendering it the locus of attention for a victim for whom vulnerability and materiality become hopelessly entangled” (5). The point I want to draw out of this is that the body is purposefully targeted as the center of gravity for the black woman—her most vulnerable part of her self as the component which experiences pain and the most destructive to the self as the pained body misinterprets the cause of the pain to be itself. This coupled with the black woman’s unique pathology—a pathology which itself blames the worthlessness of the black female body for its continued victimization—sets the stage for what Scarry terms, “an unseen self-betrayal in pain,” where the black woman conceives of her rape as a self-inflicted wound, a suicide (47). For this reason, black woman authors’ work of reimagining the raped black woman as victim, their project of acquitting black women of their own rapes, is fundamental to the reclamation of the black female body as the black woman’s own.

Michele Wallace discusses the invisibility of the black woman. Susan Brownmiller admits black-on-black rape is ignored (210). Kimberle Crenshaw proves that Brownmiller's assessment remains unchanged two decades later in her discussion of intersectionality (357-8). These women confront what has been true since slavery, that the black woman had not been regarded as victim, not seen as worthy of the level of humanity required for victim status. Placed in contrast to the white woman sitting on her pedestal holding the power to lynch black men who dared glance at her whether in lust or in wonder, the black woman was determined legally un-rapeable, her body forcibly penetrated by both white masters and black studs. This "disavowal of sexual violence engendered black femaleness as a condition of unredressed injury," a condition which did not end with emancipation (Hartman 101). The black female body has been misused and abused as the black woman struggles to find the strength of self to cry rape and reject her sub-human status by acknowledging her own humanity and, with it, her pain. Traci West addresses the importance of naming oneself victim offering that, "in order to assess both the damaging impact and the coping strategies that stem from intimate assault by males, black women must first be acknowledged as victims" (57). Arguably, the first step in this process is black women acknowledging themselves as victims. Jayne Cortez's poem, "Rape," quoted as an epigraph to this chapter imagines rape as a declaration of war on the black female body, "And what was Joanne supposed to do for/ the man who declared war on her life," and considers both passive options of acquiescence and active methods of resistance in the process of sustaining a living self after experiencing the soul murder of rape (278). Cortez specifically highlights the

victimless status of the black woman by figuring her rapist as a policeman<sup>23</sup>, symbolically manifesting the citizenship and protection not afforded to black women. Cortez advocates for fighting back, “Joanne came down with an ice pick in/ the swat freak motherfucker’s chest,” and asserting agency through requisite violence, acknowledging that the black woman’s options are otherwise limited. In the discussion that follows I will show how Shange and Naylor ultimately resist Cortez’s vision of violent resistance in favor of a black woman collectivity and solidarity as the life-giving force that revives the expiring sense of black womanhood experienced by rape victims.

Not a Stranger: Date Rape and Colored Girls

Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* meshes poetry and drama to tell the story of seven colored women living on the outskirts of seven major metropolitan cities, each named reflecting a color of the rainbow (with a couple of additions, most notably the color brown which is symbolic of the skin color of the colored girls). Their experiences range from childhood fantasies involving black revolutionary leaders to losing virginity to the more traumatic episodes of sexual and physical abuse. Their stories figure black men as both sources of strength and pleasure and the agents of pain and death. Without apology, Shange exposes the complicated intimacy of black men and black women, exploding the silence on subjects like acquaintance rape, abortion, and post-traumatic stress disorder, often painting the black woman as victim and the black man as perpetrator of violence in a manner which created much controversy, specifically with black male intellectuals. Black women and

---

<sup>23</sup> Cortez’s poem is inspired by the factual case of a black woman, Joan Little, who was the first woman in the United States to be acquitted for using deadly force to prevent sexual assault after she killed a white prison guard forcing her to perform oral sex.

colored girls, on the other hand, celebrated Shange's brave documentation of the everyday perils black women face while attempting to love black men and sustain the black community. I will focus primarily on a reading of the "latent rapists'" section of the choreopoem before addressing briefly the other instances in the poem where Shange writes date/acquaintance rape happening within the black community into existence. Shange cries rape and exposes the modern rape of black women as a black-on-black crime inevitably tied to a masculinist cultural paradigm, one informed by a dominant culture that privileges whiteness, foregrounding date rape within the black community as a silent killer of black women's souls.

Shange is not alone in her writing intraracial acquaintance rape into existence, albeit she is one of the few. In fiction, Lutie Johnson famously slays Boots after he attempts to rape her in the final pages of Ann Petry's *The Street*. More has been written in the last few decades in testimonials outside of fiction attempting to understand the plight of the black woman and what it means to her that she is constantly under the threat of rape. June Jordan in an essay considering the meaning of being both black and feminist writes, "it is here, in this extreme, inviolable coincidence of my status as a Black feminist, my status as someone twice stigmatized, my status as a Black woman who is twice kin to the despised majority of all human life that there is, it is here, in that extremity, that I stand in a struggle against suicide" (270-271). As Shange's text does, Jordan links considerations of suicide to gender and racial oppression, to a powerlessness where death looms as not just an escape, but as an act of control, the sole remaining act of agency one can enact over one's life. Significantly, part of Jordan's understanding of

black women's oppression is rooted in her own experiences of rape. Raped twice, her second rape being at the hands of a black man she knew, Jordan recognizes the self murder of rape and the role that the intraracial nature of this rape played in making her brutalization even more destructive. She explains, "I don't think you can ever completely recover from rape...race paralyzed me to the deadly extent of self-effacement...I never I never tapped into the rage necessary for resistance to the demons of domination" (80). Jordan's sense of racial solidarity, her social and political unification with black men in the project of racial uplift, kept her stunned in a moment of denial and shock that ironically and tragically made her an ideal victim for her violator.

Andrea Benton Rushing addresses the inherent conflict of interests black woman victim's of intraracial rape face in her essay, an essay written, in part, as therapy for her own rape experience. She describes the conflict saying, "My core is cracked when the rapist is a man my politics have taught me to call brother...now we learn to cringe from men who look like our fathers, uncles, nephews, godsons" (132). The politics of racial uplift through the rhetoric of the civil rights era and the black power movement adds an incestuous overlay to the already complicated violated intimacy that intraracial acquaintance rape manifests. During these movements black men and women, in contrast to whites, routinely called themselves "brother" and "sister" in an effort to actively internalize the familial relationship of black people in order to encourage community and solidarity. Audre Lorde recounts how this attempt within the black community to create family made intraracial rape even more painful. Raped as a young girl by "a boy much bigger than [her]" who "threatened to break [her] glasses if [she] didn't let him stick his

“thing” between [her] legs,” (75) Lorde is again faced with rape as an adult, a scene she describes in detail:

Like when your Black brother calls you a ball-buster and tricks you up into his apartment and tries to do it to you against the kitchen cabinets just, as he says, to take you down a peg or two, when all the time you’d only gone up there to begin with fully intending to get a little in the first place (because all the girls I knew who were possibilities were too damn complicating, and I was plain and simply horny as hell). I finally got out of being raped although not mauled by leaving behind a ring and a batch of lies and it was the first time in my life since I’d left my parents’ house that I was in a physical situation which I couldn’t handle physically—in other words, the bastard was stronger than I was. It was an instantaneous consciousness-raiser. (181-182)

Each of these stories is meant as a consciousness-raiser; they are meant to, as Shange means to, make colored girls aware of a silent predator within the black community in order to arm them not with the physical strength to overcome them, but with the knowledge to make their sought-after black female bodies less accessible. What I am suggesting is perhaps a radical thought: the language of black uplift movements made black female bodies more accessible to black men for rape by creating a false consciousness of trust and respect, one that some black men took advantage of to the detriment of the black woman. In my following analysis of date rape specific to Shange’s text I do not mean to assert that white women would be any less outraged as a victim of date rape, but I do mean to make clear specific circumstances unique to the black

community which allow for the rape of black women by friends and acquaintances who are also black that Shange's seems to point out. At this point it seems appropriate to remember that Shange wrote this text specifically to warn "colored girls" of the threat of violence from men within their community and encourage them to abandon the project of racial uplift in favor of their own survival, and so, I figure race as central to all that Shange's women say.

The lady in blue begins the "latent rapists" section saying, "a friend is hard to press charges against," a telling comment that suggests the ambiguous nature of black intraracial acquaintance rape (17). The rapist being named "friend" before his status of rapist is ever revealed exposes the complicated loyalties involved and the psychology of denial experienced by victims of black intraracial acquaintance rape. Shange exposes the pervasiveness of black-on-black rape as an epidemic affecting black women by following multiple victims, which is quickly evident as the lady in blue's testimony is immediately followed by those of the the ladies in red and purple. Because of this, Neal Lester maintains that, "'latent rapists' is not an account of one woman's personal experience. While it is both a personal and political statement of the injustices suffered specifically by females because of their gender, all of the women join in this redefinition of the rapist and the nature of rape" (47). But before these women join in this redefinition of the rapist, they first participate in the dominant narrative shaping perceptions of rape, specifically date rape in a manner that both indicts the dominant narrative but also expresses victims' unwitting complicity in the narrative. The exchange beginning the "latent rapists" section reads as follows:

lady in blue  
a friend is hard to press charges against

lady in red  
if you know him  
you must have wanted it

lady in purple  
a misunderstanding

lady in red  
you know  
these things happen

lady in blue  
are you sure  
you didnt suggest

lady in purple  
had you been drinkin (17)

Shange initially presents these ideas as the thoughts of the women verbalizing them. This structure suggests a certain amount of buy-in by the women and dramatizes the re-victimization many women experience when confiding in other women, who, as potential targets themselves, reiterate a dominant narrative that appropriates their victimhood instead of creating a new narrative that deflects the blame away from the victim back toward the perpetrator. Shange suggests that part of why “a friend is so hard to press charges against” is that the collectivity of black women or even the legal definition that

views rape as a crime is overridden by the patriarchal hegemony inscribed within the black community where the black woman is always at fault for the black man's failure and always responsible for her own safety no matter the circumstances. This initial exchange offers no possibility that the black man as rapist is guilty of a crime.

As the lady in red acknowledges a critical flaw in the dominant narrative's definition of rapist it is understood that these woman are invested in the project of re-defining the term rapist:

lady in red:

a rapist is always to be a stranger

to be legitimate

someone you never saw

a man wit obvious problems

lady in purple

pin-ups attached to the insides of his lapels

lady in blue

ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket

lady in purple

a lil dick

lady in red

a strong mother

lady in blue

or just a brutal virgin (17-18)

These women understand that acquaintance rape is not rape in the sense that rape is an impersonal act of violence conducted by men with deep-seated psychological problems, oedipal complexes and the haunting of unproven masculinity. Instead, date rape is complicated by the fact that these women are perceived to willingly engage in their seduction and by the fact that the men are known as productive, successful members of society. The lady in red returns to her explication of the dominant narrative's rationale excusing date rape by documenting the woman's assumed complicity:

lady in red

but if you've been seen in public wit him

danced one dance

kissed him good-by lightly

lady in purple

wit closed mouth

lady in blue

pressin charges will be as hard

as keepin yr legs closed

while five fools try to run a train on you (18)

Even if the agreed-upon intimacy has clearly reached its limitations with a "closed mouth" kiss, the woman is held liable for her own destruction, ironically her choice to enter into an exploration of interconnection with this man her only allowable act of agency as her decision seemingly relinquishes her body over to his possession. As the lady in red later articulates, "women relinquish all personal rights/ in the presence of a

man/ who apparently cd be considered a rapist” (20). Significantly, Shange parallels the legal difficulty of prosecuting a “friend” for rape with the near impossibility of fighting off five men during a gang rape. Just as each penetration of the multiple rapists’ tears further open the brutalized body of its victim, the dominant narrative’s illegitimization of date rape continues the victimization of the rape sufferer.

Shange writes a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative that assumes the guilt of the black female victim of date rape by re-imagining black intraracial date rape as a conscious manipulation of gender identities, as a purposeful deception on the part of black men who use a socially constructed familial relationship to gain access to their victims. Working within the parameters of statistical data which determined that rape is most often a planned act of violence, Shange documents the premeditative nature and ritualistic quality of the rapists’ attack beginning with how, “these men are friends of ours/who smile nice/stay employed/ and take us to dinner” (18-19). Like a serial killer, these men knowingly use their attractiveness and charm, their privileged status as a “good” black man to trap their victims into a violent playing-out of their fantasies of domination and hyper-masculinity. These rapists, after succeeding in the seduction phase of their plan, “lock the door behind you/ wit fist in face/ to fuck,” and the women stand, like June Jordan, paralyzed in their shock that they have been “betrayed by men who know us” (19). The lady in red offers the scenario of black men “who make elaborate Mediterranean dinners/ & let the art ensemble carry all ethical burdens/ while they invite a coupla friends over to have you” (19). Again, Shange’s use of gang rape highlights the black woman’s vulnerability, her lack of recourse, and her inability to resist. As the lady

in red posits, “it turns out the nature of rape has changed” and the reality of the modern rape of the black woman is that she could “get raped in [her] own houses/ by invitation,” by a “friend” (20, 21).

The fact that these women do not know, but “must have known” about the possibility of their bodies’ abuse, their souls’ murder, positions the violent self-murder experienced as date rape as its own kind of suicide. Instead of the immediate death of a bullet to the brain, the murder caused to self and soul by date rape is a slow death extending far beyond the physical violence of the unwanted bodily penetration. The perpetrator as “friend” attacks not only the physical body of the victim, but the normalcy of the victim’s life in a way that prevents immediate recovery. The ladies explain, “we can now meet them in circles we frequent for companionship/ we see them at the coffeehouse/ wit someone else we know,” situations that not only remind the victim of the rape itself, but requires her to acquiesce to her violent subjection through silence (20-21). Safe havens are turned to spaces of violent reenactments of her abuse. For reasons already mentioned, these women do not scream out to their rapists’ friends the details of their vicious betrayal. They do not run to the police with any hope of justice. Silently, they must interact with their abuser, acknowledging their own weakness and unpreparedness, knowing their fixation on “the stranger/ we always thot waz comin,” but never did because a “friend” came instead made them even more vulnerable targets. Susan Brownmiller notes that, “to make a woman a willing participant in her own defeat is half the battle” (312). The modern rapist understands this and expects “that we will submit” (19). The fact that the black woman so often does “submit,” whether due to

paralysis or denial or silence, is what makes specifically intraracial date rape, in part, a self-inflicted wound, a suicide, whether this suicide is consciously acknowledged or not.

Although my reading of “latent rapists” can, in one respect, frame date rape as a kind of suicide, Shange, on the other hand, takes great pains to indict the black male perpetrators of rape as legitimate rapists deserving of punishment, who if not legally penalized for their crime, should suffer for their violent destruction of black women’s bodies and souls in some way. The lady in blue angrily repudiates the dominant narrative’s verdict of the black male rapist’s innocence arguing that he “is not less worthy of bein beat within an inch of his life/ being publicly ridiculed/ having two fists shoved up his ass,” followed by the lady in red’s addition, “than the stranger we always thot it wd be” (20). Shange foregoes any possibility of legal justice and suggests that what the black man rapist, this new face of terror for the black woman, should suffer is a rape of his own, the emasculating penetration of his anus meant to feminize him as much as the public embarrassment she also prescribes. But implied in this heated espousal of what the rapist should suffer is the reality that the rapist often emerges unscathed from his crime. The lady in red makes the point that the violator, “suffer[s] from latent rapist bravado,” while the victim is “left with the scars” (19). Shange acrimoniously reserves the use of “suffering” for the rapist while flippantly re-enacting the dismissal of the black woman victim’s pain. As is evident in both Williams’s and Jones’s work, the black woman is the one who really suffers in the midst of absent consequences for her abuser. This dismissal of the black woman’s agony is even more evident in Shange’s figuration of the abused black female body discussed in the next section. First, however, I want to

mention several other instances of rape and acquaintance rape depicted in *For Colored Girls* to fully understand the full scope of Shange's re-imagining of modern rape.

Gloria Wade-Gayles critiques *For Colored Girls*' treatment of rape for its lack of racial centeredness claiming that, "the problem with the play...was not its depiction of abusive black men, but rather its failure to place abuse in the context of racial oppression" (9). What Wade-Gayles fails to consider is that the play itself is framed within a racial context, beginning with the title which clearly defines an audience of colored girls. Shange resists marking her characters racially (i.e. with dark, red, or light skin) and, in doing so, signifies upon white-authored literature in which whiteness is assumed unless otherwise stated. Race, non-whiteness, is implied in Shange's text unless otherwise marked. For this reason, the date rapes voiced in the "latent rapists" section are assumed to be intraracial, just as the persistent fear of rape that Shange documents in "i used to live in the world," is assumed to imply a fear of black male rapists. Set in Harlem, the lady in blue narrates how her life has been reduced to six blocks, the perimeter of Harlem's black neighborhood. She documents the ironic solitude of living within a community of black people while "remaining a stranger," "alone" (36, 37). Shange resists the glorification of Harlem common in African-American literary works since the Harlem Renaissance and figures Harlem as "stagnant," dirty and dangerous. And for the black woman, what is most dangerous is the predatory nature of the black man, a nature Shange suggests is born early out of a patriarchal culture which deems it a right to appropriate, or worse, harm the black female body.

The lady in blue articulates an exchange with a twelve-year-old boy, written in all caps to signify the terror and frustration that this seemingly daily occurrence presents: “NO MAN YA CANT GO WIT ME/ I DON’T EVEN KNOW YOU/ NO/ I DON’T WANNA KISS YOU/ YOU AINT BUT 12 YRS OLD/ NO MAN/ PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE” (37). She describes the safety measures she must take, now routine defensive measures acquired to protect her body from the attack of black men. She “stay[s] close to the curb,” “praying wont no young man think I’m pretty,” acknowledging how it “wdnt be good/ not good at all/ to meet a tall short black brown young man fulla his power/ in the dark” (37). The constant threat of rape haunts the lady in blue, and hers is a fear of all black men, whether tall, short, black, or brown. The universality of the lady in blue’s trepidation demonstrates further the collectivity of the black woman’s experience that Shange offers in “latent rapists.” We are presented with no evidence that the lady in blue has ever been raped, but her fear of rape and specifically her fear of rape at the hands of black men figures the modern, intraracial rape of the black woman as a communal problem. The lady in blue is aware, as all black women are, of her rapeability, and, so, although seemingly spared thus far the physical violence of actual rape, she is psychologically and emotionally raped daily simply by walking through the darkening streets of Harlem.

The third rape scenario Shange suggests is found in the most controversial section of the poem, “a nite with beau willie brown.” The lady in red tells the story of Crystal and Beau Willie Brown. Crystal has Beau’s two children, even after being brutally beaten after tellin Beau of the second child. Beau returns from the Vietnam War

suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, looking for a way to sustain the manhood being a soldier offered him, and between bouts of beating Crystal, asks her to marry him, a proposal she denies. Beau Willie Brown responds in rage and ultimately drops their two children out of a fifth floor window. Beau and Crystal meet when Crystal is a young colored girl, “she’d been his girl since she waz thirteen/ when he caught her in on the stairway,” an incident that Tejumola Olaniyan reads as rape. Olaniyan further explains, “defeated by the white-dominate world, Beau resorts to the last and only advantage allowed him by this world, the advantage of his sex” (135). Crystal, “caught” on the stairway conceives her first child and trapped by the consequences of Beau’s taking sexual “advantage” of her, participates in the cycle of abuse that leads to her children’s murder. Significantly, other than the use of the word “caught,” Shange does not explicitly name Crystal and Beau’s first sexual experience as rape, but her warning to colored girls is evident. Statutory rape, otherwise phrased as rape of a child, can be confused with adolescent understandings of love and sex. Crystal, controlled sexually, psychologically, and emotionally by Beau from the start, never fully escapes her adolescent fantasy of marriage and a traditional family, which is why, after being broken and filing restraining orders, she places her children in his hands, “beau willie oozed kindness & crystal who had know so lil/ let beau hold kwame” (59). Never free from Beau’s manipulation she sentences her children to death. Shange, once again, frames the black man as a skilled predator, purposefully deceptive and masterfully plotting to use the black woman to fulfill his masculinist need for control and power. As Neal Lester assesses, “Shange captures what is at the heart of rapist’s motives: a desire to control his

environment. The power to control a woman's life, her livelihood, then, becomes a test of his alleged manhood" (47). Shange also warns that all rapes do not look the same and that while the thirteen year old girl "caught" in the stairway may not understand her loss of virginity as rape, her psychological and emotional control has been secured by the rapist and she is left powerless. Crystal's situation, then, is perhaps the most tragic and traumatic of all.

#### Figurations of the Abused Black Female Body: Rape and Abortion

Unlike Williams and Jones, Shange does not participate in rendering graphic representations of the abused black female body, at least not as far as her depictions of rape are concerned. Focused primarily on the emotional and psychological damage of rape, specifically intraracial acquaintance rape, Shange omits the abused black female body from her accounting of the modern rape of black women. In fact, the only reference to the violence suffered by the black female body as a consequence of rape is the acknowledgement of the "scars" the black women are left with, and even this reference is partially alluding to emotional and psychological wounds (20). Shange's omission of the abused black female body in her depictions of rape relegates her discussion of rape to the ideological realm versus the realism Williams and Jones succeed in portraying. Williams and Jones also wrote their texts a hundred years after the horrors they describe, a distance from the event Shange does not have the luxury of. I submit that the contemporary realness of the modern rape coupled with the fact that this issue controversially implicates the black man as enemy and criminal is what keeps Shange from exposing the physically violated raped black female body. In this sense, her tactic is safer, her cry of

rape more likely to be heard. Notably, “latent rapists” was left off the original Broadway sound recording. Lester suggests that perhaps, “presenting rape as an issue for women was thought too graphic for a sensitive Broadway and television audience” (75). Censored as is, one can only assume that vivid descriptions of the forcefully penetrated black female body would have incurred even more hostility.

Laura Tanner offers another explanation for why the scene of abuse may be omitted in her discussion of William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*. She claims that, “by withholding any direct representation of the rape upon which it focuses, *Sanctuary* shifts the burden away from Faulkner and toward the reader...the rape becomes a gaping hole in the text that the reader must fill” (18-19). In this sense, Tanner suggests that the author’s purpose in refusing to write the scene of violation and thus, the abused body into existence, is to implicate the reader in the act of violence. Tanner proposes that such a tactic “invites the reader—if only momentarily—to envision and even create the promised violence,” adding that “it is the voyeur who perpetrates the ultimate crime” (21,23). Considering Tanner’s reading of *Sanctuary* with respect to *For Colored Girls*, then, offers significant insight. The voyeur that Tanner names as solely the reader is, in the case of Shange’s text, also the black community—a community that is aware of such acts of brutality to the black female body, but is content to watch her body suffer from a safe distance—removed, detached, and silent. Just as Tanner suggests that the reader’s creation of the rape scene through her imagining an act not explicitly detailed in the text is a criminal act, Shange similarly understands the black community’s muted complicity as a re-victimization of the raped black woman. Significantly, Shange does not resist

these types of descriptions all together. Her depictions of abortion are extremely graphic, centering the black female body as brutally violated object.

“abortion cycle #1” follows “latent rapists’,” a design that seems to suggest a cause-and-effect relationship between rape and abortion. This is not to say that all abortions result from rape, but that the unwanted pregnancy as a consequence of rape can terminate in abortion. The lady in blue describes the “tubes tables white washed windows/ grime from age wiped over once,” of the operating room. She describes the invasion of the black female body as, “metal horses gnawin my womb/ dead mice fall from my mouth/ ... bones shattered like soft ice cream cones” (22). Distinctive from the women’s articulation of rape, the lady in blue voices her pain, “get them steel rods outta me/ this hurts/ this hurts me” (22). Lester reads Shange’s understanding of abortion as “a metaphoric rape that can also leave deep and lasting scars,” and indirectly comments on this type of abuse by stating, “images of blood and shattered bones reinforce not only the physical violence of the surgery itself but also the effect on a victim of sexual assault” (51). Lester’s reading of abortion as a metaphoric rape presents an interesting perspective. That the lady in blue feels that she has no other option, “i cdnt have people/ lookin at me/ pregnant,” that she is forced to have her insides torn open again for her own survival supports his argument (22). But if the abortion is symptomatic of rape and results similarly in physical pain and non-physical death as rape does, then the fact that the abortion is self-inflicted frames abortion as suicide. Lady in blue says, “i cdnt have my friends see this dyin,” a statement that refers both to the dying fetus and to her dying self (22). There is, of course, the very literal killing of a part of oneself (the fetus) that is

the intent of an abortion coupled by the extension of the shame and self-hatred resulting from rape that is manifested in the self-destructive choice to have an abortion. From this perspective, Shange's interpretation of abortion is not liberatory or revolutionary, but an explicit warning to colored girls who are considering abortion as a form of suicide.

Abortion can also be understood as a liberatory act of agency. Loretta Ross explains, "abortion, in and of itself, does not automatically create freedom. But it does allow women to exert some control over our biology, freeing us from the inevitability of unwanted pregnancies, and is, therefore, indispensable to bodily and political self-determination" (144). What Shange does make clear about the raped black female body is that her body is not hers, but rather the objectified possession of the rapist/s.

Terminating an unwanted pregnancy resulting from a rape, an act that divests the black woman of ownership over her own body, can be read as a reclamation of that body, a choice to eliminate one of the consequences the rape victim suffers, an act of agency fundamental to the process of recovering one's self. But this understanding of abortion assumes choice or the availability of viable choices. The point Shange makes is that the black community eliminates any other option for the violated black woman: "i cdnt have people/lookin at me/pregnant" (22). This lack of options forces her to make a choice where her body to undergoes further transgression against her will—a trauma she suffers alone: "get them steel rods outta me/ this hurts/ this hurts me/ & nobody came/ cuz nobody knew/ once i was pregnant & shamed of myself" (22-23). The lady in blue, "really didn't mean to," but is obligated to as a participant in the patriarchal culture which denies her self and her body worth. David M. Adams explains this dilemma as "the

phenomenon of the ‘false consciousness’ of the oppressed—by the extent to which women are unwittingly complicit in their own continued oppression, by the degree to which they trivialize their own pain and humiliation as deserved, view submission as their duty, regard male dominance as somehow natural or inevitable” (33). Shange cautions that this state of “false consciousness” is a suicidal state of being, one that is self-destructive and assumes the rapeability of the black female body allowing its further victimization. Shange does posit a method of resistance, one that is strikingly similar to what Gloria Naylor poses in *The Women of Brewster Place*; therefore, I will reserve my discussion of how these authors suggest black women resist the violent abuse of their bodies in an effort to reclaim their selves for the end of this chapter and will instead turn now to a discussion of the horrific rape scene that ends *The Women of Brewster Place* and how Naylor approaches another type of rape, gang rape.

#### Gang Rape and Hyper-masculinity in *The Women of Brewster Place*

The subtitle to *The Women of Brewster Place* describes the book as “a novel in seven stories.” Each of these stories details the life of a black woman living in Brewster Place, a run-down housing development, whose decline is represented in its transfer as a home for whites to immigrants to blacks. Only one of these stories is not named the name of the woman it is centered around, “Two,” the story of the lesbian couple Lorraine and Theresa. Most of the women whose stories are told experience violence at the hands of the black men in their lives in one way or another: Mattie is brutally beaten by her father after getting pregnant and is betrayed by her son, Ciel suffers physical and emotional abuse from her boyfriend and aborts a child in fear of his anger, Etta Mae is

tossed from man to man as a sexual object, and Cora endures physical abuse from her first boyfriend and resigns herself to sleeping with unnamed men in the darkness of her bedroom in order to continue supporting her habit of making the babies she so unhealthily loves. But the most horrific act of violence enacted against any of the black women at Brewster Place (and arguably against any black woman in black women's literature) is the gang rape Lorraine survives at the end of the novel. Naylor presents Lorraine's rape as a result of her lesbian lifestyle; C.C. Baker and his cohorts are unable to accept a woman un-desiring of their masculinity and, so, they rape her in an effort to re-claim the lost masculinity Lorraine's rejection of their penises represents. Although Lorraine's lesbianism is determined as the reason for her rape, Naylor clearly suggests that all of the black women living at Brewster Place (and thus all black women) are subject to such abuse, albeit not unproblematically, a point I will clarify later in this section. First, I need to explore the significance of Lorraine's rape being a gang rape, what Lorraine's sexual affiliation and the idea of compulsory heterosexuality has to do with it, and why Gloria Naylor felt it was necessary to so graphically portray the raping of Lorraine.

First and foremost, Naylor represents the gang rape of Lorraine as an assertion of masculinity, a masculinity denied by Lorraine's sexual desire for women. This assertion of masculinity falls under what Christopher Kilmartin and Julie Allison define as hypermasculinity, a concept that is very much connected to my earlier discussion on how black men compensate for their powerlessness in a white-dominated masculinist society. They argue that "hypermasculine men have sexually calloused attitudes toward women

equating heterosexual intercourse with male power and female submissiveness, and perceiving the sex as an 'achievement' rather than a means of intimacy...the belief that violence is an acceptable and often preferred means of expressing power, dominance, and manliness" (100). What is important to understand about C.C. Baker and his gang's action as affirmation of their masculinity is that their hypermasculine behavior is not reserved solely for lesbians, but is deeply seated in a cultural performance of masculinity that is a socially accepted norm. The narrator describes C.C. Baker and his friends' performance as they approach Kiswana and Lorraine outside of Brewster Place, "blasting their portable cassette players and talking loudly. They continually surnamed each other Man and clutched at their crotches" (161). These boys' heroes are identified as Shaft and Superfly, both fictional characters whose power is, in part, defined by their exploitation and abuse of women in a manner that tends to highlight their masculinity. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting describes the cultural phenomenon of black male youth's hypermasculinity as "sexual violence, sexism, 'beat-downs,' sexual dishonesty, anti-lesbianism, and the legacy of color prejudice [which] all hammer away [black women's] self-esteem" (12). She adds that what is most problematic about the hypermasculine culture of black male youth is that it is celebrated and commercialized to a point that it becomes normative. The norm, then, is a culturally sanctioned environment of violently misogynistic attitudes and demonstrations which are accepted and perpetuated.

For this reason, Lorraine and Kiswana do not understand C.C. Baker's verbal protestations as a real threat to their physical safety. C.C. Baker engages Kiswana in a game of the dozens (a game which she wins) and angrily spouts while grabbing his

crotch, “Why don’t ya come over here and I’ll show ya what a real man can do,” adding later after he has been defeated, “I oughta go over there and slap that bitch in her face and teach her a lesson” (162). Significantly, C.C. Baker’s violent outbursts are symptomatic of his and his gang’s pathology and offers insight into their subsequent gang rape of Lorraine. Groth and Birnbaum submit that in gang rape, “sex becomes an expression of power and anger to compensate for feelings of inadequacy, depression, and vulnerability, and to retaliate for feelings of humiliation, hostility, and frustration” (115). The gang rape beyond the cultural figuration of hypermasculinity demonstrates a collectivity of insecurity and disempowerment that is at once named and anonymous, that is both C.C. Baker and his gang. The rapists are at once individualized and blended. This dynamic requires a leader and followers, the leader being C.C. Baker who “forced [Lorraine] down on her knees while the other five boys began to close in silently” (169). The other boys’ silent acquiescence to the impending rape demonstrates how C.C. as the leader not only “feel[s] in control of the victim, he also feels in control of his cohorts: they are following his orders” (Groth 113). Although C.C.’s need for power is most fulfilled by his role, the other accept the leader’s gift of seconds (or thirds, or fourths—as each boy takes his turn using Lorraine’s body) as satisfactory and still empowering.

Within this dynamic of individuality and collectivity is the victim who experiences multiple individual rapes, rapes which are then understood as a gang rape. The compounding of these individual rapes is, I think, lost in the singularity of the term gang rape—gang rape as an act of premeditated violence that “often involves forethought, strategic planning and preparation and coordination,” an act that should

more accurately be represented as “an extreme manifestation of negative cultures of masculinity and the abuse of power” (O’Sullivan 102, Kilmartin 121). C.C. Baker and his friends laid in wait for Lorraine, hiding, “a dark body that had been pressed against the shadowy building [which] swung into her path so suddenly she couldn’t stop in time” (168-169). Her attack was planned with a precision that evokes animals hunting their prey.

Although Naylor most prominently figures the threat of lesbianism as the primary source of the gang’s sexual insecurity, a point I expand on shortly, the text suggests other underlying social factors such as poverty and lack of sociopolitical impact as roots of the gang’s violence. Michael Awkward comments that “Naylor’s description of Lorraine’s expedition into black male gang territory is charged with an acute understanding of white racism’s culpability in the creation of C.C. Baker and his gang of urban thugs” (57). Just as Naylor explains in the beginning of the novel, that “there was no one to fight for Brewster Place,” there is no one to fight for C.C. Baker and his gang of young black men, and so they fight for themselves in the only way they know how, by exaggerating their manhood to prove their masculinity and thus power (2). Naylor refers to the underlying social implications of Lorraine’s rape in the moments before the rape occurs:

Born with the appendages of power circumscribed by a guillotine, and baptized with the steam from a million nonreflective mirrors, these young men wouldn’t be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon—and they knew it. They only had that three-hundred-

foot alley to serve them as stateroom, armored tank, and executioner's chamber.  
(169-170)

Naylor, in a 1993 interview, describes why she inserts this indictment of the dominant culture: "I remember deliberately taking the narrative risk with that rape to stop the action...and to explain why that young man is raping her and point the finger toward society and their definition of manhood" (Fowler 134). And by society, Naylor means the dominant white power-wielding patriarchal structure that determines notions of masculinity along with gender norms.

Significantly, Naylor figures white power as inherently violent, a power only possible in its ability to wage war as verification of its ability to destroy other less powerful beings and/or objects. Lorraine's rape is figured, even partially justified as a resultant of the imbalances of social power, economic prosperity, racial hierarchy, and gender equality. In this respect, the black woman, or more accurately, the black lesbian is scapegoated for the black male ego. As representative of black women loving black women, Lorraine signifies the overturning of black woman's internalization of the externalized hatred she is the target of. C.C. Baker and his friends are allowed to feel alive through the rape and soul murder of Lorraine. Wrapped up in all of this is a negation of the black woman's humanity, an objectification of the black female body that reduces her to property, and a contempt for her right to exist as an autonomous self. As Brownmiller reasons, in rape, the "woman is perceived by the rapist both as hated person and desire property. Hostility against her and possession of her may be simultaneous motivations, and the hatred for her is expressed in the same act that is the attempt to

‘take’ her against her will” (185). This hatred and desire to possess falls in line with what Adrienne Rich defines as compulsory heterosexuality, or “the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economic, and emotional access” (1773). Lorraine’s lesbianism heightens C.C. and his crew’s hypermasculine need for power, a need informed by a compulsory heterosexuality, an “extreme form of masculinity...both toxic and pathological” (Kilmartin 103).

Pamela Barnett argues that “rape is compulsory heterosexuality’s most horrific mechanism” (133). She continues, adding that “C.C. explicitly fantasizes rape as a correction to Lorraine’s lesbianism and, more broadly, as a correction to a subversive homosexual logic. C.C.’s fixation with Lorraine’s sexuality, and his desire to “fix her,” make her heterosexual, seemingly incites the rape. As C.C. begins brutalizing Lorraine he taunts her with his intentions, “Yeah, now don’t that feel good? See, that’s what you need. Bet after we get through with you, you ain’t never gonna wanna kiss no more pussy” (170). Rape becomes a method “whereby heterosexual ‘preference’ has actually been imposed on women” (Rich 1777). The fact that C.C. acknowledges the plurality of this (en)forced heterosexuality, the fact that it takes him and all of his friends to reverse the homosexual condition of Lorraine exposes C.C.’s insecurity and lack of confidence in his own masculinity. Although his penis exists as his “lifeline to that part of his being that sheltered his self respect,” this lifeline is tenuous, as fragile as the erection meant to “validate a world that was only six feet wide” (Naylor 162, 170). Lorraine’s lesbianism alters the dynamic of this world for C.C. Women, specifically black women, are, for him, culturally figured as his means of maintaining a sense of self and to be presented

with a woman who is inaccessible is to be stripped of that lifeline, to be figuratively castrated, to be impotent. Rich explains how the “lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women” (1775). Read this way, C.C. and his gang’s rape of Lorraine is a retaliation, a counter-attack to what they understand as an act of war against their manhood.

C.C. Baker and his following of black male youth need the normative structure of gender roles in order to survive, in order to wield any amount of power in a society that otherwise ostracizes and condemns their very existence. O’Sullivan explicates the significance of gender roles while outlining the ideological elements of gang rape, noting that gang rapists tend toward “a traditional conceptualization of sex roles and sexuality, under which women are supposed to be sexual gatekeepers...and women who do not conform to these notions are fair game for exploitation (the virgin/whore dichotomy)” (85). Another way to understand O’Sullivan’s ideology with regards to Lorraine’s rape is through the hetero/homo dichotomy where the lesbian is the whore and, thus, rapeable woman.

Ann Cvetkovich acknowledges the danger in these normative standards of sexuality offering that “the normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, which is effective precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem,” that is no outward sign (46). Naylor documents the subtle nature of the abuse Theresa and Lorraine suffer at the hands of the black women whose gossip threatens their relationship and, hence, their existence. The rape, then, becomes the outward

manifestation of this otherwise dangerously restrained social norm. As Barnett explains, “rape socially sexes characters in a cultural moment when gender identities are considered unstable and there is no more powerful figuration of gender instability than homosexuality” (xxv). What C.C. Baker and his friends do is attempt to make right what Lorraine has upset; “they attempt to force her to be a ‘woman’ and, correspondingly, to stabilize their identities as ‘men’” (Barnett xxxv). Penetrating Lorraine and using her as they would a heterosexual woman invalidates her choice while validating their masculine power.

Therefore, beyond trying to fix Lorraine, C.C. Baker and crew mean to punish Lorraine for what they understand as an assertion of an autonomous self, an assertion that exposes their lack of masculine control over the feminine, and thus diminishes their power. If heterosexuality is assumed, then Lorraine’s homosexuality exposes not only the possibility of an alternative, but the woman’s ability to make a choice on her own. It is Lorraine’s choice that becomes the issue. Not that Lorraine chooses her sexuality necessarily, but that she makes a conscious decision to be true to her sexual preference and live outside a culturally mandated heterosexuality. Although Lorraine is thought by Theresa to be weak—she at one point she asks, “Why didn’t she ever fight back?”—Lorraine’s choice to actively pursue a lesbian lifestyle suggests a strength of self that unsettles C.C. and his friends (135). Traci West offers that “when the meaning of a black lesbian’s identity is read through the cultural norms of compulsory heterosexuality, she is perpetually condemned for being guilty of having chosen ‘deviance’” (73). My point is that the choice itself might be more important than the deviance. C.C. Baker and crew

think that the deviance can be cured by possessing the black female body, but the authority over self that the choice implies is what fuels their anger.

Perhaps a better way of saying this is that it is Lorraine's sexual abnormality that makes her body uniquely rapeable, but it is her display of autonomy that makes her worthy of rape. C.C.'s interaction with Kiswana best explains this assertion. After Kiswana beats C.C. in a game of the dozens in front of Lorraine, his anger is first directed toward Kiswana, "I oughta go over there and slap that bitch in her face and teach her a lesson" (162). Reminded, however, that Kiswana's autonomy is validated and protected by her heterosexual black male partnership, "that's Abshu's woman, and that big dude don't mind kickin' ass," C.C. then directs his anger toward Lorraine, "I'm gonna remember this, Butch!" (163). Kiswana's assertion of self still exists within the culturally permissible confines of heterosexual desire and is thus protected. Even as she speaks out on her own, she belongs to, is possessed by a black male and so her display of autonomy is controlled. Lorraine's autonomy is not, thus C.C. projects his fear-born anger at the culturally unprotected lesbian. Driving home this point, C.C.'s comments before the rape do not center on Lorraine's lesbianism, but rather on her corroboration in his verbal battering, "You ain't got nothing to say now, huh? Thought you was real funny laughing at me in the streets today? Let's see if you gonna laugh now, dyke!" (169). Even in the course of these statements, C.C.'s focus shifts from Lorraine's demonstration of agency to her deviant sexuality, a shift that masks the true origin of the impending violence.

One element of the gang rape that is often overlooked or ignored is the homosocial nature of act. Ironically, C.C. and his friends demonstration of hypermasculinity is also a homosocial event arguably masking latent homosexual desire. Susan Brownmiller cites Blanchard's study of gang rape. He conclude that "the idea of 'sharing the girl among us fellows,' congregating around a common sexual object, and being sexually stimulated together as a group certainly have their homosexual implications" (192). Notably, Brownmiller disagrees with Blanchard's assessment, but I submit that even if one does not agree with the gang rape as an expression of latent homosexual desire, one cannot deny the homosocial nature of the violence. The "communal bonding" element of the gang rape lends itself to a homosocial reading (Horeck 24). Christopher Kilmartin and Julie Allison even go so far as to hint that the homosocial nature of the group dynamics found in male communities is foundational to the gang rape. They assert, "perhaps because of their homosocial nature, some fraternities and athletic teams may have a tendency to endorse violent ideologies and a level of organization that allows for an aggregation of power, dominance, and group allegiance" (121). The "'it ain't no fun if my homies can't have none' mentality" of black male youth bonding that is at once misogynistic and violent allows for the unauthorized possession of the black female body in an environment that gives the act "peer sanction, support, and validation" (Sharpley-Whiting 79, Groth 118). Groth and Birnbaum further describe the homosocial quality of the male bonding experienced during a gang rape: "one of the unique dynamics in gang rape is the experience of rapport, fellowship, and cooperation with the co-offenders. The offender is not only

interacting with the victim, he is also interacting with his co-offenders” (115). C.C. and his friends “laughed and stepped over [Lorraine] and ran out of the alley,” after the rape, their connection solidified by their communal brutalization of their black female victim (Naylor 171).

The pathology of hypermasculinity and extreme homophobia also works to establish the homosocial nature of the offense. O’Sullivan submits that “homophobia and a need to establish masculinity through sex with women but without intimacy with women,” exists as one of the ideological elements of gang rape (85). The homophobia exists ironically in a voyeuristic environment where the men not only watch each other have sex with the victim, but share in the bodily secretions of each other and the victim. As Naylor gruesomely describes, “her thighs and stomach had become so slimy from her blood and their semen that the last two boys didn’t want to touch her, so they turned her over, propped her head and shoulders against the wall, and took her from behind” (171). By adding sodomy as another rape, Naylor closely links the homosocial nature of the gang rape to the male homosexual sexual act. Gang rape as a form of bonding and relating to other men may not explicitly signify homosexual desire, but the homosocial nature of the sexual violence, which is accepted and encouraged in the midst of an otherwise hypermasculine display, exposes the sexual ambiguousness underlying C.C. and his friends’ fear and anger. Lorraine is raped because she is gay and if she is gay then gayness exists. Part of the motivation for fixing Lorraine’s gayness through the destructive act of rape, then, is destroying the possibility of their own homosexual desire.

Lorraine's rape is often discussed as one of the most brutal depictions of rape in all of literature. Naylor describes the black youth "ripping her insides apart," Lorraine unable to speak, "her eyes screaming the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. Please" (171), a politeness Tanner explains as ironic in the midst of Lorraine's torture: "the nicety of the polite word of social discourse that Lorraine frantically attempts to articulate...emphasizes the brute terrorism of the boys' act of rape and exposes the desperate means by which they rule" (29). In graphic detail Naylor describes Lorraine's "split rectum [and] the patches of her skull where her hair had been torn off by grating against the bricks," "her mouth crammed with a paper bag, her dress pushed up under her breasts, her bloody pantyhose hanging from her thighs" (171). Part of the project of Naylor's horrific word pictures is to create a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative which assumes the un-rapeability of the black woman. West explains how the culturally sanctioned assumption of "black women's moral decrepitude ... undermine[s] the innocence of women victimized by male violence. They particularly feel a perception of women as willing participants in an immoral lifestyle bred within their subculture" (135). Naylor, by choosing as the victim of rape the ultimate sexual deviant, a black woman who is also a lesbian, and by then shockingly depicting her victimization erases any assumption of guilt on the part of the black woman. Naylor gives Lorraine victim status. Lorraine, having her insides ripped out, is exorcised from any culpability or willingness in her rape. In doing so, Naylor presents the black woman and the black female body as a subject of rape.

### The Raped Black Female Body

Gloria Naylor wants us to experience the rape of Lorraine, to see it in vivid detail, to squirm as we read the gruesome details of this black female body's defilement. Significantly, she rejects the notion that Lorraine is raped because she is a lesbian. In a 1983 interview, Naylor explains that "Lorraine wasn't raped because she is a lesbian, they raped her because she was a woman. And, regardless of race, regardless of social status, regardless of sexual preference, the commonality is the female experience. When you reduce that down in this society even to something as abysmal as rape, there is no *difference* between women" (Goldstein 6-7). Resisting what Saidiya Hartman calls "the pathologizing of the black female body" as un-rapeable, Naylor exposes the raped black female body as a reality, a truth, and the black man as administrator of that truth. The harm of the body seems to be central to the black male's violation of black women. The fact that this raped black female body is a lesbian complicates the universality of Naylor's project, but only in so far as it allows her the ability to uncover the truth at all. Understanding this, I must first discuss Naylor's representation of the black female lesbian body before addressing her vivification of the raped black female body, one that happens to be lesbian.

As mentioned, the only chapter Naylor does not name after the female protagonist it is centered upon is the chapter involving Theresa and Lorraine, a chapter she titles, "Two." Naylor explains this choice to William Goldstein, offering that she did this to mirror the way society views these women, "not [as] individuals, or even women, but as some alien social situation" (5). To expose the baselessness of the other women's

perception, Naylor resists boxing Lorraine and Theresa inside the stereotypical lesbian roles of “butch” and “femme.” In fact, the women of Brewster Place are first threatened by the “short dark one—too pretty, and too much behind,” before acknowledging (after their men remain theirs) that the two were “nice girls” (129,130). Marilyn Farwell, discussing lesbian narratives, offers that traditional narratives “work to position the lesbian as either male or female, but because the lesbian subject is already erased by narrative’s control, it exceeds narrative’s categories because it is not functional in or bounded by the constructed women’s relationship to man” (142). What Farwell explains as the narrative’s difficulty in constructing the lesbian body is mirrored through Naylor’s non-lesbian black women characters. The women find it hard to comprehend how a body that presents as female can be “that way,” because if that black female body is a lesbian, then there is the possibility that their female body is as well (131). Not unlike the struggle I suggested earlier that C.C. and his friends undergo, the possibility of the black female lesbian body causes the questioning of otherwise stable identities. Mattie considers this when she says, “maybe that’s why some women get so riled up about it, ‘cause they know deep down it’s not so different after all” (140). Barnett reasons that, “not only do ‘the two’ look and act like straight women, the straight women come to realize that they themselves often look, and more importantly act, like lesbians” (127). The fact that lesbianism cannot be read on Theresa and Lorraine’s bodies causes the other women to look for difference. Too many chocolate chip cookie packages found in the couple’s trash becomes a sign of something abnormal, something strange. Naylor tells Angels Carabi in 1992 that the community was simply unable to accept the lesbians, even

as black women, “they could not reach over the difference. Just like the world had put a wall in Brewster Place, they had put a wall between themselves and Lorraine and Theresa” (119). The raped body of Lorraine, then, is what proves Lorraine’s womanhood by proving its similarity.

To recognize that neither Lorraine nor Theresa “read” as lesbian is to also understand C.C. and the other women’s rhetoric as unfounded in any kind of physical reality, but as instead a power performance. C.C.’s name-calling (“butch,” “dyke,” “freak”) and Sophie’s instigations are really about the manipulation of power. So whereas Naylor wants to suggest that the rape of Lorraine is about biology, she also offers that because it is Lorraine who is raped, it is also about power. Lorraine’s physical biological allows her to be raped in the manner that she is, but her status as lesbian makes her body more accessible as a perversion of and more threatening as a subversion of the dominant narrative. Patricia Williams’s thoughts on gender construction can help explicate this point, “gender...having less to do with the biology of male and female than with the semiotics of power relations, of dominance and submission, of assertion and difference, of big and little...such as reproductive rights and the complicated ability of women in particular to live freely in the territory of their own bodies” (12). Lorraine’s female body and her lesbianism are not mutually exclusive. Lorraine’s choice to use not her body in ways acceptable to C.C., and her community of black women’s determination to find difference, positions her body as more vulnerable. My point is this, C.C.’s and the women of Brewster Place’s intentions are the same, to preserve the black female body in

its traditional conception and, in doing so, they end up literally ripping the black female body apart.

Part of the design of Naylor's brutal depiction of Lorraine's rape is for the reader to experience the rape as real and forced. The rape is focalized through the narrator on Lorraine's body, a strategy which, at first, de-centralizes the rapists' bodies in favor of the victim's body. In doing this, the violation temporarily becomes self-inflicted, the black female body the perpetrator of its own abuse. The opening paragraph of the rape demonstrates this point:

He slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry. He pushed her arched body down onto the cement. Two of the boys pinned her arms, two wrenched open her legs, while C.C. tore at the top of her pantyhose. Lorraine's body was twisting in convulsions of fear that they mistook for resistance, and C.C. brought his fist down into her stomach. (170)

Lorraine's body causes C.C.'s nails to dig into her and its movement causes it to be used as a punching bag. Using Elaine Scarry's conception of how pain is experience, Tanner explains how, "Lorraine's pain and not the rapist's body becomes the agent of violation, the force of her own destruction" (30). At first, Lorraine exists as the agent of her own violation and as such mirrors the dominant narrative which defines her body as unrapeable. Even in the midst of being raped by others, Lorraine experiences the rape as at her own hands—her body's pain as the agent of her suffering. Unlike Tanner who suggests Naylor maintains this construction, "as the body of the victim is forced to tell

the rapist's story, that body turns against Lorraine's consciousness and begins to destroy itself, cell by cell," I submit Naylor reverses her construction and offers a counter-narrative which identifies the gang as the agents of violence.

As the actual rape begins and Lorraine, "fe[els] a weight drop on her spread body," she symbolically opens her eyes, "and they screamed and screamed into the face above hers—the face that was pushing this tearing pain inside of her body" (170). Lorraine awakens from her false-consciousness and understands the lie her body is telling. Looking face-to-face with her abuser, she determines her rapist to be the cause of the "tearing pain." Her mind centers "around the pounding motion that was ripping her insides apart," "one continuous hacksawing of torment"—her body being raped (171). Although Lorraine is powerless to stop her rape, the fact that she understands the pain emanating from her body as rape is significant. By deconstructing the dominant narrative Naylor reveals the black female body as rapeable. She acquits the black female body of any involvement in its own victimization, and instead convicts the "weight" of the first, "second," "third," "fourth," and "last two boys" of the "moving pain inside of her that refused to rest" (171). By focusing on Lorraine's violated black female body and not the black male rapist's bodies, Naylor privileges Lorraine's pain over the men's pleasure, her survival over their momentary demonstration of physical power. Although, as earlier mentioned, Naylor desires to indict society for making possible Lorraine's rape, the brutality of the rape itself, the utter disregard for humanity evidenced in the viciousness of the attack, that lack of respect for woman-kind demonstrated in the savage destruction

of the black female body, convicts C.C. and his gang as violent sexual predators and reveals the black female body as undeserving of such malevolence.

Although many critics miss this, Lorraine does survive. But the fact that Lorraine survives in a state of perpetual madness, “her eyes screaming the only word she was fated to utter again and again for the rest of her life. Please,” is not without problems (171). Although Lorraine’s body survives the rape, her self does not. The morning after the rape, Mattie does not see Lorraine crawling in the alley, but “the body crawling up the alley” (172). In this sense, her rapists are successful in destroying her identity, in robbing her of her consciousness. For this reason, Barnett argues that, “the rape socially sexes Lorraine, reducing her to only her wounded inside, thus insisting that she is essentially female and no different from the other women in the novel” (124). Barnett and I agree that this reduction from person to object, from lesbian black woman to pain, from something to nothing is problematic: “the rape is extraordinarily successful. Lorraine is reduced to the violable vagina, never conscious again of anything except her wounded inside” (134). But perhaps this is too reductive as well. Lorraine does see Ben emerging into the alley—a black man and a threat—and murders him in retaliation for the pain inflicted by other black male bodies. Her inability to speak is understood as a stifling of voice, but the rape seems to have given her the strength to finally fight back—a point I address below. Her act of violence against Ben speaks what her body is unable to, and although somewhat misdirected (Ben, after all, did not rape her), this act of violence signifies life within her. Even still, Lorraine’s survival is dubious because as June Jordan says, “I don’t think you can ever completely recover from rape” (80). Gloria Naylor

needed to expose the raped black female body as real without undercutting its pain by resurrecting it too easily. The pain remains and the violation can be so extreme as to prevent ever recovering a whole self.

Perhaps the most problematic element of Lorraine's reduction to body part, to her objectification is that it is because of this reduction that she becomes accepted as part of the larger community of women at Brewster Place. The nights following Lorraine's rape, "every woman on Brewster Place had dreamed that rainy week of the tall yellow woman in the bloody green and black dress" (175). In Mattie's dream sequence, Ciel returns also having experienced the dream. No knowing about Lorraine's rape, Ciel understands the woman in the dream to be her, "She didn't look exactly like me, but inside I felt it was me" (179). As Barnett suggests, "it is troubling both that the common cause is located so firmly in the violable body and that Lorraine is included according to the terms orchestrated by her rapists" (124). Barnett asks an important question: "Why is Lorraine embraced into the collective only once she has been reduced to nothing but her violable sex?" (138). The women's acceptance of Lorraine as one of them suggests two things: 1). That the women of Brewster Place have always already known that womanhood opens their bodies to violation, and 2). A body that shares that same threat is woman. But it is important to make a distinction between the women of Brewster Place accepting Lorraine's body as woman and them accepting her self as lesbian.

I disagree with Barnett's assertion that "the novel attempts to suture a fissure between black women and black lesbians by emphasizing the penetrable female body as a common vulnerability" (141). Yes, the violated female body presents a similarity in the

midst of difference, but the initial conflict between the women, the hetero/homo dichotomy, the shared fear of the unknown, is left unresolved at the novel's end. In Mattie's dream, Theresa is still outcast and is moving out of Brewster Place, "Dumb bastard, they're having a lousy block party. And they didn't invite me" (187). In fact, there exists a subtle desire, while acknowledging the similarity the female anatomy presents, to celebrate the difference lesbianism provides. Because if Lorraine is, in fact "raped *because she is a lesbian*," then there is a kind of relief that accompanies this realization (Barnett 142). Lorraine is rapeable as a woman, but in the minds of the heterosexual women of Brewster Place, she is raped because she is sexually degenerate. The heterosexual women of Brewster Place may dream of Lorraine's brutalization, but they do not suffer it themselves. The community's homophobic fear of Lorraine's lesbianism allows her to be scapegoated, and, reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's short story, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," those who stay endorse her victimization. As Michael Awkward maintains, Lorraine exists as "both purgative scapegoat and brutalized martyr whose demise apparently serves to unify a (female) community" (56). Significantly, Theresa walks away while the other women stay to throw a party (not mourn a loss), haunted by Lorraine's bodily sacrifice, but more secure because of it.

The unified collectivity of the women figured in Mattie's dream—the women who having torn down the blood-soaked wall of Brewster Place, the women whose hearts beat "almost in perfect unison,"—exist ultimately as a dream deferred. Jill Matus asks, "Why is the anger and frustration that the women feel after the rape of Lorraine displaced

into dream?" (128). Maybe because the women never come to terms with their part in Lorraine's rape, never resolve the division they've created between the black female body as rapeable, and the black lesbian as deviant, and so, can never progress past the dream-like utopian fog they've created to displace the true reality of their existence. In the end, the novel fulfills the women's initial desire and, through the violation of the black lesbian female body, rids Brewster Place of sexual deviance. These women, then, participate in the perpetuation of the dominant narrative for their own benefit making the resistance Mattie dreams implausible if not impossible.

#### Shange and Naylor's Failed Resistance

Both *For Colored Girls* and *The Women of Brewster Place* end with an emergent black woman's collectivity that suggests survival is gained through solidarity while a more aggressive resistance is possible through the unification of black women. Both texts espouse Traci West's ideology that survival is resistance. As she explains, "unlike healing, resistance involves any sig of dissent with the consuming effects of intimate and social violence. When a woman survives, she accomplishes resistance" (151). The women in *For Colored Girls*, having lived through rape, but on the verge of suicide, find each other and sing a collective song of healing and resurrection. The stage direction reads, "the ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle" (64). The circle is a symbolic unification, impenetrable to the oppressions, injustices, and violences expressed in the preceding text. The women's survival and song serves as their testimony of an impending victory, each woman having "found god in [her]self," now "movin to the ends of their own rainbows,"

on the path to self-actualization (63, 64). The text suggests the collectivity of women provides the foundation for self-acquisition, acts as the cornerstone of endurance, and facilitates “an exploration and discovery of the ways and means for self-(re)fashioning, for the ‘making’ of collective and individual selves” (Olaniyan 131). Neal Lester argues that the abuse these black women face at the hands of black men pushes them toward one another, “the sufferings the women have met with at the hands of some men move them toward self-discovery” (57). These black women’s solidarity is purposeful, intended to not only encourage continued existence, but to protect their bodies and emerging selves from further violation.

Similarly, *The Women of Brewster Place* advocates a collectivity of black women. In Mattie’s dream, the women come together to throw a block party, and when Cora notices blood stained on the wall of brick, they unite to pull the wall down. The first brick, “passed by the women from hand to hand, table to table, until the brick flew out of Brewster Place and went spinning out onto the avenue” (186). The one brick becomes the whole wall in a scene that is described as a “riot” (187). Even Theresa is reluctantly allowed to participate in the uprising when Cora, too tired to carry any more bricks, hands them to her. Naylor’s ending, like Shange’s, insists that these women are only as strong as their collective strength and that solidarity is based on black womanhood, a womanhood that is subject to abuse and violence regardless of other difference. And like Shange’s ending, Naylor’s is temporarily satisfying until one figures out that it is just a dream and the spectacle of victorious revolt from both literal and figurative imprisonments is deferred. Naylor, in doing this, challenges Shange’s utopic vision by

suggesting that it is a too easily achieved recovery for black women living within a complex system of oppression and violent subjection.

Critics often cite Naylor's use of Langston Hughes's poem, "Dream Deferred," as the novel's epilogue to explain Mattie's dream of the women's resistance as the dream deferred, implying that the text supports the possibility of the dream's realization. Marilyn Farwell offers that the ending succeeds in that "the agency claimed by this community is now more furtive because it refuses to stand in relationship to male domination...[it] conclude[s] with an affirmation of identity through relationship with other women" (166). Or as Jill Matus submits, "Naylor inscribes an ideology that affirms deferral; the capacity to defer and to dream is endorsed as life-availing" (138). But I read the ending as more melancholic and less gratifying. The community of women at Brewster Place ultimately gain nothing and instead of the deferred dream exploding in a riotous insurgence, the novel ends at dusk with, "Brewster Place still wait[ing] to die" (192). Notably, Brewster Place is uninhabited at this point, "abandoned" like its dreams, "only waiting for death, which is a second behind the expiration of its spirit in the minds of its children" (192). The dreams still remain, but not as dreams deferred, but as dreams denied. Michael Awkward best explains Naylor's failed resistance narrative writing, "Mattie's dream is perhaps most profitably understood as an illusion that serves to perpetuate the text's content and formal disjunctions in much the same way that the self-deceptive dreams of Naylor's characters prolong their personally injurious self-divisions" (62). I would add that part of what is "self-deceptive" about these women's dreams is that these women, without wanting to acknowledge it, understand the futility of their

dreams and their coming to Brewster Place is an act of resignation—the place they all come to let their dreams fade, just as Brewster Place’s life fades with the setting of the sun. Although initially agreeable, Shange’s and Naylor’s utopic black women’s collectivity is ultimately revealed as too simplistic and too banal to incite a rebellion of black women against their further destruction.

Ironically, Lorraine is rarely celebrated for her individual act of resistance, her murder of Ben the morning after her rape. Ben’s death at Lorraine’s hands is generally read one of two ways: 1). He dies because he is the anti-man, a feminized version of masculinity unable to sustain himself, in the end, as C.C. Baker and his friends do, by any means necessary, and 2). He dies because he represents all men and Lorraine, in this moment, wants to kill all men. Farwell argues that Ben’s death is symptomatic of the “system[‘s] need to rid itself of the potential that a male can be feminized,” while Barnett goes so far as to name Ben, “a figural victim of sexual violence,” whose “trauma is ultimately disavowed and repressed to all for an explicitly feminist vision” (318). Although I agree with the assessment that Ben’s trauma is left negated, I would argue that the reason behind Naylor’s dismissal of Ben’s pain is more complex. For one, Naylor’s vision is not only explicitly feminist, but also explicitly heterosexual. If Ben is to be read as a feminized man, then he exists as his own kind of sexual deviant and all sexual deviance is eliminated by the novel’s end in order to restore an environment seeded in compulsory heterosexuality. In this sense, Lorraine’s killing of Ben announces there is no room for difference in this society.

On the other hand, if Ben becomes representative of all men, then it is important to make the distinction that he is representative only in so far as all men exist as agents of violence against women. As Michael Awkward asserts, the novel “insists the reader view Ben as part of a continuum of male violence against women of which the actions of the gang are the reprehensible extreme” (60). Naylor insists that the reader not forget that Ben’s inaction directly contributed to his daughter’s rape, a guilt that is acknowledged by Ben in his bouts of drunken self-medicating, but is often resisted by the text itself. Lorraine kills Ben because he is, in effect, a rapist, and she, aware of this fact, is able to enact some form of justice through his death. Jill Matus would disagree, arguing instead that, “Ben’s death avenges neither the machismo of C.C.’s gang nor Lorraine’s repressed anger towards her father. Rather, the text suggests that accumulated hurts and betrayals breed a store of violence which erupts on displaced targets” (131-132). I agree that Ben’s death promotes the philosophy that violence begets violence in a torturous cycle of irresolution and destruction, but Ben should not be understood as a “displaced target.” Lorraine reneges her own forgiveness of Ben’s cowardice with regards to his daughter’s rape after experiencing the pain and violation of rape herself, and she lashes out against not just black men, but against rapists as she bashes Ben’s head in. Naylor and Shange may ultimately advocate for a black women’s collectivity, but Lorraine’s act of violence, read as an act of justice, speaks in ways these women-united are yet unable.

Even though *For Colored Girls* and *The Women of Brewster Place* refuse to offer a constructive solution or method of resisting the rape of the black female body suggesting that such a solution is not forthcoming, they both do important work in

recovering the black female body from its un-rapeable status. Rejecting the dominant masculinist narrative reflected in Cleaver's rape protocol and Wideman's writing—that the black female body is acceptable collateral damage for the black man's fight against the racist white society—Naylor and Shange establish the raped black female body as worthy of subjectivity while outing the black male rapist's agenda and modus operandi. These works expose the raped black female body as a truth existing amidst social and cultural denial and refuse the scapegoating of the black woman via the destruction of her body for black masculinist ends. Although the problem of intraracial rape is not solved within these texts, it is revealed, and the importance of black women standing together against communal victimization is promoted as a utopic vision of unity and strength to strive for—a vision that, arguably, grants black women too much credit. As is evidenced in the novels of the next chapter, the black community of which black women are a part, too often aids in the perpetuation of violence, specifically the violence against women and even more so, the violence against young black girls. The next chapter will look at depictions of incest in two novels: *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. I will explore how *Push* signifies on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as both novels work to expose incest in the black community and retrieve the sexually abused black girl-child from her invisibility.

### Chapter 3

It's Not Too Late<sup>24</sup>: Exposing the Black Girl-Child Victim of Incestuous Rape in *The*

*Bluest Eye* and *Push*

*If I've killed one man, I've killed two—*

*The vampire who said he was you*

*And drank my blood for a year,*

*Seven years, if you want to know.*

*Daddy, you can lie back now*

*There's a stake in your fat black heart*

*And the villagers never liked you.*

*They are dancing and stomping on you.*

*They always knew it was you.*

*Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through*

--Sylvia Plath

In 1970, shortly before Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* first appeared and within weeks of Toni Cade Bambara's *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, Maya Angelou

---

<sup>24</sup> An allusion to the last lines of *The Bluest Eye*: "It's too late. At least on the edge of town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late."

published her memoir, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. In it, Angelou discusses her sexual abuse as a young girl. Raped by her mother's live-in boyfriend at the age of eight-years-old, Angelou describes the progression of the abuse from her abuser, Mr. Freeman, rubbing his "thing" against her leg, masturbating against her child body, and ultimately ripping apart her eight-year-old vagina with his penetrating penis. Angelou first exposes the black child body in pain in her description of her rape: "Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot" (65). Angelou awakes after passing out from the pain to her rapist washing her in a futile attempt to erase the pain he caused, "I didn't mean to hurt you, Ritie. I didn't mean it" (66). But Angelou makes clear that the pain of the raped child body does not cease once the initial violation is over. She remembers the aftermath: "Walking down the street, I felt the wet on my pants, and my hips seemed to be coming out of their sockets," and how she "had started to burn between [her] legs," which "throbbed" (66). The pain, or more accurately, the threat of more pain silences her. She reasons about confessing to her mother, "Could I tell her now? The terrible pain assured me that I couldn't" (68). Significantly, the loving and trusting relationship Angelou shared with her brother, Bailey, allows her to speak her abuse, but her assertion of voice is short-lived. Angelou's case makes it to court, but the trial itself works to re-victimize her. First silenced by fear and then by a legal system which does not value the black female body in any form, child or adult, Angelou is further re-victimized as the defendant's lawyer "snickered as if [she] had raped Mr.

Freeman” (70). Angelou eventually consciously silences herself deciding, “I had to stop talking” after her rape is condoned by a masculinist and racist legal agenda that released Mr. Freeman from his year-long sentence on the same day of his conviction (73).

Angelou’s tortured child body is ultimately avenged purportedly by men in her family who are thought to beat Mr. Freeman to death (this is never spoken, just assumed by Angelou), but Angelou’s eight-year-old mind misreads Mr. Freeman’s death as her fault and thus she suffers from not only the guilt that she felt for thinking she played a part in her child body’s ravishment, but also for assuming a role in her violator’s murder.

Maya Angelou’s choice to voice her rape as a child stands as a historical confession of the abuses many young black girls suffer during the innocent years of their childhood and in what is supposed to be the safety of their private, domestic space. Poignant as a true account of child sexual abuse, Angelou’s experience validates what novels like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, and Sapphire’s *Push* fictitiously represent through their tales of incest. These fictional imaginings of child incestuous rape work to accomplish what Angelou began with her testimony: to resist the myth of the seductive daughter, to expose the brutality of child sexual abuse and the horrific reality of the black girl-child’s body in pain, and to offer strategies (whether successful or not) for resistance and survivorship. Although groundbreaking in their telling of incest in the black community, these novels are not without problems and deserve critique. However, with so much already published about the written text and the film representation of *The Color Purple*, this chapter will focus on the other two of the novels mentioned: *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. I will, in fact,

examine *Push* as a re-interpretation of *The Bluest Eye*. Following the form of many of the sociological studies of incest, I first examine the role of each “player” involved in the incest: the abused black girl-child and her violated body, the Rule of the Father, and the role of the bad mother. Finally, I discuss the texts’ successes and failures in offering means of resistance and survivorship. But before delving into the two novels, a more detailed understanding of incest and its relationship to the black community is needed.

### Incest and the Black Community

Webster’s College Dictionary defines incest as, “sexual relations between persons so closely related that they are forbidden by law or religion to marry” (667). The Oxford English Dictionary defines incest as, “the crime of sexual intercourse or cohabitation between persons related within degrees within which marriage is prohibited; sexual commerce of near kindred.” Although the Oxford English Dictionary goes so far as to name incest as a “crime,” what is further revealed in these definitions is that incest includes a wide range of sexually indiscriminate behavior from adult consensual “sexual relations” to what we commonly consider incest—the sexual abuse of a child by a family member. Because of the word’s rather innocuous definition in popular thought, it is necessary for me to be explicit in my conception of the term incest in this chapter and with regards to the novels studied. For this reason, I will use the terminology ‘incestuous rape’ when referring to the sexual abuse portrayed in the novels. This two-part phrasing is important to my project in that it properly addresses the improper familial sexual relationships divulged within the texts while also properly naming the sexual relationship as rape. This term seems especially appropriate in dealing with texts that involve parent-

child incest where the parent-child relationship is known by both parties. Adding the word ‘rape’ to ‘incestuous’ serves to constantly and consistently remind myself and the reading audience of what Tony Martens explains as the character of incest: “acts of incest and child sexual abuse themselves define violence. These are acts of aggression, domination, coercion, manipulation and self-seeking with no regard for the damage done to the victim...the emotional traumatization created through the destruction of trust and exertion of power has a violent, devastating effect on the victim” (6). Elizabeth Ward makes a similar choice by using the term father-daughter rape instead of the word ‘incest’ in her sociological study of the subject. She explains this choice, commenting:

Psychological, sociological, and theological concerns about the blood or kindred relationship between the victim and the offender, which are contained within the usage of the word ‘incest,’ also blur reality, by focusing attention upon who is involved, rather than upon what is happening. What is happening is that a child is being victimized and that she and the offender usually belong to, and live in, the same family. The particularities of this rape dynamic mean that the offender has almost unlimited access to the victim, in space, and over a long time, as well as the access of a parent/adult/male over a girl-child. (78)

Most significantly, using the phrasing ‘incestuous rape’ allows the abused black girl-child body to take center stage in my assessment of the texts. Always acknowledging that the act of incest is the raping of a child resists the diminishing or marginalization of the pain caused by the sexual act in a way that the novels, at times, fail to do, but I will get to that point later in the chapter.

In both of the novels I will discuss a girl-child who is raped by her father. In *The Bluest Eye*, eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove is cleaning the kitchen when her drunken father rapes her for the first of at least two times causing an unsuccessful pregnancy and her madness, and in *Push*, Precious is first sexually assaulted while still in diapers and is subsequently raped by her father for years, bearing two of his children while also being sexually molested by her mother. Each novel deals with incestuous rape differently, from the scenes of incest themselves to the rationalization of the rapes, and the figuration of the different characters involved. I will examine each part of these incestuous rapes, but first and foremost I am concerned with articulating how the authors present the black girl-child's body as a body in pain, and the black girl-child self as a victim worthy of recovery. It is important to note that while the previous chapter also concerns rape, incestuous rape is strikingly different. I have already framed the black woman as oppressed due to the white dominant patriarchal social structure of this country, a position that defines black women as un-rapeable by the dominant culture and voiceless in her own community, but if this is the case for black women, then the powerlessness of black girls is exponentially dire. The fact is that these novels reveal what social studies tell us, that the large majority of sexual abuse suffered by children is by family members, and this means that many black girl-children are not even safe in their own homes. Moreover, these novels tell us is that there is no place of refuge for a little black girl, and in the authors' attempts to tell her story and recover the abused black girl-child body, they offer incestuous rape as an integral cause to the black girl-child's invisibility. Before getting further into my textual analysis, one other issue needs to be discussed: the

connection between gender/racial superiority and incestuous rape. This is in order to better frame the vulnerability and defenselessness of the black girl-child victim.

One cannot overstate the role that patriarchy plays in the perpetuation of incestuous rape, specifically those instances where the father is the offender and the daughter the victim. Every sociological study I referenced cited patriarchy as causal to incestuous rape in our society. Judith Herman argues that “without an understanding of male supremacy and female oppression, it is impossible to explain why the vast majority of incest perpetrators (uncles, older brothers, stepfathers, and fathers) are male, and why the majority of victims (nieces, younger sisters and daughters) are female” (*Father-Daughter Incest* 3). Elizabeth Ward asserts that “the rape of girl-children by a Father is an integral product of our society, based on its male supremacist attitudes and organization, reinforced by the fundamental social structure of the family” (77). Sandra Butler adds, “although incestuous assault happens within a family context, the family has incorporated the values and standards of our traditional patriarchy. Therefore, as important as it is to understand the personal psychodynamics of the male sexual aggressor, it is equally important to understand male sexual aggression as an outgrowth of the patriarchal nature of male/female relationships in every aspect of our lives” (6). Judith Herman goes so far as to argue that the patriarchal structure of our society and its rule of/by the Father works to undermine the incest taboo,<sup>25</sup> using its silencing power to

---

<sup>25</sup> Most theories surrounding the incest taboo regard incest as universally prohibited in societies as far back as research allows, although more contemporary research suggests this may not be the case (see Wolf, *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo*). Although incest is defined differently depending on the civilization, there seems to be a nearly universal taboo against incest which often aids in silencing the victims of incest by creating a culture that both disbelieves its victims and shames them, making it a perpetually and grossly underreported crime. Anthropologists like Claude Levi-Strauss suggest that incest

the Father's advantage. She claims, "wherever women are considered the property of men, the incest taboo becomes a rule governing their exchange" (*Father-Daughter Incest* 60). Herman maintains that this is because the daughter is objectified in patriarchal cultures and is viewed as a possession of the father. She explains:

But the daughter belongs to the father alone. Though the incest taboo forbids him to make sexual use of his daughter, no particular man's rights are offended, should the father choose to discard this rule. As long as he ultimately gives his daughter in marriage, he has fulfilled the social purpose of the rule of the gift. Until such time as he chooses to give her away, he has the uncontested power to do with her as he wishes. Hence, of all possible forms of incest, that between father and daughter is most easily overlooked. (*Father-Daughter Incest* 62)

Herman concludes that "only under male supremacy do male incest taboos become agreements among men regarding the disposition of women" (*Father-Daughter Incest* 62). Patriarchal cultures, then, by promoting the incest taboo in public spaces and undercutting it in private spaces, entrap their daughters in a culture that simultaneously silences and denies its most powerless victims.<sup>26</sup> Incestuous child-rape, like adult-rape, becomes a method by which "girl-children are controlled in a male supremacist society" (Ward 95).

---

was used to promote exogamy, or the mating of two non-related beings. As Arthur P. Wolf describes, "putting exogamy before the incest taboo led to the remarkable conclusion that the incest taboo is the means by which human beings transcended their animal nature. For Leslie White and Claude Levi-Strauss, this made the incest taboo the passage between nature and culture" (6).

<sup>26</sup> A connection between incestuous rape and slavery is often made by sociologists as the girl-child is literally the sexual slave of her abuser in a society whose refusal of the possibility of her victimization further enslaves her.

Janice Doane and Devon Hodges discuss African American representations of incest in their book, *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*. They significantly point out that black writers first addressed incestuous rape in the black community by revealing the rape of black girl-children daughters by their white slave-owner fathers, and in doing so, revised the “incest story so as to shift the responsibility for incest from marginalized and poor people to those whose social status and authority allow them to commit acts of incestuous violence and to silence speech about them...namely that slavery was a paternalistic institution in which white men economically and sexually exploited people that they defined as their dependents” (5). This refiguration of the incest narrative which placed responsibility on the white slave owners helped to advance the project of racial uplift by exposing a dark secret of this nation. But as the task of racial uplift became rooted in the black community over time and explicitly negative presentations of the black community were squelched (particularly during the Harlem Renaissance by its black “talented tenth” elite—W.E.B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes), the effect of this social silencing buried the truth of black familial incestuous rape. Doane and Hodges submit that “this form of silence, silence as social discretion, is one that tacitly supports racialized, patriarchal prerogatives...’not telling’ ultimately functions to legitimize forms of gendered inequality within the family,” and, I would argue, racial inequality within society (32).

Doane and Hodges reference Ellison’s Trueblood episode in *The Invisible Man* as a problematic and representative portrayal of black familial incestuous rape by black male authors, and claim that incest in this depiction becomes “a way of signifying the

black man's claim to an originary and potent symbolic authority" (38). Ironically, Ellison's attempt to expose incestuous rape within the black community reifies the rapist's goals by confirming black masculine virility and power at the expense of the black girl-child's body and self. Where black women writers differ from black masculinist depictions of incestuous rape is by exposing the abused black girl-child body. By centering on the abused black girl child, "African American women writers challenge the African American male's precarious and tainted narrative and paternal achievement by bearing witness to his compromised symbolic authority" (Doane 38). While understanding the unique challenges of black masculinity, these black women authors attempt to resist glorifying the black masculine presence at the risk of dismissing the black girl-child as victim.

Acknowledging that incestuous rape, like all rape, is about power—and more accurately, the acquisition of power by one who seemingly lacks power, but who society claims is deserving of power (i.e. the male in a patriarchal society)—presents a specific challenge to our understanding of incestuous rape in the black community. Following the theory of power and domination that defines incestuous rape leads one to conclude that because of the racial emasculation black men experience on a daily basis, the black familial home is a more ripe environment for the gestation of incestuous rape. As Calvin Hernton argues, "we are forced to realize that the centuries of slavery and racism, and the struggle to overcome them, have not informed the humanity of black men when it comes to black women," including their own daughters (*Sex and Racism* 7). This is, I am sure an unpopular assertion, and one that will most likely never be proven due to the gross

underreporting of incestuous rape by all victims, but the politics of the black male/female dynamic nevertheless deserves further thought, especially in light of the black women-authored texts which depict incestuous rape; for example, Gloria Naylor's attempt to ameliorate C.C. Baker's brutal rape of Lorraine.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Toni Morrison overwhelms the reader with reasoning derived from Cholly's back-story as to why he would rape his daughter—a story seeped in details of Cholly's emasculation by white men and further oppression by a dominant white culture. Alice Walker links the lynching of Celie's biological father to her impending incestuous rape at the hands of her stepfather (a violation that Walker also offers as consequential to Celie's father's lynching)—another black man living in a society that, without cause, murders black men, thus rendering them powerless. And, Sapphire has Precious, in *Push*, directly attribute her father's behavior to white supremacy: "Crackers is the cause of everything bad. It why my father act like he do. He has forgot he is the Original Man! So he fuck me, fuck me, beat me, have a chile by me" (34).

All of these authors suggest that black men live in a society that promotes masculinity as all-powerful through its patriarchal domination, but simultaneously strips black men of their masculinity in order to uphold white supremacy. This predicament leaves black men looking for means to access power, and incestuous rape serves this purpose. However, I want to make clear one final point. My position is not that all black men are predisposed to incestuous rape, or even as Butler suggests that society predisposes men in general to incestuous rape. She argues, "it is not these men who are

---

<sup>27</sup> I say this acknowledging that Lorraine's rape is not, in the sense I am using the term, incestuous rape. But, how would it change the way we read black-on-black rape if we consider all of these rapes to be a kind of incestuous rape which violates the brother/sisterhood of a shared community?

monstrous; rather, it is society that has defined them and taught them to define themselves as a consequence of their gender. When all else in their lives fails, they have been led to believe that the exercise of power of their genitals will assure them of their ultimate competence and power” (65). I argue, rather, that these novels depict incestuous rape as a definite reality in the black community, but also as symptomatic of a larger social evil that in the weakest of men manifests itself as incestuous rape.

Toni Morrison says of *The Bluest Eye*, “the act of writing the novel was: the public exposure of a private confidence” (*The Bluest* 212). This telling of incestuous rape is all-important. As Doane and Hodges assess, “silencing is the trauma,” or at least part of the trauma (52). Both Morrison and Sapphire make clear that the physical trauma suffered by the abused black girl-child must not be dismissed, and that the telling of these stories, “undercut the patriarchal cultural authority that produces and promotes the male canonical text” (Doane 71). Most important to the telling of incestuous rape is the accounting of the scene of incest and within it the recovery of the raped black child-body. This next section will examine Morrison’s and Sapphire’s handling of the scene of incest and how both represent the black child-body in pain, and to what ends Sapphire’s depiction of the black child-body builds upon (whether successfully or unsuccessfully) Morrison’s.

#### The Raped Black Child Body and the Myth of the Seductive Daughter

Toni Morrison’s depiction of incestuous rape in *The Bluest Eye* presents the act as a confused performance of sexual gratification and forceful penetration on the part of the father. Cholly walks into his kitchen drunk and sees his daughter washing dishes.

Reminded of his once-young wife by Pecola's "bare foot scratching a velvet leg," he begins to "nibble" the back of her leg (162). Recognizing his touching as "forbidden," he becomes "excited" as "a bolt of desire ran down his genitals" (162). Cholly, in this moment, wants to "fuck" his daughter "tenderly," but as "the tenderness would not hold," he commences to "fuck" his daughter absent of tenderness making "gigantic thrust[s]" until he ejaculates, "disintegrate[ing]" into his daughter (162-163). He then "snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina," leaving her "fainted," "sad," and "limp," lying helpless on the kitchen floor (163).

Pecola's eleven-year-old child-body is, as her father's "mouth tremble[s] at the firm sweetness of the flesh," immediately paralyzed with fear, "the rigidity of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat," preventing her from resisting the sexual advances of her father beyond her body's automatic opposition. Her "tight," virgin vagina is broken open, "provok[ing] the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon" (163). Pecola's deflation and the "disintegration" that the narrator references is a painful response to Cholly's orgasm; Pecola's body is first resisting and then succumbing, her "fingers clinching," "struggle[ing] to be free," her self ultimately dissolving into lifelessness (163). With her father's exit as abrupt and destructive as his entrance, she passes out awaking to the "pain between her legs" and her "mother looming over her" (163). Left for dead on the kitchen floor, with Cholly's "authority inscribed on her [human] body," Pecola's raped child-body validates the worthlessness and ugliness she inherently understood about herself all along (Wall 261). Ironically, what her rape also proves is

her humanity. Like her mother's need to reject the white doctor's belief that black women "deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses," by moaning "something awful" to "let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement," Pecola's body in pain signifies her personhood in the moment she is most objectified, a personhood otherwise denied by her physical corporeality. As Jane Kuenz writes, "Pecola, in fact, is all sign: to see her body is to know already everything about her or at least everything her culture deems important about her" (105). But Pecola's raped body rejects this assumption of her inhumanity and witnesses that even as a dark-skinned, "ugly," black girl she is rape-able and her body is capable of feeling the pain of its destruction.

What happens to Pecola's self through her experience of incestuous rape is best described as "symbolic murder" (Doane 39). Like a victim of adult rape, Pecola experiences the death of her self, the very limited self she maintained while negotiating a cruel world in which she was viewed primarily as an outcast. Doane and Hodges describe Cholly's rape of Pecola as an "assassination" of self that is demonstrated by her disintegration into madness. Pecola, capable of experiencing the pain of rape, but incapable of processing the rape itself, splits her consciousness in two in order to survive. Silenced during the rape by the pain and silenced after by her mother's dismissal and her community's acquiescence, she creates another self with whom to speak. J. Brooks Bouson identifies shame as the primary cause of Pecola's end-state and explains her fragmentation as a result of the "doubleness of experience" shame creates (14). She further explains Pecola's split adding that "her self damaged beyond repair, Pecola

retreats from real life and converses with her alter identity, her only ‘friend’: that is, she ends up living permanently in the dissociated world of the severely traumatized individual” (26). Morrison, unlike the later imaginings of incestuous rape by African American women writers, does not rescue Pecola from her traumatization and instead leaves her “outdoors,”<sup>28</sup> mirroring the garbage she searches for at the end of the novel, discarded and displaced.

Whereas Morrison centers a single scene of incest in her novel, Sapphire chooses to expose the longevity of incestuous rape typical to father-daughter rape scenarios. Scenes of incestuous rape pop up in the novel disturbing the narrative structure, like they pop up in *Precious*’ victim-mind, disrupting her ability to function. Creating a disjointed and, at times, dysfunctional narrative, these interjections of incestuous rape allow the reader to empathize with the constant effect of rape on the mental and emotional stability of its victim. *Precious* reveals that her sexual abuse by her father begins around the age of three. *Precious*’ mother recounts the initial scene of incest to a counselor:

So he on me. Then he reach over to Precious! Start wif his finger between her legs. I say Carl what you doing! He say shut your big ass up! This is good for her. Then he git off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious. You know what trip me out is it almost can go in Precious! I think she some kinda freak baby then. I say stop Carl stop! I want him on me! (135-136)

*Precious*, herself, does not remember this far back, but recalls the first penile penetration of her body at age seven: “Seven, he on me almost every night. First it’s just in my

---

<sup>28</sup> Morrison leaves Pecola in the worst position imaginable to her childhood friends. Claudia explains, “Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life,” adding, “if you are outdoors, there is no place to go” (17).

mouth. Then it's more more. He is intercouraging me. Say I can take it. Look you don't even bleed, virgin girls bleed. You not virgin. I'm seven" (39). But Precious does bleed, a point she makes seven pages earlier while attempting to understand her objectification—a state she comprehends as invisibility, “my fahver don't really see me. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a *real* person, inside. He would not climb on me from forever and stick his dick in me 'n get me inside on fire, bleed, I bleed then he slap me” (32).

While Morrison focuses only on the black raped child-body in pain, Sapphire addresses a conflict many victims of incestuous rape suffer, albeit problematically, that of sexual fulfillment in spite of physical violation. Pondering the news that her father is HIV positive, one of the most brutal and complicated accounts of incestuous rape takes over Precious' thought:

My clit swell up I think Daddy. Daddy sick me, disgust me, but he sex me up. I nawshus in my stomach but hot tight in my twat and I think I want it back, the smell of the bedroom, the hurt—he slap my face till it sting and my ears sing separate songs from each other, call me names, pump my pussy in out in out in out aww I come. He bite me *hard*. A hump! He slam his hips into me HARD. I scream pain he com. He slap my thighs like cowboys do horses on TV. Shiver. Orgasm in me, his body shaking, grab me, call me Fat Mama, Big Hole! You LOVE it! Say you love it! I wanna say I DON'T. I wanna say I'm a chile. But my pussy popping like grease in frying pan. (111)

Although Precious details her child-body in pain, “the hurt,” and the screaming “pain,” Sapphire minimizes the pained child-body in this scene and throughout the novel by overemphasizing the raped child-body in orgasmic pleasure. While Sapphire chooses not to depict the seven-year-old raped child-body in pain, and rather innocuously details the initial penetration of the penis into Precious’ virgin vagina, she does repeatedly highlight the pleasure Precious experiences during rape. In the above scene, Precious, in a rather graphic simile, tells of her “pussy popping like grease in frying pan” evoking an earlier memory of her confused feelings of hatred for her rapist and enjoyment of sexual pleasure, “I get so confuse. I HATE him. But my pussy be popping. He say that, ‘Big Mama your pussy be popping!’ I HATE myself when I feel good” (111, 58). Sapphire’s choice of the word ‘but’ to transition between hatred and pleasure works to negate the former while privileging the latter. The hatred is overwhelmed by the pleasure, and so, Precious is left not hating her violator, but hating herself. Precious even expresses a complicated desire for her father. The above scene begins with Precious confessing that when she thinks of her father her clitoris swells up with sexual arousal. An earlier scene again pairs this desire for sexual fulfillment with self-hatred. Precious confesses, “I want fuck feeling from Daddy,” followed by a desire for self-erasure, “I want die I want die” (53).

Elizabeth Ward notes that some victims of incestuous rape “suffer pleasure within a rape experience,” and that this conflict between pain and pleasure serves as, “a key element in rape crisis counseling because a ‘mind-split’ comes from feeling that the body is betraying us” (152). She further articulates that “a girl-child who is being raped by a

Father and experiences 'pleasure' feels her will (which does not want his contact) separating from her body" (152). Pecola splits her consciousness because she is unable to process the circumstances of her pained child-body, and Precious is split into two selves as her pained child body deceives her. The sexual pleasure Precious' body feels is outside of her control and the subsequent self-hatred is a direct result of her shame in believing it within her control, "my twat jumping juicy, it feel good. I feel shamed" (24). Therefore, this "mind-split" also manifests as a mental escape mechanism during her experiences of bodily violation. Precious documents how she "change[s] stations, change[s] bodies, I be dancing in videos! In movies! I be breaking, fly, jus' a dancing! Umm hmm heating up the stage at the Apollo for Doug E. Fresh or Al B. Shure" (24). This splitting of the mind allows Precious to exist outside of her body as it is being victimized. She never establishes a concept of morality regarding her father's rapes. In another world, her "inside world," she is able to fantasize about all that the incestuous rape has taken from her—confidence, self-esteem, and control. She imagines herself, "I am so pretty, like an advertisement girl on commercial" (35). Creating an inner world, a fantastical flight of mind, allows Precious to detach her self from her body's abuse and treason.

In addition to this conveying an understanding of Precious' split self, however, I would argue that Sapphire's concentration on Precious's pleasure in the midst of an act that constitutes bodily violation aids in diminishing the act of violence Precious' father performs on her child-body and presents Precious as the agent of her pain—a pain caused not so much by the splitting open of her child-body, but by the splitting apart of her self.

In Sapphire's constructions of scenes of incestuous rape, with the near-absence of the child-body in pain and the overpowering presence of the violated body in rapture, the rapist is imagined as the agent of pleasure. A pleasure so intense that Precious' tactic of splitting off in order to avoid the conflict is overcome and she returns to her corporeal self in order to experience the orgasm, "I start to feel good; stop being a video dancer and start coming. I try to go back to video but coming now" (24). Carl, her father-rapist, reads her body correctly and speaks its fulfillment, "See, you LIKE it! You jus' like your mama—you die for it!" (24). Through this, Precious resides in an amoral place, a place that is a defense mechanism to preserve her sanity. In this respect, Sapphire's imagining of the scene of incestuous rape denies the abused black child-body in pain in a way that betrays the violence of the act in the same way that Precious' body betrays her.<sup>29</sup> Walker says of the scenes of incestuous rape in *The Color Purple*, "once the lie that rape is pleasant was stripped away, it was difficult to deal with the 'positive horror' of the many children 'who have been sexually abused and who have never been permitted their own language to tell about it'" (Johnson 96). Sapphire's unwitting perpetuation of "the lie" works to feed myths central to the maintenance of the incest taboo and the continued violation of the black child-body.

The novel's positioning of Precious as a sexual being who responds positively to the sexual element of her incestuous rape alienates her from the reader and begs the question: Who weeps for Precious? On the one hand, Sapphire depicts the brutal

---

<sup>29</sup> In one sense, Precious' pain is intensified by her experiencing of pleasure which serves as a confirmation of her father's justification of his abuse—that she wanted it. My argument is that Sapphire's presentation of the complexity of incestuous rape with its overwhelming focus on Precious' experiencing of pleasure as method denies that pain.

simplicity of the act and the primal responses of the child. But, ironically, in doing so she oversimplifies the abuse of Precious' humanity by showing this innocent child having complex psychosexual emotions. Desire is mixed with trauma, pleasure is mixed with pain. On the other hand, Precious cannot get past this trauma, and this leads to a damaged psyche, to psychosis. The incestuous rape retards her emotional and intellectual growth. She spends years in regression, not growing emotionally or intellectually. She is fixated in the physical stage and does not mature psychologically or sexually. She misinterprets abusive and brutal acts upon her body. She is confused about physical and genital needs. Her mental development is stymied. She remains illiterate. She does not learn math. She is trapped in her abused shell of a huge dehumanized (overgrown but underdeveloped) body. She falls behind in school. She is ridiculed by her classmates, pretends to be invisible, and fantasizes about being glamorous and white. She does not parent her first child. In this way, she has lost her body to her father, and her mind to fixated psychic development. And these are surface observations. They do not attend to her psychosexual complexes and the consequences of her parents' psychotic behaviors. They do not address her weight problem, which is symptomatic of a rejection of her body and poor self-esteem. They do not analyze her self-effacing fantasies of idolized race and beauty and mythical self-worth. We meet her at a time when she seems ready to claim her body and develop her identity, when she wants to be human, but she is entrapped in a diseased, pregnant body and an impoverished, fixated, and abused non-identity that Sapphire suggests (unrealistically) can be redeemed—through a special public school program and a counselor, no less. If nothing else this suggests that while Sapphire does

know the implications of incestuous rape on a child-body (the novel at times feels designed primarily to list possible responses and consequences), she does not understand the depth of the trauma repeated incestuous rape of a child causes, trauma not so easily reversed.

By positioning Precious as the agent of her pain, an amoral entity in an immoral world (her family), Sapphire introduces the myth of the Seductive Daughter, a myth Morrison wants to, but unsuccessfully rejects. Judith Herman outlines how the myth of the Seductive Daughter began: “children do have sexual feelings, and children seek out affection and attention from adults. Out of these undeniable realities, the male fantasy of the Seductive Daughter is created” (*Father-Daughter Incest* 42). The myth works to redirect blame, placing the burden on the child-victim. Sandra Butler further comments that “the responsibility for so dangerously shifting the accountability for incestuous behavior onto the female victim rests squarely on the patriarchal nature of our society as a whole and makes us aware of the double victimization and powerlessness of being a child and a girl” (36). As Elizabeth Ward asserts, “in no other crime of physical violence is the victim presumed to have colluded on these grounds” (142). But even for black women writers, the myth of the Seductive Daughter is not easy to escape, especially in literary representations of incestuous rape. As Herman submits, “the image of the Seductive Daughter is part of the literary and religious tradition” (*Father-Daughter Incest* 36).

According to Herman, Precious’ experiencing sexual pleasure during her experience of incestuous rape could indict her of participation in her abuse, and her

“failure to report the abuse [can be] interpreted as willing acquiescence” (*Father-Daughter Incest* 39). The reader as juror is challenged not only by Precious’ orgasmic fulfillment, but by her expressions of desire. In reality, Precious does not seduce or enjoy the act. When she experiences pleasure, she establishes an amoral place to psychologically defend herself, she responds on a basic physical level, but she also hates her father’s repeated assault, and so, she is confused. We must remember that Precious is a child. Her mother, however, blames Precious and projects seductive behavior on Precious in a pathetic explanation of her own inadequacies. Rather than blame the father, she blames the child. And being blamed, Precious accepts her behavior as seductive because her father—not out of desire but out of power—repeats the act. In effect, Sapphire constructs the dynamic of incestuous rape such that Precious articulates “wanting it,” Precious thinks, “I want fuck feeling from Daddy,” and in doing so, shifts the focal point of the aggression from the rapist to the raped child-victim (25). In the sense of the psychosexual complexes at play, the mother should provide a strong moral structure to protect the child. Precious mother is incapable of doing this and her failure enables the immoral world of the family to exist. Precious’ “hate” of her rapist is, then, interpreted by the reader as a love-hate relationship in an immoral and inhuman context and she is not capable as a child to control it—a point I will return to below.

Significantly, Morrison also fails to fully escape participation in the myth of the Seductive Daughter. Pecola “seduces” Cholly in the same manner that her mother does as a young girl: “the timid, tucked-in look of her scratching toe—that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky...A desire to cover her foot with his

hand and gently nibble away the itch from the calf with his teeth. He did it then, and started Pauline into laughter. He did it now” (162). In seeing Pecola as her mother, Cholly justifies his sexual advances toward her to himself. In Morrison’s imagining, only Cholly, the masculinist presence and author of the “male fantasy” reads Pecola’s toe-scratching as a seductive gesture. Pecola herself is busy innocently cleaning dishes and the reader is conscious of Cholly’s predatory assertion of himself onto Pecola’s body. Paula Eckard connects Pecola’s raped-body to her mother’s sexed-body. She states, “Pecola’s voiceless response to the rape becomes a point of connection between mother and daughter, as her silence mirrors Pauline’s own silent experience of sex with Cholly” (50). Eckard’s reading, however, fails to recognize Pecola’s “sex” with Cholly as rape, revealing Eckard’s unconscious entrenchment in the myth. The myth of the Seductive Daughter, however, is outright rejected in the text as Pauline’s “laughter” at Cholly’s touching is contrasted to the description of Pecola’s violated self, the “rigidness of her shocked body,” and Pecola as child-victim is restored. Notably, this restoration of the raped child-body is an interpretive mechanism for the reader. Even as the novel resists the myth of the Seductive Daughter, it does not wholly resist blaming the victim. The black women of the community condemn Pecola as partly responsible for her victimization, “she carry some of the blame...how come she didn’t fight him?” (189). Pecola’s interpreted acquiescence prevents her from being assigned victim status by the black community even as we, the reader, work hard to recover her as such.

The myth of the Seductive Daughter may mislead the reader into accusing the child-daughter. The key is that the child, even if she is accused of behaving foolishly,<sup>30</sup> is still the violated victim of a crime. Where the myth of the Seductive Daughter works as a rationalization of an adult character to negate the girl-child's victimhood, it also aids in vindicating the perpetrator. At work in the myth of the Seductive Daughter is the notion of love as part of what constitutes incestuous rape. Claudia, attempting to understand Pecola's rape says, "Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (206). Because of this passage, critics like to wrongly assign the term 'love' to Cholly's act of violence against Pecola's child-body. Jane Kuenz claims that Pecola, looking like her mother, "allows [Cholly] to see Pecola more clearly than probably anyone else in the book...and to love her in spite of what he sees" (108). Similarly, Mark Ledbetter appraises Cholly's raping of Pecola as "an attempt to know love" (108). Instead of critiquing Claudia's rationalization and evaluation of Pecola's incestuous rape, these readings mistakenly misidentify the violent sexual penetration of incestuous rape as affection. Elizabeth Ward comments on this tendency and instead argues that incestuous rape may provide the appearance of love, but one that is false. She explains, "fear, compliance and dependence can produce the *semblance* of love. They almost certainly

---

<sup>30</sup> Police identify what they call the "damned fool syndrome," meaning that a person may behave as a damned fool but that does not give anyone the right to commit a crime against them. For instance, a woman is a damned fool if she leaves her purse on the seat of her convertible with the top down and walks away, but if someone were to take the purse without her permission, it would be theft. A girl may seduce an adult unwittingly and that would be foolish behavior, but if the adult has sex with her, it is rape of a child. However in either of these cases within this paradigm, it is hard to see the behavior of Pecola or Precious as being "foolish" or seductive. Cholly fashions the seduction because his daughter has the mannerisms of her mother. But this is clearly his fantasy. Precious' mother blames Precious for seduction because her perverted pedophile husband prefers the child to the mother. This is clearly her projection. Both adults are simply trying to excuse behavior.

produce a *desire* for love, of which a semblance of love may be the manifestation” (144). Tragically, for these victims, “love and rape have therefore become synonymous” (Ward 145). Even so, Morrison’s scene of incestuous rape does not support Claudia’s assessment of love.

Cholly’s “sequence of emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love,” but this “love” is not felt by him; rather he imagines Pecola loving him as a daughter does a father: “he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him?” (*The Bluest* 161). Instead of love, Cholly hates Pecola, “his hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit,” and his rape of her is a manifestation of his incapacity for love, his anger and his need to dominate something (162). His physical desire for her is named “lust,” and in the end his “hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her” (163). Tenderness is not love and neither is rape. Claudia’s understanding of Cholly’s rape is perhaps informed by her child-vision of love. When, as nine-year-olds, Pecola, Claudia, and Freida discuss how babies are made, Frieda says, “somebody has to love you,” and Claudia, influenced by the blues songs of her mother thinks, “it would involve, I suppose, ‘my man,’ who, before leaving me, would love me” (32). Through a child’s eyes, then, Pecola’s pregnancy by her father is translated to mean love. But to a discerning adult, Pecola’s incestuous violent penetration is rape, and rape is never love.

It is true, however, as Butler attests, that for many victims of incestuous rape, the physical closeness is the only form of “affection and attention” they receive (30-31). In Precious’ case, she is brutally beaten by both parents and ostracized by her community

for her dark skin, size, and child pregnancies. The “good” feeling at times felt during her rapes also serves as a manifestation of the need for affection. Significantly, in *Push* it is not Precious, with her child-mind, who misreads her incestuous rape as love, but her father. He, while raping her, says, “I’m gonna marry you,” as close to an, “I love you,” as we get in the novel (24). Carl equates what he perceives as good sex with love, while Precious, on the other hand, desires love of a different sort. She mourns her isolation as a product of her abuse, “no boyfriend no girlfriends,” and fantasizes about being with a man of her choosing (38). Revealingly, whereas her father equates sex with love, Precious can only imagine sex as “fucking,” as she dreams of “fucking a cute boy” (109). What both novels make clear is that although both daughters desperately desire love, this desperation should not be misread as seduction, and to do so is to validate the myth of the Seductive Daughter. As aware as Claudia is of her community’s scapegoating of Pecola, she is surprisingly unaware of her own subconscious bias which aids in perpetuating the myth. Sapphire works to revise Claudia’s misinterpretation, but in doing so, eliminates love altogether.

Touched on, but not fully explained in the preceding analysis is the matter of perspective, the significance of the focalization of the scene of incestuous rape and how the representation of the black girl-child body differs depending on whose perspective the scene is told from. Bouson describes the effect of Morrison’s singular imagining of incestuous rape as, “oddly muted as the narrative proliferates, telling stories...around the empty center of the text, the ‘void’ of the silenced and backgrounded victim” mirrored in its form (28). What is significantly different between the two novels is Precious’

outspokenness about her sexual abuse and Pecola's interminable silence. *Push* begins, "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby by my fahver," with Precious voicing her rape (3). Incestuous rape is also immediately revealed in *The Bluest Eye*, but from the voice of an outsider, Claudia, remembering the circumstances of an infertile fall in 1941, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (5). In contrast, Precious' naming of her sexual abuse as rape is critical to her acquisition of self, "Nigger rape me I not steal shit fat bitch your husband RAPE me RAPE ME" (74). She knows it is wrong, but what is interesting is how her remembering of her abuse minimizes the black child-body in pain and allows her to create an amoral space for its acceptance. Her different re-creations of incestuous rape scenes focus her telling of her incestuous rape on the circumstances surrounding the rape, the dialogue exchanged, her fantastical trips during the rape. Symptomatic of the trauma suffered and her inability to process her raped body and a self still-in-pain, Precious rarely describe her raped child-body in pain. When she does describe her raped child-body in pain it is in generic terms; for instance, she repeatedly uses the word "hurt" to describe her pained body (18,111). Precious details what happens to her body, but not how her body reacts to the violence depicted other than in the manner already discussed, with pleasure. Significantly, she does mention how her traumatized self responds to her violation. She describes peeing on herself, being distracted, her consciousness plagued with self-hatred, self-mutilation, and even "smear[ing] shit on [her] face," all symptoms sexually abused children routinely exhibit (111). Perhaps the absence of Precious' abused child-body in

pain is expressive of her unwillingness to fully re-enter the scene of incestuous rape, a problem the detached narrator in *The Bluest Eye* does not have.

Contrary to many critics' reading of the incestuous rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*, I disagree that Morrison, "represented the rape of African American girls by black father figures from the perspective of the victim" (Boesenberg 224). Morrison claims she felt she succeeded in capturing, "the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape—the persons no one inquired of (certainly not in 1965)—the girls themselves," but I challenge her assessment of her accomplishment ("Unspeakable" 387). None of the victims or could-be victims narrates the scene of incestuous rape, although less-impactful scenes of sexual molestation and black girl-child vulnerability to sexual predators are narrated by Claudia and Freida. Even the scenes of black girl-child sexual abuse at the hands of the resident pedophile, Soaphead Church, are first focalized through an omniscient narrator and then described by the offender himself, ironically, in a letter to God, not by the violated black girl-child victims themselves. This is not to say that Morrison's approach is without significant achievement. As stated before, the detachment of the narrator allows the black girl-child body in pain to be exposed in a manner that the "victims or could-be victims" are not ready to imagine. The narrator's word choice when telling the scene of incestuous rape positions Pecola's child-body in pain. Words and word couplings like, "fuck," "gigantic thrust," "disintegration," "fingers clenching," "grip," "struggle," "painful," and "snatched," each work to describe the violence enacted upon Pecola's child body as pain-causing. Like Precious, we know that Pecola is also not ready to express her body in pain in this manner. Talking with her

alternative self, Pecola is only able to describe her incestuous rape as “horrible,” using the same word three times adding no other details. Pecola is able to acknowledge her violation as rape, albeit without the correct terminology to name it as such, saying that she did not “let him” have sex with her (199). But it is Pecola’s lack of language to express her pained child-body that keeps her trapped in the horror of her rape, only able to escape by imagining something good and beautiful, blue eyes. Sapphire, then, improves upon Morrison’s desire to understand the “vantage point” of the black girl-child victim, but reveals how this perspective is not necessarily a greater truth. In the end, where *The Bluest Eye* is able to expose the raped black girl-child body in pain, *Push* aspires to recover this pained body as worthy, as of value, as Precious.

#### The Rule of the Father

The modern black family is historically a strictly patriarchal governance, a system instituted post-slavery as a means of uplifting the disenfranchised black man, placing him, at least in his home, on equal footing as the white man. As discussed above, the patriarchal structure of the black family and the larger social dynamic it mirrors allows incestuous rape to occur in an environment that denies the act because of the Rule of the Father. The emasculated black father following the Rule of the Father determines the oppression of women and injects the fear of rape as a form of domination in patriarchal societies. As Sandra Butler articulates, “perhaps the most insidious aspect of incestuous assault is that in the same way men have been societally permitted to be sexual predators, their daughters have been trained into the role of victim by virtue of their femaleness” (82-83). The Rule of the Father as such, “father-daughter incest [is] but one

manifestation of a despotic paternal rule,” a rule by violence and for power (Herman 63). Morrison aggressively documents the Rule of the Father through Cholly and seeks to understand his tyranny, while Sapphire leaves her father-rapist at the margins of her text. Both texts name the ruler-father as abuser-rapist in an effort to recover the raped black girl-child body, but both novels find it difficult to fully escape patriarchal control by problematically attempting to understand the father at the expense of the child daughter’s raped body and abused self.

Morrison states in her Afterword to *The Bluest Eye* that she “did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse,” and this includes Pecola’s father, Cholly Breedlove (211). For this reason, Morrison takes great pains to give the reader a complete understanding of the kind of black man who would rape his own daughter. We know that at “four days old his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad” (133). Ironically discarded like the garbage through which his daughter rifles through at the end of the novel, Cholly is rescued (she, of course, is not) by his Great Aunt and lives incident-free until her death when Cholly is still a youth. At his Great Aunt’s funeral reception Cholly finds himself literally coming into his manhood, experiencing his first sexual intercourse with a girl, Darlene, a scene of romantic innocence abruptly interrupted by two white men with “long guns” (147). Morrison plays with the sexual pun of the men’s “long guns” as they disrupt Cholly’s shooting of himself into Darlene, “paralyzing” them in fear (148). The white men force a now limp Cholly to continue having sexual intercourse with Darlene, “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger,

make it good,” and Cholly performs his masculinity “with violence born of total helplessness” (148). Emasculated and embarrassed, Cholly’s reaction is not violence against the white men, but against the black woman he, just moments before, touched and “kissed” gently—a scene that foreshadows the dichotomous feeling Cholly later senses of desiring to “fuck” his daughter “tenderly.” Cholly “hated her. He almost wished he could do it—hard, long and painfully, he hated her so much” (148). He “wanted to strangle her” (149). Cholly’s violent anger is acknowledged by the text to be misdirected; Cholly first scapegoats Darlene before doing the same to Pecola decades later: “Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless” (150). Unable to protect Darlene and himself from the racialized violence of the white men, Cholly assumes the only position of power he owns and asserts his patriarchal privilege over Darlene, “the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence” (151). Already, Cholly recognizes that the black girl-child can be sacrificed for his own survival.

Running from the possibility that Darlene might be pregnant, Cholly travels to find his father, and once he does he is violently rejected in another blow to his male ego. His father dismisses him saying, “Tell that bitch she get her money. Now get the fuck outta my face!” (152). Without any recourse, without any means to immediately reaffirm and empower his self (i.e. through the possession/destruction of a black female body), Cholly collapses, defecating on himself “like a baby,” “paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes for a long time” (157). Significantly, the reader is sympathetic of Cholly at this

moment despite his already stated hatred of the innocent black girl, Darlene. Morrison frames Cholly as a motherless, fatherless, emasculated black male youth with seemingly nowhere to go, and we, the audience, commiserate with him, understanding the rationalization that he has no other access to self (read power) than sex, with prostitutes who “give him back his manhood, which he takes aimlessly” (159). But what is often minimized in discussions of Cholly’s back-story is the fact that his survival depends not only on sex as the determiner of his masculinity, but on violence as the determiner of his power.

Cholly is described as a murderer, a physical abuser of women, and a possessor of things not meant to be possessed, and significantly, Morrison identifies Cholly’s violent acquisition of self as freedom: “he had already killed three white men. Free to take a woman’s insults for his body had already conquered hers. Free to even knock her in the head, for he had already cradled that head in his arms. Free to be gentle when she was sick or mop her floor, for she knew what and where his maleness was” (159). The text ironically suggests Cholly’s freedom, “Cholly was truly free,” is the ideal, the end-goal for a black man in Cholly’s world even as we, the reader, understand this ideal assumes a perverted value system. (160). As such, Cholly’s “freed” state blindly excuses the murders, physical violence and unwanted possession, and instead celebrates Cholly’s triumph over his own figurative rape and societal dismissals by his violent assertion of self. Because Cholly is “deeply traumatized and shamed at the disgraceful exposure of himself as weak and contemptible...[he] invokes the inherited stereotype of the ‘bad nigger’—the defiant, but also unrestrained and potentially dangerous, male” (Bouson 35).

But this “bad” is both “bad” as in not good, and “bad” as in the Michael Jackson slang sense of bad-ass. In this way, Cholly’s documented violent nature is problematically romanticized and idealized. In fact, Cholly’s choice to marry and the resulting family is offered as Cholly’s fatal flaw, as what ultimately leads to his downfall and exorcism from the novel, “the constantness, varietylessness, the sheer weight of sameness drove him to despair and froze his imagination” (160). Marriage and family enslave Cholly, literally driving him to drink, “only in drink was there some break, some floodlight, and when that closed, there was oblivion” (160). And so it is, when Cholly “staggered home reeling drunk,” that he rapes his daughter (161).

Morrison’s characterization of Cholly ultimately works, in many ways, to justify Cholly’s crime of incestuous rape, and many critics use Morrison’s narrative construction as a means of accepting Cholly’s act of rape. Mark Ledbetter reasons that Cholly’s raping of Pecola is because of “failed communities,” adding that “in a world where men define their power in terms of sexuality, to be powerless is to resort to sexual extremes,” and so Cholly rapes, “in order to regain some sense of control in his life” (31). Paula Eckard suggests Cholly is mentally ill, connecting his mind-state to his daughter’s madness, “Cholly’s sense of self, particularly his manhood, has been similarly warped through white influence,” but without properly naming Cholly as the “influence” causing his daughter’s schizophrenia (39). Morrison tries to subvert these analyses by claiming that the connection of Cholly’s rape to his own of his daughters, “this most masculine act of aggression becomes feminized in my language, ‘passive’ and, I think more accurately repellent when deprived of the male ‘glamor of shame’ rape is (or once was) routinely

given,” but I disagree (“Unspeakable” 388). Instead of “fucking” Pecola, Morrison depicts Cholly as “tenderly fucking” Pecola in a rhetorical move that displaces the assumed violence of the act of “fucking” with an unexpected softness. Thus, “feminization” of the rape by definition makes it less repellent, softens the violent act of sexual violation and discounts the “masculine” aggressiveness of the brutalization Pecola’s girl-child body experiences.

Explaining how “Pecola’s rape therefore seems to be perpetuated by the encounter in the woods in which Cholly was forced by whites to perform what became, under scrutiny, a contrived sex act,” Minrose Gwin rightfully comments on the shifting of responsibility that occurs when Cholly’s back-story as justification is more closely examined (321). Gwin claims that it is precisely the knowledge of Cholly’s personal victimization that allows Pecola to be seen “more as a perpetrator of the incest rather than a rape victim” by the black community, and I would argue, by also the reader (324). Pecola stands as yet another manifestation of Cholly’s failure:

How dare she love him? Hadn’t she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (161-162)

Cholly reacts to Pecola as a symbol of his lack as he always has, through violent force, by brutalizing her in order to feel better about himself. Cholly’s action is, then, made understandable given a socially plausible explanation, and the narrative’s construction of

Cholly's rationalization of Pecola's incestuous rape positions Pecola as causal to the rape. Pecola is, in effect, blamed for victimizing Cholly and her punishment for her violation of him—her being his daughter and, thus, a reflection of his inadequacy—is rape. The problem with these explanations is that Pecola is a child victim—no justification can forgive this violation. In this context, the raped girl-child body is lost as is Pecola's self in its traumatic aftermath.

Sapphire offers significantly less characterization of Carl Kenwood Jones, Precious' father-rapist. Largely absent from the novel as he is largely absent from Precious' life, the text reveals few details about the man who not only rapes his daughter, but infects her with HIV. The only explanation given for Carl's raping of his daughter is the aforementioned influence of white supremacy, "Crackers is the cause of everything bad. It why my father ack like he do" (34). This difference between the two narratives is noteworthy. Whereas Morrison's thorough explanation serves, in ways, as a justification, Sapphire resists developing Carl at all, reducing his authority over the text. Sapphire's narrative construction pushes the father-rapist to the margins and centralizes the raped black girl-child body. In this sense, Morrison midjudges her project in *The Bluest Eye* when the narrator states, "since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (6). The concentration on Cholly's back-story is precisely the "why," while Sapphire attempts to understand the "how," or more accurately the what.

This is not to say that Sapphire's lack of characterization of Carl is unproblematic. In leaving Carl all but undefined, the father-rapist becomes everyman, or at least every black man. The tragedies suffered by Cholly help to explain his psychosis, and the reader

is comforted in the end that only a black man having suffered such destructive abandonment, emasculation, and rejection is capable of raping his daughter with such brutality.<sup>31</sup> Without this, the black male pathology is offered as the reason for black men raping their daughters, and Carl exists as representative of this distorted sense of black masculinity, as symbolic of the stereotype, as the dangerous, predatory black male. What Sapphire does not do is offer another alternative. The black man exists only as father-rapist. Morrison, on the other hand, does offer an alternative. Claudia describes her father's strength and tough-love figuring him as a kind of superhero fighting snow and cold, "winter moves into [his face] and presides there...wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills" (61). Morrison submits Claudia's father as an example that the hard existence of the black man does not have to translate into violent abuse, whether it be physical or sexual, of the women connected to him. Notably, regardless of alternate representations of black manhood, both authors make clear that the black girl-child body is always at risk of rape from black male paternal figures, even as the texts question the idea of "father" and its automatic, yet problematic biological attachment. This representation of the "father" as really a non-father presents an opportunity to deny or minimize the incestuous element of incestuous rape that is, in the end, unsettling.

Influenced by the always overarching Rule of the Father, in an effort to, perhaps subconsciously, minimize the act of incestuous rape, Morrison goes so far as to excuse

---

<sup>31</sup> Morrison's characterization of the black father-rapist through Cholly is also problematic. The reader is comforted by Cholly as victim, by Cholly as poor, by Cholly as overtly oppressed and emasculated, and so limits their definition of a father-rapist to this kind of black man. The reality is that perpetrators of incestuous rape do not all fit this profile and come from every kind of racial, economic, and social background.

Cholly from the role of father all together, thus taking the incestuous element from the rape:

the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. ... Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. (160-161)

In another example of misplaced fault, blamed for his callous ineptness as a father is the black woman, and surrogate mother, who saved and cared for him. With no parents of his own, Cholly has no strict psychosexual barriers to incest. Cholly is unable to parent, existing as a non-father, and the text subsequently dissolves him of parental responsibility. The incestuous rape metastasizes into the romantically natured rape<sup>32</sup> of a girl who is reminiscent of another girl the rapist once cared for—a significantly less offensive act than father-daughter rape.

Sapphire makes a similar move in her characterization of Precious' father. Carl is also represented as a non-father. Precious, after remembering Alice Walker's twist in *The Color Purple* when Celie finds out her father-rapist is really only her stepfather, asks

---

<sup>32</sup> Notably, the rape is left in question due to Pecola's lack of protestation. As mentioned in the previous chapter and earlier in this one, lack of protestation in rape scenarios is often read as acquiescence, as willingness.

her mother, “you huzbn, Carl, my real daddy?” (86). Her mother responds, “he your daddy, couldn’t no one else be your daddy. I was with him since I was sixteen. I never been with nobody else. We not married though, he got a wife though, purty light-skin woman he got two kids by” (86). Carl may be a father to his other two kids, but he is not to Precious. He “come in the night, take food, what money they is, fuck us bofe,” but, like Cholly, he does not fulfill any paternal responsibility (85). Precious manifests her confusion between the person who is named her father and her idea of what a father should be by alternatively calling her father “daddy” and “Carl.” Sapphire’s choice to remove Carl from the home of his raped daughter and her denying him the role of parent works to minimize the incestuousness of Precious’ rape. If the greatest sin associated with incestuous rape is the betrayal of trust and love nurtured in a traditional father-daughter relationship, then this element is absent from Precious’ rapes. Carl’s figuration as a non-father detaches the reader from the traumatic reality of incestuous rape even as the reader accepts the disturbing nature of the biological relationship Carl and Precious share. By, in part, excusing Carl as not really Precious’ father, at least not in terms of actively fulfilling the paternal role, the text downplays the incestuous nature of Precious’ multiple rapes, making the scenes of rape ultimately more accessible and process-able to the reader.

What my analysis of the father-rapist in these two novels hopefully reveals is the difficulty these black women writers faced in attempting to represent black incestuous rape and the complexity of telling it. For this reason, the texts are full of contradictions regarding the black girl-child victim of incestuous rape, and as both novelists attempt to

recover the raped black girl-child body, this effort is, at times, undermined by the larger cultural environment—an environment still very much rooted in racial uplift and entrenched in the denial of the possibility of incestuous rape. The Rule of the Father inconspicuously governs the texts making Morrison believe that Cholly's back-story is necessary to the telling of incestuous rape, while Pecola's version of the rape is not. In contrast, the fear of the Rule of the Father pressures Sapphire into virtually eliminating the father-rapist from the text, a strategic choice that ultimately backfires. Both novelists retreat in different ways from the incestuous, and most egregious, nature of the rape (as does Walker), and, in doing so, leave the black girl-child body uncovered, but not recovered. The horror of incestuous rape and its father-perpetrators are revealed, but not convicted; neither by the law<sup>33</sup> nor by the reader. Instead, in both novels, the mother accepts much of the blame for her daughter's victimization.

### The Bad Mother

Judith Herman submits that the mothers of incestuous rape victims are traditionally blamed in three significant ways for their daughters' abuse: "first, she failed to perform her marital duties; second, she, not the father, forced the daughter to take her rightful place; and third, she knew about, tolerated, or in some cases actively enjoyed the incest" (*Father-Daughter Incest* 42). Many sociologists cite the mother's unnatural co-dependency on the father-rapist as what is at the root of what many read as the mother's complicity in her child's rape. Herman reasons that loyalty to the husband plays a critical

---

<sup>33</sup> Notably, neither father-rapist threatens their daughter in order to encourage her to not tell. This speaks to how the black girl-child body is perceived as worth-less, and to the community of silence which conspires to keep the victim of incestuous rape invisible. There is no fear of legal consequence; the father-rapists are aware that the deed of incestuous rape performed on a black girl is either not understood as a crime by the dominant culture, or not acknowledged as possible by the black community.

role in these “unusually oppressed” mothers’ involvement in incestuous rape; she states, “if the price of maintaining the marriage includes the sexual sacrifice of her daughter, she will raise no effective objections. Her first loyalty is to her husband, regardless of his behavior. She sees no other choice. Maternal collusion in incest, when it occurs, is a measure of maternal powerlessness” (*Father-Daughter Incest* 49). Elizabeth Ward argues that the mother’s forced (by means of total dependency) collusion is as a kind of rape the mother experiences in an effort to re-figure the mother as victim:

In keeping silent about the Father, the Mother betrays herself: herself as female, reflected in her Daughter. To that extent, the Mother too, is being raped. In her experience of her powerlessness, in her humiliation at bearing such a socially unacceptable ‘family secret,’ and in her identification with her daughter (or any girl-child), the Mother shares with her Daughter the horror of rape exploitation. But the Daughters, in their desperate need for understanding from the Mother, often feel angrier with their Mothers than with their Fathers. They feel their Mothers have deserted them, failed them. In a sense, they are right. (164)

What works at the core of the tendency to blame the mother is the inability for non-“unusually oppressed” outsiders to comprehend the magnitude of dependency and powerlessness that would allow a mother to either collude in her daughter’s rape or abandon her daughter in pain. But Ward further explains:

The internalization of passivity by women differs in degree along a spectrum: it is a direct result of a male supremacist cultural system that indoctrinates women to exist only as the playthings or nurturers of men. Female sex-role conditioning,

fostered within the rape ideology which inculcates fear of men as a way of living has inevitably led women to respond ‘inadequately’ in the face of father-daughter rape. (171)

What must be understood is that the issue here is not that mothers collude and abandon their raped child-daughters, but that the mothers are blamed for the incestuous rape of their daughters because of these roles in their abuse. “Blamed principally for *causing* it,” these mothers are more often figured as rapists than victims of rape (Ward 163). This section will examine how both *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* blame the mother in each of the three ways Herman offers, and how *Push*’s addition of mother-daughter incestuous rape further demonizes the mother. Finally, I will discuss how the texts suggest incestuous rape impacts the child-victim as a mother herself.

Pauline Breedlove explicitly describes making love to Cholly in the early years of their marriage: “I know he wants me to come first. But I can’t. Not until he does. Not until I know that my flesh is all that be on his mind. That he couldn’t stop if he had to. That he would die rather than take his thing out of me. Of me. Not until he has let go of all he has, and give it to me. To me. To me. When he does, I feel a power. I be strong, I be pretty, I be young” (130). Not only is the sex mutually fulfilling, but it is empowering and self-validating. But Pauline quickly informs us that these episodes of love-making are short-lived and replaced by passionless, violent sex: “but it ain’t like that anymore. Most times he’s thrashing away inside me before I’m woke, and through when I am. The rest of the time I can’t even be next to his stinking drunk self” (131). This detailing of the progressive sexlessness of the Breedlove marriage works to provide cause for

Cholly's need to satisfy a sexual need with his own daughter. Pauline's recalling of a time when the sex was desirous connects to Cholly's remembering of her as he begins to "nibble" the calf of his daughter. Cholly, longing for the sexual relationship of his early marriage, transposes his child-wife onto his child-daughter and attempts to reenact the love-making of a previous time.

The scene of incestuous rape cast in this light blames Pauline for failing to fulfill her marital duties, lacking sexual desire for her husband. In her youth, Pauline innocently desires romantic love and a physical beauty she thinks will provide that kind of love, but love and beauty become obsessions for Pauline; "both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (122). After losing more than one tooth and resigning herself to ugliness, unworthy of her ideal of romantic love, Pauline gives up, "she stopped trying to keep her house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like afterthoughts one has just before sleep" (127). Considering Cholly as an "afterthought," pushed to the margins of his wife's existence, left "outdoors," emasculated and embarrassed, Cholly's rape of Pecola is figured as the desperate act of a lonely man, well-intentioned and pitiable. Pauline as the "bad mother" and her failure to serve as a "good wife" are upheld as a catalyst for Cholly's stumbling into his daughter's virgin vagina.

Sapphire, signifying on *The Bluest Eye*, similarly connects the notion of ugliness with an inability to satisfy masculine sexual desire. Similar to Pauline's loss of teeth changing her perception of herself enough to impact her marital relationship, the morbid obesity of Precious' mother, Mary, is offered as the reason why she, as "wife," is no longer able to satisfy Carl sexually. Precious repeatedly mentions her mother's "big woman smell," and although Precious is herself a big girl, her mother is an extremely large woman with personal hygiene issues. Precious makes very clear that she, "don't smell like [her] muver," and the textual inference is that although Mary's "husband" and Precious' father enjoys big women, "Butter Ball Big Mama Two Ton of Fun," Mary has let herself go beyond sexual desirability (36, 35). Whereas Pauline no longer wants her husband sexually, Mary still desires Carl, and Precious hints that part of the reason for her continued sexual abuse is an agreement between her mother and father, "she bring him to me. I ain' crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Probably thas' what he require to fuck her, some of me" (24). Mary, as Precious' pimp, incites the incestuous rape of her daughter in order to maintain a sexual relationship with Carl herself.

Part of what is also at work within the dynamic of the incestuous rape in *Push* is Mary's jealousy of Precious, her seeming ability to better perform marital duties as evidenced by Precious' bearing of two children by her father versus the one Mary herself has born. Notably, Mary is not Carl's wife legally. He is married and also has two children by his wife, leaving Mary as his "imaginary" wife lagging behind. Elizabeth Ward explains how jealousy can work with mothers of incestuous rape victims: "for many women the conditioning that leads her to believe she will virtually cease to exist

without 'her man' had been very effective: she has also been taught that to be sexually desirable is the only way to keep him when it comes to brass tacks" (177). Mary expresses this in her description of Carl's first sexual abuse of Precious, "I wanted my man for myself. Sex me up, not my chile," and for her, Precious' children serve as reminder of failure as a "wife," or in Mary's case her reality as a non-wife, that 'her man' not only desires someone else as a life partner, but would rather have sex with her daughter than with her (136). Precious' birthing of her "husband's" children is perceived by Mary to be what "ruin[s] her life," a conception she takes out on Precious through physical and sexual abuse. Mary, then, punishes Precious for what she perceives to be Precious' theft of her spouse, "you steal my husband!," while simultaneously satisfying her sexual needs by raping Precious herself.

Beverly Ogilvie's 2004 work, *Mother-Daughter Incest: A Guide For Helping Professionals*, is the first major sociological study on the subject. In Ogilvie's assessment, "mother-daughter incest is not rare; it is underestimated and underreported because its occurrence involves the breaking of two taboos, incest and homosexuality" (4). Significantly, Ogilvie identifies mother-daughter incestuous rape as a form of slavery; the children "feel imprisoned because the captor has total control over their existence and unlimited access to their bodies" (49). Ultimately, Ogilvie ascertains that "hostility and self-hatred" are at the root of mother-daughter incestuous rape. What is most problematic with the dynamic of mother-daughter incestuous rape is how the victim "struggles with identifying with and differentiating from her mother" (Ogilvie 55). Wanting to forge the maternal bond, what Ogilvie names as the "essential human

connection,” the daughters of mother-daughter incestuous rape are confused by their anger at their abusive mothers and disillusioned by the absence of any human connection.

In *Push*, the impetus for Precious’ mother’s sexual violence against her stems from her jealous hostility and subsequent self-hatred at, on the one hand, being displaced as a sexual object for Carl, and on the other, not being strong enough to stop the incestuous rape of her daughter—instead participating in it. Precious’ victimization by her father is exponentially compounded by her mother’s sexual abuse, which, like Carl’s, is a demonstration of a need for power and control. As Ogilvie explains, “perpetrators of mother-daughter incest controlled their victims methodically and repetitively by inflicting psychological trauma. Through words, they disempowered and disconnected their victims. They instilled terror and helplessness and destroyed the victims’ sense of self in relation to others” (90). Precious is never allowed to construct a self absent from sexual abuse.

Precious’ first memory of her mother is “the smell of Mama’s pussy” in her face (117). With no memory of her mother before abuse, Precious understands that her mother, “don’t love me” and she hates her for it (34). Significantly, Precious never experiences sexual pleasure during the episodes of mother-daughter incestuous rape. Instead, Precious fixates on “the smell,” “I can tell Mama’s other hand between her legs now ‘cause the smell fill room” (21). Mary, who “can’t fit into bathtub no more,” force-feeds Precious in an attempt to subvert Carl’s desire for Precious. Precious describes “eating first ‘cause she make me, beat me if I don’t,” and then, “eating hoping pain in my neck back go away” (21). Precious attempts to differentiate herself from her mother by

cleaning her body and staying smaller in size than her mother, but ultimately succumbs to the comfort of food as self medicating, a symptom typical of mother-daughter incest survivors: “food may become a focus, a means of control...to the overeater, food is a comfort, a means of escape, a disconnection from the pain, a way to fill that huge hole in the soul” (Ogilvie 75). In the end, Mary’s incestuous rape of Precious imparts on Precious the responsibility to fulfill the “marital duties” for both parents. For Carl, no longer sexually attracted to his morbidly obese partner, Precious serves as a substitute, and for Mary, rejected and displaced, Precious becomes the source of her sexual fulfillment. In all of this self-serving behavior, Precious’ humanity is lost.

Symbolic of Pecola and Precious’ lost humanity as victims of incestuous rape is how the mothers in these texts fail to recognize them as daughters, but as wife-substitutes who carry out the terms of Herman’s second indictment of the blamed mother, forcing or permitting “the daughter to take her rightful place” (42). By all accounts, both girl-children effectively take on the role of their mothers as wife beyond just the “marital duties,” serving unwillingly as sexual partners of their fathers. As Pauline “neglects” her role as wife, Pecola is placed in the position of her mother in order to maintain the home. Pecola is washing dishes when Cholly sees her in the kitchen and is reminded of his wife. Likewise, Precious makes clear that “Mama never do anything” (22). Mary tells Precious, “that’s what you here for,” to cook, clean, and financially support the household with welfare checks garnered as the result of her incestuously begotten children (22). The fact that these girl-children are placed by their mothers into their place in the household further works to explain the incestuous rape (or continuation of abuse in

Precious' case). The fathers, conditioned to view women's existence only in relation to themselves and their needs, accept their daughters' new role as wife. Reading the texts in this way, the girl-children are removed as daughters in order to replace wives *by* their mothers. Placing the "bad mother" at fault, the men understandably expect their daughters to fulfill all of a wife's "marital duties," sex being a part of this. The mothers' failure to nurture their children and perform wifely duties place Pecola and Precious in a heightened state of vulnerability, as not only scapegoats for a larger community, but as scapegoats in their own home. Claudia identifies this reality in *The Bluest Eye*: "all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (205). They become the sacrificial lambs allowing these mothers to attain their own sense of power and control, whether it be, in Pauline's case, through her surrogate white family, or as with Mary, through the violent physical and sexual violation of her daughter.

Lastly, *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* both blame the mother for the incestuous rape of her child because of her knowing and toleration of the abuse. Both mothers not only disbelieve their daughters' abuse, but also punish their daughters for voicing their rape. Pecola, when speaking to her alternative self says, "she didn't even believe me when I told her" about the first time (200). Pauline's response is instead a violent betrayal of Pecola's trust, "they say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself" (189). Pauline's denial of Pecola's incestuous rape, beyond even the trauma of the rape itself, is

what silences Pecola, a silencing that inevitably leads to Pecola's self-destruction. Her alternative self asks, "so that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?," to which Pecola responds, "she wouldn't have believed me then either" (200). What is implied, but not specifically addressed in Pecola's conversation with herself, is that had her mother believed her the first time, her body would have been saved the second violation. Pauline is further condemned in that she is the one who is witness to Pecola's raped child-body but fails to comfort her and, in fact, harms her further. Pauline finds her daughter, still unconscious, "lying on the kitchen floor, under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her" (163). In this sequence, Pecola equates her body in pain to her mother's face, and identifies her mother as pain, an initial assessment validated through Pauline's subsequent physical violence enacted upon a body already in pain. Pauline not only fails to stop the sexual abuse of her daughter, but participates as an inflictor of pain.

Precious' mother does not disbelieve the incestuous sexual relationship between Carl and Precious, but she does not believe it as rape. She screams, "Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty slut" (19). Figuring Precious as the seductress and blaming her for her victimization, Mary absolves Carl of all responsibility for raping his daughter. Mary testifies to knowing about Precious' abuse from its inception, but what spurs her violent outburst, "Fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch! He done quit me! He done left me 'cause of you...I should KILL you!," is Precious' birthing of Carl's children (19). In the beginning of the novel Precious is seen giving birth on the kitchen floor, screaming out for "Mommy," needing a nurturing, care-

giving presence to guide her body through the pain of child birth. Mary violently rejects Precious's pleading, "she KICK me side of my face! 'Whore! Whore!' she screamin" (9). Precious continues to yell, "Mommy," as the beating continues. The circumstances surrounding the birth of Precious' second child are no different. Returning from the hospital with Abdul, Precious is forced to leave her house and sleep in a shelter after her mother viciously attacks her, "I got new baby boy in my arms 'n she callin me bitch hoe slut say she gonna kill me 'cause I ruin her life" (74).

Sapphire's depiction of Mary, a Mommy Dearest-kind of horror villain, as an anti-mother, presents her as more of a monster than Carl. By demonizing Mary and further corroborating her evilness as a rapist, Carl is removed from the text as the villain as he is removed from the text with his death from AIDS, and Mary is left to shoulder the blame for all of Precious' abuse. I am not saying that Pauline and Mary should not be blamed for their roles in perpetuating and participating in their daughters' abuse, because they should. What I do want to show, however, is that the texts set up these mothers to take the blame, and in doing so, partly relieves the father-rapists of their responsibility in violating the girl-child bodies of their daughters. The tragedy is that no one in these novels wants to fix the problem, rather everyone fixes the blame. The daughters are silent, both Cholly and Carl disappear from the texts without consequence, and the mothers are left to blame. It is important also to note that motherhood itself is offered in both texts as a consequence of father-daughter rape. Whereas *The Bluest Eye* rejects the possibility of incestuous rape resulting in life, *Push* more complexly looks at the girl-child incestuous rape victim as mother. Like the marigolds, Pecola's baby fails to grow,

“came too soon and died” (204). Pecola’s birthing of this child is absent from the text just as Pecola is absented from her self after the rapes. Morrison suggests that nothing alive can result from incestuous rape as Pecola is left a dead woman walking, “searching the garbage” (206). Sapphire’s dealing with motherhood as a consequence of incestuous rape is more complicated.

As mentioned, giving birth for Precious is written as a traumatic event, the pain of the birth itself overwhelmed by the physical violence accompanying it and the social/economic deprivation that allows Precious to be treated as a second-class citizen. Precious’ first child is born with Down Syndrome and is taken from her to live with her grandmother. Precious’ teacher tries to convince her to give up her second child, but Precious refuses and determines to be a good mother, a move to further differentiate herself from her own mother, but we are shown that this decision is not without complications. While Precious loves her newborn son, she, at first resists her role as his mother not wanting her new identity as his mother to signify her participation in her rape, “I love my baby, but he ain’ mine he is but I didn’t fuck for him. I was rape by my fahver” (69). Precious is forced to reconcile that her son is both a part of her and her father-rapist in order to not repeat the cycle of victimization begun by her parents. Ultimately Precious’ naming of and voicing her rape helps her to separate her sexual abuse from her resulting child. Precious finds her self in motherhood, a self outside of pain, “In his beauty I see my own” (140). Significantly, Precious is a good mother--caring for, reading to, and protecting her son in a way that was never modeled for her. In this way, Sapphire rejects Morrison’s interpretation of incestuous rape as a death

sentence and submits that even in the most infertile of soil, the most barren of environments, a flower can bloom. But it is important to note that Sapphire fails to resist Morrison's notion completely. At the end of *Push*, Precious is HIV positive having acquired the virus from her father. Although Precious' children survive, and, at least Abdul, may thrive, Precious herself will still die as a consequence of incestuous rape.

Both novels suggest that even as Pecola's and Precious' mothers fail them, the presence of a maternal figure is critical to their survival. In the absence of adult empathy for Pecola, Claudia and Frieda try, as children, to act as mother surrogates. Claudia remembers, "I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it" (190). Unable to mother Pecola, the girls take on the role symbolically and plant seeds, promising to "watch over them. And when they come up, we'll know everything is all right" (192). The flowers never bloom and Pecola is not all right. The critique Morrison makes is that in a community where no one but two little girls, "want the black baby to live," the black baby dies (190). Sapphire revises this and provides Miss Rain, Precious' teacher, as an example of an effective surrogate mother. *The Color Purple* first depicted the role of maternal surrogates. Janet Montelaro writes of *The Color Purple*, "*The Color Purple* foregrounds women whose maternal subjectivities emerge through a number of discourses, which often problematize conventional notions of motherhood" (72). Conventional notions of motherhood are rejected as a part of the patriarchal system that silently allows the incestuous rape of its daughters as a means of maintaining power and control. Miss Rain, unconventional as teacher-mother and as lesbian-mother, unlike Pauline and Mary, believes Precious and listens to her story, offering unconditional love

and an environment of mutual respect. Like Celie does with Shug's nurturance, Precious flourishes under the maternal care of Miss Rain and is able to conceive, for the first time, a future. bell hooks, also commenting on *The Color Purple*, argues, "displacing motherhood as a central signifier for female being, and emphasizing sisterhood, Walker posits a relational basis for self-definition that valorizes and affirms woman bonding" ("Reading and Resistance" 294). *The Bluest Eye* and *Push* also work within Walker's womanism framework, suggesting that healing is possible through maternal surrogates if mature and capable. Morrison, by critiquing the lack of a communal maternal presence, calls for what Sapphire presents in Miss Rain as an example of the power of maternal nurturance on the acquisition of the abused black girl-child's self.

#### Survivorship and Resistance

Morrison exposes Pecola's abused black girl-child body and validates Pecola's pain in a way that no one in the novel is able to do. Pecola neither survives nor resists her incestuous rape, but this failure is not presented as hers, but rather her community's. Morrison blames the black community that not only denies Pecola's pain, but laughs at her victimization behind her back. Speaking of the baby Pecola is pregnant with, the ladies of the town exchange mocking banter, "She'll be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking," "Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground" (190). These women prophesize the death of Pecola's baby, helping to cause it, ironically, with their ugliness. Only the little girls, Claudia and Frieda, still innocent and only just learning to judge others (notably by overhearing conversations like these) see the situation for what

it is, a little black girl in pain: “We thought only of this overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby. We remembered Mrs. Breedlove knocking Pecola down” (191). But these two little black girls do not have the power to “change the course of events and alter human life,” like the black community unified might have, and so their efforts fail. Pecola is left a walking dead, forever wounded, so that each individual member of the community can feel better about themselves:

We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (205)

Pecola, blamed for her acquiescence of the community’s treatment of her, allows the fantasy of worth and power and beauty to survive even as she is left for dead. Morrison suggests that despite the horror of Pecola’s tragedy this black community needs her so that they can draw strength from their contrast to her condition. The “unyielding” earth described in the beginning of the novel serves as a metaphor for the black community, or more specifically, the community of black women, who, all like Pauline, neglect their own seeds, and choose personal survival over communal resistance. Claudia ends the novel saying, “this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we

acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (206). Too late for Pecola, but Morrison offers love as a possible answering, cautioning, "love is never any better than the lover" (206). Her challenge to her readers is to become better lovers. To love little black girls whose raped child-bodies leave them in constant pain at least as much as we love ourselves.

Perhaps, Morrison gives us Claudia as a model. She at least, has retained enough of a sense of her childish understanding of love to tell Pecola's story. Claudia as a "could-be victim" of sexual abuse not only survives but resists the abuse of black girl-child bodies ("Unspeakable" 387). As the agent of "the public exposure of a private confidence," Claudia airs the dirty laundry and exposes not only the raped and sexually molested black girl-child bodies, but the black community and its complicity in the pain (*The Bluest* 212). By complicity I mean, the "failure to report sexual abuse," and how this "places the outsider in complicity with the father. Any relationship the outsider establishes with the daughter, the mother, or the whole family must be comprised by the fact that the outsider, by withholding knowledge of the incestuous offence, is tacitly protecting the father and breaking the law" (Herman 135). Claudia rejects her place as an outsider, acknowledging the fantasy and determining to live outside of the false consciousness perpetuated by the black community, siding with Pecola. Unable to rectify the damage done Pecola as an adult, Claudia speaks Pecola's pain and serves as a witness to her victimization by her father, her mother, and her community.

Sapphire goes a step further and does not just convict the black community for its role in the continued abuse of its daughters, but holds accountable the larger patriarchal, capitalist, racist American society.<sup>34</sup> Sapphire's strongest critique is of the educational system. We learn early on that Precious is involuntarily removed from her traditional public school because she is pregnant. The concern of the school is not how or why Precious is pregnant, but simply that she is pregnant and, thus, does not belong. Failing to identify abuse as the cause of Precious' pregnancy, Precious experiences her removal as an additional victimization, "I ain' done nuffin' I doose my work. I ain' no trouble. My grades is good...You can't suspend me for being pregnant, I got rights!" (8). What Sapphire makes clear is that Precious, in fact, does not have rights and in this way the system dictates her ability to survive. Sapphire also documents the educational system's failure to educate. Although Precious is illiterate, she "got A in English and never say nuffin', do nuffin'. I sit in seat. I sit in seat everyday for 55 minutes, chair so far back it touch wall. After first day I don't see hear. I play TV in my mind" (49). The teachers, as part of the larger educational system, continue to pass an illiterate child with an "it's not our problem" attitude, satisfied that she will eventually "work some live-in job for old crackers and shit" (123). Sapphire makes clear that a society and its systems that do not value black girls like Precious, leave Precious, like Pecola, "searching the garbage." Ironically, Sapphire has Precious moving into her deferred future of searching the

---

<sup>34</sup> Morrison also identifies the patriarchal, capitalist, racist nature of white American society as causal to much of the oppression and abuse suffered within the black community, but, in the end, does not convict white American society for scapegoating Pecola and denying Pecola's pain. In Morrison's novel the white community is so far removed the assumption is that it could care less what happens to a little black girl.

garbage triumphantly, where Morrison has Pecola tragically searching the garbage in her immediate future.

Sapphire does, however, advocate for the power of one as a significant contributor to resistance. The kindness of the Spanish male nurse enables Precious to overcome the pain of child birth and her mother's physical brutality and "push" her baby out (10). Mrs. Lichenstein, the school counselor, goes out of her way to connect Precious to the Each One Teach One alternative school, providing Precious with an opportunity to survive her circumstance. Miss Rain, Precious' teacher, offers Precious the gift of literacy and finds her a place to live outside of her abusive environment, reordering her life. Sapphire accounts for the overarching power of the American social system, but also demonstrates the power single individuals willing to resist the oppressive manifestations of this system can have.

Beyond the impact of individual resistance, Sapphire, mirroring Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, submits that literacy is critical to survivorship and resistance. E. Yvette Walters writes of *The Color Purple*, "the power of language has elevated the semiliterate Celie from a voiceless nonentity to an integrated self with an awareness of the strength of her own voice," and the same is true for Precious (144). As Precious announces, "them words everything" (66). Precious discovers that her name, "mean somethin' valuable," and that she, as a human being, has worth (67). Through her journal writings, Precious voices her incestuous rape and begins, through language, to affirm her self. She writes, "I is best able to meet my child's needs," confident in her role as mother. Precious, still acquiring language, overcomes her lack by writing poetry. Doane

and Hodges comment on Precious' use of poetry, stating, "through poetry the linear recovery tale of growth and recovery is disrupted by a discourse of circling and shattering that has resonance with work on the long-term effects of violence on traumatized subjects" (129). Precious' poetry reflects her remembering of incestuous rape, and evident in her verse is both her positive progression of self and her struggle to accept worth, "eye see/ see me/ live/ or/ die/ positive/ or/ negative/ why? why?/ must/ I lie/ to myself" (91). The disjointedness of Precious' poetry is symbolic of her internal fragmentation, "a sign of agency even as it marks Precious' vulnerability" (Doane 129). Split, like Pecola, Precious uses language to weld together her broken fissures of self, but Sapphire's use of the literacy trope—literacy as freedom—is not as utopic as Walker's. Precious, in her final poem, acknowledges literacy has not freed her, "I'm not really free/ baby, Mama, HIV," and "the final words of the novel—'tick/ tock'—remind the reader that there is not much time for Precious left, that even the most courageous and resourceful individuals are flattened by the bone-crushing momentum of a system that depends on the regular wastage of human resources" (Doane 130). For Precious, it is also "much, much, much too late," as her fate has been decided for her. The power in Precious' story is her desire to resist in spite of her circumstance, fight until her time runs out.

Although these novels exist as resistance narratives, exposing the raped black girl-child body, there are also significant ways these novels fail to resist. Sapphire, in a 1996 interview, concedes that "there are a lot of stereotypes and negative things laid out in the book, but Precious is like a tree—she just busts through all that tired shit and we come

away with a vision of a living breathing woman of intelligence and integrity” (Keehnen 3). I would argue that neither *The Bluest Eye* nor *Push* “busts through” key stereotypes regarding incestuous rape and rather perpetuates certain imaginings of incestuous rape in order to create a safe place for the reader. Ward asserts that father-perpetrators of incestuous rape “come from every class in society,” a fact not acknowledged in these novels (nor in *The Color Purple*) (83). Both Pecola and Precious are not just poor, but exceptionally poor, and centering the victims of incestuous rape in this level of poverty works to figure the poverty itself as causal to the rape. Both novels also cast “ugly,” dark-skinned girls as victims of incestuous rape. The implication is that although the Maureen Peals of the world may be desired by sexual predators, the most horrific of sexual assaults remain the burden of socially determined outcasts, the darkest and, thus, ugliest among us. Sapphire compounds this by adding obesity as a physical attribute of Precious. Significantly, Sapphire tells Katie Couric in an interview that her student and victim of incestuous rape upon whom Precious is based was “slim” and “articulate.” Sapphire, then, very consciously writes Precious within the culturally defined ideology of a socially acceptable incestuous rape victim, even when her personal experience falls outside of this stereotype. Lastly, both novels minimize the monstrosity of the father-rapist while maximizing the monstrosity of the blamed mother. These conventional representations of incestuous rape are problematic because of the readers’ response to them. Working within the dominant narrative comforts the reader even as the reality of the existence of incestuous abuse is revealed. The reader comes to understand that as long as she is not devastatingly poor, horrendously disfigured by too-dark skin or obesity,

or parented by monsters, then the reality of incestuous rape will remain, to her, a fiction. The authors' exposure of incestuous rape, then, is really a peeling back of a corner of the rug the truth has been swept under, and the problem is that we, as readers, are satisfied with that.

bell hooks critiques *The Color Purple* for the “fantasy of change without effort” that the novel promotes, “wherein an oppressed black woman can experience self-recovery without a dialectical process; without collective political effort; without radical change in society” (“Reading and Resistance” 295). I think this is a danger we need to be aware of when considering *The Bluest Eye* and *Push*. Herman reasons that “if incestuous abuse is indeed an inevitable result of patriarchal family structure, then preventing sexual abuse will ultimately require a radical transformation of the family,” and, I would add, in the cases of these novels, a transformation of the black community as well (*Father-Daughter Incest* 202). Perhaps a re-ordering of the black community is too large a task for one novel to accomplish, but what the novels do suggest is that before the raped black girl-child body can be fully recovered and embraced in the loving arms of a community that does not blame them, the community must first come to love itself.

Addendum: *Precious—Push*, the Movie

I would be remiss if I did not at least briefly mention the 2009 release of the movie, *Precious*, based on the novel *Push*. If Sapphire's imagining of incestuous rape is problematic in the novel, then the movie's representation of Sapphire's conception of incest is even more so. Whereas the novel works to uncover the truth behind the abused black girl-child victim, the movie works to cover it up. There are only two brief scenes

(not even full scenes) of incestuous rape in *Precious*. The first is at the beginning of the movie. An episode of physical violence at the hands of her mother triggers Precious' memory of incestuous rape by her father. We see a dark-skinned hairy stomach drenched in sweat removing a belt and then the father-rapist's face, very dark and very wet. Precious is lightly pushed to the bed, her face and still dressed upper body are all we see. Her mother watches her boyfriend rape her daughter from the hallway. The second scene, really a single image, occurs as Precious is confronted with her illiteracy by Miss Rain. Here she momentarily sees Carl's dark-skinned, sweaty face looming over her and we hear him say, "I like you better than your mother." This memory is coupled with another memory of her mother yelling her name and an image of boiling pigs feet. Precious, herself, is not seen in this flashback. Only momentarily do we see Precious as the victim of incestuous rape, and never do we see her raped child-body in pain. Her facial expression is of mild discomfort and the rest of her is literally covered.

The two brief scenes of incestuous rape are juxtaposed with Precious' fantastical and near-comedic hallucinations of Hollywood glamour. Whereas a total of thirty seconds is given to showing incestuous rape, large portions of the movie bring to life Precious coping mechanism of imagining an alternate reality. We see her flaunting ball gowns, boas, and diamonds on the red carpet, lavishly adorned singing on stage, glamorously posing in a magazine photo shoot—always accompanied by the same light-skinned boy whom she so desperately desires. Constructing the film in this way works to minimize the sexual abuse Precious suffers by concentrating the film's energy on

Precious' flights of fantasy. At least as far as the incestuous rape is concerned, the audience walks away thinking Precious' abuse by her father is really not all that bad.

What is most disagreeable is the film's representation of Precious' mother. Mary is a monster. Even with the absence of the birth-beating scene found in the beginning of the novel, Mary in the movie is portrayed as an evil fiend. Where Lee Daniels, the director, chooses to minimize incestuous rape, he expands Sapphire's accounting of Mary's physical abuse. Mary sits idle, smoking cigarettes and watching television while Precious cooks and maintains the home only moving to beat and curse Precious. In the novel, Precious tells us that her mother threatened to kill her when she returned from the hospital with her second child. Out of this, Lee Daniels creates a scene of over-the-top violence where Mary throws her three-day-old grandson aside, aims and launches a glass at Precious head, slams her against the wall, and when Precious escapes, falling down the stairs with newborn baby in tow, she hurls a television set at Precious' head from the stair landing above, missing her only because Precious moves at the last second. Mary exists as the monstrous presence in the movie while Carl is all but absent. Excused from the film, Carl is also excused from his responsibility in the incestuous raping of his daughter. Even when Mary recounts the first sexual abuse of Precious, her description is notably lacking. All she says, in dramatic contrast with the novel, is, "he touched my baby." What the film focuses on is Mary's allowance of the touching. Mary is convicted of Carl's crime as the social worker berates her for her acquiescent condoning of Precious' violation. Significantly, Mary also does not blame Carl, but lashes out at Precious

screaming, “she let him have her.” Carl, as father-rapist, is removed from the scene and, thus, from the site of abuse.

Daniels choices beg the questions: What violence is ok to show and what is not, and by whose hands? What is simply too much? The movie does not explicitly show Carl's incestuous rape of Precious, but suggests (intentionally or unintentionally) that sexual abuse is an acceptable part of the family's relationships. Mary is an accomplice too ignorant of self and too morally void to know basic right from wrong, incapable of being a parent. She watches the incest, she accepts, she cooks pigs feet while her daughter is being raped in the next room. Rather than parent Precious, she makes her a slave child. The cinematic version fails to accurately portray the horror and terror of incestuous rape, but does show a child-mother falling down the stairs carrying her three-day-old son. If this is black reality, as the movie promotes itself, then incest is acceptable and violence against your children is acceptable and sexual disease transmitted from father to daughter is acceptable and husband transferring his desire from his wife to his emotionally disordered daughter is acceptable and making your children serve you as slaves is acceptable in the poverty of the black experience. There exists then a whole other hedonistic set of values that define that lower-class black experience. Blacks are animals and the institution of slavery necessarily still pervades the culture. But, honestly, we know this is a false reality.

There are other instances of this false consciousness. The movie also refuses to show a black butch/femme lesbian relationship, and instead recreates a black male fantasy—two light-skinned, thin, but curvy, beautiful women sensually kissing, one

dressed in a white, silk negligee. The motion picture rejects the birth-beating scene that begins the novel, but accepts the minstrel-like fried chicken stealing episode.

Problematically, Daniels' choices are rooted in white audience approval and black audience acceptance, and in attempting to satisfy the two, Sapphire's well-intentioned message is lost. Armond White says it best: "Not since *The Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as *Precious*. Full of brazenly racist clichés (*Precious* steals and eats an entire bucket of fried chicken), it is a sociological horror show" (1).

Consequently, the hyped incestuous storyline serves as only a foil for the movie's true agenda, which is to promote notions of colorism within the black community. The "bad" (the poor, abused, abusers) are all dark-skinned, mostly obese people, while the "good" (the saviors, teachers, and helpers) are well-to-do, light-skinned, and healthy. Miss Rain, a dark-skinned butch-dyke in the novel, is cast as a near-white femme lesbian. As *Precious* enters her classroom a bright light shines and Miss Rain reaches out her hand as Jesus does to welcome new followers. The social worker (played by Mariah Carey), and the nurse's aid (played by Lenny Kravitz, both bi-racial) are also near-white and work as emotional and financial support for *Precious* as she attempts to heal. *Precious* fantasizes about a light-skinned boyfriend, sees herself in the mirror as a white, blond-haired woman, and wants to be, "skinny, light-skinned, with long hair." The problem with the movie's representations of colorism within the black community is that it is not self-aware. *Precious*' too simplistic acceptance of the dominant narrative's color determinations of light as "good" and dark as "bad" is validated by the casting in the

movie, never challenged. Even childish innocence symbolized in Precious's first child, Mongo (the incestuous product of two very dark-skinned people) is signified in the little girl's near-white skin and straight, long hair.

But it works. Both times I viewed the movie, women, black and white, walked out crying, tears streaming from their eyes. For Precious' struggle, her victimization, her rape and abuse? No, for her victory. The final scene begins with a Mary J. Blige singing, "It took a long time to find this place. It took a long time to see happy." Happy, triumphantly, Precious walks off into the sunlight, holding the hand of her newly acquired Down Syndrome daughter and carrying her infant son. Mary has, albeit unsuccessfully, apologized for her role in Precious' abuse (notably not her own abuse of Precious), and Precious is only .2 points away from getting into her GED class, "then high school, then college." Precious walks, happy, and seemingly unconcerned with the literal weight of her children burdening her (she has to readjust her son several times to keep from dropping him), her status as HIV positive, her still semi-illiterate state, and her lack of income to support two children. Victorious in just being alive, happy, Precious walks off the screen and the women cry. I also cry because in all of this, the story that matters most is lost. The black girl-child victim and her raped/beaten body whose vagina is forced open too early, who bleeds and screams in pain, who suffers rejection and denial and continued victimization for something not her fault—she is lost and the seemingly innocuous "fantasy of change" wins again, covering the raped black girl-child body, like Cholly does Pecola's, tenderly hating her.

## Chapter 4

“Don’t Explain Me”: Violent Resistance to Abuse as a Means of Self-Actualization in

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Eva’s Man*

*Eva carries out what Ursa might have done, but didn’t.*—Gayl Jones

*To be a survivor—first you must bleed. You bleed all that was inside of you: the pain, the memories, the fear, the wounds fusing together... You bleed not once but several times. And when you are empty, you either fade into a shadow or find the strength, and courage to live. When you stand up again, you are for a time, hollow—empty, like a bottle of beer...you fill yourself up with the new, you recreate yourself—you reform. You don’t have the same heart or mind. The way you see the world is forever changed.* --Lynn Mari

In Richard Wright’s 1937 review of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, he comments on Hurston’s “minstrel technique” and critiques the novel further in an oft-quoted passage arguing, “the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought...she exploits that phase of Negro Life which is ‘quaint,’ that phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the ‘superior’ race” (1). Wright was not alone in his critique of Hurston; Alain Locke also harshly criticized the novel and Ishmael Reed similarly lashed out at “black feminist authors who are playing this ‘hate black male’ angle” (Martin). Wright’s criticism (and arguably the other critiques) seems to be motivated by more than just a bruised ego, it appears charged with contempt. We read in his criticism a tone of dismissal and even insidious hatred of the black woman, and that is supported by a disturbingly indifferent disregard for the black female body

which is detailed in his fiction. The most notable example is Bigger Thomas's brutal rape, beating and disposal of his loyal girlfriend, Bessie's, still-alive body in Wright's celebrated novel, *Native Son*. Like Cleaver<sup>35</sup>, Bigger uses the black female body to perform an act of violence he was unable to first perform on a white female body and rapes Bessie in an act of pent-up sexual violence—an act designed to validate an unacknowledged masculinity. Significantly, Bessie is not the only example of a black woman denied subjectivity in Wright's texts. Consider his short story, "Long Black Song." It articulates beautifully Wright's understanding of the hierarchy of oppression involving white men, black men, and black women, an arrangement of power that leaves the black woman scapegoated by both white men and black men as the men perform their essential masculinity.

In "Long Black Song," Sarah sits waiting for her husband to come home from selling their crop when a white man drives up selling graphophones. He—naming her "Aunty" in a dismissal of her autonomy and a failure to acknowledge her as an independently named subject—rapes Sarah before leaving the graphophone at a reduced price for alter purchase. This last act signifies Sarah as a prostitute and further victimizes her. Sarah resists her rape; "She jerked away... 'Lemme go!' She tried to pull her hand out of his and felt his fingers tighten. She pulled harder... she leaned backward and tried to dodge his face... 'Naw, naw'" (1425). Yet, in a Styron-like reversal, Sarah begins to enjoy what begins as a violation of her black female body, and ultimately transforms into a willing participant in her rape, "her loins ached. She felt her body sliding." Sarah

---

<sup>35</sup> Eldridge Cleaver admits to practicing rape on black women before raping white women in his memoir, *Soul on Ice*.

orgasms, “the muscles in her legs flexed and she bit her lips and pushed her toes deep into the wet dust by the side of the well and tried to wait and tried to wait until she could wait no longer. She whirled away from him and a streak of silver and blue swept across her blood” (1425). Wright’s understanding of the black female body as ultimately unrapeable is shared by Sarah’s husband who later that night comes home and quickly pieces together what has happened. Silas, never considering that his wife’s body is taken against her will, threatens to get his “raw-hide whip” and “take [her] t the barn!” to beat Sarah like an animal (1429). His treatment of Sarah is justified by his own subordination to the dominant white male presence, “Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! (1429). Sarah is an “it” in Wright’s view, in her husband’s view, and in the white man’s view. Her orgasmic response is involuntary submission to male virility—what her husband fears, what the white man seeks to possess, and what Wright accepts without understanding Sarah as victim. Sarah is the object in a “I-it” relationship. None of the men sees her as a subject.

Sarah, like Eve, is blamed for tasting of the forbidden fruit without any acknowledgement that this tasting is forced and unwanted. Wright sympathizes with Silas/Adam who, “stabbed in the back by [his] own blood,” hunts her down in the night with a shotgun (1434). Ultimately, Sarah escapes with her daughter, but only to watch her husband in a homicidal rage kill several white men before burning himself. Wright assigns Sarah the blame for Silas and the white men’s deaths ending the story with Sarah guiltily screaming, “Nay, Gawd!” (1436). Written after his comments on *Their Eyes*

*Were Watching God*, the implication of Wright's story is that white men are causal not only to the destruction of black men, but also to the destruction of self-serving black women who are unable to resist the seduction of whiteness. Wright relegates the black female body to the status of a possession—that of both white and black men. Therefore, it is not surprising that Wright would respond with contempt for Hurston whose project is to explicitly reject the black female body in its objectified position by exposing specifically the black male will to power manifested as physical abuse.

This chapter explores Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man* as the black woman victim's Ur-resistance novels. Both black female protagonists successfully acquire autonomy by killing black male abusers in acts of resistance designed to eliminate the power of black male patriarchy and end the cycle of violence. Although the acts of violence first speak resistance, both black female protagonists ultimately acquire voice and tell their story. These novels explore physical abuse as a manifestation of denied power meant by black men to dictate an environment of false consciousness for their black female victims where the black woman is disempowered and the black male is empowered by the threat of violence. Both novels elucidate the black male delusion of power inferring that through the physical abuse of black women black men ironically reaffirm their position of disempowerment through the very means meant to empower. The male delusion is complex in this context. Adrienne Rich exposes it in her discussion of heterosexuality stating that "male power is manifested and maintained" by methods of sexual domination and gender abuse. She further asserts that "we are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality and

property possession, but a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained” (1767). The manifestation of the male as dominant prevents women from realizing that they have a choice. These novels work to reject the helplessness of the black woman trapped in a patriarchal culture which validates violence as a means of control, and instead suggest that even in the most extreme circumstances of domination there is always the choice to live or to die, to kill or be killed. These women, Janie and Eva, choose to kill, and thus, choose life.

This chapter will examine the scenes of violation and the resulting battered black female body, the murders of Tea Cake and Davis as sites of resistance, and the consequences/limitations of these acts of resistance and the novels themselves. But before getting to the scenes of violation, it is necessary to consider the central theme underwriting each text: for *Their Eyes* I need to address Janie’s romantic vision, which informs all of her interactions with men, and for *Eva’s Man* I need to consider Eva’s sanity, which directly impacts how her murder of Davis is understood.

What is generally misunderstood in readings of *Their Eyes* is the predatory nature of Janie’s black male abusers (Jody and Tea Cake) and her susceptibility to their manipulation due in large part to her stunted development caused by her forced marriage to Logan Killicks, which was forced upon her by her grandmother. We first meet young Janie at sixteen with “glossy leaves and busting buds” dreaming of being “a pear tree—any tree in bloom!” (11). Janie, full of hormones and in possession of a newly developed body, desires romantic love. Her desire for romance is so strong it transforms “shiftless

Johnny Taylor” and “beglamor[s]” him causing a blossoming physical connection. And so it happens that Nanny awakens to see “Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss” (11). Notably, Janie does not view Johnny’s kiss as a laceration, but as a realization of a dream—a dream that Janie is jostled out of by Nanny’s screaming. Nanny, recognizing the inherent objectified nature of the black female body, refuses to allow Johnny Taylor to “us[e] yo’ body to wipe his foots on,” and ironically auctions Janie’s beauty off to the most eligible bachelor, Mr. Killicks. Janie resists the termination of her romantic vision, “Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree,” and Nanny asserts her authority over Janie with physical violence: “she slapped the girl’s face violently, and forced her head back so that their eyes met in struggle” (13). We learn several critical elements to Janie’s construction over the course of these events. First, Nanny’s misreading of Janie’s first kiss as “youse got yo’ womanhood” ironically stunts Janie’s growth into womanhood by preventing her the opportunity to mature this adolescent understanding of love. Janie’s romantic desire is successfully shut down by her first marriage, but it is not killed and thus leaves her vulnerable to predators like Jody and Tea Cake. Second, Janie’s romantic vision distorts reality and allows her to see only what she wants to see, a trait which eventually allows her to justify Tea Cake’s abuse<sup>36</sup>. Third, Janie always exists as a possession and her objectified status is maintained through physical violence beginning with her grandmother. Understanding Janie’s want of romantic love becomes foundational to an analysis of her as a victim of intimate violence.

---

<sup>36</sup> Ritchie comments on how abuse and romantic notions of love are intertwined in her book, *Compelled to Crime*. She states that “a sense of shame and inadequacy that emerged when they [victims] first realized that the abuse symbolized their failure to accomplish their romantic dreams in their intimate relationships” often cause women to work more fervently in trying to save their relationships in an attempt to restore the lost romantic dream (75).

Eva, because of the vicious nature of her murder of Davis, namely her castrating him by biting off of his penis, causes most scholars to deem Eva mad or at the very least an unreliable narrator. Casey Clabough does both arguing that Eva is “wholly incapable of resisting Davis’s increasingly unreasonable demands and—once he strips society from her, keeping her locked in his room—she is also unable to ward off the seductive and persistent overtures of madness” (32). She continues suggesting that there is a “strong possibility that many” of the expressions of madness “themselves may be lies altogether” (37). Candice Jenkins asserts that “Jones’ narrative ultimately suggests that Eva’s vicious desire is a marker of her insanity because Eva’s extreme actions ruthlessly expose the unpleasant ‘truth’ of desire in the novel” (180). Keith Byerman adds that “the structure of the tale embodies not only the increasing intensity of events but also the increasing madness of the narrator” (“Black Vortex” 94). I disagree with these assertions and argue instead that while Eva suffers a moment of temporary insanity at a point of extreme emotional traumatic stress, Eva is otherwise sane, that her act of violence is premeditated (a point I will revisit later in the chapter), and that her confusion of memory is completely in line with victims recovering traumatic memories.

Two oft-quoted examples used as proof that Eva is an unreliable narrator are her supposed confusion of her mother’s victimization by her father and her own victimization by her husband. When Eva’s father begins to rape her mother he says, “Act like a whore, I’m gonna fuck you like a whore. You act like a whore, I’m gonna fuck you like a whore” (37). Faced with Eva in the house with a male friend, Eva’s husband echoes almost exactly the words of her father, “You think you a whore, I’ll treat you like a

whore. You think you a whore, I'll treat you like a whore" (163). The likeness of the two memories is uncanny and this causes readers to deem Eva as unreliable; but in doing this, the reality of both Eva's mother's rape and her own victimization by a controlling, obsessive husband are dismissed. More significantly than the exactness of Eva's memory is the fact that her husband's jealousy triggers in her the traumatic memory of her father raping her mother and it is this trigger that motivates Eva to leave her husband, saving herself from what Eva understands is the inevitability of increased violence. Susan Warner and Kathryn Felty's research on traumatic memory can help further explain my point. They claim that recognizing memory as traumatic "shifts the focus of the question from the validity of memories to the meaning of memories. We are not interested in whether revered memories are true or false—that is, whether they can be proven or substantiated...we assume that if individuals define their memories as real, they have real meaning, and in turn real consequences in their lives" (161). Neither of Eva's memories should be invalidated as unreal and how she remembers these events can help understand how her mind works to connect traumatic experiences.

Sociologist Megan Sweeney used *Eva's Man* in a course she taught with incarcerated and abused women, many of whom understood Eva's memory as traumatic. One of the women, Maria, commented on how if a man approaches Eva and says something, "that clicks a memory. She goes back to something in her childhood, or something that happened a week ago" (462). Maria acknowledges how traumatic memory does not happen all at once, but rather in pieces with new memories triggered by life experiences or other memories. Traumatic memory is repressed and "what is

repressed is pushed downward into the unconscious” and these triggers help uncover the memory snippets at a time (Van Der Kolk 168). Even with this understanding of traumatic memory, Eva’s narrative is remarkably linear and Jones is careful to signal Eva’s traumatic memories from Eva’s dream sequences (toward the end of the novel), which are manifested as a consequence of the trauma suffered. In this context, Eva’s processing of her trauma is misread as insanity and her violent reaction to her continued victimization is judged madness in an effort to minimize her act of resistance. Thus, my understanding of Eva as sane valorizes her telling of her abuse and her violent response as an appropriate response to the violence she suffers. This is not to say that Eva’s brutal act of castration is a sane response to her history of oppression and violent objectification. Rather, I argue that Eva exists as an otherwise sane black woman who is pushed over the brink of sanity in a moment which results in a violent recovery of self. It is not the act of violence itself that is insane, but rather the grotesqueness of Eva’s murder that signifies a switch being flipped—temporarily—and as such, should not color how we understand her traumatic memory of her history of abuse—a history which undoubtedly causes the switch to be flipped in the first place.

#### Scenes of Violation and the Battered Black Female Body

Before discussing the scenes of physical abuse and the resulting battered black female body in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Eva’s Man*, I want to first outline some central concepts used by sociologists when studying intimate partner violence. The first is the cycle theory of battering which details the three phases experienced by victims in most intimate violence relationships. Leading battered woman expert, Lenore E.

Walker, describes that episodes of physical violence occur in, “repeated cycles, each having three phases. The first phase is a period of tension-building which leads up to phase two, or the acute battering incident, the third phase consists of kind, loving, contrite behavior displayed by the batterer toward the woman, which provides the reinforcement for the cycle” (*The Battered Woman* 2). Walker warns that “the reality of acute battering incidents is that they are genuinely life-and-death situations, replete with all the inherent terror that violence wreaks on its victims,” a point I will stress later in this chapter when attempting to justify the murders of Tea Cake and Davis (*Terrifying Love* 76). Frances Restuccia further comments on how, “the battered woman is caught in a vicious circle; the subtle punishment of her mind and soul primes her for the gross punishment of her body; the cessation of physical torture only releases her to a comparatively pleasant world in which her mind and soul are subtly punished” (60). Although Walker acknowledges that this cycle was not apparent in all cases of intimate partner violence, she does stress that “violence always escalated in frequency and severity over time,” meaning the abuse always only gets worse as the relationship progresses (*The Battered Woman* 148). Walker submits that abused women remain in abusive relationships in part due to what she terms “learned helplessness.” She explains that the “learned helplessness theory predicts that the perception of helplessness can be learned during childhood experiences of uncontrollability or noncontingency between response and outcome” (*The Battered Woman* 9). This explanation makes Janie and Eva both prime candidates for predatory male abusers. Learned helplessness, then, is what victims must first overcome in order to resist their abuse, “by, for example, becoming angry rather than depressed and

self-blaming; active rather than passive; and more realistic about the likelihood of the relationship continuing on its aversive course rather than improving” (*The Battered Woman* 87). What Walker’s research reveals is the prison-like control that the cycle of abuse and the resultant learned helplessness generate to make the victim of intimate partner violence a captive body.

As the violence escalates and the victim’s prison becomes more fortified, the psyche of the victim becomes more damaged making resistance all the more implausible. As Walker describes it, the abuser plants a seed “in the psyche of the battered woman by repeated subjection to psychologically sadistic manipulation and physical bullying: it grows and grows until she is incapable of believing in the effectiveness of taking positive action on her own behalf, until she has become a true victim of learned helplessness” (*Terrifying Love* 64). With the victim’s psyche this vulnerable, the batterer has the power to shape the victim’s identity, “insofar as she begins to conceive of herself as nothing more than ‘a battered woman’ and of pain as her essence—he may come close to shaping her ‘soul’” (Restuccia 48). Specific to African American victims of intraracial intimate partner violence, Beth Ritchie acknowledges how the black woman’s pathology aids in the perpetuation of the abuse cycle arguing that “racism furthered the impact of violence” on black woman “and influenced the sense of loyalty to the men who battered them and adherence to the cultural values regarding gender roles and relationships” (159). Part of the black woman’s learned helplessness is the cultural environment of racial uplift which charges the black woman to “stand by her man,” sacrificially lifting him up regardless of the personal consequence. Ultimately, due to “historical circumstances and

contemporary social conditions, events in the public and private spheres, and conscious and unconscious processes,” the black woman victim of intimate partner violence is imprisoned not only by her batterer, but by black communal values and a racist social justice system, which de-value her black female body—a point I will return to later in the chapter (Ritchie 161). Ultimately, understanding the cycle of abuse and how it works to cause a learned helplessness in abuse victims will help us understand more accurately the scenes of violence written in these two novels and the self-willed audaciousness of the violent acts of resistance detailed in both.

Hurston examines the male delusion of power manifested in physical violence with Janie’s three husbands. Janie is forced by her grandmother at sixteen to marry the much older, but land owning Logan Killicks—a decision Nanny understand as securing a better future for her granddaughter, “Tain’t Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it’s protection” (14). Adrienne Rich accounts for this tendency of women to use marriage as a strategy of protection. She states that woman “may well turn to marriage as a form of hoped-for protection, while bringing into marriage neither social nor economic power, thus entering that institution from a disadvantaged position” (1769). Notably, Nanny is also protecting her granddaughter from the sexual violation suffered by her daughter—the same violation underwritten in every text examined thus far—the threat of rape by which Janie’s existence is determined: “Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby and run off just before day” (15). Janie’s mother, unable to handle her body’s victimization and Janie as a living reminder of its trauma, runs off leaving Janie in her grandmother’s care. To an extent, Nanny is

successful in her protection of Janie from bodily harm. Janie marries Logan Killicks seemingly unaware of the danger her blossoming body inherently presents to her self, but keenly aware that the marriage stops at least the violence her grandmother's insistence begets.

Awakened from her romantic visions of love and marriage by Logan Killicks performance of power as he rides off "tuh see uh man about uh mule," an act Janie understands as an attempt to relegate her to the status her grandmother most feared, the black woman as "de mule uh de world," Janie takes her first chance to break free of the cycle of subjugation and runs off with Jody Starks (25, 14). Janie disregards Logan Killicks as many critics do, failing to see Logan as a decent man. The most egalitarian of all Janie's husbands, Logan allows Janie a voice and acknowledges her autonomy within the marriage, "Youse powerful independent around here" (29). He is hurt by Janie's intention to leave him, but even in this moment of emasculation does not resort to violence making Logan the only person intimately involved in Janie's life who does not physically harm her. Logan intuitively Jody's game, warning Janie, "Ah guess some low-lifed nigger is grinning in yo' face and lyin' tuh yuh" (30). Janie, however, makes her decision, blinded by romantic visions of love, unable to see beyond the male delusion, and ends up perpetuating the cycle she meant to escape.

Patricia Hill Collins praises Hurston's novel as "one of the best Black feminist analyses of domestic abuse," and reads the novel "as a Black feminist analysis of the sexualized violence that many black women encounter in their deepest love relationship" (159-160). And yet, in the scholarship addressing Janie's domestic abuse generally the

focus is on debating Tea Cake's status as batterer, and Jody's violence against Janie is all but ignored. The problem with this is that critics who choose to focus only on Tea Cake fail to identify the similarities between Jody's and Tea Cake's seduction and manipulation of Janie and tend to demonize Jody while celebrating, or at least excusing, Tea Cake. In my view, Jody and Tea Cake are one and the same—predatory batterers who perform their power by hitting and marking Janie's black female body. Significantly, both are killed by her, whether intentionally or not.

Jody Starks, Janie's second husband, offers false hope. Hurston carefully frames Jody's appetite for power within the oppressive social hierarchy as Janie likens his actions to a white man, "He was a seal-brown color but he acted like Mr. Washburn or somebody like that" (26). Hurston's use of "but" distinguishes between Jody's subordinate position in the social hierarchy and his attempt to compensate by performing whiteness in "citified, stylish" clothing. Jody seduces Janie with talk of, "being a big ruler of things with her reaping the benefits" (28). Starry-eyed, Janie relinquishes herself to Jody's cravings of power via domination despite an initial reaction to resist her intuitive knowledge of Jody's infertility. As the text indicates, "[Jody] did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees" (28). Hurston hints at the fruitlessness of the new couple's misguided notions of power and foreshadows not only Jody's sexual impotence, but Janie's impotence against Jody's mental and physical abuse. Janie's surrender to Jody rids her of any power her decision to run off with him might have claimed. Hurston announces their wedding with the coming of night as "the sun plunged into the same crack in the earth from which the night emerged" (31). Janie enters into the marriage self

defeated by romantic notions of greatness, a victim of what Crenshaw terms “intersectional subordination...the consequence of the imposition of one burden interacting with pre-existing vulnerabilities to create yet another dimension of disempowerment” (359). Jody, like a lion on a hunt, sniffed out a mule and pounced.

Fueled by his own notions of greatness, Jody Starks takes over Eatonville devouring land and titles to increase his power, to erase his impotence, and to cover his lack. Mimicking white male domination, Jody “strives simply to usurp the white man’s place at the top of the social ladder” (Meisenhelder 65). In a true validation of Foucauldian repression, Jody effectively suppresses his community and his wife through total domination. As far as Janie is concerned, the domination manifests itself slowly, beginning with silencing gestures first seen when Jody prevents Janie from speaking at his mayoral election, “but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (40-1). Thus, phase one of the cycle of abuse begins and the tension builds toward Jody’s inevitable lashing out to exert control over Janie in the form of physical violence. Janie is put in her place, sexualized and domesticated, as Jody publicly expresses the expanse of his domain and the limitations of hers.

Jody’s insatiable need for power is further illustrated by his increasing utterances of “I god” to begin his sentences. His “big voice” once only a dream becomes realized as God-like used with “a bow-down command in his face” accompanied by a “love [for] obedience out of everybody under the sound of his voice” (46). Parasitically, the more powerful Jody grows, the more Janie deflates as expressed by one town member’s

observation: “She sho don’t talk much. De way he rears and pitches in de store sometimes when she make uh mistake is sort of ungodly, but she don’t seem to mind at all” (47). Jody views any attempt by Janie to assert a self as a mutiny against his authority; “he wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (67). The physical abuse, then, follows naturally, “he slapped her face in the kitchen...slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears” (67). Hurston proceeds cautiously, wading stealthily through iteratively narrated scenes of abuse, just enough to expose and name Janie as a battered wife and Jody as “the rock she was battered against” (51).

The scene of physical violation or the acute battering is prefaced by a period of psychological abuse and emotional control. For instance, Jody demands that Janie work the store knowing she does not have the skills and uses her inability to compute the necessary math as an opportunity to emotionally berate her: “She went through many silent rebellions over things like that. Such a waste of life and time. But Joe kept saying that she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted to *use her privileges*. That was the rock she was battered against” (51 italics mine). Janie’s privileges in Jody’s eyes are her physical attributes which bring customers into the store, attributes Jody is careful to showcase while maintaining strict control, commanding that “her hair was NOT going to show in the store” (51). The narrator comments on Jody’s obsessive jealousy as motivating his need for panoptic surveillance of Janie’s doings. Janie is isolated as demonstrated during the comedy that is the neighborhood mule’s funeral, “the carcass moved off with the town and left Janie standing in the doorway,” alone and silenced.

Jody rationalizes his treatment of Janie as placing her on a pedestal, but acknowledges her resentment at his placement, “here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it” (58). Jody treats Janie like a child as the word choices “high chair” and “pouting” suggest and he responds with violent anger when Janie desires something more. He thinks to himself, “he ought to box her jaws!,” but decides he is too tired to engage in an episode of heightened and more overt abuse at this time (58).

For Janie, the tension-building phase lasts for seven years, until, “one day when he slapped her face in the kitchen” over some fish “not quite done to the bone” (67).<sup>37</sup> Already subdued with the victim’s psyche of learned helplessness, having already “pressed her teeth together and learned to hush,” Janie stands in idle shock after the first incident of acute battering; “She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered” (67-68). Still clinging to her romantic vision, Janie realizes Jody is not that, but “just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over” (68). Janie’s survival technique is to dissociate, “she had an inside and an outside and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (68). Janie’s romantic vision still does not die with the emergence of physical violence, but it is relegated to her safe place inside while outside Janie goes about living the life of a battered woman. Janie, with no recourse, nowhere to go, no other option, returns to her pedestal: “she bathed and put on a fresh dress and head

---

<sup>37</sup> In figuring Janie as a victim of physical violence Hurston makes clear the difficulty the black woman faces in keeping her body from victimization. As Susan Meisenhelder says, “although in more complex ways than the literal rape Nanny feared, Janie becomes a spit-cup for Joe, her passive status exemplified in the spittoon he gives her” (66). The black female body, then, always already exists in danger of physical and sexual violence in a multitude of ways the black woman is always already fighting against.

kerchief and went on to the store before Jody had time to send for her. That was a bow to the outside of things” (68). Jody receives Janie pleasantly, beginning the third phase of contrite kindness, “he wanted to be friendly with her again” (68). And the cycle of violence completes itself in a way the novel suggests is ongoing, “he wanted her submission and he’d keep fighting until he felt he had it” (67).

Significantly, Janie keeps fighting too and her dissociative split should not be misread as acquiescence.<sup>38</sup> As Todd McGowan points out, Janie’s dissociation helps her keep part of her self intact despite the abuse: “the emergence of a distinction between outside and inside—the formation of a distance from herself—indicates, for one, that Janie is alienated, but it also indicates precisely because she is alienated, that Janie has some distance from her own domination. In other words, insofar as Janie is alienated in her relationship with Joe, she has some measure of freedom from his control” (97). Later in this same scene Janie takes full advantage of Jody’s guilt by asserting her voice in retaliation, “it’s so easy to make yo’self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothin’ tuh strain against but women and chickens,” sarcastically commenting on the false consciousness of power and strength that the men sit around rhetorically creating (71). In a way, Janie’s first incident of acute battering awakens her to her reality, “it reconciled her to things,” allowing her to prepare herself for battle (73).

---

<sup>38</sup> Applying the Getzels-Guba model of conceptualizing social systems can help us further understand Janie’s position. If we understand that behavior in any social system is a direct function of the interaction between the individual and her preestablished roles, and that these roles determine expectations which may differ from the individual’s needs, we can better understand the stickiness of Janie’s predicament. Janie is expected to play the role of the battered wife when her need is to not be battered. The expectation of her community is different than the need of her self, and so Janie finds herself (like all battered women) in a bind larger than just the acute incidents of battering.

Battered, but with an emerging consciousness about her youthfulness juxtaposed to Jody's literal withering away, Janie begins to appropriate power over herself. Mirroring her aforementioned public silencing, Janie publicly strips Jody of the source of his power, his masculinity, saying, "when you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life" (75). The impact of these words on the greater Eatonville community is best expressed through the narrator: "Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul's daughter had done to David. But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing" (75). Jody responds to this symbolic murder of his delusion of power the only way he knows how; "he struck Janie with all his might and drove her from the store" (76). With language reminiscent of God's wrath, Hurston mocks that phantasm that is Jody's power.

While Jody is most vulnerable, on his death bed, Janie takes the opportunity to tell him about himself. For once in the position of power, Janie forces Jody to listen, "you ain't de Jody ah run off de road wid...mah own mind had to be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me" (82). Of course, Janie is wrong. Jody is exactly the person she ran off with, she was just blinded by the prospect of being attached to something great and failed to recognize that Jody's longing for power and control could extend to her. Janie was attracted to Jodie's ambition, but as Langston Hughes asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?"—in Janie's case love is lost and in Jody's, "it explodes," and abuse happens. Evelyn Hammonds argues that Janie got caught up: "what catches women up, Hurston seems to me to say, is not their penchant for confusing

and conflating sex and love, love and marriage, dream and truth, but their tendency to measure manliness by the same yard stick as men, to believe like men in the power vested in the penis” (449). This in no way means that Janie is at fault for her abuse; rather Hammonds statement reveals the disempowered position of woman by virtue of her lack of a penis while simultaneously disclosing the black man as a victim, a slave (one could argue), to what he considers the real “power in the penis”—the power of white masculinity. Ultimately, Janie symbolically murders Jody with words, but without an awareness of the meaning of this gesture and without the successful emergence of a new self unbound and unblinded by romantic notions of love.

Shortly after Jody’s death, Janie “let[s] down her plentiful hair,” a short-lived gesture of agency and power as she only takes her hair down to comb it and “tied it back up again” (83). “*And she tied it back up*” (emphasis mine) represents the futility of not having a choice of existing in a world dominated by the male delusion of power even if the male’s power is ultimately impotent. Janie letting her hair down signifies her womanhood, femininity, freedom, a desire to exist fully within her black female body—her hair acts as a critical piece of her self. By taking it down she gets a glimpse of her true self, her real identity, but is not ready to follow that role. And so, she resists, but does not rebel.<sup>39</sup> Just as short-lived as the momentary freeing of hair is Janie’s freedom from the suppressive force of a man. Tea Cake soon enters Janie’s life looking “like the love thoughts of women” and quickly, but playfully deconstructs any power Janie has acquired (101). My “dogging out” of Tea Cake may, on the surface, seem unfounded as

---

<sup>39</sup> See Camus, *The Rebel*. For Camus resistance is an absurd act, slow suicide rather than the rebellion of murder. To quote Camus, “What is a rebel. A man who says no.” “Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being.”

most scholarship deifies Tea Cake as Janie's savior. Mary Helen Washington, in her foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, discusses the reaction of women to the novel and specifically to Janie and Tea Cake's relationship. Although Washington quotes Sherley Ann Williams generally pointing to Tea Cake's "flaws," what the passage hints at is how women remember Tea Cake and yearn for him; how women wish they were Janie by the end of the novel, not because she successfully self-actualizes, but because she finds love (ix). After all, Tea Cake "looked like the love thoughts of women" (101). The producer's choice to cast sexy, blue-eyed Michael Ealy in the 2005 television movie plays off of this often undocumented desire. My first (and perhaps second) reaction to the novel was the same. Janie's talk of love overshadowed any of Tea Cake's flaws in my adolescent mind and I, too, sat in waiting for my Tea Cake to show up. As I have matured and returned to the novel, what I now find most problematic is Hurston's characterization of Tea Cake and Janie's willingness to celebrate him despite his being (upon closer inspection) an arguably grosser representation of the black male delusion of power than either Logan Killicks or Jody Starks.

To phrase it in colloquial language, let's face it; Tea Cake's got game! Tea Cake woos Janie with lines like, "Ah ain't been sleepin' so good for more'n uh week cause Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair. It's so pretty. It feels jus lak underneath uh dove's wing next to mah face" (99). Hurston hints at Tea Cake's premeditation (similar to that of Janie's other suitors) as Tea Cake shows up for the first time at one of the rare times when Janie is completely alone and will remain so for several hours. Tea Cake plans elaborate scenes of seduction as he enters and exits Janie's

space, encouraging Janie to “play” within these scenes, not just at the checkers board. Hurston links “playing” to sexuality as Janie’s immediate reaction to Tea Cake’s invitation to play checkers is to sexualize Tea Cake as the thing to play with: “She looked him over and got little thrills from every one of his good points. Those full, lazy eyes with the lashes curling sharply away like drawn scimitars. The lean, over-padded shoulders and narrow waist. Even nice!” (92). Janie succumbs to Tea Cake’s seductive game and the sweetness suggested by his name the same way she fell for Jody Starks’ talk of wanting to be a big voice. Shawn Miller agrees, commenting that Tea Cake “achieves what he wants by saying what he does not mean...he allows her to bow down without losing face...she is deceived into obedience, struck powerless by a handsome face and charming words that flatter her own pride” (191). Just like Jody, Tea Cake transforms after marriage into a physically and mentally abusive husband, while Janie’s reaction and responses (denial, excusal, submission) to the different types of abuse mirror closely the psychosis of an abused spouse.

This understanding of Tea Cake’s emergence in the novel as a batterer being named a “transformation” deserves further thought. McGowan claims that after marriage or even “after the dog bite, Tea Cake becomes *explicitly* what he already was *implicitly*” (94, author’s emphasis). I do not wholly agree. Whereas critics like McGowan argue that Tea Cake is different from Jody, that “in the worlds of Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks, Janie exists only as an object and is denied her autonomous voice. Her relationship with Tea Cake, however, makes her change” (86). Instead, I would argue that Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake signals how she is yet unchanged and following

the same pattern of behavior precipitated by her desire for romantic love that has always guided her decisions. After all, she lets down her hair and “she tied it back up.” That is a gesture of conformity, not change. On Tea Cake’s part, transformation implies change and Tea Cake never changes, he just becomes more visibly what he always has been. He is not changed, he is revealed. What I find strange is how easily Tea Cake has been forgiven for being a more attractive combination of Logan and Jody. Like Jody, Tea Cake seduces Janie with words and whereas Logan wants to have Janie work along side him in the fields is read as oppressive, Tea Cake’s desire for Janie to work beside him in the muck is wrongly interpreted as an egalitarian gesture when, in fact, it is motivated by Tea Cake’s desire to maintain full-time surveillance of Janie’s actions as Janie acknowledges, “Maybe you think Ah ain’t treatin’ yuh right and you watchin’ me” (126). Even though Tea Cake’s manipulation of the tension-building phase mirrors almost exactly the progression of Jody’s violent behavior, both Janie and most critics write it off as innocent love-play because Janie *feels* love with Tea Cake and never did with her other husbands. Missy Dehn Kubitschek claims that Tea Cake’s domination is “not, like the earlier experiences, examples of violence used to enforce an action or behavior, but violence used to make another person aware,” as if this kind of intimate partner violence is somehow justifiable (112). Wendy McCreddie asserts that “Tea Cake does not beat Janie for anything *she* has done but to protect her from Mrs. Turner’s brother,” meaning Janie suffering at Tea Cake’s hand is for her own good (28, author’s emphasis). The reader might buy the jive he is putting down, but it is still jive. Kubitschek and McCreddie’s comments, of course, lack an understanding of the trauma inflicted by

intimate partner violence and lack empathy for the victim. In the parlance of the time, he is just another, “jive-ass nigga.” To fully grasp the complexity of Hurston’s commentary on intimate partner violence it is necessary that we as readers break through the love-blindness Janie finds herself inflicted with and instead see Tea Cake for what he is—a predator and batterer from the start.

Our first glimpse at the real Tea Cake arises only a week after the marriage when Tea Cake steals Janie’s money in an “act of astounding male prerogative” (Ramsey 44). Hurston parallels Janie’s experience with the robbery of Annie Tyler, and in doing so suggests that Janie (and the reader) should just be happy that Tea Cake comes back, and, in fact, Janie is. Even after Tea Cake describes his initial intentions when taking the money as theft, Janie stays silent about the personal hell she experiences, left once again sitting with the walls pressing in on her (the same feeling she experiences throughout her marriage with Jody). Tea Cake, having been so easily forgiven for losing nearly \$200 and staying away for a day and a half, takes this opportunity to explain to Janie his gambling interest and commences a string of contradictions that begin to define his character. Janie excuses Tea Cake’s gambling as “part of him, so it was all right” (120). Janie’s blind acceptance of anything pertaining to Tea Cake is never more evident than when Tea Cake admits to murdering a man in order to successfully bring Janie back the \$200. Tea Cake disapproves of Janie crying while nursing his wounds explaining, “It’s his [the murdered man’s] ole lady oughta do dat” (122). In the aftermath of this moment Janie feels a “self-crushing love” (122). Tea Cake crushes Janie’s self just like Logan

and Jody, the only difference is that this time Janie justifies the crushing by calling it love.

The tension-building period abruptly ends with the arrival of Mrs. Turner's brother and the igniting of Tea Cake's jealousy; "before the week was over he had whipped Janie" (140). The narrator<sup>40</sup> acknowledges that Janie did not deserve this punishment, but rather that resorting to physical violence satisfied some need of Tea Cake's: "it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession" (140). The narration attempts to minimize even justify Janie's beating: "no brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to sho he was boss" (140). Undercutting what is implied as Tea Cake's justification for his violent wielding of power is a hint of sarcasm, a tone of disquietedness. Even as the narration wants to make light of Janie's violation, Hurston's word choice makes clear that whatever we thought Janie was to Tea Cake up until this point, she is revealed as a "possession," an object Tea Cake uses to grow his status in the muck's community, something to dominate.

Tea Cake moves into the contrite kindness phase to the extent that "it aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams" (140). Hurston exposes the black

---

<sup>40</sup> There is a tendency for critics of *Their Eyes* to confuse the narrator and Hurston as author. Emblematic of this is Donald Marks' statement that "the author rationalizes Tea Cake's violence into an appropriate form of behavior through the acceptance of the supposition that it is not committed out of malice but out of love or madness" (156). The narrator, to an extent, is operating, like Janie, from a position of learned helplessness, a position also held by the black community as a whole. Hurston critiques this attempted justification of Tea Cake's violence by turning him into a mad dog and then slaying him at the hands of his victim rejecting any form of intimate partner violence, even the pre-mad dog kind of violence that is too often too easily dismissed.

community's complicity in the perpetuation of intimate partner violence. Not only does the community tolerate Tea Cake's violent demonstration of power, but it encourages it, even desires it. Tea Cake as batterer and Janie as victim are coveted by a black community sickened by a pathology of oppression and abuse, psychologically destroyed to the point that it understands no other means of existence. In this sense, Janie's status as victim is denied by the community. Instead, Tea Cake's act of violence returns Janie to the same isolating pedestal Jody's psychological alienation first created.

Thus, Janie's battered black female body is misread as a masterpiece rather than a master's piece. Once you accept Janie as object, it is easy to rationalize her victimization. The men in the novel mistakenly celebrate Tea Cake for marking Janie's body with his masculine power, "Uh person can see every place you hit her...Lawd! Wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie!" (140-141). In what Candice Jenkins deems a "process-as-sexual-marking," Tea Cake literally imprints himself on Janie and solidifies their "idealized romantic bond" (159). That Janie is mark-able holds meaning; "these marks inscribe both visually and physically the full implications of her racial identity as well as the violence that brought it into being" (Clarke 610). The men in the novel assume Janie's acquiescence as worthy of the standard of womanhood, "Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yah back, neither...Ah bet she don't even holler" (140-141). In fact, Janie does not holler. Mary Helen Washington comments on Janie's lack of voice in this scene: "perhaps the most stunning silence occurs after Tea Cake beats Janie. The beating is seen entirely through the eyes of the male community. While Janie's reaction is never given...Janie is silent, so thoroughly repressed in this section

that all that remains of her is what Tea Cake and the other men desire” (“I love the Way” 14). Notably, Janie’s acquiescence is also offered as what allows her to be beaten. Sop-de-Bottom explains, “take some uh dese ol’ rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn’t tell you even hit ‘em. Dat’s de reason Ah done quit beatin’ mah woman” (140). The suggestion here is that the darker the woman the less visible the bruising, which devalues the black(er) woman while valuing whiteness. Also embedded in this exchange is the blueprint for resistance—to fight back—an option Janie inevitably must take in order to survive. Notably, as apologetic as Tea Cake’s fawning over Janie is to her, he does not express the same remorse to the bottom’s men. Tea Cake agrees with Sop-de-Bottom’s assessment and brags, “Ah didn’t whip Janie ‘cause *she* done nothin’. Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss...Ah jus’ let her see dat Ah got control” (141). Obviously these values are twisted and perverted, a response to a legacy of disempowerment and disenfranchisement. To this end, Tea Cake uses Janie as a pawn to acquire power just as Jody used her and whereas Jody’s control was silently understood, Tea Cake boasts about his domination of Janie, further solidifying her position of subjection.

Significantly, soon after the period of contriteness we see the cycle of abuse begin again as Tea Cake reneges on his initial desire to have Janie working in the muck with him, “Tea Cake would no let her go with him to the field. He wanted her to get her rest,” in a tension-building act of control (146). Although Janie remains blind to the cycle, Hurston makes clear that regardless of whether Tea Cake is bitten by a mad dog, he will continue to act out in violent rage against her. Hurston uses the trope of the mad dog to

signify the true threat Tea Cake and all batterers pose to their victims.<sup>41</sup> Tea Cake as rabid beast symbolizes the worst-case scenario of abuse and illuminates the madness inherent to abuse—the potential for murder in all violent intimate partner relationships. In this way, Hurston exposes the true dilemma for all victims of intimate partner violence—to kill or be killed, a choice I will return to in the next section. First I will examine how Gayl Jones builds on Hurston’s construction of intimate partner violence in *Eva’s Man*.

Predictably, most of the scholarship on *Eva’s Man* focuses on the circumstances surrounding Eva’s murder of Davis and her telling of her story. What does surprise me, however, is the near total lack of engagement with regard to Jean, the battered wife of Eva’s cousin, Alfonso (also one of Eva’s victimizers). While I will discuss Eva’s many violations, I think understanding Jean’s role in Eva’s decision to murder Davis is critical to understanding why Eva acts as she does. I see Jean as an exaggerated Janie, perhaps living the life Janie might have lived if Tea Cake’s bouts of physical violence were allowed to progress slowly over time. Alfonso “would take her down to this hotel and start beating her in front of it. He wouldn’t take her inside, he’d beat her outside” (39). Alfonso, unlike Jody or Tea Cake, publicly beats his wife. Unlike the other batterers, Alfonso’s beatings are brutal and always threaten death, “it’s the way he looked, if anybody had a look that could kill, it was that one, and I ain’t lyin” (39-40). Alfonso only stops beating Jean when his brother, Otis, stops him. Otis reflects on “how long and hard he would beat on her if I hadn’t come all them many times...Do you think he

---

<sup>41</sup> To carry Hurston’s metaphor further—Tea Cake, through his possession of Janie—becomes the pack leader, the alpha male and ultimate determiner of roles and expectations within the community.

would've ended up beating her to death?" (43). Eva's mother answers that "somebody would've stopped it," but this is a statement rooted in hope rather than experience. Repeatedly, Otis is called from an off-site location to stop his brother with no one intervening in the meantime. Like the black communities in *Their Eyes*, the violence is justified as being mutually desirous, "Jean was just as crazy as Alfonso and they need each other," and Jean's staying with Alfonso is interpreted as a silent acceptance of her abuse (43). What does speak is Jean's marked body, "bruised all up" (39). Like Janie, Jean's marking is used by Alfonso as a stamp of ownership and demonstration of machismo. Notably, the text suggests that Alfonso beats Jean at this specific hotel because he suspects her of an infidelity which occurred there. Jenkins offers that "like the sex act wielded as punishment in other instances of the text, Alfonso's abuse constitutes a fusion of intimacy and brutality, because it violently asserts the couple's union, literally 'marking' Jean's body as Alfonso's sexual and social property" (159). Hence, Alfonso beats Jean outside—to announce his masculinity, his control, his power over his wife to those who might want to take his property.

Because Jean stays, she, like Janie, loses her victim status within the black community. Otis describes one scene where Alfonso, "started beating on her. But the woman stay with him, though. That's what I don't understand. She stay with him" (39). Otis' use of "but" indicates a shift from his displeasure with Alfonso's beating of Jean to a justification of the beating, one that is conditioned and validated by Jean's perceived acquiescence, an acquiescence that Otis interprets as Jean giving Alfonso permission to beat her again. What Otis (and the black community) fails to understand is the learned

helplessness Jean as a victim of repeated physical violence suffers from. She details her one attempt at leaving, “I did go away once...He came and got me. He came and got me and brought me back” (56). Jean, like Janie, is blinded by her love for Alfonso and insists, “when he came and got me, I was ready to go back” (56). Jenkins misreads Jean’s statement as willing participation, “Jean and Alfonso’s story recalls the ways that women might voluntarily participate in figures of vicious desire willingly offering up their bodies for violent consumption” (161). Jean is ready, in part, because her attempt at escape is unaided and because Alfonso’s appearance validates her learned helplessness (a learned helplessness justified as love), not because she desires to be violently consumed. As Walker explains, “battered women don’t attempt to leave the battering situation, even when it may seem to outsiders that escape is possible, because they cannot predict their own safety. They believe that nothing they or anyone else does will alter their terrible circumstances” (*Terrifying Love* 50). Battered women see being beaten as endemic; it is the relationship. We see it as epidemic, within that relationship. Because of this, the community sees ending the abuse as solely the victim’s responsibility, “the onliest person could do anything is Jean, if she’d leave but she won’t leave” (44). Implied in this ideology is the thought that Alfonso’s demonstration of power via physical violence is part of his nature, like Tea Cake, “part of him,” something that is unalterable and acceptable. Although Otis rightly identifies Jean’s ultimate fear that “maybe [Alfonso] be worser off if she did leave and he didn’t have nobody to beat on,” he misunderstands the meaning behind this (44). Jean’s fear is that the next time she leaves and he comes to get her, he will fulfill the intent Otis reads in Alfonso’s eyes and kill her. Significantly,

Eva, as a young girl, is privy to these discussions about Alfonso and Jean and witnesses Jean's markings. In one instance Eva's mother asks, "Did you see all up under her eyes?," and adds, "it ain't no sense in a man treating a woman like that is it?," to which Eva responds, "No ma'am" (56,57). Undeniably, watching from a distance the cycle of abuse endured by Jean impacts Eva's own tolerance for abuse. Eva determines not to end up like Jean, and understanding that leaving exists as only a temporary relief, ultimately chooses a more permanent termination of her abuse.

Eva does not just sit by and idly watch others' victimization, of course. She is victimized repeatedly by multiple offenders beginning when she is five years old and Freddy Smoot "with a dirty popsicle stick digging up [her] pussy" invades her body. Freddy rapes Eva with a popsicle stick at eight years old and continues to try again, but Eva "wouldn't play with him anymore" (13). Freddy, further victimizes Eva by telling the other boys who interpret Eva as whore (what she is misrepresented as throughout the text) and chase her, "there's Eva, we can get some" (19). Eva runs and successfully escapes having already learned by the age of five that the threat of rape is constant. Ironically, Freddy, before moving, gives Eva a knife—an apologetic act that acknowledges his predatory nature and the peril that Eva's black female body always faces. Still in the process of forming her self-consciousness, Eva is sexually molested by her mother's boyfriend, Tyrone: "but all of a sudden he took my hand and put it on him. I was scared to look up at him" (30). Tyrone follows his acute act of molestation with contrite kindness, "bringing [her] things," and each time Eva is reminded of the event and re-traumatized. She articulates this saying, "sometimes when I would think about it, I

would go and wash my hand” (31). Tyrone begins building the tension by psychologically torturing Eva with the knowledge of their sexualized physical contact, “You remember it, cause I remember it” (33). Eva, understanding her body as always at risk in his presence, begins taking evasive measures to ensure she is not left alone for his violation. Eva is seemingly able to escape further assault by Tyrone, but is raped-by-proxy by her father because of Tyrone’s presence in the home.

Eva’s father’s reaction to finding her mother in the house with her boyfriend is to rape her while Eva (complicit in her knowledge of her mother’s betrayal) listens in the next room. Eva remembers the rape, “it was like I could hear her clothes ripping...now he was tearing that blouse off and those underthings...I kept feeling that after he tore all her clothes off and there wasn’t anymore to tear, he’d start tearing her flesh” (37). Like Alfonso, Eva’s father takes his wife to the site of betrayal and emasculation in an effort to violently and publicly reclaim lost masculinity. Eva is as much a victim in this rape as her mother, traumatized by the violent sexual abuse of her mother’s body, a body she connects intimately with her own. Keith Byerman comments that “the father forces upon his wife the knowledge that the instrument of pleasure is also the instrument of control. By entrapping Eva in a room where she must hear the conflict, he teaches her the violent and inevitable consequences of her womanhood” (“Black Vortex” 96). Byerman’s choice of the word “inevitable” is significant. As he understands it, each violent performance of masculinity

replicate[s] the initial one. In each, a male attempts to dominate a woman through some forceful act. The woman responds with a combination of passivity and

resistance. Both the man and the community assume that the woman is helplessly attracted to men and sex; resistance is a sign of perverseness. In each case, she receives what is considered her just deserts, either reward for her cooperation, or punishment for her rejection of a particular man; and, in each case, the society reinforces the actions of the man. The sequence is considered to be both inevitable and desirable. (“Black Vortex” 95)

As these scenes of violation compound for Eva and she can no longer even detach her father from the violent demonstrations of power conducted at the expense of the black female body, Eva recognizes the abuse of her body by black men as unavoidable, even expected and resolves to resist the daily threat to her self her body poses.

From this moment, Eva meets physical violation with violent resistance. Alfonso attempts several times to corner Eva into a vulnerable position ripe for sexual assault, finally stopping when Eva pulls a knife on him as he claims with masculine bravado, “shit, a tiddy ain’t shit” (94). Fulfilling the threat she promises to Alfonso, Eva stabs Moses Tripp whose misreading of her as a prostitute justifies his reaching “down between [her] legs” from which he “screamed and pulled his hand back” after Eva stabs him with, ironically, Freddy Smoot’s knife (98). At this point Eva understands that her words have no value, no power, and fail to speak to her would-be violators. Violence, or more accurately the infliction of pain caused by violence, becomes Eva’s only method of articulating her, “no.” She explains it best, “I told him to get lost again but he wouldn’t so I knifed him” (153).

Perhaps wanting to satisfy her mother's notions of womanhood after disappointing her with stabbing a man and going to jail (two notably un-womanly actions), Eva marries James Hunn, a known murderer who, with seductive manipulation gains access to Eva much like Jody and Tea Cake do Janie. The difference is that Eva is aware of the indicators of the cycle of intimate partner violence and leaves after the first acute battering incident well aware that this type of violence always escalates. James begins tension-building with episodes of obsessive jealousy and strategic control. He removes the telephone from the house because, "he didn't want [Eva's] lovers calling [her] up at all hours of the night," and limits her contact with the outside world to attending school, "and then he would come to the school and pick [her] up after classes" (110). James' tension-building explodes in an acute battering incident after he finds Eva at home with a male classmate. Eva first remembers him "slapping" her, an act of marital violence that triggers her memory of her father's rape of her mother under similar circumstances. The two traumatic memories blend and Eva imagines her husband saying, "You think you a whore, I'll treat you like a whore. You think you a whore, I'll treat you like a whore," after which he rapes her as her father did her mother (163). Eva answers the implied questioning of this memory by insisting, "Naw, I'm not lying" (163). As she explains, "it ain't me lyin, it's memory lyin," a statement Eva doesn't completely understand--one that, nonetheless, explains her memory as traumatic, no less real. Eva refuses her mother's "profound silence" during her violation, which suggests "that she is expected to (and does) accept this sexualized punishment without resistance," and instead of silently enduring, Eva speaks with violence and "squeeze[s] [her] legs around his

neck” in an attempt to both shut him up and cut off his life source (Jenkins 156, *Eva’s Man* 163). Eva mistakes her husband’s airway as what gives him life and is, thus, unsuccessful in her attempt to strangle him, a mistake she rectifies later with Davis. What this conflation of memory does for Eva is confirm for her that she is in danger, and ultimately jolts her from her passive acceptance of her husband’s control, calling her to action, and, so, she leaves.

Eva, then, lives as a free woman, dodging sexually harassing bosses and the always-existing threats to her black female body until she meets Davis sitting in a bar. Perhaps Eva is vulnerable in this moment to Davis’ advances having lacked sexual intimacy for a period, she “hadn’t been with a man for a long time” (169). Perhaps Davis’ misreading of her as a prostitute, a misrepresentation Eva is confronted with repeatedly, causes her to want to challenge this notion by becoming (temporarily) what society has named her. She expresses this desire, “I know why he came over. I knew he would come over” (169). Perhaps both reasonings work together to create a perfect storm which compounds into something Eva is unable to, at this stage imagine. Janelle Wilcox further explores the impact of Davis’ misreading of Eva arguing, “Davis’ understanding of Eva as a woman/whore echoes the voices from Eva’s past, the same demanding and inscribing voices of men who defined Eva by her sexual function while simultaneously condemning her for it” (83). Eva desires to reject this representation of herself and, in an effort to use the master’s tools to tear down the master’s house, she leaves with Davis impersonating the prostitute he believes her to be. Eva’s choice to leave asks the question: “What if I were what you say I am?” As Wilcox submits, Eva

“assumes an active role in constructing an identity that is not imposed on her by men who demand whore-like behavior from her, and she rejects a passive role of victimization” (86). Thus, Eva’s leaving with Davis must be read not as an act of resignation to the power of masculinity demonstrated by its power to define, but one of purposeful resistance.

Having said that, Eva is unprepared for the psychotic torturer Davis is revealed to be. Initially held up in a hotel room for three days waiting for her menstruation to pass, the fulfilling sexual encounter turns to a scene of captivity where Davis holds Eva hostage for more than a month as Eva reveals, “I was bleeding again” at one point in her narrative (148). Mirroring the other perpetrators of intimate partner violence detailed in these texts, Davis slowly builds the tension through episodes of control. Eva tells how, “he wouldn’t let me comb my hair after we made love” (66). Davis eventually takes possession of the comb, symbolic of him taking possession of Eva saying, “You don’t need it,” implying that not only does Eva not need the comb, but she does not need an autonomous self that would desire her to use a comb against Davis’ will. Eva explains, “He thought I was his” (171). Davis expands his control and prevents Eva from leaving the room as this exchange documents:

Let me go get it this time.

No.

What’s there about keeping me here?

Where I can find you. (115)

Eva witnesses how, “he made me stay there,” “he kept me there” (169, 171). The captivity symbolizes the endemic world—there is no escape. The captivity is what Eva is unprepared for as she enters the situation ready to give her body up for sexual consumption mistakenly figuring she would maintain control of her self, but instead, as Hortense Spillers explains, “the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality” (457). She continues, revealing that “the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness” (457). Eva, in an attempt to empower herself, begins to lose control.

Beyond Eva’s entrapment as a captive body is the abuse her body suffers at her captor’s hands. The text suggests that Davis’ penetration is violent, akin to rape, “he went in like he was tearing something besides her flesh,” and suggests other incidents of Davis taking possession of Eva’s body against her will (51). Eva accounts, “He did it while I was sleeping. I was bleeding but he went ahead and did it” (148). In another instance, Eva describes how Davis, “had no tenderness, no none, and then he laid me on my back on the bed. He didn’t play first. No, he went in before I was ready” (158). Davis uses violent sex as a means of control. Walker articulates how batterers often times use sex “as a power weapon to dominate women in the same manner that they used physical violence” (*The Battered Woman* 149). In uncharacteristic fashion, Eva responds to her violation by validating it, “But still it was so good” (148). Eva, captive, powerless, trapped by a power she misjudged is, at this point in her victimization, in danger of losing her self, and it requires an audacious act of will to recover what has been lost—an act reminiscent of Dessa Rose’s brutal coffle attack and Sethe’s inconceivable murders.

Significantly, unlike Janie and Jean, Eva is left visually unmarked by her many victimizations, a fact that works to convict Eva's crime as unjustifiable. The police captain investigating Davis' murder asks, "She got any marks on her?," and receives the response, "No, not a mark one" (69). Still unable to conceive of Eva's attack without proof of her victimization, the captain questions further, "No scratches or nothing?...He didn't beat her or anything?" (69). Whereas Dessa and Sethe bear the scars of their captivity on their body as inscriptions of their bodily violation, and Janie's and Jean's light skin whispers the secret of their abuse through black and blue bruises, Eva is left unmarked and, thus, removed from the subject position of victim. One of Megan Sweeney's incarcerated students, Sue, responds angrily to the injustice of Eva's predicament, "You don't have to have marks," a point that Eva's violent resistance clearly makes whether rightly interpreted by others or not (461). Part of Jones' critique here of the way that society reads abuse and who determines who constitutes a victim and who does not, involves the notion that the marking of the abused body is necessary as proof of the violation—a notion that invalidates the abuse of black female bodies whose coloring masks marks of violent violation and invalidates the ability for any woman to speak the truth of her abuse without this proof. Cindy Patton comments on the notion that marking defines victimhood, arguing that "unlike the black body that continuously signifies its status as object of racism, the victim of sexist battery appears discontinuously, as before and after the crime committed on her body. She is only a victim when she is being beaten; even when she is persistently battered, her body is simply the object of repeated but discontinuous bouts of sexist violence" (138). Eva's

silence throughout the text, in part, acknowledges this position of subjection and causes Janelle Wilcox to pose the questions: “What can a bitch-cunt-hussy-whore say that will counter what is inscribed in the dominant male discourse?” (86). Jones seems to say, nothing, at least not verbally, but offers violent resistance as a type of speech that is at least heard, even if misunderstood.

#### Kill or Be Killed: Murder as an Act of Violent Resistance

The reality of the victim of intimate partner abuse’s existence is that death is a daily threat. Studies show that “more than 50 percent of all women homicide victims are murdered by former abusive male partners” (*Terrifying Love* 62). Walker maintains that “most of the time, it is the woman (who dies); she is either killed by her batterer or she commits suicide as a result of his abusive behavior” (*The Battered Woman* 38). Melissa Doak’s research supports this claim adding, “studies have found that battered women often contemplate suicide because they see no other escape from the cycle of abuse, and that as many as a third of women who do commit suicide each year have been abused by a male partner” (114). What we know in all cases of abuse is that the perpetrators of violence as an act of domination do not stop themselves, and, so, the victims of this violence, imprisoned by a false sense of consciousness of learned helplessness, live in constant terror. And it is this terror that Walker suggests is the reason why battered women kill: “while many other emotions play a part in the tragic stories of battered women who kill, nearly all of them kill not out of anger, jealousy, or other emotions, but out of terror...they kill in self-defense; their ultimate fear is that they will be murdered themselves if they do not kill” (*Terrifying Love* 65). Therefore, it is critical that as we

consider Janie's and Eva's acts of violent resistance that we understand the violence as different from their abusers by "evaluating the men's violent acts for power and control differently than the women's, who strike back in self-defense, to stay alive or minimize their possible injuries" (*The Battered Woman* 33). That these women would in a moment of sheer terror, "sensing an increased loss of control in the batterer and the level of violence," choose their life cannot be minimized (*Terrifying Love* 105). The act proves self, and in that way, defends it.

Frances Restuccia, commenting on Alice Walker's use of intimate partner violence comments, "Walker's writing performs black male violence to unhinge it from the social forces that seem to generate it, and in thus loosening it suggest the possibility of conversion," but adds that in doing this, "Walker leaves women's pain in a state of opacity (refusing to usurp it for the sake of her own literate power)" (68). This is where Hurston and Jones succeed where other black women authors have failed—to usurp the pain of the victimized black female body in an act of violence that acknowledges an autonomous self. And what Hurston reveals through Janie's act of violence is just how close learned helplessness and the victim-pathology can get one to death.

Janie, faced with Tea Cake as mad dog, Hurston's accelerated imagining of the abuser Tea Cake would eventually become, nearly dies before, at the very last moment, killing Tea Cake. In denial, "anyway Tea cake wouldn't hurt *her*. He was jealous and wanted to scare her," Janie subconsciously acknowledges the threat to her life and loads and hides the shot gun that will eventually kill Tea Cake (173). Although Tea Cake is sickened by the rabies virus multiplying in his system, his justification to Janie for his

attack on her with a gun sounds rational and is remarkably like his earlier jealousy that precipitated the first incident of acute battering, “Janie, Ah done went through everything tuh be good tuh you and it hurt me tuh mah heart tuh be ill treated lak Ah is” (174). Janie “noted that even in his delirium he took good aim,” and still justifying his violence against her (with a gun pointed directly at her), she thinks, “maybe he would just scare her, that was all” (174). At its core, this scene mirrors the first incident of battering with the only difference being the escalation of violence. Instead of his hand, Tea Cake wields a gun.

Tea Cake shoots at Janie twice before she pulls the trigger to kill him. Shawn Miller comments on how it is only at the moment of certain death that Janie can separate her self from her romantic vision of love that Tea Cake has come to resemble to save her own life. He reasons that “only after Tea Cake’s pistol has twice clicked on an empty chamber does Janie, for the first time in their relationship, dare to command him” (200). But Janie’s choice to live, even if at the absolute last moment, should not be trivialized because, as Walker’s statistics prove, so many women are unable to make this choice. Significantly, Hurston offers Janie subject status after her victory over Tea Cake, “a minute before she was a scared human being fighting for its life” (175). As a human being and not a possession, Janie emerges as a free self and resists her objectification. As Todd McGowan asserts, “through this gesture, the act of shooting Tea Cake, Janie allows her self as subject to emerge—not, this time, as a fully realized self, as a unified subject, but as a subject freed from its dependence on the Other” (99). By killing Tea Cake to

preserve her self, Janie, for the first time, demonstrates an acceptance of self-worth that allows her to potentially break the cycle of abuse plaguing her life.

Eva's murder of Davis is more complex for two reasons: 1) the threat to Eva's life is not as obviously imminent and, 2) the brutal grotesqueness of Eva's crime. Before moving further into my analysis, however, I will restate my understanding of Eva's act of castration and necrophilia as a singular act of madness. She is victim turned predator, each failure to live as an un-violated black woman reinforcing her desire to empower her self. For Eva, in her temporary psychopathic state, power is achieved not only through killing, but through destroying—mutilating this man and all of the men who have violated her and the women she loves. Eva poisons Davis with rat poison and then bites his penis off, wrapping it in his silk handkerchief and then, “laid it back inside his trousers, zipped them up” (129). She then uses his body to sexually pleasure herself, “I kissed his cheeks, his lips, his neck. I got naked and sat on the bed again. I spread my legs across his thighs and put his hand on my crotch, stuffed his fingers inside me. I put my whole body over him. I farted” (129). Much has been written about, specifically, Eva's castration of Davis. Wilcox offers, “Eva's violence functions on two seemingly contradictory levels: on the one hand, she has become what the dominant discourse says she is—the castrating bitch—on the other, her action challenges the logic of a discourse that expects passivity and sexual victimization from what it fears” (86). On the one hand, Eva is impersonating the prostitute who readily and willingly gives up her body for male consumption, and on the other hand, she is the Queen Bee/Medusa who seductively manipulates men to their demise, turning them to stone. Sally Robinson adds that, in

“literally castrating Davis, Eva claims a power that mythologies of race and gender have always assigned to women, at least metaphorically,” and reverses them in a violent reconstruction of myth and of the narratives which attempt to write for her an identity independent of her autonomous self (169). Identifying the power of the patriarchy to assign roles, Clara Ascoda Agusti writes that “symbolically, Eva puts Davis, by ‘robbing’ him of that around which he constitutes his privilege and his superiority, at her ‘same’ level, thus depriving patriarchy of that which constitutes its narcissism: the phallus” (33). All of these assessments, I think, accurately express the multiplicity of implications the act of castration connotes. When Eva unsuccessfully attempts to cut off her husband’s life source by suffocating his airway she recognizes that she must literally cut something else off, that the male’s power source is not the respiratory system, but exists within what makes them distinctly male, the penis. And since, in Eva’s experience, male is associated with violence and pain and disempowerment, control, and misrepresentation, Eva desires to make Davis un-male, removing his maleness and, thus, his threat of violation to her self.

Also motivating Eva’s act of castration is what “Cixous has called the ‘phallogentric representationalism’ that distorts and objectifies” Eva, misnaming her as a whore, misreading her as insane (Nnaemeka 218). Biman Basu provides an explanation of how these phallogentric representations work:

“Domestic abuse,” “crime of passion,” “unfaithful/deceitful lover,” “unrequited love”—these are all categories, in some cases constructed by experts, but in all cases recognizable and familiar. Once formulated, these terms gain the currency

through which these ideas circulate in popular culture. This is not to deny the empirical reality, for example, of domestic abuse, but to try to understand the way in which these categories are deployed in the text. The text clearly represents this deployment at the level of critique. These categories are male constructions which position the female subject in a particular, and negative, relation to the male subject. The female is the passive victim or an excessive, and therefore, irrational agent. (201)

In this sense, Eva's labeling as "whore," and prostitute, and "crazy" work as male constructions to exert control over her. Eva's psychologist, then, is correct in his assessment that Davis "came to represent all the men" Eva had known and understanding this helps determine the need for Davis' castration (81). As Nnaemeka explains, "all the cultural symbols that construct woman as dangerous temptress, a bewitching snare, are brought together at the scene of Davis' castration" (218). Eva, then, in her castration of Davis, metaphorically castrates all men, eliminating the masculine control in her life. She explains, "Every man could look at me the way he was looking. They all would. Even when I" (171). Significantly, Eva does not finish this thought, perhaps aware that already her act of resistance has been silenced by a patriarchal power outside of her reach, one that has silenced her violent assertion of voice by naming it an act of madness. Young, despite this fact, is comforted that Eva's act still works to protect her body from further victimization as it "warns all other men who would abuser her, warns them about her teeth down there, about the potential of her body to protect itself against injury rather than merely suffer injury" ("Inheriting" 383). Only after the act does Eva recognize the

extent to which she is impotent, and although “Eva’s narrative actively shapes her history so that others’ representations of her are displaced by her self-representation,” the narrative also documents the difficulty Eva faces in accomplishing this (Robinson 166). Even as she attempts to explain herself, the psychiatrist inserts his own interpretation, his own (mis)reading of Eva’s violent act of resistance. Eva, still fighting for autonomy pleads, “Don’t explain me. Don’t explain me. Don’t explain me. Don’t explain me” (173). Jones leaves Eva here, after having successfully circumvented her systemic devaluation and self-erasure in a moment through an act of violent resistance, still battling for her words to be heard.

Even beyond her desire to rid her self of the threat of violence and misrepresentation is her desire to be freed from the captivity Davis engenders and the oppressive captivity of being a black woman in America. As previously discussed, captivity enforces an environment of imprisonment, of total powerlessness. In this state, Eva perceives the imminent danger to her self. Walker addresses how battered women, “all told of ways they learned to keep control of their own minds, recognizing that the batterer had the ability to control their bodies” (*The Battered Woman* 41). What Eva recognizes is that her control over her mind is loosening, and, so, she does not murder Davis because she is crazy, but to keep from becoming crazy. As Walker claims, “it is the nature of psychological self-defense that a battered woman may kill to stop herself from *going* crazy. She may sense that she is finally being driven over the edge, killing to preserve the inviolability of her psychological boundaries” (*Terrifying Love* 190). Davis’ imprisonment of Eva becomes symbolically representative of the psycho-sexual

enslavement the dominating male patriarchy uses as a means to control women. Like Davis' terrifying captivity, the narrative of male dominance which allows for Eva's daily victimization by men expressing their "right" to control, does not leave scars, but exists as equally destructive to the self. To use a term I co-opted from Debra King in my discussion of rape, Davis' captivity as a scaled-down version of patriarchy's grander manifestations of domination amounts to "soul-murder." For this reason, it is significant that Eva requisitions her body as the murder weapon.

Eva, in order to prove the vitality of her mind, must re-claim possession of her abused black female body. Her choice to use her body as the agent of violence, the inflictor of pain, actively rejects a reading of her body as passive. Young helps explain how the black female body, itself, can be used as a site of resistance:

their use of the black female body to articulate resistance, no matter how constrained that resistance is, reflects what can only be an attempt to counter invest the body with meaning. Resisting the fallacy that the body is only flesh that power can violently act upon, [they] use their bodies as the site of resistance to violence. They insist that their violated bodies are not only texts that speak to the injury of slavery, racism, and patriarchy, but also texts that can exploit the hegemonic gaze for control over their own bodies. ("Inheriting" 380)

Eva bites off the symbol of Davis' control, and in an expression of her freedom from his sexual possession of her body, she reverses their roles and takes possession of him, pleasing herself with his now lifeless body. Implied in this reversal of fortune is Eva's evaluation of her self under Davis' command as lifeless. Disallowed choice, Eva's

grotesque masturbation with Davis' dead body translates to a deferral of desire—an acting out of what she was, in her captive state, unable to express. Carol Davison understands the reversal of gender roles differently as, “Eva assumes the role of outraged phallic mother, while Davis becomes the grotesque, menstruating body” (407). What is implied in Davison's assessment is Eva's masculation as a result of Davis' emasculation, an idea I think deserves further exploration.

Walker asserts that “there is a tacit understanding, in Western culture, that violence lies in the province of male prerogative,” while Teresa de Lauretis assesses that “the subject of the violence is always, by definition, masculine; ‘man’ is by definition the subject of culture and of any social act” (*Terrifying Love* 188, 250). In this sense, Eva not only defies masculine domination by resisting violently her subjection, she acquires a level of masculinity through her appropriation of violence as a means of control. It is this acquisition of masculinity that threatens patriarchal control, not the violent act itself, causing her to be deemed insane. The male detective comments, “A woman got to be crazy to do something like that,”—a woman, not a person, allowing for the possibility that a man could do something similar and be justified. The second male detective recognizes the possible fallacy in this logic responding, “or want you to think she's crazy...do something so people will think she has to be crazy to do it” (65). Notably, this conversation is followed by a discussion of where Davis' severed penis was put, exposing the men's preoccupation with the threat of castration. Both men want Eva to be crazy, but underlying this desire is the fear that she is not, because if she is not and is, indeed, a woman capable of masculine violence, then she exists as a threat to their existence.

Jones' implication is that this threat is limited in its effectiveness at gaining women who assert violence as resistance liberation from an overarching patriarchal presence. Eva's roommate, Elvira, recounts her knowledge of other women who killed their men saying, "they get back out on the street again, and some new man gets them mad and they be saying, 'I done killed you once, I don't want to have to kill you again. Don't make me kill you again'" (150). Like Hurston, Jones acknowledges the potential of breaking free from the cycle of violence, but ultimately concedes that collectively the violent domination by men of women persists.

#### Justice Served?: Consequences of Black Women's Violent Resistance

One constant in all of the novels discussed in this project is that none of the violators of the black female body, white or black, faces any legal consequences for his abuse—their violent possession of the black female body and their murder of the black woman's self. The neo-slave narratives discussed in the first chapter document how beating and raping black women slaves was legally not a crime while the novels set in more contemporary times suggest that, in this respect, not much has changed. Mutt Thomas is never persecuted for his attempted murder of Ursa in *Corregidora*. The black male predators who rape their should-be friends in Shange's *For Colored Girls* lurk behind the shadows of black women's shame and fear keeps these men's abuses hidden. The black male youth in *The Women of Brewster Place* who violently display their masculinity by gang raping a defenseless lesbian woman escape to rape again—notably, calling the police is not ever discussed as an option of recourse. Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter and neither his wife nor the black community (both wholly aware of the

incestuous violence) hold him accountable for his brutalization of Pecola's eleven-year-old body. Precious is raped nearly her entire life, her father's name is on her first child's birth certificate, and no one intercedes to protect her black child body by punishing her black male perpetrator. Ultimately, the lack of consequences faced by these black male violators of black female bodies says more about the socially disempowered position of black women in American society than it does about the bravado of black male abusers.

Black women victims of physical and sexual violence find themselves in the disserving predicament of fighting for a racist/sexist judicial system to fight for them. The justice system in America has always fought for "good" women, meaning white women whose honor and purity stands on a pedestal (a position Jody and Tea Cake try to mimic through their identity-shaping of Janie). As Ida B. Wells documents, most of the lynchings of black men were caused by (unfounded) accusations of white women against predatory black men. Today, these "good" white women more and more successfully use Walker's theory of the battered woman's syndrome to defend their violent resistance of abuse, while black women still must confront the historical precedent defining them as not worthy of justice and the historical stereotype defining them as "bad." Sharon Allard explains, "race certainly plays a major role in the cultural distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' woman" (196). She notes the double-bind that black women face, forced to, "overcome the demeaning stereotypes of both race and gender" (198). Walker assesses how this works in court, "women who behave 'ladylike' become 'good' victims who are more believable and therefore more likely to get an overloaded system to identify with them and work on their behalf" ("Racism and Violence" 244). The problem black

women face is that due to an increased, inherent fear of the judicial system and a (sub)conscious understanding of their oppressed status, black women often resemble the antithesis of ‘ladylike’ behavior with their self-protective demeanor, and the “hard” or “tough” woman “is less likely to be seen as a battered woman with PTSD and Battered Woman Syndrome that impacted her state of mind and therefore, not entitled to claim self defense” (“Racism and Violence” 244). For this reason, Allard argues that the Battered Woman Syndrome, “essentially excludes Black women,” “to the extent that battered woman syndrome restores a battered woman’s image to that of a ‘good’ woman, the theory implicitly embraces the notion that there are ‘good’ women and ‘bad’ women” (201).

What Allard is really saying is that a white woman can still be a “good” woman and be a murderer while a black woman cannot. A white woman can kill her abuser, can assert her self in an act of defense whereas a black woman, by societal definition, does not have a “good” self to protect. In this sense, Hershini Bhana Young understands black women’s incarceration as a consequence of their violent resistance as ironic. She claims, “public discourse only recognizes black women in their criminality, a direct legacy of slavery in which blacks were without agency except when that agency was criminalized” (“Inheriting” 377). Saidiya Hartman reasons that this criminality is essential to defining the black self, maintaining that “the fashioning of the subject must necessarily take place in violation of the law, and consequently, will, criminality, and punishment are inextricably linked” (41). Imprisonment, then, must be read as its own site of resistance—in an act of violent trickery, the black woman succeeds in being

acknowledged. Notably, in the two novels discussed in this chapter, one woman is acquitted and the other sentenced to an undetermined time length in a mental health prison. Janie succeeds in presenting herself as a “good” woman where Eva does not. If it is, as Jennifer Jones understands, that “patriarchal culture has been successful in containing women in a binary discourse of womanhood, where the ‘good woman’ is self-sacrificing and the ‘criminal woman’ is self-serving,” then I argue that Janie sacrifices her black self in order to appropriate a whiteness that allows for her freedom while Eva chooses her incarceration and, thus, chooses her identity as a black woman.

Hurston uses Janie’s trial to expose the injustices surrounding and causing Janie’s acquittal. Throughout the novel, Hurston causes the reader to react complicitly in Janie’s abuse, and by acquitting Tea Cake of domestic abuse, we place the fault on Janie, thus misunderstanding the need for Tea Cake to die at Janie’s hands. This misunderstanding is what Janie fears most, “It was not death she feared. It was misunderstanding” (179). Abuse is normalized in the novel to the point where we, the reader, no longer hold Tea Cake accountable for his actions, for his threat to Janie’s life. Hurston places Janie on trial so that not only the black community must confront their blind acceptance and encouragement of intimate partner violence, but the reader must as well. The jury exists not only as the white, power-wielding community of the muck (symbolic of what Tea Cake forcefully tries to ape), but also the reader. Janie’s unanimous acquittal trumpets Janie’s self-actualization, as Henry Louis Gates puts it, her “finding a voice, with language as an instrument of injury and salvation, of selfhood and empowerment,” and also Janie’s survival from abuse (187). But the trial itself presents more complex

implications about the dominant white patriarchal justice system and the black community at-large.

Significantly, Janie is not tried as a black woman, but rather a non-black woman, and, thus, is judged by the standard of white womanhood and capable of being judged as a “good” woman. The black community, reeling from Janie’s assault on its masculinist patriarchal culture, denies Janie and positions her as an outsider. The narrator describes how, “they were all against her, she could see. So many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat her to death. She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts” (176). Armed with “cocked and loaded” tongues, the black community turns against Janie, protecting an always tenuous sense of black masculine dominance. Notably, Janie recognizes her position as an outsider, “she had to remember she was not at home,” and uses this position to her advantage by appropriating whiteness, a choice only made possible, ironically, by the black community’s dismissal of her.

Susan Meisenholder further describes the dynamics of the courtroom with regards to the black community, writing, “eager to demonstrate their racial dominance, the white judge silences [the black community] and invites Janie to speak. His reaction, the white women’s applause, and the jury’s acquittal demonstrate not their understanding but rather their misinterpretation and appropriation of a black woman’s story for their own purpose” (83). I think Meisenholder sells Janie short in her analysis. After all, it is Janie who appropriates the white woman’s story, who narrates a tale that ultimately defines her as, “a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy” (179).

Perhaps because we do not hear Janie's witnessing we tend to defer agency to the white jury, but this is a mistake because unlike any other black woman protagonist in any of the novels discussed in this project, Janie is able to escape her subaltern state and be heard by her oppressors, and this feat of speech allows her to be set free. Janie is so successful in her appropriation of whiteness that "the white women cried and stood around her like a protecting wall and the Negroes, with heads hung down, shuffled out and away" (179). Janie is literally accepted into the inner circle of white womanhood, a victory which is translated by the black community as defeat. Susan Meisenhelder argues that this acceptance by the white women, "falsifies Janie's experience, diminishes her stature, and transforms the self-preservation in her shooting of Tea Cake into selfless female devotion" (81). I argue, instead, that Meisenhelder's dismissal of Janie's agency is what diminishes Janie. Janie, now free, visits her new "kind white friends who had realized her feelings," accepting, for the moment, her new subject status—a status she determines, much like Dessa Rose, through her telling of her story.

Beyond Janie's ability to appropriate whiteness to her benefit, a notably temporary and situationally based act, the worthlessness of the black male body is also exposed in Janie's acquittal. Janie overhears men talking, "she didn't kill no white man, did she? Well, long as she don't shoot no white man she kin kill jus' as many niggers as she please" (179). Cindy Patton discusses this pathology in real cases in which black men are involved arguing, "that women are so often the direct victims of male violence collides in the white paranoid imaginary with the figure of the predatory Black man, and complicates both anti-racist and anti-sexist political strategies" (134). The black man,

who is always already a violent dangerous threat to the white community and more specifically to white womanhood, is viewed differently within the justice system. Taking into account the white pathology of fear, the death of a black man is deemed reason for celebration, not punishment. For this reason, Hawkins offers that “the literature of the devalued status of the black victim suggests that among black and white domestic murderers, blacks will receive less punishment than whites” (194). The other implication to Janie’s acquittal, then, is that Tea Cake’s death simply does not matter to, and in fact, poses a relief to the white community and its determination of justice.

While Janie is acquitted of murder and set free, Eva chooses a life of incarceration. Eva calls the police and tells them, “about the man in the hotel room” (129). She returns to the scene of the crime after enjoying another meal of cabbage and sausage and is there taken into custody. What Eva recognizes during her brief stint of “freedom” is that the cycle of violence continues. Just like she drinks beer and pees and then drinks more beer and pees again, Eva realizes that her existence will always be defined by male domination and Davis’ death only provides temporary relief while her desire is only temporarily quenched. As Eva pays for her food she thinks, “I wanted to be fucked. I wanted him to fuck me up my ass” (130). She desires Davis sexually, but has already witnessed that she, as a black woman, is unable to enact desire separate from male domination. Her desire is inherently misread and this misreading labels her a “whore” and “prostitute,” disallowing her the ability to fulfill her sexual desire without falling prey to false constructions of her identity. This is why she goes back to the hotel room, not deluded by some fantasy of Davis being alive and her getting “fucked,” but

because she understands that murdering Davis has left her existence unchanged. She still exists as a black woman, prey of black and white men, object, and possession. She escapes one prison cell only to be delivered into another, larger, but equally as soul-crushing cage. For this reason, Keith Byerman comments that Eva, “in effect chooses her final prison at the still center of the whirlpool” (“Black Vortex” 99). This choice, however, should not be read as resignation.

For Eva, prison represents a refuge, a space of freedom that the outside world cannot give her. As Walker explains, “an important truth about those who live in violent relationships [is] they are not able to exercise free will because they are not free. Violence creates a psychological prison from which escape is sometimes impossible. Real prison may be a less noxious form of bondage than a battering relationship at least for some women who kill” (*Terrifying Love* 224). Notably, Eva’s choice to not speak, in opposition with Janie’s choice to speak, causes her to be misread as insane—a diagnosis not without consequences. As Walker points out, “a homicide conviction brings a time-limited sentence, but not guilty by reason of insanity brings a hospital sentence of potentially unlimited duration” (*Terrifying Love* 189). Although Eva is incarcerated for an undetermined amount of time, I submit that Eva’s placement in a mental health prison actually allows her more agency than a prison sentence might. Significantly, Eva does, ultimately, choose to tell her story and just as easily as Janie’s appropriation of whiteness

frees her, Eva's manipulation of the dominant narrative at her will provides a similar opportunity<sup>42</sup>.

Eva's manipulation of the dominant narrative's primary goal need be to establish her as a "good" woman, a title acquisition that Jones suggests is problematized by the gross sexual brutality of Eva's killing. As Sweeney comments, "the readers' overall discomfort with Jones's juxtaposition of sexual desire and sexual violation highlights the extent to which communities and courts simplify—even excise—women's sexual desire in adjudicating questions of victimization and resistance" (470). In the end, Eva demonstrates no desire to squelch her own sexual desire in an attempt to reconstruct her identity by creating a false consciousness that would work to define her as "good." In the final scene Eva receives vaginal oral stimulation from Elvira and orgasms, saying, "Now,"—a scene most critics read as Eva exploring alternate possibilities for her sexual desire in an act that validates the lesbian sexual experience as mutually empowering. But I think something different is working here. As discussed, Eva's act of violence, a socially defined masculine act, endows Eva with a masculine presence. In this sense, not only does Eva engage in an act of (satisfying) lesbian sex, but she reverses her sex-role and becomes the dominator versus the dominated. In this role, Eva is able to vocalize demands, "Now," and determine the how of her sexual fulfillment. More than an act of cunnilingus, it is an act of figurative fellatio as Eva genders herself masculine through her use of violence; she destroys and thus possesses the power of the phallus. In this way, even amidst her incarceration, Eva resists. Ultimately, she resists false and too simplistic

---

<sup>42</sup> Here I am suggesting a more literal freedom. As already stated, my argument is that Eva is free even while in prison from further victimization by men, free emotionally to process her traumatic experiences, and free to explore sexual desire on her terms.

constructions of her identity and sexuality, and she challenges our notion of freedom by complicating appearances and asserting a self even as everything around her wants to deny one.

### Limitations of Resistance

While I want to argue that these two novels stand as the Ur-resistance novels for black women victims of black male violence, while I want to imagine, as Walker does, that “it is entirely possible, albeit entirely unproven, that women who kill their batterers are subconsciously perceived as expressing a collective message from all women to all men: *your days of controlling us are over*,” these texts, like all the others, suffer from limitations which disallow them their full victory. The more I read *Their Eyes*, the more I agree with Mary Helen Washington’s conclusion that “the only reason for Janie’s account of her life to Pheoby [is] to vindicate Tea Cake’s name” (13). I cited earlier as evidence of Janie’s self-acquisition the moment the narrator names Janie as a “human being fighting for *its* life,” but neglected to address the following sentence: “Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake’s head in her lap” (175, emphasis added). Perhaps it is no mistake that as the narrator names Janie a human subject, she immediately retracts her subject status by using the pronoun “it” instead of “her.” Janie returns to her old ways of sacrificing her self to promote the romantic vision of Tea Cake she conjures in her mind, even in his death. The novel ends with Janie dreaming of Tea Cake “prancing around her where she was ... He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace” (184). Janie finds peace in her denial of the truth of Tea Cake, and so do we.

What the text fails to do is to acknowledge that “the love thoughts of women” do not look like slaps to the face. Susan Meisenhelder comments on Hurston’s back-peddling after Janie’s violent act of resistance saying, “Hurston works here to allow a story of female resistance to ‘pass’ as romance, to create an ending that would make possible Janie’s ‘acquittal’ with Hurston’s own divided audience” (90). Through Hurston’s design, Janie kills a “mad dog” and not Tea Cake, which ultimately resists resistance in the same way that Cholly’s shrouded, duplicitous rape of Pecola resists its horror. Marks argues that “this synthetic resolution mystifies Hurston’s inability to find an ideological position that will produce a vision of community not predicated upon violence and male domination” (157). Ultimately, Tea Cake’s death stands as a veiled warning about the potential of intimate partner violence to always escalate toward murder, but, in the end, Tea Cake’s and Jody’s physical violence and emotional control are not totally condemned. In this respect, the cycle of violence is pushed momentarily off course, but destined to continue its orbit.

Eva resists perpetuating what she understands to be an inevitable cycle of violence by removing herself from a society which allows her to be continuously victimized without retribution, but how can we read Eva’s imprisonment as a positive solution to the oppressive devaluation of the black female body? Jones, instead, suggests that the black woman exists within a lose-lose dichotomy, and means to demonstrate how “imprisoned women underscore our ongoing, pressing need to develop cultural and legal frameworks that remain absolutely attentive, rather than ‘absolutely blind,’ to the systemic, socially sanctioned forms of violence that lead women to become violent

victims themselves” (Sweeney 478). Both of these novels concede that the racial, gender, and social influences that determine the object status of black female bodies are overwhelming and not easily (if not at all) deconstructed. The dominant power is so great it swallows up these audacious acts of violent resistance like a black hole, sucking the life from them, eventually leaving them impotent. I do not say this to suggest these novels advocate passivity. As these novels expose the battered black female body and identify the social and cultural structures which allow black women to be abused without consequence, they also warn, as does Charles Mills, that “one has a better chance of getting things right through a self-conscious recognition of their existence, and corresponding self-distancing from them” (23). Even as these novels subtly acknowledge the futility of resistance to a degree, they promote the survival of the black woman and the protection of the black female body, like Malcolm X, by any means necessary. These novels reveal that even in the midst of overwhelming suppressive control, black women have the strength to do what society deems impossible—to fight for an independent self—but warn that this fight is constant. Both Janie and Eva determine not to be explained, and defy their act’s eventual futility by telling their stories of resistance and survival in their own words. Ultimately, they choose to kill, and, thus, choose to live, and this is no insignificant choice.

## Conclusion

*“Oddly enough, it is necessary to point out what should be obvious—Black women are individuals too.”* –Toni Cade Bambara

*“the black woman in American can justly be described as a ‘slave of a slave’...the black woman had no protector and was used, and is still being used in some cases, as the scapegoat for the evils that this horrendous system has perpetrated on black men”*

–Frances Beale

As I write this, we are now 40 years removed from Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Black Woman: An Anthology* and the beginning of the project of uncovering and reclaiming the abused black female body—a project that remains unfinished—a project that has now turned into a fight for the safety and survival of young black girls and women in this country. The difference between then and now is that this battle for ownership of the black female body is played out in a multitude of multimedia outlets whereas 30-40 years ago the novels I’ve discussed served as the battleground. One such example of this is the now infamous intimate partner violence incident involving popular culture icons Chris Brown and Rihanna. On February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, in the early morning hours before the Grammy Awards, Chris Brown brutally attacked his girlfriend and pop star, Rihanna, in the front seat of a very expensive, rented sports car, leaving her post-beating to walk the dark and dangerous streets of Los Angeles alone. The police report

released describes how Rihanna was punched in the eye and face and was choked in a head lock until nearly unconscious with blood filling her mouth. The report also documents Brown's threats to Rihanna's life as he reportedly said, "Now I'm really going to kill you." A photograph of Rihanna's battered face flooded every media outlet with not-so surprising responses. The immediate reaction was, of course, shock. Sympathy for Rihanna poured from fans at first, while Brown was hesitantly forgiven, excused of his behavior because of his youth and his documented past experience of abuse (his mother was abused by a live-in boyfriend). As the immediate firestorm cooled, sentiment toward Rihanna shifted, spurred by rumors of her rekindling with Brown, rumors that gave notoriously anti-feminist media voices an opening to place Rihanna under attack. Blogs began to fill with everyday people (men and women) asking what Rihanna did to provoke Brown; what could she have done to make him so angry that he would react that violently? Oprah, in response to this lashing-out at Rihanna, publicly reprimanded Brown and tried to redirect the blame away from Rihanna, adamantly declaring, "If a man hits you once, he will hit you again." But Oprah's message did not have the impact she (and the rest of us black feminists watching this unravel in disbelief) would have liked.

I happened to be tutoring a group of 5<sup>th</sup> grade black girls at the time of this incident and because of this I was able to watch first hand how Rihanna's abuse at the hands of Brown was translated by young black girls. Their first reaction was anger: "How could he do that?"; "No man should ever hit a woman!"; "That's why I'm not listening to his music anymore—he don't respect women." But just weeks after these

comments, these same girls were humming a different tune: “She must have really made him mad. I mean, a man shouldn’t hit a woman, but she probably did something and he just lost control.” They even went so far as to want to erase Rihanna’s subject status of victim altogether: “I don’t even think that picture is real,” and refused to believe Rihanna’s testimony: “she was just sayin that’s what he did to get him in trouble. He didn’t do all that.” Our discussions about Rihanna’s abuse became so disturbingly sided against Rihanna, the victim, and in favor of Brown, the abuser, that I felt compelled to sit each one of my girls down and really talk to her about intimate partner violence and the cycle of abuse, repeating over and over Oprah’s declaration, “If a man hits you once, he will hit you again.” I think I made some progress and eventually the girls conceded that they would never allow a man to hit them, but would still listen to Brown’s music because, “he’s fine.” I took this as a minor victory and as symptomatic of the critical danger our young black girls face living in a society that still refuses to allow a black woman the subject status of victim and essentially dismisses the abuser’s behavior as outside of his control.

Rihanna eventually spoke about her abuse to Diane Sawyer for a *20/20* interview. In this interview, she talks about how, even in the midst of being battered, she rationalized Brown’s threat to her life as just an attempt, “to scare her,” mirroring almost verbatim the words Hurston puts in Janie’s mouth as rationalization for Tea Cake’s attempt to kill her in his “mad-dog” state of mind. She adds that as the abuse was happening all she could think about was making it stop. Significantly, Rihanna, like many of the victims in these novels, has a history of violence—her dad beat her mother

as she stood between them trying to get him to stop. Because of this history of abuse (one she swore she would never allow in her own relationships) and her growing status as a superstar, she describes her feelings after the abuse as, “embarrassed,” “humiliated,” and “angry.” In part, she discusses being angry with herself for being so in love that after the abuse she went back to her abuser, and embarrassed that she could even fall in love with the type of person who would beat her and leave her stranded at night in a dangerous city. The interview also revealed another interesting fact—that the violence between Brown and Rihanna escalated to this level of life-threatening abuse. Still fighting through denial, Rihanna at first refutes Sawyer’s assertion that other incidents of violence had occurred in her relationship with Brown, but then admits to Brown breaking in a car window and pushing her hard into a wall in two separate incidents of intimate partner violence. Finally, acknowledging the threat of death as always existing in intimate partner violence relationships, Rihanna decided to leave Brown permanently not wanting to, “feel responsible for a young girl being killed,” because of the possibility of her staying being misinterpreted as acquiescence of the abuse. Rihanna ultimately accepts her role as a role model and does not want to condone intimate partner violence through her personal behavior. Notably, Rihanna must fight against her pathology of learned helplessness to make this choice, speaking several times during the interview of the power love has to blind onto unhealthy circumstance, Rihanna warns, “love is so blind. It’s so blind,” and asks battered women to stop and see the situation for what it really is—a danger to their life. Ultimately, Rihanna reasons that the physical marking of the battered body is not what is most damaging, but “the scar inside” that remains and

replays the picture (the documentation) of her victimization over and over again in her head.

Chris Brown also gave an interview, his to Larry King on *Larry King Live*. Brown dressed in a baby blue sweater and bow tie, an outfit choice that reflected the casual insincerity with which he approached the interview. After articulating that the incident of abuse was “blown out of proportion,” Brown refused to discuss the events of February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at all. The interview, rather narcissistically, revolved instead around Brown’s attempt to portray himself as the victim. Brown’s mother (beside him during the interview along with his lawyer), a victim of intimate partner violence herself, commented that it was, “hard” because of “Chris’s pain,” while Chris similarly played for sympathy admitting that, “it took a toll on me.” When asked about the police reports from that night and the much distributed picture of a battered Rihanna, Chris said he was “in shock,” and tried to remove himself from the incident by claiming he did not remember beating Rihanna. At one point during the interview King transitioned into a video clip of Brown on the *Tyra Banks Show* (one in which Brown ironically discussed his mother’s abuse and vowed adamantly that he would never hit a woman), and we can see in the split screen Brown joking and laughing playfully with his lawyer.<sup>43</sup> Brown faces a conundrum; while he wants to take responsibility for his victimization of Rihanna, his attempt to position himself as a victim while promoting the reconstruction of his image makes these efforts come across as insincere and forced, much like his YouTube apology, which was read from a script. What the Chris Brown/Rihanna incident of

---

<sup>43</sup> At another point in the interview the lawyer makes a joke about not knowing either artist and asking his daughter, “Who is Chris Brown and what’s a Rihanna?,” a joke that ironically demonstrates the lawyer’s subject positioning of Brown and objectification of Rihanna.

intimate partner violence media frenzy demonstrates is that as a society we have a lot more work to do as far as educating a larger population about intimate partner violence, the cycle of abuse, and learned helplessness if we desire to save our young black girls from objectification and their bodies from victimization. Ultimately, the incident reminds us that the characterizations in the black fiction I have studied provide contextual meaning to the acceptable abuses black women still face, an abuse some believe is endemic to black culture.

Yet another case in point happened in the midst of the Chris Brown/Rihanna battering incident when Oprah interviewed convicted rapist and known wife batterer Mike Tyson. When asked how Tyson felt about a now infamous interview he gave with his then-wife, Robin Givens, an interview in which she exposed the physical abuse she suffered in their relationship, Tyson responded, “I truly wanted to sock her,” a statement he repeats several more times while the audience laughed and Oprah smiled awkwardly. Tyson continued to say, “I have socked her before,” but that he did not “sock” her after that interview. Robin Givens, now a national spokesperson against domestic violence, immediately contacted Oprah in response to her ex-husband’s appearance and appeared herself on the show just days later. Robin explained to Oprah, “I wouldn’t be honest if I didn’t [say] there wasn’t a part of me that wanted you to...say, that’s not right,” adding, “when there is laughter, if you are in that situation out there, it kind of lightens it for all women that are experiencing it” (2). Oprah, then, apologized for her handling of Tyson, saying, “I would say to you and to every woman who’s ever been hit, I feel that I did not handle that as well as I should have. And I feel that I could have gone further and should

have said more to clarify that what he was doing and what he was saying was wrong. So I apologize to you and to every woman who has ever been in that situation” (2). If Oprah, as a victim of physical and sexual violence herself, a victim who has also led countless interviews and exposes on the subject, can fail egregiously to handle Tyson’s obviously inappropriate comments, then how can we expect the lay society member to know how to confront abuse of any kind when confronted with it?

Perhaps Oprah asked herself this question because since this episode Oprah has aired several shows about sexual abuse in an effort to educate people about the larger ramifications of abuse and encourage victims to speak out about their abuse including an interview with four incest perpetrators and an interview with a man who, as a boy, was horrifically raped by his mother who also prostituted him out to men as a sex slave. The most recent interview dealing with abuse was one with the comedian-turned-actress Monique’s brother, Gerald. Monique, in several interviews, told how her abuse at the hands of her older brother served as the motivation behind her Oscar-winning portrayal of abuser Mary Jones in the movie *Precious*. To her, Gerald was that “monster” that she had to become to portray Mary, and she has been able to use her success in this movie to expose her own abuse and encourage other victims to do the same. During her Golden Globe acceptance speech she exclaimed, “it’s time to tell!” Monique was abused by Gerald roughly from the ages of seven to eleven and told her mother at the age of fifteen that Gerald was sexually molesting her. To her mother’s credit, she did believe Monique, but, failing to understand the complexities of abuse and the continuous trauma suffered even after the abuse ends, Gerald was allowed back to the home and an atmosphere of

normalcy was soon achieved. Gerald denied abusing Monique from the beginning (and for the next 37 years) until finally admitting on the Oprah show he sexually assaulted his sister<sup>44</sup>. He offered Monique a back-handed apology shortly after the explanation, saying to her, “If you think I did something wrong then I’m sorry.” Gerald also admitted to being abused as a young boy and to a drug addiction, which he understood as contributing factors to his abuse of his sister, “drugs allowed me the opportunity to do what I always, in the back of my mind, wanted to do.” Ultimately, Gerald claimed the abuse “happened more than I wanted it to,” to which Oprah responded, “but one time is too much.”

Perhaps what is most disturbing about Oprah’s interview with Gerald, an interview Monique refused to be a part of, is the lack of understanding, awareness, and knowledge that the family shared, which combined to re-victimize Monique. Steven, another brother of Monique, fails to understand how Monique, after all of these years and after seemingly positive interactions with Gerald, can still want to talk about her abuse. He commented, “it isn’t what it looks like, it’s blown out of proportion.” Steven, rather than focusing on Monique’s pain, instead wants to recover Gerald from his identity as an abuser and, so, offered that “after being a monster, outside of apologizing, this guy has always tried to make amends.” Monique’s father expresses a similar confusion asking Oprah, “When did he become the monster?,” to which Oprah responds, “the first time he touched her.” The family simply cannot understand that Monique, behind her smile and attempts at normalcy, was suffering pain—a pain that only recently was released through her role as Mary Jones, and that part of this release manifested as Monique claiming

---

<sup>44</sup> Gerald was also convicted on another sexual molestation charge and sentenced to 12 years in prison.

agency over a self that had been otherwise denied by a family uneducated about abuse. Evidence of this is Monique's mother's failure to understand her over two-year estrangement from her daughter as having anything to do with Gerald and his abuse of Monique. Gerald himself seems to think that simply coming forth after 37 years of denial, admitting his abuse and apologizing for it, is enough to erase the negative feelings and reunite as a family. But it is clear that even as Gerald wants to take responsibility for his abuse, he still considers what happened as not entirely his fault. He describes their relationship as "great, except for the secret we both kept," adding later that "this did happen between us," comments that unveil a sense of shared blame and responsibility in the abuse. Gerald acknowledges that his authority and trust over Monique as her older brother allowed him to target her as a victim, "I didn't have to groom Monique. I was her big brother. I had her trust," but misunderstands his sexual abuse of Monique as sexually motivated instead of power-driven, "I wanted to express sexuality...so I did it with my sister." To his credit, Gerald's final words strongly advocate for victims' to speak out, "shout, scream...dammit make it happen," but the interview as a whole stands as another example of how little people understand or even desire to know about abuse and the journey to survivorhood for abuse victims, and speaks to the devastating effect denial can have on a victim and those close to her.

I provide each of these examples to say that although the novels discussed in this study are fiction, this does not mean they are unreal. These novels can be used to understand the legacy of violence always informing the existence of black women while contextualizing the violence in its acute form of emotional, sexual, and/or physical abuse

and hopefully give us a way as a community to deal with the stories of physical and sexual violence black women and girls suffer that never make to Oprah. For instance, the 15 year-old girl gang raped in October 2009 by at least 10 men while as many as 20 people watched outside of a Richmond, California high school during its homecoming dance,<sup>45</sup> or the seven-year-old black girl sold by her teenage sister to five men who then gang raped her in April 2010 in Trenton, New Jersey. What we know is that these are just two examples of an epidemic of violence endured by black women in their own communities, violence that is allowed to continue because of “no snitching” mentalities and a total devaluation of the black female body.

What we have learned from these texts is that meaning is not found just within the act of violence itself. What we have learned is that these acts of violence against the black female body and the black woman’s self occur everywhere: in their homes, in their community streets, in their places of employment. The violence is pervasive. What we have learned is that the black female body is perceived the same way by white and black men, as an object devoid of human feeling and existing solely as a playground for male performances of power. We have also learned the danger the black woman faces in light of her objectification, for, as Walker explains, “as long as men consider women to be their property, and as long as that view is supported by the law, some of them will feel free to abuse, damage, and destroy their women as they see fit” (*Terrifying Love* 169). What we have learned is that a host of sociopolitical and cultural, gendered and racial environmental factors contribute to both the black man’s pathology, a pathology that manifests itself as rage and a desperate need for domination, and the black woman’s

---

<sup>45</sup> Since then another teenager has been gang raped by at least four men in Richmond, CA.

pathology, one that suppresses her true self and allows for her continued victimization. What we have learned is that despite our ability to explain the black man's abuse of the black woman, we must not excuse him or try and hide the sinister character of these violent violations. What we have learned is that we must not dismiss the violent performances of power black men enact upon black women's bodies as outside of their control. What we have learned is that black men exploit the pathology of black women, women who "were most often socialized to excuse or tolerate violence from men, and learned that loyalty and stability, in most instances, were paramount to their own safety" (Ritchie 52). What we have learned from these novels is that black women do not trust the judicial system to acknowledge black women as human subjects worthy of justice, and so black women are forced to enact their own sense of right. What we have learned is that racist and sexist ideologies are so entrenched in American society that the authors of these texts do not imagine a world where the violent violation of the black female body is judged as criminal, and instead imagine the black female body as the black woman's weapon in order to offer black women some means of resistance. Ultimately, what we have learned is that resistance is often futile, but must remain constant in order for the black woman to have any chance at survival. We have learned that as resounding as this message is, we as a society have not heard it, and have been remiss in our understanding of it.

Perhaps the greatest lesson these novels teach us is the significance of telling, the necessity of standing as a witness to the abuse black women suffer. These black women authors allow their black female protagonists to take ownership of their personal

narratives and speak the unspeakable—tell their abuse—and in doing so, the authors are able to give voice to the millions of nameless victims of abuse. Speaking the violence is the first step to self-recovery; “repossessing one’s life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation” (Laub 70). The act of resistance is life saving, while the act of telling is life giving. After all, witnessing implies an exchange between two persons—a speaker and a listener where the “interaction between the teller and the listener allows for the cooperative construction (or destruction) of the narrative, and can result in altered subsequent performances, which aim to increase positive evaluation of the teller by the listener” (Montalbano-Phelps 11). Speaking the abuse resists the isolation and control of the abuser, and “once no longer alone...[s]he is able to stop the death machine in [her] dream without having to wake up” (Laub 73). In this way, we as readers of these novels participate in the authors’ project of reclaiming the black female body from its objectified state and their project of actualizing the black woman self. But, we can participate only if we are “empathetic listeners”, if we are able to understand acts of violence against the female body for what they are—always a threat to the black woman’s existence (Montalbano-Phelps 13).

We have seen that the nature of abuse is as simple as it is complex. It is accepted in its denial and it is denied in its fatuous acceptance. Buddhist thought offers four reasons why we suffer: 1. when we want something we cannot have, 2. when we have something we do not want, 3. when we love someone who does not love us, and 4. when

we are loved by someone we do not love.<sup>46</sup> At the core of this Buddhist idea of suffering, then, is desire to some degree or in some form. By framing abuse and victimization within this context of suffering we are reminded that suffering is within the abused and the abuser. We see these truths played out over and over in these novels. Being disenfranchised, dispossessed, having the slave mentality, seeing control and power as or premium value creates suffering. Seeking dominion over another creates suffering. In this way, suffering is conveyed and transferred as a cultural norm; black women are the body objectified to be owned, controlled, violated—and this is the element of abuse that we are only now beginning to acknowledge and understand. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves: How can understanding the treatment that black women suffer help us to better combat abuse and heal the black community as a whole? Remember Sojourner Truth—an ever present image working in the background of our texts—the question for black women to black men, to black communities, to society at large remains: “Ain’t I a woman?”

I mentioned in the Introduction that this project was a way of honoring the black women authors who so audaciously exposed the secret of emotional, physical and sexual abuse happening within the black community. My hope is that by focusing my analysis of these novels on the scenes of abuse I will carry these authors’ projects one step further. My hope is that this project will not only help to express the depth and complexity of these black women-authored texts, but also increase awareness and educate its readership

---

<sup>46</sup> See Cheri Huber, *The Key*. Keep it Simple Books, 1984.

about abuse as an intolerable act of violence, about the necessity of continuous resistance, and about the life-saving power of witnessing. Most of all, I hope that this project helps the black woman find God in herself and love her, love her fiercely<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>47</sup> From *For Colored Girls*: "i found god in myself/ & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely"

## References

- “Accused of Molesting Her: Mo’Nique’s Brother Comes Forward.” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. HARPO Productions, Chicago. 19 Apr 2010.
- Adams, David M. “Date Rape and Erotic Discourse.” *Date Rape: Feminism, Philosophy and the Law*. Ed. Leslie Francis. Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 1996.
- Adeeko, Adeleke. *The Slave’s Rebellion: Literature, History, and Orature*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005.
- Agusti, Clara Escoda. “Strategies of Subversion: The Deconstruction of Madness in *Eva’s Man*, *Corregidora*, and *Beloved*.” *Atlantis* 27.1 (June 2005). 29-38.
- Allard, Sharon Angella. “Rethinking Battered Woman Syndrome: A Black Feminist Perspective.” *Domestic Violence at the Margins: Readings on Race, Class, Gender, and Culture*. Ed. Natalie J. Sokoloff. NJ : Rutgers UP, 2005.
- Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. NY: Bantam Books, 1970.
- Awkward, Michael. “Authorial Dreams of Wholeness: (Dis)Unity, (Literary) Parentage, and *The Women of Brewster Place*.” *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. NY: Amistad, 1993.
- Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro American Literature: a Vernacular Theory*. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1984.
- Bal, Mieke. Introduction. *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke

- Bal et al. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 39-54.
- Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. NY: New American Library, 1970.
- BarbaraNeely. "Spilled Salt." *African American Women's Literature*. Ed. Valerie Lee. NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006.
- Barbee, Evelyn and Marilyn Little. "Health, Social Class, and African American Women." *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Barnett, Pamela. *Dangerous Desire: Sexual Freedom and Sexual Violence Since the Sixties*. NY: Routledge, 2004.
- Basu, Biman. "Public and Private Discourses and the Black Female Subject: Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*." *Callaloo* 19.1 (Winter 1996). 193-208.
- Baum, Rosalie Murphy. "Alcoholism and Family Abuse in *Maggie* and *The Bluest Eye*." *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007.
- Beale, Frances. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. NY: New American Library, 1970.
- Boesenberg, Eva. *Gender—Voice—Vernacular: The Formation of Female Subjectivity in Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*. Hiedelberg, Germany: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999.

- Bond, Jean Carey and Patricia Peery. "Is the Black Male Castrated?" *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. NY: New American Library, 1970.
- Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Brison, Susan J. "Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self." *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Ed. Mieke Bal et al. Hanover: UP of New England, 1999. 39-54.
- Brown, Laura S. "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. NY: Bantam Books, 1976.
- Bryant, Jerry H. *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Amherst: U of Mass P, 1997.
- Butler, Sandra. *Conspiracy of Silence: the trauma of incest*. San Francisco: New Glide Publications, 1978.
- Byerman, Keith. *Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC P, 2005.
- . "Black Vortex: The Gothic Structure of Eva's Man." *MELUS* 7.4 (Winter 1980). 93-101.
- Carabi, Angels. "An Interview with Gloria Naylor (1992)." *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004.

- Caruth, Cathy. Introduction. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Christian, Barbara. Naylor's Geography: Community, Class and Patriarchy in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*." *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. NY: Amistad, 1993.
- Cixous, Helene. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001. 2035-2055.
- Clabough, Casey. Gayl Jones: *The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & CO, 2008.
- Clarke, Deborah. "'The Porch Couldn't Talk for Looking': Voice and Vision in Their Eyes Were Watching God." *African American Review* 35.4 (Winter 2001). 599-613.
- Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. NY: Random House, 1968.
- Clinton, Catherine. "'With a Whip in His Hand': Rape, Memory, and African American Women." *History and Memory in African American Culture*. Eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally. NY: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, And Violence Against Women of Color." *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings of the Movement*. Ed. Kimberle Crenshaw et al. New York: The New Press, 1995.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Cultures*.

- Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003.
- Davis, Mary Kemp. "Everybody Knows Her Name: the Recovery of the Past in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*." *Callaloo* 40 (Summer 1989). 544-558.
- Davison, Carol Margaret. "'Love'em and Lynch'em': The Castration Motif in Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*." *African American Review* 29.3 (Autumn 1995). 393-410.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender." *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*. Eds. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Dixon, Melvin. "The Black Writers Use of Memory." *History and Memory in African American Culture*. Eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally. NY: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Doak, Melissa. *Violent Relationships: Battering and Abuse Among Adults*. Detroit: Thomas Gale, 2005.
- Doane, Janice and Devon Hodges. *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire*. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 2001.
- Dubey, Madhu. *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- Dworkin, Andrea. "I Want a Twenty-Four-Hour Truce During Which There is No Rape." *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Ed. Emilie Buchwald et al. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed editions, 1993.
- Eaton, Kalenda. *Womanism, Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980*. NY: Routledge, 2008.

- Eckard, Paula Gallant. *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith*. Columbia, MO: U of Missouri P, 2002.
- Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Eyerman, Ryan. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. NY: Grove Press, 1967.
- Farwell, Marilyn. *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*. NY: NYUP, 1996.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, of the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Fletcher, Pamela R. "Whose Body is it Anyway?: Transforming Ourselves to Change a Rape Culture." *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Ed. Emilie Buchwald et al. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed editions, 1993.
- Fowler, Virginia. "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor." *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004.
- Gates, Henry Louis. Afterword: "Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Negro Way of Saying'." *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Harper & Row, 1937. 185-195.
- . "Lifting the Veil." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998.
- Goetting, Ann. "Patterns of Marital Homicide: A Comparison of Husbands and Wives." *Black Family Violence: Current Research and Theory*. Ed. Robert L. Hampton. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1991.

- Goldberg, Elizabeth Swanson. "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*." *Callaloo* 26.2 (Spring 2003). 446-472.
- Goldstein, William. "A Talk with Gloria Naylor." *Conversations with Gloria Naylor*. Ed. Maxine Lavon Montgomery. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004.
- Gottfried, Amy S. "Angry Arts: Silence, Speech and Song in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." *African American Review* 28.4 (Winter 1994). 559-570.
- Griffin, Farah Jasmine. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic, and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery." *Callaloo* 19.2 (Spring 1996). 519-536.
- Groth, A., Nicholas and H. Jean Birnbaum. *Men Who Rape: The Psychology of the Offender*. NY: Plenum Press, 1979.
- Gwin, Minrose C. "'Hereisthehouse': Cultural Spaces of Incest in *The Bluest Eye*." *Incest and the Literary Imagination*. Ed. Elizabeth Barnes. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2002.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality." *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York UP, 2000. 482-497.
- Harris, Trudier. *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. NY: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Hawkins, Darnell F. "Devalued Lives and Racial Stereotypes: Ideological Barriers to the Prevention of Family Violence among Blacks." *Violence in the Black Family*:

- Correlates and Consequences*. Ed. Robert L. Hampton. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1987.
- Henderson, Mae. "Speaking in Tongues: Diologics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition." *African American Literary Theory*. Ed. Winston Napier. NY: NYUP, 2000. 348-368.
- Henke, Suzette A. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998.
- Herman, Judith. *Father-Daughter Incest*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000, c1981.
- . *Trauma and Recovery*. NY: Basic Books, 1992.
- Hernton, Calvin. *Sex and Racism in America*. NY: Doubleday, 1965.
- . *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers: Adventures in Sex, Literature, and Real Life*. NY: Anchor Press, 1987.
- hooks, bell. "Reading and Resistance: *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. NY: Amistad, 1993.
- . "Seduced by Violence No More." *Transforming a Rape Culture*. Ed. Emilie Buchwald et al. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed editions, 1993.
- Horeck, Tonya. *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London: Routledge, 2004.
- Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994.

- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1937.
- Jackson, Edward M. *Images of Black Men in Black Women Writers 1950-1990*. Indiana: Wyndham Hall Press, 1992.
- Jenkins, Candice M. *Private Lives, Proper Relations [regulating black intimacy]*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. *Three Negro Classics*. NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1965, c1927.
- Johnson, Yvonne. *The Voices of African American Women: The Use of Narrative and Authorial Voice in the Works of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, and Alice Walker*. NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 1998.
- Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
- . *Eva's Man*. NY: Random House, 1976.
- Jones, Jennifer. *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University UP, 2003.
- Jordan, Jennifer. "Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7.1 (Spring 1988). 105-117.
- Jordan, June. *Some of Us Did Not Die*. NY: Basic/Civitas Books, 2002.
- Keehnan, Owen. "Artist With a Mission: A Conversation with Sapphire." *Chicago Outlines*. Aug 1996.
- Kekeh, Andree-Anne. "Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*: History and the Disruptive Power of Memory." *History and Memory in African American Culture*. Eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally. NY: Oxford UP, 1994.

- Kilmartin, Christopher and Julie Allison. *Men's Violence Against Women: Theory, Research and Activism*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc, Publishers, 2007.
- King, Debra Walker. *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2008.
- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. "'Tuh De Horizon and Back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Black American Literature Forum* 17.3 (Autumn 1983). 109-115.
- Kuenz, Jane. "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity." *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2007.
- Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Ledbetter, Mark. *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative, or Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing*. NY: St Martin's Press, 1996.
- Lester, Neal A. *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays*. NY: Garland Publishing, 1995.
- Li, Stephanie. "Love and the Trauma of Resistance in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*." *Callaloo* 29.1 (Winter 2006). 131-150.
- Lincoln, Abbey. "To Whom Will She Cry Rape?" *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Ed. Toni Cade Bambara. NY: New American Library, 1970.
- Locke, Alain. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1925.

- Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. MA: Persephone Press, 1982.
- Mann, Coramae Richey. "Black Women Who Kill." *Violence in the Black Family: Correlates and Consequences*. Ed. Robert L. Hampton. Lexington: Lexington Books, 1987.
- Marks, Donald. "Sex, Violence, and Organic Consciousness in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Black American Literature Forum* 19.4 (Winter 1985). 152-157.
- Martens, Tony. *The Spirit Weeps: Characteristics and Dynamics of Incest and Child Sexual Abuse*. Edmonton: Nichi Institute, 1988.
- Martin, Reginald. "An Interview with Ishmael Reed." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 4.2 (Summer 1984). 2 Dec 2007. <http://www.centerforbookculture.org>.
- Matus, Jill. "Dream, Deferral, and Closure in *The Women of Brewster Place*." *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. NY: Amistad, 1993.
- McCredie, Wendy. "Authority and Authorization in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Black American Literature Forum* 16.1 (Spring 1982). 25-28.
- McDowell, Deborah. *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995.
- McGowan, Todd. *The Feminine "No!": Psychoanalysis and the New Canon*. NY: State University of NY P, 2001.
- Meisenhelder, Susan Edwards. *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Colored Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999.

- Miller, Shawn. "'Some Other Way to Try': From Defiance to Creative Submission in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2008.
- Mills, Charles. "White Ignorance." *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana. Albany: State University of NY P, 2007.
- Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction*. NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Mitchell, Keith B. "'Trouble in Mind': (Re)visioning Myth, Sexuality, and Race in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*." *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*. Ed. Fiona Mills and Keith Mitchell. New York: Peter Lang, 2006. 155-172.
- Montalbano-Phelps, Lori L. *Narrative Risk: The Empowerment of Abuse Survivors*. Dallas, TX: UP of America, 2004.
- Montelaro, Janet. *Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal as Signifier in Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Victoria, B.C., Canada: U of Victoria P, 1996.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. NY: Knopf, 2000, c1970.
- . "The Site of Memory." *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*. Ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin CO, 1995.
- . "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature." *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994.
- Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place: A Novel in Seven Stories*. NY: Penguin Books, 1983.

- Nnaemeka, Obioma. *The Politics of (M)othering: Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Ogilvie, Beverly A. *Mother-Daughter Incest: A Guide for Helping Professionals*. Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press, 2004.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama*. NY: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Oliver, William. "Cultural Racism and Structural Violence: Implications For African Americans." *Violence as Seen Through a Prism of Color*. Ed. Letha A. (Lee) See. NY: The Haworth Press, 2001.
- "Oprah Talks to Former Heavy Weight Champion Mike Tyson." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. HARPO Productions, Chicago. 12 Oct 2009.
- O'Sullivan, Chris. "Ladykillers: Similarities and Divergences in Masculinities in Gang Rape and Wife Battery." *Masculinities and Violence*. Ed. Lee H. Bowker. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.
- Patton, Cindy. "An All White Jury: Judging Citizenship in the Simpson Criminal Trial." *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*. Eds. Ana Douglass and Thomas Vogler. NY: Routledge, 2003.
- Pineau, Louis. "Rape: A Feminist Analysis." *Date Rape: Feminism, Philosophy and the Law*. Ed. Leslie Francis. Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 1996.
- Ramsey, William. "The Compelling Ambivalence of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *The Southern Literary Journal* 27.1 (Fall 1994). 36-50.
- Restuccia, Frances L. "Literary Representations of Battered Women: Spectacular

- Domestic Punishment.” *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*. Ed. Thomas Foster et al. NY: NYU P, 1996. 42-71.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Ritchie, Beth E. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women*. NY: Routledge, 1995.
- “Robin Givens Responds.” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. HARPO Productions, Chicago. 13 Nov 2009.
- Robinson, Sally. Engendering the Subject: *Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*. NY: State Univ of NY P, 1991.
- Ross, Loretta. “African-American Woman and Abortion: 1800-1970.” *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Rowell, Charles. “An Interview with Gayl Jones.” *Callaloo* 16 (Oct 1982). 32-53.
- Rushdy, Ashraf. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. NY: Oxford UP, 1999.
- . *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of NC P, 2001.
- Rushing, Andrea Benton. “Surviving Rape: A Morning/Mourning Ritual.” *Theorizing Black Feminisms: The Visionary Pragmatism of Black Women*. Eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena P.A. Busia. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Sapphire. *Push*. NY: Vintage Books, 1996.

- “Sapphire.” @katiecouric.com. CBS News Video, New York. 27 Oct 2009.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. NY: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*. NY: Scribner, 1975.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean. *Pimps Up Hos Down: Hip Hop’s Hold on Young Black Women*. NY: NYU P, 2007.
- “Singer Chris Brown.” *Larry King Live*. CNNHD 202, New York. 2 Sep 2009.
- “Singer Rihanna discusses her relationship with ex-boyfriend Chris Brown.” *20/20*. WKEF 22, New York. 6 Nov 2009.
- Smith, Sidonie. *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993.
- Spillers, Hortense. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Ed. Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke UP, 1994.
- Sweeney, Megan. “Prison Narratives, Narrative Prisons: Incarcerated Women Reading Gayl Jones’s *Eva’s Man*.” *Feminist Studies* 30.2 (Summer 2004). 456-482.
- Tanner, Laura E. *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth Century Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994.
- Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. and Onno Van Der Hart. “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma.” *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. Cathy Caruth. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1995.

- Wade-Gayles, Gloria. *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Gender in Black Women's Fiction*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1997.
- Walker, Lenore E. "Racism and Violence Against Women." *Racism in the Lives of Women: Testimony, Theory, and Guides to Antiracist Practice*. Eds. Jeanne Adleman and Gloria Enguidanos. NY: Harrington Park Press, 1995.
- . *Terrifying Love: Why Battered Women Kill and How Society Responds*. NY: Harper & Row, 1989.
- . *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. NY: Springer Publishing CO, 1984.
- Wall, Wendy. "Lettered Bodies and Corporeal Texts." *Alice Walker Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. NY: Amistad, 1993.
- Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. NY: Verso, 1990, c1979.
- Walters, E. Yvette. "Women and Literacy in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Readers of the Quilt: Essays on Being Black, Female, and Literate*. Ed. Joanne Kilgour Dowdy. NJ: Hampton Press, Inc, 2005.
- Ward, Elizabeth. *Father-Daughter Rape*. London: The Woman's Press, 1984.
- Warner, Susan and Kathryn Felty. "From Victim to Survivor: Recovered Memories and Identity Transformation." *Trauma and Memory*. Eds. Linda M. Williams and Victoria L. Baynard. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1999.
- Washington, Mary Helen. Foreword. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. By Zora Neale Hurston. New York: Harper & Row, 1937. vii-xiv.
- . "I love the Way Janie Crawford Left her Husbands': Zora Neale Hurston's

- Emergent Female Hero.” *Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God*.  
Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2008.
- West, Traci. *Wound of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics*. NY:  
NYUP, 1999.
- White, Armond. “Pride and Precious.” *New York Press*. 4 Nov 2009. 9 Jan 2010.  
<http://www.nypress.com/article-20554-pride-precious.html>
- Wideman, John Edgar. *The Lynchers*. NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1973.
- Wilcox, Janelle. “Resistant Silence, Resistant Subject: (re) Reading Gayl Jones’s Eva’s  
Man.” *Bodies of Writing, Bodies in Performance*. Ed. Thomas Foster et al.  
NY: NYU P, 1996. 72-96.
- Wilentz, Gay. *Healing Narrative: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease*. NJ:  
Rutgers UP, 2000.
- Williams, Oliver. “Healing and Confronting the African American Male Who Batters.”  
*Family Violence and Men of Color: Healing the Wounded Male Spirit*. Eds.  
Ricardo Carillo and Jerry Tello. NY: Springer Publishing CO, 1998.
- Williams, Patricia. *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Boston, Harvard UP, 1991.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1986.
- Wolf, Arthur. Introduction. *Inbreeding, Incest, and the Incest Taboo: The State of  
Knowledge at the Turn of the Century*. Ed. Arthur P. Wolf and William H.  
Durham. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005.
- Wright, Richard. “Between Laughter and Tears.” *New Masses*. 5 Oct 1937. 22-23.
- . “Long Black Song.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds.  
Henry Louis Gates Jr, and Nellie Y. McKay. NY: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997.

Young, Hershini Bhana. *Haunting Capital: Memory, Text, and the Black Diasporic Body*. Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth UP, 2006.

---. "Inheriting the Criminalized Black Body: Race, Gender, and Slavery in *Eva's Man*." *African American Review* 39.3 (Fall 2005). 377-393.