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Cultures of Violence: Racism, Sexism and Female Agency in Twentieth-Century American Fiction

by

Veronica M. Toombs

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Doctor of Philosophy

APPROVED. DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

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Abstract

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Male authors intent on critiquing American racism, specifically William Faulkner and Richard Wright, have been more successful in defining the parameters surrounding the discussion of violence in American society than have their female counterparts. Intent to illuminate the connections between racial oppression and violent reactions to social marginalization, these authors assert that violence ensues in the lives of male protagonists as implicit responses to the social injustice that their protagonists face. Their pornographic representations of violence effectively erase the subjectivity of female victims and subvert attempts to critique violence against women.

Whereas the male authors focus only on racism as the cause of male violence, Hurston begins the project of revising this vision. She highlights the power relations that exist in intraracial contexts--both white and black--that contribute to violence against women. Hurston shows that violence directed toward women is often the result of patriarchal oppression, connected to other forms of oppression because the structures of
oppression (sexism and racism) are mutually supporting. Using the construct of sadomasochistic theory, I illustrate the imbricated nature of oppression and its effect on female identity and subjectivity.

Where Faulkner, Wright, and Hurston have focused primarily on acts of physical violence, Jones' text, Eva's Man, adds the dimension of discursive violence to this discussion. Eva Medina Canada both internalizes negative images of womanhood and transforms those representations into models of female empowerment and resistance. Eva's signifying gesture offers women an avenue of reclamation, a way of preserving their autonomy in a hostile environment.

Finally, Morrison brings together the various forms of violence discussed in previous chapters. She creates a text which illustrates both material and discursive violence, a text that illuminates the connection between social and individual expressions of violence. Rather than prioritize one form of violence over another, Morrison engages both black feminism and black nationalism to critique sexism and racism in American society. Her model of imbricated critique and analysis of "disinterested violence" offers a model to feminism for effective social intervention and transformation.
Dedication

First to God, thank You.
Mom, your spirit never deserted me. Your voice (which echoes in mine)
never ceased to inspire me.
Then to Dad. I owe you my all.

To JB. ULS. LDC. ALJ, and Ms. Traylor:
Without your patience, support and love I would have fallen long ago.

To the many others along the way
--who made the way--
nameless, but not faceless
I will never forget.

And for my husband, Herbert Watson, who has surprised and enlightened me--
This is only the beginning.
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INTRODUCTION

A Battle Fought on Many Fronts: A Beginning

There is no end to this process of composing and being composed, figuring and being figured, whether we look to representations in the discursive economy or in the sociopolitical context. We are always (being) represented and representing ("being").

--Elizabeth Meese

The bottom line is this: if you want a real movement, that is to say, one that can really change practice, you must have a constituency. A constituency is not a verbal entity; a constituency has body; it has concrete practices, individual concrete practices.

--Elizabeth Deeds Ermath

As soon as we become comfortable in a name that spreads its protective canopy over our intellectual designs, we become blind to our own ideologies at work.

--Alice Parker and Elizabeth Meese

I.

In the late 1960's, Feminists coined the phrase, "the personal is the political" in an attempt to authorize women's experiences and to show the significance of those experiences to more standard political issues in contemporary society. That maxim served its purpose, inviting women both within the academy as well as those outside of these institutions, to speak about their experiences without self-deprecation or apology. Experiences of women within the home, workplace and other social arenas became
microcosmic expressions of what was happening within larger political spaces. This phrase encouraged us to start examining the lives that women led with fervor and critical attention, realizing as if for the first time that these experiences were worthy of reflection, study and transformation.

From this initial moment of cohesive political struggle, however, the Feminist Movement\(^1\) began to fragment. Feminism became associated with men-bashing on the one hand, radicalism and lesbianism on the other, and the significance of the social work that Feminists sought to do became embroiled and embittered with the struggle for identity within the Movement. To be sure this challenge was needed, for the early Feminist movement was steeped in its own biases and prejudices that went largely unexamined for almost a decade. It was predominantly a movement of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who, although critical of the patriarchal structure of American society, still retained certain privileges due to their race, economic status, and sexual orientation in a society that was (and still is) racist, classist, and heterosexist. Although these women proclaimed a desire for the liberation of all women, challenges from women of color during the 1970's and beyond, showed how limited the visions of early Feminists really were. Women of color, particularly black Feminists, illuminated the problematics

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\(^1\)I use the proper noun "Feminist Movement" throughout section one of this introduction because this form of the term best reflects a social movement that is defined and structured, as in the Civil Rights Movement. The use of the proper noun calls attention to the fact that Feminism in its current expression has been granted cultural legitimacy due in large part to the ways in which the Movement has sought to define itself for larger cultural commodification. I utilize the lower case "feminism(s)" throughout the remainder of the dissertation to reflect my belief that feminism needs to reconceive and recast itself in terms of plurality and heterogeneity of forms, approaches, goals and membership in the movement.
associated with white, middle-class women presuming to speak for disenfranchised and marginalized female others, particularly when they often gained and retained their identities and statuses as white, middle-class women in relation to these silenced women. White Feminists were castigated for their blindness regarding issues of race and class, and still later, lesbian Feminists made similar critiques of the movements' homophobic and heterosexist biases. By the mid to late 1980's, the feminist sisterhood was deeply divided and troubled.

It is perhaps from this complex and complicated history, as well as its origins within academia, that the Feminist Movement became so fractured. Feminists of all races, classes, ethnicities and sexual persuasions, were making necessary and life-sustaining critiques of the Movement of which they all claimed themselves members, but in some ways those internal challenges and adjustments were foregrounded within the Movement. Feminists were fighting amongst each other, bitterly challenging and correcting, sometimes losing sight of the larger struggle in which they all engaged. The "common enemy" of the phallocentric, heterosexist and racist foundations of Western Civilization benefited from the divisive struggles happening within the Feminist Movement, as the internal battles often dissipated the Movement's energy to demand social change.

With the introduction of deconstructive theory in the academy, Feminism faced another formidable opponent to its efficacy. Deconstructive criticism challenges the validity and/or existence of the category "Woman" by highlighting the ways in which this totalizing identity works to erase and/or elide the specificity of female experience. Linda
Alcoff posits the problem as follows, "...the dilemma facing feminist theorists today is that our very self-definition is grounded in a concept that we must deconstruct and de-essentialize in all of its aspects."² She concludes, "Thus feminists cannot demarcate a definitive category of "woman" without eliminating all possibility for the defeat of logocentrism and its oppressive power."³ In other words, post-structuralism undercuts the idea of woman (as a category) as discrete and different subject from man (as a category). The minute Feminists invoke this essentialist category, they utilize a foundation that has traditionally defined and delimited possibilities for female expression, identity, and subjectivity. A similar conundrum presented itself regarding the "common enemy" of Feminism because deconstructive theory subverted the notion of an identifiable foe (Man) by radically calling into question all formations of a monolithic identity (i.e., there is no Man that oppresses Women, but only individual men who oppress particular women). Feminist activists and academicians were forced to find new ways to represent and defend the interest of women who they clearly did not know in their particularity, against sexist institutions and policies that, thanks to the advent of post-structuralist theory, had even less body and substance.

While the philosophical and intellectual debates surrounding the subjectivity of


women has been liberating in some ways (deconstructive theory provided Feminists with an ideological framework within which to center their critiques of logocentrism), it has also occasioned the deepest reflection and reassessment of Feminism since the 1970's. Feminists have risen to the challenge post-structuralism poses to the foundations of the Movement by theorizing female subjectivity in more innovative, non-essentialized ways. We have begun to theorize and to repoliticize the category "woman" without tying it to a transhistorical view of female identity. We are now, however, faced with yet another (albeit familiar) enemy that must be recognized and resisted within the Feminist Movement if we are to continue to go about the work of liberating all women from their particular localities of oppression and subjugation. Clearly more insidious than the foe of masculinist ideology is the impetus and demand for this Movement to define itself for an outside (and inside) audience. Academics, politicians, and representatives from practically every other walk of life, want to know what Feminism is and does, who are among its ranks, and who might be included at any particular (historical) moment. For most it is not enough to define the goals for the Movement; in a social structure that is obsessive about definition, demarcation and boundaries, any group that agitates for social change must be able to delimit its membership and outline its borders in order to gain legitimacy.

Somewhat understandably, then, this is part of the work that Feminists have engaged in since the inception of the Movement. But the accomplishment of this goal is at best suspect, and at worst, self-defeating, especially in this contemporary political climate. Alice Parker and Elizabeth Meese correctly assert "Naming articulates an
inviolable territory, marks off a boundary. The ideological investment in a position marked "feminism"...may mask even to ourselves the comfort of settling in (to) a place we can call our own." In other words, Feminists have (inadvertently?) engaged in a process which enacts exclusion of certain individuals and critical approaches aimed at the liberation of women and which may mire us in our own ideology. The gesture of defining too closely ones' membership, constituency, and methodology (even if it is to gain political authority and clout) actually closes down the possibility of unexpected coalition formation and effective but unorthodox sociocultural examination and analysis.

Rather than trying to define Feminism for ourselves and others, perhaps a more effective strategy would be to conceive of the movement as "feminisms," recognizing that the work that each of us does toward the liberation of all human subjects will be inflected by the socially-constructed and imbricated categories of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as well as the individual and historically materialized experiences that we bring to the battle. This approach to a social movement that has been suffering from a weakened membership base and internal struggles might help us to move beyond an organizational mode that is based on identity politics, an especially significant change

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5I borrow this concept from Elizabeth Meese who points out, "the inadequacy of the definition appears in the very structure of the word: it is singular ("Feminism")--a feature reiterated in simple dictionary definitions--a doctrine..." (Meese, (Ex)Tensions, 6). Like Meese, I advocate acknowledging that Feminism has never been a singular expression of female desire for social transformation. Rather, almost from its inception Feminism has utilized multiple approaches to achieve its varied and shifting goals.
given the post-structuralist critique of individual and collective identity. That there is no "Woman" to represent and defend does not have the same debilitating impact on "feminism(s)" as it does on Feminism, which was devitalized for a time by this ideological epiphany. Some women at any given historical moment will still have similar battles to fight while others, because of their positioning within the nexus of socially-constructed identity, may find that struggle to be inappropriate or ineffective for their own lives. The multiple expressions of feminism(s) would allow for continued social critique and resistance precisely because it does not rely on a monolithic (feminine) identity for definition; difference is not only accepted, but is expected and celebrated. The lack of a singular identity and/or agenda could reinvigorate the constituency base of the Movement(s) and work to authorize local and specific sites of resistance that might have been overlooked within a movement that established strict definitional borders.

II.

The critique of social structures that enable and encourage violence against women has been made on many feminist fronts. Katherine MacKinnon and Susan Brownmiller have addressed the problems facing women from the angle of legal scholarship while women like Clarissa Pinkola Estes and Angela Davis have made feminist critiques in the areas of psychology and sociology respectively. The feminist concern with violence against women is indeed well researched and studied; it has proven to be one of the foundational concerns of feminism. But while this concern provides a common bedrock for feminists in various fields of study, the specific subject of inquiry as
well as the critical methodology these women (and men) utilize, as suggested above, are often quite varied. Such is also often the case within a particular discipline, such as literary studies. Feminists' approaches to literature cover such a broad scope that only a common purpose—the critique of masculinist domination and sexist social structures—seems to unite them. We have engaged in scholarship that critiques the hegemonic foundations of everything from psychoanalysis to literary theory, and have then used these new and revised theories to critique texts by men and women of various historical periods, races, classes and sexualities. Some feminists have focused their attention on critiques of canon formation while others have (and continue to) participate in projects of literary recovery of the texts of women writers. And yet others have turned their energies to the critique of our critiques and more practical and explicit ways of making our abstract work more concrete, of impacting the lives of real women and men worldwide.

This dissertation reflects the reality of our diverse sisterhood and work. While all of the chapters are united through a common theme—the physical, emotional and sexual violence that women are subject to in twentieth century American fiction—the theoretical constructs of each chapter are quite different. In the spirit of Elizabeth Meese who argues, "for feminism(s) to be a contra/dictory space for polyphous forms requires that . . . positions be negotiated rather than consolidated and insisted upon," I have united texts, methodological approaches and critical theories that may seem quite fractious on first consideration. In chapter 1, applying and expanding upon the work of Susan

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Kappeler. I elucidate what I have termed the "pornographic representation" of violence against women. Looking at texts by William Faulkner (Light in August) and Richard Wright (Native Son), I have noted their common tendency to portray sexual violence from the male vantage point, focusing on the male experience of that violence, whether the protagonist be the perpetrator or victim of that violence. Violence against women (as well as modes of undercutting female subjectivity) is all but excused as these authors complicate their portrayals of male aggression with incisive explanations of racism's role in engendering (black) male violence against (black) women. In other words, Faulkner and Wright illustrate how the emasculation of the (black) male in social and economic arenas proximately causes their violent acts against women.

However, the physical and sexual(ized) violence that is threatened or actualized against Joe Christmas (Light in August) and Bigger Thomas (Native Son) is anything but forgiven or excused. Lynching and castration act as synecdoches for racial oppression and injustice in these texts, much as sexual violence against women can be read as a literary trope for their social and sexual domination. The violence these male characters fear and flee is foregrounded—often graphically—to the complete elision of the men's illicit activities and violent acts toward women. Their troubling actions are explained away as the desperate acts of individuals denied the means to economic progress, and their aggression is justified as an instinct to survival. Through a comparison of the textual attention given to violence against men versus women, this critical tool also allows me to identify and discuss the male gaze that has historically structured the view of (violence against) women.
Like Faulkner and Wright, Zora Neale Hurston shows that "the act of violence is many things at once." The violence Hurston represents is meant to define and fix gender roles that are otherwise disturbingly in flux, as well as to assert masculine power and control over an individual or situation. But in focusing on white and black protagonists, Hurston shifts the focus of the social critique from the strict interest in racist social oppression that characterized the texts of the first chapter, to a broader social examination which includes a critique of patriarchal oppression of women. In Their Eyes Were Watching God and Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston creates female characters who undergo various forms of physical, sexual and psychological abuse within their marriages. Yet, Janie and Arvay, the protagonists of Eyes and Seraph respectively, show little (or sporadic) resistance to their abusive mates, submitting to the power of their husbands to control their lives. So inculcated are they in the expectation of female (self) subjugation that they are hesitant to disrupt even problematic family dynamics in order to save themselves from denigration and violence. In Chapter Two I consider this dynamic of family power through the theoretical framework provided by Lynn Chancer and her discussion of the sadomasochistic dynamic in social and intimate interpersonal relationships. This framework was an obvious choice because these texts are clearly and specifically about S/M—dominance and subordination that is often sexualized, the enactment of socially-constructed gendered behavior and/or roles that are naturalized, the

gendered symbiosis evident in some romantic relationships. Theories of sadomasochism also explain, however, the subtlety of oppression in these relationships, the ways in which women/masochists become self-subjugating and self-effacing when confronted with a domineering and irrationally demanding partner.

Finally, use of the construct of sadomasochism helps me account for the interlocking nature of oppression evidenced primarily in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Arvay is both victim as well as perpetrator of the violent marginalization of the Other. Her attempts to understand herself as a privileged "white" woman (as opposed to the "cracker" she has been prior to her marriage) affect the ways she constructs other "raced" people. Hence, as she moves closer to identifying herself as a white *lady* (a move that is precipitated by her husband's violent and abusive instigation), her attitudes toward ethnic others becomes more vitriolic; her willed ignorance to the ways in which her social status is built upon the labor of these Others is central to understanding the complex interaction between racist and sexist oppression as Hurston envisions it.

Like the term pornographic representation, the sadomasochistic dynamic is much broader than commonly accepted definitions of sadomasochism. But the term does retain the interest in power relations that pornography seeks to interrogate, the primary difference being that sadomasochism also speaks about self-inflicted subjugation. It allows us to speak of symbiotic relations that develop among people that keep them in positions of powerlessness within their interactions with others. It also allows us to acknowledge that not all relationships are the same, that an individual who is powerless in one situation may seek to assert him/herself in another situation to counter the sense of
powerlessness that exists in other areas. Where pornography allows us to consider who is granted the status of subject in interpersonal relations, sadomasochism asks what role an individual is playing within a particular relationship. Where pornography assigns the status of victim to individuals who are subjugated, sadomasochism allows that "victim" may be a position that is laden with erotic overtones for certain people. And where pornography casts individuals in particular roles based on gender and race, sadomasochism acknowledges that gender and race are constructed identities that people may put on or take off in particular situations.

But where Faulkner, Wright and Hurston have focused primarily on acts of physical and psychological violence, in Chapter Three I use Gayl Jones' text, *Eva's Man* (1976), to add the dimension of discursive violence to this discussion. I interrogate the mythic representations of women that cause their wholesale devaluation in American society and facilitate their mental, emotional and physical brutalization by men. I am particularly interested in the ways that Eva Medina both internalizes negative images of womanhood and transforms those representations into models of female empowerment and resistance to male objectification. I argue that Eva's signifying gesture offers women an avenue of reclamation, a way of preserving their autonomy in a hostile environment. This character also suggests a means of reascripting power to the victimized and silenced woman whose subjectivity is constantly questioned and/or denied. Eva's silence her self-defense mechanism when she is confronted with an objectifying male gaze.

My central focus, however, is on Eva's ultimate response to male violence. She is the only woman in this study that responds in kind to male victimization; she castrates
her lover in a scene that is rife with symbolic and mythic significance. Using Maggie Kilgour's formulation of the relation between literary metaphors of eating and the communion ritual. I examine this scene in the light of issues raised in the first chapter regarding pornographic representations of violence, and suggest that the scene is written to wrest cultural power from the symbol (the phallus) and to refocus attention on the traumatized psyche of this particular woman (as opposed to the body of her male victim).

Throughout this literary study I concentrate on writers who have created either anti-racist discourses within their textual worlds or authors who have sought to prioritize feminist issues within their texts. Toni Morrison, however, brings together the various forms of violence discussed in previous chapters. She creates a text that illustrates both material and discursive violence, a text that illuminates the connection between social and individual expressions of violence. Rather than prioritizing one form of violence over another, however, Morrison engages both black feminism and black nationalism to critique sexism/misogyny and racism in American society. Her feminist rewriting of rape and incest, violences that are overwhelmingly directed toward women, is significant because she seeks to reascribe power to the silence of female victims. Yet, unlike the previous authors, Morrison does not subjugate the critique of one system of oppression to another. For her, both racism and sexism are debilitating social forces which need to be simultaneously eradicated in order to secure personal liberty for all people, but in particular, black women.

III.
Ideally by the end of this literary study one will have a much greater sense of the various approaches that feminist critiques can and must take toward literature and actual mechanisms of social organization evidenced in literary texts. Rather than one theoretical approach being applied to several texts, one text being viewed using various conceptual frameworks, the illumination of one theme throughout the whole of a project, or the literary corpus of one author being considered in full—traditional forms and methodologies of (feminist) literary criticism—I have combined these various approaches in one work. It is a compilation of all of these things and more, a mishmash, perhaps a misfit, definitely a mongrel. This dissertation is in some respects a study of feminist methodology. It is about what feminists do when confronted with the variety of human oppressions. This project is about our general condition as women as well as our specific battles to stay alive. It is my hope that the patchwork nature of this project might suggest a more effective model for methodological connection (not cohesion) and coalition building among feminists. Rather than our work being placed in conflict with one another, this project illuminates the ways that we might build from one another's work, realizing the need for multifaceted and multidirectional approaches to psychological and social transformations.
"In League with the Oppressors":
Pornographic Representations of Violence
in William Faulkner and Richard Wright

There's a larger difference between the way black
women write and the way white women write than
between the way black men write and the way white
men write.

--Toni Morrison

The history of representation is the history of the
male gender representing itself to itself--the power
of naming is men's. . .Culture, as we know it, is
patriarchy's self-image.

--Susanne Kappeler

In the African American literary tradition portrayals of violence have always been
intimately intertwined with critiques of racism. From some of the earliest renderings of
escaped slaves, Frederick Douglass and Olaudah Equiano, through their literary
descendants like Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson and John Edgar Wideman, authors have
been intent to illuminate the connections between racial oppression and violent reactions
to social marginalization. Douglass grappled with this cause-and-effect relation between
oppression and violence in his Narrative when he wrote of his battle with the slave-
breaker, Edward Covey. This physical confrontation precipitated Douglass's resolution,
"however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could
be a slave in fact."1 The battle was no less than Douglass's reclamation of his manhood

1 Frederick Douglass, Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave,
Written by Himself in The Classic Slave Narratives, ed. David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford
and humanity through his willingness and ability to defend himself from a beating at the hands of one of his oppressors.

This need to violently reclaim one's black manhood—and with few exceptions it is one's manhood that is at stake—is a literary legacy that male authors after Douglass have been intent to follow. Violence, these authors would seem to suggest, is the only way to confront racism in American society. Or put more precisely, violence is the preferred mode of resistance to social and racial oppression. In text after text written by male authors espousing anti-racist discourses, violence ensues in the lives of male protagonists as an implicit response to the social injustice that these protagonists face. Refuting the stereotype of the "naturally" aggressive and violent black male, many authors have asserted the complex connection between black male violence and the closing down of legitimate avenues of economic opportunity and social equality.

The male authors of this study, William Faulkner and Richard Wright, illuminate this connection, suggesting that black male violence flourishes as a result of American social injustice. The definition of violence for these authors is simple: it is something that is done to a black man's psyche and body. Violence is Joe Christmas's castration for the crime of being black and being sexually involved with a white woman, or the threat of lynching that Bigger faces once Mary Dalton's murder has been discovered. In


African American authors have not created many female protagonists who use violence to reassert their humanity and the value of their female identities. Among contemporary examples that come to mind are Lutie Johnson of The Street by Ann Petry and Eva Medina Canada of Gayl Jones's Eva's Man (1970). But these are perhaps the exceptions that prove the rule.
Faulkner's *Light in August* and Wright's *Native Son,* the most egregious acts of violence are defined as those enacted by society against the protagonists. The social strictures that frustrate the dreams of social equality for Bigger Thomas and that similarly affect Joe Christmas's ability to embrace his dual racial legacies, both come under close textual scrutiny and critique as contributing factors to the rage that each of these characters experiences. Their rage, in turn, is expressed in the form of aggression against other "safe" targets, particularly women. However, Faulkner and Wright posit that the only expressions of violence worthy of attention and critique are those inflicted by (white) society against the male protagonists.

But violence, of course, takes many forms. As the above-mentioned authors correctly assert, social and institutional violences are common in American society, perpetrated against marginalized peoples to maintain a socio-economic advantage for members of the dominant class. This is the violence Bigger Thomas feels most acutely in *Native Son* when he enviously laments, "They [Caucasians] get a chance to do everything" (*NS* 19). Because he is African American, there are many facets of life that Bigger cannot hope to experience; his human desires and potential are circumscribed by socially imposed racial prohibitions. But while Wright would have his audience define these discriminatory social mores as the most heinous expression of violence imaginable, there are certainly other acts of violence present in this text, as well as in *Light in August.*

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4Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940). All subsequent references will be made parenthetically, designated by the shortened title, *NS.*
Ironically, the most readily identifiable permutation of violence—physical violence by one person against another—is given meager attention in these texts. Significantly, the personal and intimate acts of violence that are largely ignored are committed by the protagonists (primarily) against black women, a group that has even less socially-ascribed power than do black men.

But what are we to make of the physical violence that is perpetrated against women by the protagonists of these texts? Black female bodies, it would seem, are not as valuable as black male bodies—they lack subjectivity. The texts reenact and reify the reality of a social hierarchy which places supreme importance on the thoughts and actions of men. The violence that female bodies experience is erased, the significance of their suffering effaced in the wake of critiques of racism. The female characters of these texts are sacrificed in order to present the most compelling anti-racist discourse possible. Women are only important insofar as they illuminate the debilitating nature of racial oppression, but not in their own right. Like Bessie Mears of Native Son, their lives and deaths only become significant as measures of how racism and other forms of oppression have warped the psyches of male protagonists. Their raped, beaten and mutilated bodies only serve to further the social critique in the texts of these male authors.

This myopia concerning the violence done to women is more than a simple oversight on the part of the authors. These authors' speechlessness on the issue of gender-based violence constitutes a pornographic representation of violence, one in which the subject position is reserved for the male protagonist and the masculinized viewer/reader. The use of the term "pornographic representation" is meant to highlight the fact that
pornography is a mode of representation that often exceeds its legal definitional boundaries: it is about "representational practices rather than sexual practices." The debate about pornography often gets mired in discussions of good sex versus bad sex, but American society is rife with pornographic representations of women that have little to do with sexual activity. Pornographic representation plays out (and plays within) power relations between people, most often people of different sexes. It objectifies the victim/participant while simultaneously casting the (male) aggressor as (the only) subject. His gaze is given primacy as he looks on the object/woman, his desire is foregrounded. His action is detailed, his words and thoughts revealed. His subjectivity is asserted, often through acts of violent sexuality, at the expense of another person.

Of course, Native Son is not pornography in the strictest and most commonplace use of the term, but it does conform to the structure of representation that is constant throughout all variations of pornography—the subjectification of the male is accomplished through the medium of the female body. Mary and Bessie are objectified so that Bigger will emerge as a fuller subject. His violence toward them (and this is important) defines him as a subject and "actor" because these women are acted upon, the objects/recipients

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6Since pornographic representations are about power relations between people, it is worth mentioning that the role of victim/participant is not limited to women. Although pornography usually offers gender as the ground upon which its representations are enacted, there are numerous ways people in this culture assert/illustrate their dominance over others. Sexism marginalizes the concerns and interests of women, but racism is another cultural phenomenon, among many, that defines a group of people as Other to the larger community. Within American society, both white women and African American women and men, among others, have been the victims of pornographic representation.
of his aggression. In other words, as Susanne Kappeler explains, "the two subjects are the author [which is, I would argue, aligned with the protagonist in the case of *Native Son*] and the spectator/reader. . . . The woman is the object of exchange. This is the dominant relationship which remains constant across varying 'contents.'" No matter what the coupling in pornographic representations, the woman remains an object of exchange between the viewer/reader and the author of the pornographic material. She is displayed for the consumption of a(other) human subject. In the case of *Native Son* and *Light in August*, women are offered as evidence to the reader of the unjust racism of American society.

These representations of women are calculated to elevate the masculine subject in the eyes of the reader, to align male protagonist and reader in their estimation of women so that the racial critiques of the texts are privileged over (non-existent) gender critiques. Bigger Thomas speaks only to other subjects, Max and Jan at the end of the text, and the reader of his narrative. We are meant to regard women as he does, as objects for our use and consumption. They are portrayed as agents of the system of oppression and psychological opponents that Bigger must overcome in his quest for subjectivity. To "read" women in these texts and to give weight to their suffering one must read against the pornographic gaze of the authors which asserts that "the pleasure of the feeling of life" is something to which only men should have access, and that that pleasure can only

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7 Kappeler 51.

8 Kappeler 104.
be achieved at the expense of a female subject.

There are several strategies for masking this "pornographic gaze," for (re)directing readerly attention to the authorized theme(s) of the text and away from the female bodies that litter the path to male subjectivity and autonomy. The first is to portray the woman as an enemy, complicitous with the system of oppression that the protagonist opposes. In this way, the act of resistance (to social oppression) often becomes synonymous with resisting and/or overcoming women. To deny women through acts of disrespect, defiance and violence becomes tantamount to reclaiming one's manhood—the first step, these protagonists believe, to reclaiming one's abused and denied humanity. Joe Christmas acts out this conviction in moments of resistance to his adoptive mother, Mrs. McEachern, and in his relationship with Joanna Burden. He refuses food, physical and emotional comfort from these women because he believes accepting them (food and emotional connection) will be a marker of his weakness. Mrs. McEachern's only offense is being kind to him and trying to shield him from the extreme fanaticism of his father, but Joe views her actions as an attempt to "make [him] cry" (*LIA* 169), to weaken his masculine pose and strip him of the power he gains as a man in Southern society. Once she has been figured as enemy, to deny her kindnesses parallels his assertion of his masculine identity. Each time he spurns her he gains psychological strength to face the adversaries that are his equal: his adoptive father (Mr. McEachern) and the religion (God the Father) to which Mr. McEachern demands Joe be submissive.

Similarly, when Joe throws away food that Joanna has prepared for him, he is attempting to deny her feminine power over him. For as he believes, to accept her food
and body unconditionally would be tantamount to relinquishing his manhood. In this moment of Southern history, man is defined against woman, and at times when Joe freely accepts Joanna, he feels he is not living up to the model of manhood that has been set for him by his adoptive father or other men with whom he has had contact. Manhood means being dominant over and detached from women, tolerating their presences as necessary evils. Indeed, Joe has so internalized this masculine pose that in order to be comfortable with his easy acquiescence to Joanna's sexual and emotional life, he has to figure her as "manlike" (LIA 234). This transformation allows him to think of their pairing as a relationship between equals, and consequently he has little need to resist her because he is not asked or required to relinquish any part of his masculinity to her. His control is evenly matched to hers; they "can count upon one another" (LIA 159) to resist feminine romanticism. Although homoeroticism is certainly not a position with which Joe feels more comfortable, if Joanna can be created (at least in his mind) as a woman who is more masculine than feminine, it is easier for him to assent to the relationship. For if Joanna is both man and woman, then Joe can shift between her dual gender identities as he needs in order to feel at ease with their interactions. But in moments when he resists Joanna most strenuously, it is because his greatest fear is being realized, "it was like I was the woman and she was the man" (LIA 235). When he believes she is trying to strip him of the power that adheres to him as a man in this society, he rewrites Joanna as Woman,  

*For a suggestive reading of the function of homoerotic character pairings in Light in August, see Diane Roberts', Faulkner and Southern Womanhood (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1994).*
the enemy that must be overcome in order to reify his position in a patriarchal culture.

The female character that is most obviously portrayed as the enemy to masculine identity in *Native Son* is Bigger Thomas's mother. She is portrayed as an overly demanding and unrealistic woman, urging Bigger to take on the responsibilities of manhood without fully acknowledging the way in which he is prevented from doing so through white prejudice and discrimination. She (like Bigger's sister, Vera) encourages him to take the job with the Daltons as if that will significantly improve their standard of living and enable them "not [to] have to live like pigs" (*NS* 15). She places a large degree of responsibility on Bigger for their destitution because he is unemployed, but what she does not consider is that even with an additional income they will not be permitted to move outside of the Black Belt to find housing that allows them to feel human again. Mrs. Thomas blindly equates an improved economic situation with social elevation. But she ignores the fact that American racism denies Bigger employment opportunities much beyond that of a chauffeur. Such menial positions can neither offer real improvement in the Thomas's economic status nor challenge the social and racial mores that prevent black families from making significant improvements in their living conditions. So while Mrs. Thomas demands that Bigger be a man and support the family, society is determined to keep him a disenfranchised "boy." Trudier Harris correctly characterizes the interaction between mother and son when she writes, "Mrs. Thomas...is viewed as an insensitive black woman who would tie the men in her life to the plodding, pedestrian cares of
everyday existence rather than permitting them to fly—either literally or symbolically."^{10} Readers are encouraged to see Bigger's mother in the same light that he does, as an enemy to be overcome in his quest for a better life for himself.

While it is clear that Mrs. Thomas adds to the burdens her son must carry as a black man, Harris, as even a cursory reading of her article will indicate, is Wright's ideal reader and perhaps the best testimony to how well Wright has justified and/or masked his pornographic representation of women. Harris unequivocally confirms Wright's portrayal of Mrs. Thomas as a covert agent working to subdue Bigger's desire for equal social and economic opportunity. But Harris never acknowledges the reality of what a second income could do for the Thomas family. Alan France reads against Wright's authorial mandate in a way that Harris fails to do when he correctly asserts, "we are asked to privilege Bigger Thomas's feeling of powerlessness caused by the family's living conditions over the actual physical suffering that those conditions impose on the family."^{11} In other words, Wright would have us believe the true crime of the Thomas's situation is Bigger's powerlessness to help his suffering family—the fact that he is precluded from being the man/provider of the family—not their suffering itself. Yet Bigger's mother wants nothing more from her eldest son than his contribution to the survival of the family, the same expectation she has of all members of the family. Vera is going to school, but she is also willing to work to assist her struggling family. Bigger, on


the other hand, views Mrs. Thomas's request as unreasonable and onerous, and we are
invited to view her request as Bigger does. Wright and Bigger (and Harris) believe Mrs.
Thomas to be a castrating bitch, forcing her son to abandon his dreams of a better life for
the quotidian chores of living.

Far from being in league with the system of oppression, however, Mrs. Thomas
wants a better life for her son which she believes the job with the Daltons could provide.
She is interested in concrete ways Bigger might attain his goals, and a steady job with a
benevolent employer is one possible means for him to improve his situation. Her
assumption even proves to have merit given the fact that upon their initial meeting, Mary
immediately asks Bigger about his knowledge of the Communist Party and agitation that
is being made for social equality, and Mrs. Dalton inquires of his interest in continuing
his education. This job, as Mrs. Thomas hopes, could be the avenue for Bigger to expand
his knowledge so that he can better pursue his desire for a fuller life, free of social
restrictions meant to keep him at a debased socio-economic level. But neither the text nor
Bigger acknowledges either of these Dalton inquiries as viable avenues for him to attain
his dreams. Rather, Wright (and readers who prioritize the social critique presented in the
text over any other possible critical response) authorizes Bigger's vague desire for social
elevation without evaluating his inaction in pursuing that goal. Mrs. Thomas is
condemned for being a collaborator with American racist injustice in order to mask
Bigger's passivity in pursuing his dream. But even further, Wright wants to readers to
understand Bigger's denial of his mother's beliefs and world views as the equivalent to
actively seeking to change his position in society.
Another means of masking the pornographic gaze and focusing readers' attention on the anti-racist discourse of these novels is to implicate the victimized woman in the violent encounters with male protagonists. In this way, the victim is made responsible for her own fate, even (or especially) when the reader might harshly judge the male protagonist for assuming the role of oppressor while simultaneously claiming special consideration as a victim. In other words, if the woman can be shown to have brought her victimization upon herself or to have put herself in a position in which the victimization was likely to occur, then the male protagonist is relieved of his responsibility. He would only bring closure to a set of events that the woman set in motion and the woman would remain responsible for her own fate.

The scene in which Bigger confesses to Bessie that he has murdered Mary Dalton is interesting for the strategies employed by Wright to remove the burden of responsibility for her demise from Bigger. When Bessie becomes hysterical at Bigger's admission that he has killed Mary, he "carried the bottle to her lips; she drank a small swallow. When he attempted to put the bottle away, she took it from him." Bigger has to take the liquor from her, adding, "You don't want to get sloppy drunk" (NS 169). Several critics have read this scene as evidence of the workings of Bessie's "escape mechanism," her attempt to "remove herself from the world [and] forget about her problems" through the use of alcohol. And while it is clear that Bessie is attempting to use the liquor as a

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12 Harris 76-77. Other critics who read this scene as evidence of Bessie's attempt to escape reality or as a sign of her weakness and passivity include Robert James Butler (1986), Kathleen Ochshorn (1989) and Willene P. Taylor (1990).
mode of escape, there is much more at stake in this scene than simply her desire to deny the reality and import of Bigger's action.

Her drinking at this moment, like her acceptance of money and liquor from Bigger after the murder and when he tells her of his blackmail plan, carries with it the suggestion that Bessie, through her inactivity and lack of resistance, is an accomplice (albeit unwilling) to his crime. Her acceptance of these things from Bigger seeks to shift to her the responsibility for her role in the scheme. Bessie becomes an agent in this moment, making and acting on her own choices. The text suggests that the instant she decides to drink rather than to separate herself from Bigger, she not only accepts the responsibility of her fate, but actively designs it. By not leaving when she has the opportunity, Bessie initiates a series of events that will ultimately end in her own rape and murder. For these reasons, her acceptance of money is central to her characterization and Wright's attempt to mediate the readers' assessment of Bigger's actions toward her. In effect, this textual detail relegates Bessie to the one-dimensional role of whore, a woman who prostitutes away her future for money and liquor.

It is therefore significant that Bigger decides "maybe he could use her" (NS 131) only after Bessie asks him about the money he has shown her; what little regard Bigger has for Bessie as a human being is destroyed the moment she makes the inquiry. As "whore," Bessie does not warrant full human consideration and compassion. She becomes a tool that Bigger has acquired through liquor and money and, consequently, is free to use (or misuse) as he pleases. Kappeler's explanation regarding the exchange of money for sex is revealing here, especially for what it does not address:
Man identifies with his possessions of use-value, they are part of him, part of his identity. . .When he loves, he gives "himself". When he acquires a wife, he gives of his status and his estate, for the willing collaborator to share in. But when he pays in cash, he ceases to identify with his gift. . .he gives nothing of himself but 'takes' from the collaborator who prostitutes herself for exchange-value rather than use-value."\textsuperscript{13}

Bessie's interest in the money marks her as venal. But in Bigger's world, where racism, economic and social oppression are the norm and property ownership is limited among black men, money binds her "to him by ties deeper than marriage" (\textit{NS} 142). Where status and estate are absent, money becomes the mode of exchange for connecting a man with the woman he selects as his partner. And although the exchange of money degrades the female recipient in a patriarchal culture, what quickly becomes evident is that whether bargaining in exchange- or use- value, the woman is cast as collaborator. The issue is less about what the man gives (or not) of himself, but the fact that the woman is still left without autonomy, without subjectivity and the attendant right to have human choices available to her. Woman is still figured as "prostitute" whatever the socio-economic status of the man; her complicity is implied in either case. This scenario makes it clear that all women, even those who do not challenge the patriarchal organization of culture, are considered objects for male pleasure and consumption, nothing more.

\textsuperscript{13}Kappeler 164-165.
What is glossed over, of course, is the fact that there are no options available to Bessie. Bigger has an advantage over her because she has already participated in two other theft schemes with him; there is little moral ground for her to stand on in order to resist this more elaborate plan. Moreover, Bessie is already legally implicated in the scheme because she does not dissuade Bigger or report him to the police. She is afraid because she realizes that in the eyes of the law she is no different than Bigger, and Bigger recognizes "he could handle her through her fear" (NS 138). As Kappeler writes, extrapolating from the argument of bell hooks. "Willingness is deduced from signs of apparent collaboration, that is absence of resistance, without regard for the available options. . . ."\(^{14}\) Where viable options for action and/or choice are absent, however, the offering and acceptance of money (or other commodities of exchange) can be nothing more than a balm to the psyche of the victimizer. It allows him (in this case Bigger) to believe "it [the necessity of her death] was her own fault" (220), to attribute the responsibility for Bessie's murder to her, the victim. In this way, his own responsibility for her death is thereby effaced. Further, the text seeks to conceal the fact that while Bigger is disenfranchised due to his race, he still is the benefactor of the patriarchal system that reduces all women to the status of objectified whore. Instead, the authorized story of his confounded desire and search for autonomy in a racist society is stressed.

This authorized story is also privileged in reference to Bigger's first female victim, Mary Dalton. Wright here seeks to mask his pornographic representation of violence

\(^{14}\)Kappeler 164.
through two justifying narratives. First, the text argues that the tragedy of Bigger's life (not the tragedy of Mary's murder) is the result of American social constructions in which race and rape are overdetermined. Bigger intuitively knows that his presence in an (intoxicated) white woman's room will be interpreted as an attempted rape by those who find him. Quite simply, there is no other way for a white reader of this scene to explain to him/herself why Bigger, a black man, should be in such a private space with Mary. In this way of viewing the world, Bigger's presence could only be understood through the racist narrative of the black male rapist whose greatest desire is to violate a white woman. It is from fear of being discovered and thus wrongly accused that Bigger inadvertently murders Mary. Hence, the text would seem to suggest, unwritten social mores and white prejudice are truly responsible for Mary's murder.

The second narrative that is offered as a justification for Bigger's actions is the willed innocence and covert racism of the Dalton family. As Willene Taylor correctly asserts, "They are guilty of the great sin of self-delusion"15 because the Daltons believe themselves to be friends of the black race. They believe they are free of prejudice and that they actively seek to help those who are less privileged than themselves. But the Daltons continually act toward him in a condescending manner, taking advantage of privileges afforded them because they are members of the master class. They constantly refer to him as "the boy" both in and out of his presence, and have a habit of speaking about Bigger, especially when he is in their presence, as if he were not there. The very

first time Mrs. Dalton meets Bigger, she initially addresses him directly and then says to her husband, "Don't you think it would be a wise procedure to inject him into his new environment at once, so he could get the feel of things?" (NS 48). The fact that she initially speaks directly to Bigger, as well as the fact that he is never dismissed, strongly suggests that Bigger is attentively listening to his new employer. Yet her language, her use of words like "inject" and "environment," as well as her more complex sentence structure, are sure to be unfamiliar and alienating to Bigger. Her language reflects her belief that Bigger is not a thinking and reasoning being capable of contributing to conversations that concern his future. Instead, her understanding of him as a social experiment—a lab rat in her efforts to uplift the African American race—is made patently evident. And while Bigger may register the subtle indicators of their attitudes toward African Americans only subconsciously, readers are sure to recognize the disparity between the words and actions of the Daltons almost immediately. Because of their blindness and naivety regarding their participation in the system of oppression, the Daltons essentially become grotesque and are rendered non-sympathetic to readers.

Mary also uses language to exclude Bigger from conversations that are relevant to and should include him. When Bigger drives Mary and Jan around Chicago, Mary assures Bigger's attention through a direct address, only to abruptly shift her attention and conversation to Jan, who is included in the "we", "our" and "us" of her last sentences. This shift enables Mary to objectify Bigger, for had she continued to speak with him, to address him directly, he would have had the opportunity to speak back, to write his own reality over her blinded view of his life. He is made the object of Mary's philosophical
musings that assure Bigger's continued silence and establish a community between herself and Jan from which Bigger is excluded. When she reasons, "...they must live as we live...There are twelve million of them...They live in our country..." (MS 70), Mary makes explicit the underlying thought of her mother: this [home, country, etc.] belongs to Caucasians who are generously allowing African-Americans to occupy the same space. Mary's language, like her mother's before her, defines Bigger (and rather explicitly, his entire race) as "Other." in need of the philanthropic attention of a superior race to create order from their chaotic lives.

So there are at least two levels enacted to shield Bigger from the full contempt and anger of the reading audience. The first is evident in Barbara Johnson's claim that "the plot in Native Son may be read in terms of racist overdetermination"16— that had Bigger been found in the room, both Mrs. Dalton and any other white "reader" of the situation would have believed he was trying to rape the young white woman (indeed, Bigger is accused of exactly this crime when he is arrested). In this way, the sordid entanglement of American race and sex relations is blamed for Mary's death. The second mitigating circumstance offered by Wright is the subconscious racism of the Daltons that continues to deny Bigger's subjectivity. As this argument goes, Bigger is justified in his resistance to the Daltons because of the insincerity of their motives and actions. The text suggests that their activities are calculated to bolster their own self-esteem and reputations as philanthropists; the fact that they benefit from the injustice of the social

system at work in America is foregrounded. This strategy of protection indicts the Daltons for being participants in and benefactors of a racially oppressive social organization which creates embittered black men like Bigger whose only sense of freedom and humanity comes in acts of murder.

This pornographic gaze is also evident in Faulkner's treatment of Joanna Burden for he, too, includes textual details that implicate a woman in her own death. Joanna completely succumbs to the stereotypes of the black male as lascivious and untamed lover; like her white female counterpart in *Native Son*, she associates Christmas with "the sensual, the taboo." She is excited by Joe not only as a man, but as a black man, and where he diverges from her expectations, she creates elaborate schemes to satisfy her fantasy of being forcefully taken by the black brute that she images Christmas to be. Long after they have consummated their relationship, Joanna still requires Joe to "climb into a window to come to her;" on other occasions, "he would find her naked or with her clothing half torn to ribbons upon her" (*LIA* 259-60). Unwilling or unable to accept her attraction to him, she imagines herself ravaged, an unwilling participant in the sexual act with Christmas. Although Joanna tries to build upon her family's history and "liberalism" in her own personal life, her sexual fantasies reveal the degree to which she has internalized stereotypes of black men. The sentiment her father intimates, "a man would have to act as the land where he was born had trained him to act" (*LIA* 255), proves to be

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true for the woman also. Despite her best intentions to carry on a racially-progressive tradition that she believes exists in her family (she gives money to "Negro" schools), Joanna cannot escape time or history. She is a product of the corrupt race relations that infect all of the South.

Given her obvious racism in their sexual encounters, it is surprising that Joanna is so intent on recreating Christmas in the image of a "positive" black man. She wants to make him "worthy" of her love and money and, therefore, pushes him to attend school so that he can become respectable in her eyes as well as those of society. In her attempt to follow her father's wisdom, to "rise [and] raise the shadow with [her]" (LLA 253), she tries to change Joe's life "to make of him something between a hermit and a missionary to negroes" (LLA 271). Yet her very conviction that the "Negro" race is a "shadow," a cursed race, and the burdensome responsibility of the white one, despoils her attempts to be morally responsible and socially progressive. By way of exculpating Joe from responsibility for Joanna's death, the text suggests that her covert racism precipitates her later (religious) fanaticism and proximately causes her death. Joe is even further excused from killing Joanna because he acts in self-defense, attacking Joanna only after she attempts to shoot him. Like the degrading sexual fantasies that she makes Christmas act out, her possession of and attempt to use a weapon against Joe effectively assign responsibility to her for her own death. In these ways, the text seeks to downplay Joe's misogyny and violence toward women by suggesting that Joe's aggression is a response to attitudes and actions of his victims. Their attitudes (primarily regarding his assumed race), rather than Joe's actions, become the subject of the critical apparatus of the text.
Thankfully, though, both Bessie and Joanna exceed Wright's and Faulkner's pornographic gazes, the authors' attempts to circumscribe their characters at every turn. Bessie emerges as a full and compelling character despite Wright's subtle textual strategies to refocus reader's attention to the main theme of Native Son—the racist social oppression of the black man. Although Bigger constantly thinks of Bessie as "inarticulate and unconscious" (NS 102), Bessie is the first in the text to deduce that Bigger "know[s] something" (NS 136) about Mary Dalton. She realizes when Bigger fails to that people will assume he raped Mary and burned her body to cover the evidence, and that his inability to prove otherwise puts them at even greater risk. She also astutely recognizes that she has been used by Bigger over the time that they have been coupled, and argues, "I see everything you ever did to me. I didn't want to see it before. . . But you got me into this murder and I see it all now, I been a fool, just a blind dumb black drunk fool" (NS 215-16). Far from being blind or deluded about her relationship with Bigger, Bessie had chosen to suppress the knowledge that she had in order to retain what measure of happiness she could. Her choice is revealing of Bessie's life, but it does not suggest ignorance or gullibility. With her insight, Bessie could have been Bigger's greatest ally. Instead, she proves to be one of his greatest challenges because she not only understands him, his motivations and intentions, but is also an adept reader of the larger society which confines them both.

Likewise, Joanna proves to be a more complex character than one might initially

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18 Critics who have made this charge against Bessie include Willene P. Taylor (1990) and Trudier Harris (1990).
suspect. She is a self-reliant and self-sustaining single, middle-aged woman who, before the arrival of Joe Christmas in her life, seems content. Although she clearly acts based on ideas of white racial supremacy. Joanna seeks to help the black race through philanthropic gifts of her money, time and advice to black schools and businessmen. And like her forefathers, she is committed to improving the condition of African Americans, willing even to die for her beliefs. Joanna ends up being a more interesting character than her textual role of catalyst would seem to warrant. For although her death shuttles Christmas to his final and symbolically resonant fate, she emerges as more than just the frustrated spinster that Christmas finally understands her to be.

While we can tease out evidence of pornographic representations by looking closely at the portrayals of women in these two texts, these representations are most visible during the rape and murder scenes that occur in *Light in August* and *Native Son*. Rape, only recently understood as a crime against women, is recast in such a way that the female victims are all but erased from the text during these affronts to their bodies. Sexual violence is the vehicle used to explore the aggressors' mentalities at the time of the rape instead of a sensitive portrayal of the effect sexual violation has on the victims.

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19 Historically rape has been seen as a crime against men rather than women. As Susan Brownmiller notes, early rape laws were written to protect a man's interest in his wife, daughter or other female relative. The value that adhered to a virgin was made concrete when she married a man with property and status, thereby reifying or improving the social position her family held. Hence it was in the interest of a patriarch to protect the virginal women in his family, and rape was a crime that stripped his property ("his" woman) of her marriageable value. It is a relatively recent legal development that rape has been defined as a crime against women, persons who have a right to the integrity of their own bodies.

20 As will be discussed in the chapter on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, concentration on the thoughts and actions of the rapist does not necessarily preclude a sensitivity to the plight of
Indeed, in *Native Son* the very definition of this form of violence is called into question:

But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against the wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He [Bigger] committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day.

That, too, was rape. (*NS* 214)

Here Bigger's interior monologue specifically argues that rape is not a crime against women. Rather, it is the suppressed hatred that comes from being (racially) oppressed in American society. "Rape" retains its violent character, but it is now a metaphor for an aggression that is directed toward a representative of social subjugation, "a white face."

The term gets exploded so that it is no longer about the aggression of one (male) person toward another (female) person; rather rape is now defined as the violent response of black men to socially inflicted oppression and violence. Everything in the text is

the female victim. Rather, these two male authors have chosen to write their rape scenes in such a way that the woman is effectively marginalized even in her own victimization. In *Light in August* and *Native Son*, she becomes only a mirror that is held up to the psyche of the male rapist to reflect his subjectivity to the only other subject present, the reader.

The definition of rape has been expanded to include sexual contact of a man that is not invited or reciprocated. In other words, legal definitions now acknowledge that men can be raped also. Male victims of rape report the same feelings of inadequacy and shame that female victims do, and rapists of men report the same desire to conquer and degrade their victims. For further discussion, see Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. 
reducible to the theme of social oppression and economic marginalization of the black man. Even the sexual violence that is visited upon women.

Although Bigger's actions clearly illustrate the truth of Michael Kaufman's words, Bigger does not seem to consciously realize.

The act of violence is many things at once. At the same instant it is the individual man acting out relations of sexual power; it is the violence of a society—a hierarchical, authoritarian, sexist, class-divided, militarist, racist, impersonal, crazy society—being focused through an individual man onto an individual woman. 22

Bigger's inadvertent murder of Mary shows us how an act of violence can simultaneously occupy two discursive positions, how it can be both personal and social. Clearly, the act testifies to Bigger's status within society. It is out of fear that he acts; the murder is the result of him being weak, not dominant, passive rather than active. It is also directed toward a particular woman, in this case woman, with whom he has a professional relationship. When Bigger carries her to her room, he responds to her on a personal level—he is attracted to and aroused by her proximity to him. The violence that is threatened at this moment (rape) is the result of these close interactions between Bigger and Mary.

Yet, in the way that Bigger transforms his accidental murder of Mary into something more meaningful for himself, we are able to see the social component to this

violence also. Bigger is trying to deny his "social powerlessness through an act of aggression." to become socially dominant by invoking trepidation in others. Bigger wants to see the "look of startled horror [that] would come over their [white] faces" (NS 123) when he revels his transgression of the ultimate taboo—the murder of a white woman. He wants, finally, to be acknowledged as human, and to have the power to alter not only his own life, but the lives of white people with whom he comes into contact.

We also see this attempt to assert his racialized presence in the way that he redefines the word rape. The character of his rewriting illustrates that Bigger really wants to be an agent in his own life, to recast his silence and passivity as subtle acts of violence. Tellingly, rape becomes something that one does to white hands and faces, synecdoches for the white race, for these hands and faces have historically denied liberty to black men. The transformation of rape, like Bigger's rewriting of Mary's accidental murder, marks his desire to interact as an equal with others who have socially ascribed power in American society. In his reworking of the word "rape," however, we see evidence that women do not have this socially ascribed power. Hence, in order for him to successfully recreate himself, he must engage with those who have denied his humanity all along—members of the white race.

As Bessie is not one of those who have circumscribed and denied his humanity, both the textual treatment of her rape and murder, as well as Bigger's response to her as victim, reflect her marginalized position in his life. The description of the rape is worth

23Kaufman 1.
quoting at some length:

Her voice came to him now from out of a deep, far-away silence and he paid her no heed. The loud demand of the tensity of his own body was a voice that drowned out hers. . . He was conscious of nothing now but her and what he wanted. . . Bessie's hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. . . He had to now.

Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind. don't don't don't Bigger. And then the wind became so strong that it lifted him high into the dark air, turning him, twisting him, hurling him: faintly, over the wind's howl, he heard: don't Bigger don't don't At a moment he could not remember, he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted. (NS 219-220)

There are only two direct statements from Bessie during the rape, and the only other note of her voice occurs during the metaphoric description of Bigger's attack in which he "rode roughshod over her whimpering protest." But even the images of the metaphor used to describe the rape are revealing. Bessie is reduced to a "resisting wind," a disembodied natural occurrence without significant force against gravity and/or momentum. Bigger, on the other hand, is cast as the master of a powerful, living animal, a creature that cannot be stopped or steered as it descends the "steep hill" of its rider's desire. It as if there is only one person in this scene, Bigger Thomas. He is the agent of an action that has no recipient; Bessie's voice falls out here because she has no significance to him. She is
simply property to him, "I wasn't in love with Bessie. She was just my girl. . . You have to have a girl, so I had Bessie" (NS 326). He "had" Bessie carnally, but also, as the denotative meaning of the word suggests, he possessed/owned her. The rape, and the murder that occurs after it, are expressions of Bigger's complete disdain for Bessie's humanity, and the text's refusal to comment on Bigger's assault--to indict him for his violence toward Bessie Mears--also effaces her value as a human being. Bessie is sacrificed to the narrative of racial oppression. Bigger's actions toward her remain uncritiqued within the text because to do so might undermine Bigger as a sympathetic character to the white reading audience. Hence even (and most especially) in rape, issues of race intervene and collude to complicate Bigger's relation to other subjects (readers) as well as himself.

Joe Christmas does not engage in the process of rewriting his life in the same way that Bigger does. Christmas is perfectly willing to accept the definition of rape as something that one does to women, as long as it is acknowledged that white women have more power in a racist society than do black men. Seeking to lay claim to the power of the phallus, Christmas enters Joanna's bedroom intent on raping her so that he might arrest power from her that she attains by virtue of her race. Through rape he seeks to assert his masculinity and the primacy of the phallocentric social ordering over the racist structure of American society. Masculinity, he believes, is unassailable, even within a racist society. And if Joe can accomplish a "rape" of Joanna, then by definition he would have "made a woman of her" (and a man of himself), for rape is a crime that is designed to strip power and self-possession from an individual, to feminize that individual and
thereby place her in a socially inferior role. The rape is designed, quite simply, to break Joanna's will and to make his male domination preclude any social power Joanna may access as a white woman. The rape allows Joe to inscribe himself into a subject position "analogous to that of the white master."24 Through this one act of terroristic violence he becomes masculinized and alternately racialized because traditionally, the power and "right" to transgress racial-sexual borders was reserved for white men. In Joe's usurpation of that "right," he believes he rises to the social stature of the white male. Unlike Bigger, however, Joe does not use the woman's body to communicate with another subject. The female body in this case is used to stabilize a gender and racial identity that is in radical flux. Joe uses the rape to communicate with himself, to create himself definitively as the rebellious and transgressive black man.25

But Joanna does not easily succumb to Joe's attempt to redefine her as strictly feminine, passive, and powerless. Rather than running for the door as Joe expects her to do, he finds her "in the dark exactly where the light had lost her, in the same attitude" (LIA 236). To his surprise, she does not fear the way he has entered the room or his malevolent intentions. Joe even thinks, "It was almost as though she were helping him, with small changes of position of limbs when the ultimate need for help arose" (LIA 236).


25Ironically, however, even in Joe's attempt to establish himself in this way, he inadvertently plays out the racial stereotypes ascribed to him by white males. He seeks through Joanna's rape to acquire the power that is typically reserved for white males, but is simultaneously written out of that positioning because his violence can be recuperated within a racist narrative--the violent and libidinous black male--that explains his actions to the dominant community.
By refusing to act in prescribed ways, Joanna subverts Joe's attempt to strip her power, which she defines as the ability to be both male and female, black and white. In doing so she denies him the power that he tries violently to acquire through this act.

But one should not assume, therefore, that Joanna has not been raped. The text makes only one note about Joanna during the rape, "...beneath his hands the body might have been the body of a dead woman not yet stiffened" (*LIA* 236). Clearly she is the victim of rape because this sexual act is neither invited nor reciprocated; her body bespeaks its violation.26 Joe's rage does not invoke desire or sexual gratification from Joanna. But rather than being completely undermined herself, Joanna accesses her own strength in order to resist Joe's attempt to psychologically and emotionally assault her (the physical assault is not countered). When Joe returns to the house a few days later, he expects the kitchen door to be locked against him, but it is open and he is insulted because it is as if "some enemy upon whom he had wreaked his utmost of violence and contumely stood, unscathed and unscarred" (*LIA* 237).

Clearly these two rape scenes are told from a masculine point of view. The rapes are expressions of masculine power that cast men as the only subject in these violent interactions. In *Native Son*, Bessie is relegated almost to the status of footnote during her attack. Her voice, as we have seen, is almost completely lost because the narrative focuses on Bigger's thoughts and actions during the attack. By the time he murders her,

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26 This description is suggestively similar to that of Pecola when she is incestuously raped by her father, Cholly Breedlove. I will revisit this description of violation in the Morrison chapter when I discuss the ways in which women writers undermine and transform traditional portrayals of female reactions to sexual violation.
Bessie has lost all humanity to him; even while he is contemplating the most effective way to kill Bessie he thinks of her as an "it" rather than a person. His comment, "Yes, that was what he could do with it, throw it out of the window, ... where nobody would find it until, perhaps, it had begun to smell" (NS 221), is chilling because of Bigger's complete disassociation from and objectification of Bessie; in this moment he completely erases of her subjectivity. To highlight his objectification of Bessie even more, one only need look at Bigger's tortured thoughts concerning Mary Dalton's murder. Her bloodied, disembodied head is foregrounded whenever he thinks of her; she has a face, a presence even after he has murdered her. Mary retains a degree of haunting forcefulness to him whereas Bessie is forgotten/erased even before he has killed her.

Bigger's relation to each of these women's murders, of course, is also indicative of the value that larger society places on each of their lives. He is more afraid after having killed Mary because, as he recognizes, "they kill us for women like her" (NS 324). The reality that Wright highlights here is that Bigger will be hunted for Mary's murder, not for Bessie's. Society does not value the body of a black woman unless, as is finally the case in *Native Son*, it can be used to illuminate some question/issue having to do with white male power.

Further, as Kappeler notes will be the case in all variations of pornographic representation, Mary and Bessie are ultimately cast as the objects of exchange between two subjects. Bessie becomes evidence for the white prosecutor to use against Bigger; her rape testifies to the "fact" that Bigger must have raped Mary. For, as the myth goes, all black men desire white women more than black women. Hence, if Bigger raped
Bessie, a less attractive and more available woman, then de facto, he must have raped Mary, the woman society deems more beautiful and desirable of his two victims. Bessie's body is simply a third term in a triangulation between Bigger, a man seeking to assert his subjectivity, and the white jury who stand as the arbiters of his subjectivity within the textual world. Within the larger scope of the reading experience, the reading audience becomes the body who stands in final judgment of Bigger's subjectivity. In both scenarios, Bessie is an object of exchange, the term that allows communication between Bigger as subject and jury/reader as subject.

Likewise, Mary is reduced to an object of exchange between Bigger and Jan Erlone. In one of the final meetings between Jan and Bigger, Jan offers Bigger forgiveness and understanding instead of hate and anger. Bigger responds to this display with dismay, noting, "For the first time in his life a white man became a human being to him; and the reality of Jan's humanity came in a stab of remorse: he had killed what this man loved and had hurt him" (NV 268). The realization that he has caused another man's loss, a man who has become human to Bigger for the first time, causes Bigger "a stab of remorse," a reaction that was not evoked by the murder of either of the two women. Jan, too, comes to understand "that it's your [Bigger's] right to hate me" (NV 268) because Bigger kills Mary. It is not until after the murder that Jan considers for the first time, "...

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23 Jan Mohamed argues in his article that "a distinction must be maintained between 'exchange,' which assumes a certain degree of consent between men, and 'appropriation,' which does not... white women were never 'exchanged' between white and black men" (108). While this is an important distinction to make between these terms, I would argue that it is necessary precisely because white men did not acknowledge black men as equals. In the case of Bigger and Jan, it is possible for Mary to serve as an object of exchange because Jan does acknowledges Bigger as a subject who has (violently) claimed his right to define himself as a man.
.all the black men who've been killed, the black men who had to grieve when their people were snatched from them in slavery and since slavery" (NS 268). Jan finally recognizes Bigger's struggle for the recognition of his humanity as part of a continuum of social oppression. Mary's murder becomes the cementing term between the two men, the act that identifies them as subjects to each other. Without Mary's murder, Jan and Bigger would have remained estranged to and ignorant of one another. Because of the murder, Jan can become more than he was, more than just a white man, and Bigger can finally see him without "a deforming mask" (NS 268). Once again, Mary as subject and person is lost in this equation. She is relegated to the object that allows two male subjects to communicate with one another.

Joanna, too, is written out of her own rape as the text focuses on Joe Christmas's thoughts and intentions, the way that he reads the scene as he enters the bedroom. The fact that this scene is told from Joe's point of view might help us account for the claim that Joanna is assisting her rapist in his attack. The suggestion that Joanna actually participates in her victimization, while serving a rhetorical end in the text, is also evidence of the rich fantasy Joe has created to account for his own powerlessness in their relationship. For throughout their pairing Joe has been following Joanna's lead, altering his typical behavior to please and satisfy her so that he can remain in her home and heart. Even in the moment when he seeks to assert his masculine identity and dominance most forcefully (during the rape), he is still plagued with feelings of inadequacy and weakness.

In addition to her lack of "presence" during the rape, Joanna is further objectified when her body ultimately becomes an object of communication between Percy Grimm
and Joe Christmas. During her life Joanna was ostracized from the community of Jefferson because of her close ties with the black community. But after her death has been discovered and the suspicion of Joe's race is revealed, her death is the justification offered for Joe's genital mutilation; she is transformed by Grimm and other members of this community into the cherished white woman that she never was while living.

Although Joe seeks to assert and fix his identity as a man through his violent act(s) against Joanna, Grimm ultimately denies Christmas the masculine power he (Christmas) has sought throughout the novel. Just as Joe has always collapsed the source of his socially-ascribed power to his dominance over women, so too does his attacker, Grimm, as he violently castrates Joe in order to remind him that without his penis (read: access to patriarchal power), he is nothing.

Indeed, this threat of castration is the focal expression of violence in the texts of Faulkner and Wright. It is a violation that is perpetrated against men but that closely approximates rape in that it collapses sexual and physical violence to demean its victims. Ironically, it is precisely because it operates at the intersection between sex and violence that it haunts both Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas. For them, to be castrated is to be literally and figuratively emasculated, for like rape, castration is meant to enforce a feminized position on its victim. This particular loss of bodily intactness restores the phallus to the status of an organ, the very move that each of these protagonists fear most. For if they are denied power based on racial prohibitions, and are then feminized in addition to their racial powerlessness, they will have no authorized social position that they can assume. Readers can deduce from the textual presentations, then, that the
ultimate result of racial marginalization of black men is a redoubled effort to assert masculinity through sexual aggression and violence against women. But this is a "reality" that goes uncritiqued within the texts. It is not as if either of these authors are claiming that this aggression and violence against women is misdirected and/or wrong; it is significant simply because it highlights the status of black men in American society. Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas are as much upset by their inability to be "naturally" dominant based on their gender as they are irate about the roadblocks that they face on the path to social mobility as African Americans in a racist society.

In texts that are preoccupied with racial and sexualized violence against men, then, it is no wonder that both literal and symbolic forms of castration abound in *Light in August* and *Native Son*. Joe Christmas is castrated by Percy Grimm in a scene that is rife with symbolic meaning. The blood that had plagued Joe all of his life "seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (*LIA* 465). The castration is Joe's final torture as he suffers for the sins of a racist society; the spilling of his blood and his "broken" body, like that of Jesus Christ, is offered as atonement for the transgressions of others. He is "resurrected" in their memories after he loses his penis and his life to Grimm, whose only concern is that Joe "let white women alone, even in hell" (*LIA* 464). This literal castration highlights the critique that Faulkner seeks to make within his text. Joe's only crime here is the fact that he is considered black; the confusion and violence that plague him for the remainder of his life are the result of the ambivalent and confused feelings that circulate around his unverified racial heritage.
If Freud's formulation regarding the psychological import of decapitation is true, however. Joe Christmas's castration literalizes a metaphoric castration that Joe had enacted when he killed Joanna. When Joanna's body is found, "her head had been cut pretty near off" (LIA 91). The decapitation foreshadows Joe's murder, for even if he was not the person who killed her (and this, it seems to me, is open to question given Lucas Burch/Brown's explanation of how he found the body), it is for her mutilation that he will ultimately die. The decapitation and the revelation of Joe's supposed racial heritage can only been answered within this Southern society by a castration. The black man that Joe is believed to be must be reinscribed into the social order; he will not be allowed to transgress Southern social mores without suffering the sanctioned social response. The castration, as both Trudier Harris and Abdul JanMohamed point out, is a ritualized response to the violation of the prohibition against black man/white woman sexual relations.

JanMohamed further argues that sexuality and rape are the "paradigm[s] of all modes of crossing the racial boundary."28 This claim is certainly true in Faulkner's novel; even the early consensual sexual relationship between Joe and Joanna is marked by a sexuality that imitates rape, evidencing how difficult it is to escape the weight of one's historical moment and cultural background. And after the relationship has been discovered, the only way that citizens of Jefferson can characterize it is "rape," although there is overwhelming evidence that Joe and Joanna had been sexually involved for a

28JanMohamed 109.
long period of time. There is simply no other discursive position that would explain the sexual interaction of a black man and white woman, a fact that also remains true in the urban landscape of Bigger Thomas's Chicago.

Bigger's literal and figurative decapitations of Mary and Bessie are, like Christmas' presumed crime, both foreshadowings of his own possible future, as well as an indication of his disdain for women. As Lauren Gardner points out, "Bigger does hack off Mary's head and bash in Bessie's head, the centers of their intelligence and selves, reducing them to bodies without minds even in death." But Bigger's act of decapitation, much more so than Joe Christmas's, calls to mind the Freudian understanding of decapitation as a symbolic castration. Virtually every time that Bigger thinks of Mary, he thinks of her head covered with bloody, curly black hair, reminiscent of the mythical description of Medusa's head, which according to Freud, represents the sight of the female genitals. What is missing from this sighting, of course, is the penis. The young boy, Freud goes on to argue, relates the absent member to punishment, for he has been told that he cannot possess the mother for himself. In Bigger's case, the "mother" that he cannot have, indeed the sight that he is forbidden to see, is Mary, the prohibited white woman. His "punishment" for desiring her for himself is the loss of his own penis. Bigger's nightmarish dream--when "the paper fell away...it was his own head" (NS 156)--is occasioned by his interactions with Mary in a racist society, but it indicates a

much more primal and private fear of castration.

What this Freudian reading of Mary's decapitation and Bigger's nightmare offer is a way of understanding the psychological castration that Bigger has experienced as a black man in American society. His greatest fear is not losing his life, but losing his penis as a result of his association with a white woman. The nightmare is so paralyzing and so real for Bigger that he inadvertently kills Mary rather than risk being found in her room innocent of any crime. Bigger knows the white woman is the "vision" that is forbidden him, and the penalty for viewing/desiring her in any way is the loss of his manhood. But what quickly becomes clear here is the conflation of the literal and figurative. Bigger fears being castrated, but that very fear signals a figurative castration that marks Bigger, at least in this society, as less than a man. His anxiety belies the fact that some level of manhood has already been denied and/or stripped from him.

The effect of this anticipation in each of these texts is that female characters who are not subject to this form of violence are relegated to the margins of the texts. It is for this reason that they, even when they experience gender-particular forms of violence such as rape, are not brought to the forefront of consideration. Violence against the black male body is prioritized in texts that critique racism because castration is part and parcel of white terrorism in a racist society, a means of maintaining social control over a particular group of people. Yet the focus on castration marks each of these texts as part of a phallocentric social order which commonly uses pornographic representations of women and violence to maintain itself. These representations mask both themselves and the larger social workings by naturalizing discourses that are anything but "natural," for rape
can also be used, as several scholars have pointed out, as a form of terrorism against a black community. But in *Light in August* and *Native Son*, texts that focus on black male protagonists, castration is the mode of terrorization centrally considered because this form of violence physically asserts social disenfranchisement on the black *male* body. The black male is denied not only equal social standing, but access to patriarchal power as evidenced by the threat of castration that permeates the lives of black protagonists.

Faulkner and Wright engage in pornographic representations of violence that are meant to prioritize anti-racist discourses within their texts. *Light in August* and *Native Son* both participate in and support a phallocentric ordering that seeks to efface the concerns of women. So even while making needed critiques of one form of oppression (racism), they are blind to the ways in which they perpetuate another form of subjugation: sexist oppression. Other authors, however, have found persuasive and effective ways of combining anti-racist discourses with a sensitivity to feminist issues that are often and necessarily raised in critiques of racism. Hurston begins this process in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by suggesting that violence against women is engendered by the phallocentric ordering of society rather than being a by-produce of racial oppression. When Janie's husbands enact various forms of aggression against her, it is not because they are oppressed within a racist society. They direct violent verbal and physical outbursts against her because she is less powerful than they and dependant upon them for her livelihood. The freedom to abuse her is granted to them because they are males within a patriarchal culture.

But although Hurston prioritizes critiques of patriarchy in her texts, she does not
neglect a simultaneous critique of racism when it is manifest. With increasing efficacy, she shows the connectedness of racist and sexist oppression and how the critique of one form of oppression cannot be made to the exclusion of another when it is present. For, as Hurston shows in Seraph on the Suwanee, differing forms of oppression are interlocking and mutually supporting. In offering up this very important black feminist critique of social oppression, Hurston begins the process of revising and arresting representational control from male authors who wrote about violence without concern for the female victims.
CHAPTER TWO

The Sadomasochistic Dynamic in Zora Neale Hurston's 
*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee*

We cannot grasp the true nature of sexual assault
without situating it within its larger sociopolitical context.

--Angela Davis

[R]acism is oppressive . . . because . . . it is a system
that promotes domination and subjugation.

--bell hooks

Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*\(^1\) has generally been characterized by
her biographers and contemporary reviewers as a deeply flawed work filled with
"contradictions" and "incompatible strains."\(^2\) Arvay Henson Meserve, the novel's central
character, has met with similar criticism since 1948 when Frank Slaughter labeled her a
"hysterical neurotic," one best understood through the constructs of psychoanalysis\(^3\)
rather than close textual reading. Many scholars have been reluctant to see the last of

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subsequent references to this text will be made parenthetically, designated by the shortened title,
*Seraph*.

\(^2\)Worth Tuttle Hedden, rev. of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *The New
Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York:

\(^3\)Frank G. Slaughter, rev. of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, by Zora Neale Hurston, *The New York
who have continued in psychoanalytic criticism of this novel include Robert
Hemenway who concludes that Arvay has "sublimated resentment" over her capitulation to Jim's
sexuality, and Karla F. C. Holloway who asserts that Arvay acts out of a pervading sense of guilt.
Hurston's novels as anything but a failure, a charge leveled at the author because (1) there are many stylistic weaknesses and dramatic inconsistencies in the novel, and (2) Arvay Henson Meserve is definitely not a typical Hurston heroine. Where Janie, the prototypical and heralded Hurston female protagonist, is self-confident, brave and daring, Arvay is unsure of herself, cowardly and submissive. Where Janie is a portraiture of indomitable black womanhood, Arvay seems to represent her cowering white counterpart.

Yet these initial differences give way quickly enough when one examines the texts more closely. One important point that often has been overlooked by those eager to accuse Hurston of assimilation and betrayal of the folk community in choosing to portray a white family in *Seraph* is the fact that this text never departs from Hurston's abiding interest in "the folk." The settings and language of the characters of these two novels are quite similar, highlighting the fact that the provincialism of small Southern communities is not the exclusive property of African American people. Rather, the attitudes and expressive forms that make up "Southern culture" are available to all who live and interact in these rural communities. Hurston thereby illuminates the falsity of common perceptions that all Caucasian people are more culturally refined and "civilized" than their African American counterparts. Through this simple but significant act of creating white protagonists who utilize the same language patterns and exist in the same milieu as Hurston's prototypical African American characters, she engages in an extremely subversive and signifying act. In this way, whiteness is revealed to be as much of a social

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*See, for example, Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* and Robert Hemenway's *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. 
construct as blackness. a claim that has the potential to disrupt dominant mythic constructions of a monolithic white middle-class.

Further, both *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* suggest that erotic love, marriage and family are primary avenues of female oppression. Both Janie and Arvay are concerned with how to find and maintain self-fulfillment and happiness within their marriages. And although Arvay is castigated as weak and spineless for remaining in her often demeaning and abusive marriage, she makes essentially the same choice that Janie does when she [Janie] learns she has an "inside and an outside"⁵: she chooses to remain in a relationship that is abusive to her psyche and spirit. Indeed, Joseph R. Urgo has noted of Janie's three husbands, "Each man seeks domination, each man seeks possession. Each man physically assaults her. . .there is no idyllic love available to her [Hurston's] protagonist in which power and violence play no part."⁶ Donald Marks expresses a similar idea when he observes, "Hurston [continually] links sexuality with the threat of violence."⁷ In linking the two (sexuality and violence), Hurston suggests that heterosexual passion constantly struggles with the distinction between mutual sexual submission in order to maintain relationships/ family and the social domination of women in other areas. Importantly though, in grappling with this

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⁵Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 112. All subsequent references to this text will be made parenthetically, designated by the shortened title, *Eyes.*


one issue in both a black and white community, Hurston debunks the myth that violence against women is simply a by-product of the racial, social and economic oppression of (black) males. She effectively shows that violence directed toward women is often the result of a patriarchal social structure that legitimizes gender inequality and female subjugation. This abuse is connected to other forms of oppression certainly, but it is not the exclusive purview of any black community. As one critic succinctly stated, "the voice of oppression...has neither gender nor color."\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, by reading \textit{Eyes} and \textit{Seraph} against one another, one can ascertain a larger dynamic at work that crosses and unites violence perpetrated by members of various races/ethnicities, classes and genders.

Certainly one would not be misguided to characterize the relationships in \textit{Their Eyes Were Watching God} and \textit{Seraph on the Suwanee} as violent and destructive, especially to the two female protagonists. But I would argue that the characterization of these relationships is more aptly defined as sadomasochistic because of the ways in which the male and female partners are "linked" together, dependent on one another for recognition and validation. This descriptive term (sadomasochism) allows me to broaden the scope of my discussion from a simple consideration of the oppression of women within these relationships to a larger focus on how social structures naturalize the hierarchical positioning of people in a wide variety of relationships, including intimate sexual interactions. One might ask is it fair to characterize Jim's and Jody's desire to dominate their wives as sadism? Or are Arvay's and Janie's willingness to endure

repetitive and almost ritualistic violation from their husbands truly an expression of masochism or simply evidence of their anomalous conceptions of womanhood? After all, many critics have commented on the dominant/submissive roles in these two texts without using the charged term sadomasochism. I believe, however, that the application of this conceptual framework can be justified if we look closely at the character of these relationships and then broadly at our modes of social organization. For the impetus for sadomasochistic expression does not occur in a cultural vacuum. The gender politics at work in society serve to naturalize this type of interaction on personal and social levels. To label these fictional relationships sadomasochistic would necessitate that we fully acknowledge the pervasiveness of this mode of interaction.

Rape theorist Cathy Roberts posits in her text, *Women and Rape*,⁹ that female sexual victimization is a process rather than an act. Taking into account the varying degrees in which this assertion might be true, depending on such factors as time, place and ethnicity, Roberts argues that in American society gender models dictate expectations for both male and female action. Men are socialized to be aggressive and egocentric. They are encouraged to understand themselves as the most important person in any relationship or social interaction, and are taught that they should impose their wills wherever they are resisted. This aggression is socially sanctioned and believed to be necessary if society wants to have Order, to create Civilization (usually figured as male) from Nature (the female principle). Men's tendency to prioritize their desires is a

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significant aspect of male (self) definition.

Women, on the other hand, are taught to be feminine, *id est.* passive and non-assertive. They are encouraged to be self-effacing, supportive of others to the exclusion of their own desires and/or needs. At the opposite end of the spectrum from male socialization, women often do not believe their will is important at all, and are encouraged to wait on a "Prince Charming" to make their dreams come true rather than pursuing these goals for themselves. This passivity, which is integral to female socialization, is a primary consideration for men in determinations of female desirability. Often, the more demure and placating a woman is, the more attractive she is to men, a lesson most women learn early in their lives. The expectation of feminine passivity suggests to both men and women that women's thoughts and actions are less significant than men's, and that they (women) should defer to men in all issues. In the interest of being deemed attractive by the opposite sex, women routinely censor their voices and actions, remaining quiet and unobtrusive rather than asserting their own opinions and wills. Women are not only narrowly defined by others and offered limited opportunities based on those circumscribed definitions, but they are also taught and/or encouraged to understand themselves in the same manner.

As Lynn Chancer succinctly states, "patriarchy creates a tendency for sadomasochism to become gendered"\(^{10}\) because of just this type of socialization. This

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\(^{10}\)Lynn Chancer, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life: The Dynamics of Power and Powerlessness* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 27. While it is certainly true that patriarchy creates "a tendency" for the two positions within sadomasochism to become associated with particular sexes, it is important to note here that within this theoretical construct
American gender socialization creates individuals who are domineering on the one hand, and passive on the other, a dichotomy that directly affects how people, particularly women and men, communicate and interact with each other. Like the sadomasochistic dynamic, gender socialization entails a hierarchical relation between the two sexes; men are made socially superior to women, who are, in turn, relegated to an inferior and debased position. Because the position reserved for men is more dominant, women are encouraged to define themselves in relation to that position, to seek recognition and validation from men. As this tendency is internalized, the group occupying the lesser, demeaned position, will almost by necessity begin to accept whatever treatment the more authoritarian individual exercises, thereby enabling a masochistic personality.

Resistance, if it is present at all, is often non-conspicuous and subconscious as the masochist seeks to rebel without acquiring the disapproval of the dominant party. The dominant individual, on the other hand, needs that demeaned Other in order to understand and appreciate his superior positioning. In order to understand the scope of his socially sanctioned power, he needs to exercise control over the masochistic partner. He becomes sadistic. The two positions are bifurcated but remain symbiotic. Joe Starks needs a docile and submissive "trophy wife" to fulfill his self-created identity as Mr. Mayor, to affirm his dominance in private as well as in public arenas. Over time, Janie comes to accept Joe's domination because she desires his recognition and approval. His sexism

these are non-essentialist categories. There is nothing that dictates a woman will or preconditions her to assume the position of masochist more often than that of sadist (or vice versa) except the dialectical interaction of sadomasochism with social realities of a particular society at a particular historical moment.
fuels her (inner) resistance, but only on a very remote, inarticulated plane. Similarly, Arvay is in a relationship in which she is hammered into submission by her husband. Jim Meserve desires a wife who will bow to him in all things and worship his accomplishments, his ability to "provide" for his wife. Arvay, like her counterpart in Eyes, becomes more submissive when continually confronted with her husband's emotional demands. He becomes more "manly" in direct proportion to her assumption of feminine roles, and vice versa. Over time, the identities of these characters become so enmeshed that the relationships often escalate to physical and sexual violence when one of the roles, usually that of the dominant individual (male in each of these cases) is challenged. This symbiotic dependence—a mutual need that is "not biological but perceptual, deeply felt and experienced"—is one of the hallmark characteristics of the sadomasochistic dynamic within relationships.

But there are other markers that signal the sadomasochistic dynamic is in play. In order to fully appreciate the ways in which theories of sadomasochism illuminate and explain interactions within both Their Eyes Were Watching God and Seraph on the Suwanee, one must understand the basic tenets of this theoretical construct. Derived from novels by the Marquis de Sade in which sexual gratification is associated with "pain, humiliation and cruelty," and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch whose writing reflected his own preoccupation with pain and submission in primarily (but not exclusively) sexual acts, the combined term "sadomasochism" has traditionally referred to the "giving and

11Chancer 48.
receiving of pain for erotic gratification." Of the two participants, one usually assumes the role of masochist and is the dominated party, often to the point that he/she will endure physical and psychological discomfort in order to achieve erotic satisfaction, while the other partner, the sadist, enjoys inflicting pain on his/her partner. In this way, dominance and submission are eroticized in the sexual act, as are suffering and the infliction of pain sexualized.

But sadomasochism is much more than a sexual phenomenon. In fact, it is just as much (if not more) about psychology as it is about sex. Sadomasochistic theory can be used to illuminate many relationships in which there are unequal distributions of power at work. However, S/M is most discernible in intimate interpersonal relationships. Sadomasochistic theory can suggest reasons why victimized individuals remain in abusive relationships, blaming themselves rather than the abusing partner. It offers some explanations as to why some people become oppressively dominant and sometimes violent towards their mates. And S/M theories might even enlighten us as to why some abused individuals return to or find new abusive partners once they have been liberated from an initial oppressive relationship.

But perhaps equally as significant because it explains so much about the structure of our society, theories of sadomasochism can be instructive when considering broader social interactions also. As I have argued, S/M theories can be revealing of many

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relationships where unequal distributions of power exist. This theory, therefore, can also be applied to social relationships as varied as those between employers/employees (sexual harassment) and invading countries/defeated peoples (imperialism), as well as a whole array of other social interactions. Sadomasochistic theory may ultimately help us to understand how and why social inequality and oppression continue to be intrinsic features of American society. But I will come back to this broader application of sadomasochistic theory when I discuss the intersection between gendered and racial oppression in *Seraph on the Suwanee*. For now, let me suggest that the application of theories of (social) sadomasochism allows us to make some observations about the interlocking nature of racial and sexual domination, how one who is disempowered in one area of his/her life might seek to become empowered through the domination of another in a different sphere of his/her life. However, I want to start with the most easily recognizable form of sadomasochistic expression--that which occurs in erotic couplings.

*The Power of Love*

Sadomasochistic relationships often begin very subtly. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both Joe Starks and Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods begin their pursuits of Janie by offering her respect and love. Jody flatters her by asserting that as a (desirable) woman, there are certain things she should not have to do, such as plowing and planting potatoes. He woos her by promising her a future that seems far removed from the work of farming and being completely under the yoke of her husband. Jody's promises elicit a positive response from Janie because they reaffirm her own idea of what is proper and
right for a lady to do and be. Indeed, her acceptance of Jody’s marriage proposal evidences the degree to which Janie has been coopted by prevailing definitions of and expectations for feminine behavior. She believes that she desires nothing more than to be taken care of, primarily financially. At this juncture of her life, she has not given much thought to compatibility or issues of equality within the relationship. What she is clear about are the values that Nanny has instilled in her, that to be married makes her a “decent” woman that "menfolks white or black" cannot make "a spit cut outa" (Eyes 37). Hence, Janie marries so that she can be provided for and protected by her husband, to avoid becoming a victim of either poverty and want or male sexual aggression. In exchange for this position of respect and protection, however, she is expected to be obedient, docile and self-effacing. Her socialization prepares her for this non-assertive, circumscribed role and predisposes her to masochistic behavior as she seeks to retain the protection that marriage affords her. Although Janie is not initially persuaded by Jody’s vision of the future, she masochistically dismisses her misgivings because her socialization teaches her that her life will be better with Jody because he desires to take care of her.

Tea Cake promises Janie a relationship that is marked by equality and sharing, which is appealing to her after her experiences in the twenty-year marriage to Joe Starks. By this point in her life, she has learned that the roles and duties typically assigned to women as ladies and wives are not the definitions of herself that she wants. Instead, Janie desires a relationship in which she is considered as important as the male partner, in which she is respected as an equal contributor to the union. When Tea Cake begins his
courtship of Janie by teaching her how to play checkers and taking her to places she was forbidden to go in her previous marriage, he holds out the promise of gender equality that Janie now believes is most important. Just as Janie works in the Muck next to Tea Cake, he assumes tasks that are usually reserved for women, such as making lemonade and cooking.

Yet at an early juncture in each of these relationships there are clues as to the kind of wife Jody and Tea Cake want Janie to be. Jody refers to her as a "pretty doll-baby" and claims that she is "made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan [her]self and eat p'taters dat other folks plant just special for you" (*Eyes* 49). Clearly, his vision of her as a woman and a wife is limited: he wants a pedestal wife who will inspire admiration and envy in other men, not an equal partner in marriage. Even at the beginning of their relationship Joe does not listen to Janie, a tendency that will only intensify as their marriage progresses. When Janie attempts to voice her concerns about leaving with him, he interrupts her as if she has no ability to think or judge situations for herself. Moreover, his interruption does not even address her fears, but rather asserts his masculine control. "Leave de s'posin' and everything else to me. . .Den all the rest of yo' natural life you kin live lak you oughta" (*Eyes* 50). As long as she does not think or assert herself in any other way Jody says here, the protection of marriage is hers. He assumes that women do not want the responsibility of thinking about the course of their lives. For him, living "lak you oughta" means that Janie will not only let her husband provide for her financially, but that she will remain quietly in the background obeying his every whim. Jody asserts more and more control over Janie as their marriage progresses, forcing her to
conform to what his idea of what a wife should be. She is forbidden to speak, questioned and ridiculed at every turn, told what she can and cannot wear, and basically prohibited from interacting with anyone outside of her husband. But Jody's sadism, like Janie's masochism, is suggested at the beginning of their relationship. And just as Janie subjugates herself to an increasingly sadistic Jody, she also reinscribes herself into another sadomasochistic relationship when she marries Tea Cake.

Tea Cake's behavior, however, even more blatantly expresses his sadistic nature than did Jody's words during the early phases of that relationship. First, he invites Janie to leave the town where she has spent most of her adult life so that they can begin their married life anew. Although Janie is excited about the move, it effectively isolates her from all that she has known and makes her totally dependent on Tea Cake. Tea Cake's next move effectively strips Janie of any means she has of supporting herself or of leaving him to return Eatonville. One morning when Tea Cake tells Janie that he is going to buy fish for breakfast, she discovers several hours later that he has taken two hundred dollars from her without her knowledge or permission. When he returns two days later, he fails to apologize for stealing the money or for abandoning Janie without any explanation. His attitude reflects his belief that because they are married, whatever Janie possesses is his to do with as he chooses.

More importantly for the thesis of this chapter, however, his abandonment evidences a central characteristic of sadomasochistic relationships: it is a test that Janie must "pass" in order to assure Tea Cake of her loyalty to him. He engages in a sadistic act (the emotional abuse inherent in abandonment) designed to subdue Janie and to
eliminate any immediate means she has to resist his will. And when Janie fails to confront Tea Cake about his actions, she unwittingly assures him of his dominance over her by revealing the level of her dependence on him. She is unwilling to jeopardize their union by setting limits for him of acceptable behavior within their relationship; she silences herself (as she had in her marriage with Joe Starks) in order to maintain family. Already, Janie has confirmed to Tea Cake the level of her commitment, her willingness to endure psychological and emotional abuse for the sake of their marriage. And although Tea Cake does not often exploit the sadistic control he has over Janie due to her (masochistic) fear of living without him, it is a power he establishes through his first act as a married man. Where his power over her ends, she engages in self-subjugation to maintain their relationship.

In most cases, the initial sadistic violations are verbal and/or psychological rather than physical. The sadist, in search of a willing participant/partner, wages small affronts that the masochist will either reject or accept, the latter response paving the way for fuller expressions of sadistic desire. Jim Meserve's courting of Arvay is replete with examples of his ridiculing and condescending to Arvay, belittling her, making her doubt herself even more than she already does, and then cajoling her into accepting his slights as expressions of love and concern. When Arvay indicates that she is not interested in him and would like to be left alone, Jim responds, "You need my help and my protection too bad for that. . .I have to stay with you and stand by you and give my good protection to keep you from hurting your ownself too much" (Seraph 17). He implies that she is incapable of providing for or protecting herself, as if she is a child rather than an adult
woman. Sounding much like the male porch-sitters in *Eyes*, he demeans her once again with his pronouncement. "Women folks don't have no mind to make up nohow. They wasn't made for that" (*Seraph* 25). Jim continually refuses to acknowledge Arvay's intelligence and ability to make decisions about the direction of her own life. Arvay recognizes that Jim is "always trying to make light of folks" (*Seraph* 28), but her primary response is self-doubt rather than condemnation of Jim. In refusing to protest Jim's sexist ridicule, Arvay evidences the level of her own masochism. She implicitly sanctions and invites a fuller expression of Jim's sadism (verbal and sexual abuse) through her silence.

Arvay has a predisposition to masochistic behavior that makes her receptive to Jim's advances despite her initial resistance to his attention. Arvay is insecure and doubtful of her own worth, made so by a "general preference for Larraine, [her] more robust and aggressive sister" that had "done something to Arvay's soul across the years" (*Seraph* 9). Her parents do nothing to allay her apprehension, berating her that she does not have "sense enough" to get a husband as Larraine has done. In addition to the lack of positive reinforcement from her family, particularly the primary caretakers, Arvay is clearly socialized masochistically, taught to deny and subjugate herself to a more powerful individual because she is a woman. This social conditioning, as discussed earlier, teaches women to deny and relinquish their autonomy, to be dependent on another in order to define themselves as women. Hence Arvay's own lack of confidence, pride and belief in her intrinsic worth is reinforced and exacerbated by a social dictum which preaches female dependence, thus leading her to be more accepting of abuse and degradation from others. In other words, psychological and social factors condition
Arvay to be masochistic.

Arvay's insecurity is a constant problem for both herself and her suitor, Jim Meserve. It causes her to remain uncommitted, even resistant, to Jim's attention and interest in marrying her. But her refusal to easily acquiesce to Jim actually feeds their budding sadomasochistic relationship rather than hinders it. For Jim, Arvay presents the challenge for which the sadist thirsts—she is both complacent in accepting his thinly-veiled insults as well as determined not to give in to his ultimate desire to marry her. She has revealed herself to be a masochist, but continues to provide a conquest that he must master in order to assert his dominance. For when the masochist resists, "the sadist can then go on taking pleasure in asserting power anew...thus prolonging and sustaining the dynamic." Jim is given the opportunity to secure Arvay's hand in marriage through ever more forceful, direct, and sadistic means when she refuses to marry him.

For Arvay, on the other hand, Jim represents the gift that she feels herself unfit to receive because of her own low self-esteem. As a masochist, she enjoys his determination and desire to rule her, relieving her of all duty in their relationship except to "love him good, be nice and kind around the house and have children for him" (Seraph 36). And while she muses that she "could do that and be more than happy and satisfied" (Seraph 36), her resistance actually illustrates the repressed power of many masochists. It is not that masochists lack power of their own, but that they choose to or are forced to give up that power in order to be accepted within a social and/or personal relationship.

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13Chancer 50.
Yes, Arvay is hesitant to believe that her (masochistic) desire might actually be realized, but she is also reluctant to give up the control and autonomy she has exercised in her own life until she meets Jim.

I have hinted that Jim's responses to Arvay's resistance escalate both in their expression as well as their violence. His early attempts to secure her consent in marriage consist primarily of verbal domination and bullying. When that fails, he drops turpentine into her eye and then boasts, "a woman knows who her master is all right, and she answers to his commands" (Seraph 33). When Arvay continues to refuse Jim's engagement offer, his final sadistic act escalates to a physical violation that is specifically aimed at the source of her value in a paternalistic society. Janet St. Clair observes that Jim "deliberately strips Arvay of power and enforces abject submission"¹⁴ through the act of rape, which Jim redefines as "marriage" and Lillie P. Howard, in a choice of words equally as misogynistic, describes as "seduction."¹⁵ He effectively takes Arvay out of the market of desirable and available women through this act because it marks her body as "used" (i.e., non-virginal) and therefore undesirable to most of his male contemporaries. It is a violation meant to, as Joe Kelsey had suggested, "make [her] knuckle under" (Seraph 46), to break her spirit and impose his will.¹⁶ The rape removes Arvay's right to

¹⁴St. Clair 47.


¹⁶Scholars have made few remarks about the fact that prior to Jim Meserve's rape of Arvay, he is advised by an African American man, Joe Kelsey, to "take 'em [women] and break 'em" (Seraph 46). As evidenced by the fact Jim has to be instructed on how to make Arvay "love" him, Hurston seems to make the racist suggestion that patriarchal domination is more natural to African American men than those of other races and ethnicities. However, it is interesting to
choose her mate and bestows it upon Jim, for if he refuses to marry her, presumably, no other man will have her. So through this particular violation, Jim simultaneously neutralizes Arvay's resistance to marrying him and makes her unattractive to potential sexual rivals.

What Jim designates as "marriage," however, Arvay initially characterizes as rape, an understanding that is supported by the language of the passage:

Jim was gritting his teeth fiercely on encountering the barrier of her tight-legged drawers, seeking an opening. Finding none, Arvay felt one hand reach up and grasp the waistband...A tearing sound of starched fabric, and the garment was being dragged ruthlessly down her legs. Arvay opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. Her mouth was closed by Jim's passionate kisses, and in a moment more, despite her struggles, Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet. (*Seraph* 51)

Although we must acknowledge that there are many consensual sexual encounters that begin in coercive manner and/or come perilously close to violence,¹⁷ this is not a description of rough but consensual sex. Arvay neither invites nor acquiesces to Jim's

¹⁷For further discussion of the inherently violent nature of heterosexual sexual encounters, see Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Does Sexuality Have a History?", Carol S. Vance, "Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality," Cathy Roberts "Women and Rape," and Joseph Weinberg and Michael Biernbaum, "Conversations of Consent: Sexual Intimacy Without Sexual Assault."
aggression. Rather, she is fearful and seeks to escape, attempting to scream before she is silenced by him. And as rapes often do, this aggression "brings back all her old feelings of defeat and inadequacy" (Seraph 51). Jim asserts his dominion over her and strips her of her own power through this act.\textsuperscript{18} Yet, once Jim indicates that he is taking her to be legally married, all mention of the contested word "rape" is dropped from their vocabulary. As Arvay’s fears of being ruined or labeled as whore are allayed, she too begins to view the rape as an expression of their "deep sweet love" (Seraph 155) rather than the violent sexual invasion that she knew it to be. In granting more legitimacy to Jim’s characterization of the rape than she does to her thoughts about and responses to the experience, however, she accepts his brutality for the sake of their union.

The rape and subsequent sexual encounter release some of Arvay’s greatest fears, that she will never be "able to get close enough to him" and that even after her forced submission under the mulberry tree, Jim will "leave her again" (Seraph 53-54). In true masochistic form, she believes that she needs Jim in order to be fulfilled, and is therefore willing to do virtually anything he asks of her. She subjugates herself, in large measure, in order to sustain her marriage and family. But she does not realize that her acceptance of this initial physical violation, and implicit validation of his brutality through her marriage to Jim, is a watershed moment. For if she is willing to accept transgressions

\textsuperscript{18}Such a neat, clear-cut definition of rape is not entirely defensible in Seraph on the Suwanee. The reader’s harshest judgment must be mitigated as we recognize that Arvay not only responds to Jim’s violation (as is evidenced by the "remorseless sweet pain" she feels), but invites his "body weighing down upon her" a second time just minutes later. While we must be careful about conclusions that we might draw based on Arvay’s sexual response to the rape, it is certainly worth noting that it is not until after Arvay thinks Jim has lost respect for her that she expresses her belief that she has been raped.
against her body, then Jim is free to demand almost anything else of her. The danger is that she will not recognize and resist violence that is more subtle than rape and other forms of physical violation. Psychological abuse, for instance, seems to pale (for Arvay) in comparison to this initial aggression.

The Meserve marriage is filled with the myriad expectations Jim has of Arvay but never fully verbalizes. He remains silent about his desires while expecting Arvay to recognize them, causing her much stress and fear because he threatens to leave their marriage if she cannot decipher his expectations. He also withdraws from her emotionally, which in addition to his threat of deserting their marriage, continually terrorizes Arvay and subjects her to emotional blackmail. Jim recognizes the effect that his threat of leaving has on his wife and how easily he might strengthen their relationship by improving their communication. But he never expresses his complaints to Arvay because his silence effectively keeps her imprisoned in the relationship. As long as she continues to feel inadequate and unworthy of his love, she will continue to strive to please him without recognizing her own power or the injustice inherent in his choice not to verbalize his expectations. Jim's silence keeps her focused inward viewing her own shortcomings rather than concentrated on his sadistic ploys designed to bind her to his side.

Further, Jim's expectations, true of a sadomasochistic interaction, have a "ritualistic and repetitive character" to them: his demands of Arvay never change. His major (unspoken) complaint is that she does not show "some appreciation of his love as expressed by what he was striving to do for her" (*Seraph 77*). When they are still
relatively poor. Jim brings home a large Christmas turkey that he could not afford through any normal means or channels. Arvay "baked it...but...never asked for the story behind it" (Seraph 75). On the occasion of Jim's building the house, once again he is dissatisfied and disappointed because Arvay does not seem to appreciate his hard work in providing for his family. He therefore engages in larger and larger feats to try to win her devotion and pride, evidencing the "dialectic form of the interaction." For each "test" that Jim creates, Arvay's success or failure determines both the nature of his response as well as the level of escalation of his next "test." This pattern finally culminates in Jim's most daring and dangerous attempt to impress his wife. Seeing "a chance to do something big and brave and full of manhood...to win admiration" (Seraph 261) from Arvay, Jim grabs and raises for her inspection a large snake that he has caught. But when it begins to threaten his life, Arvay's tremendous fear of snakes prevents her from helping her husband free himself from its coils. His words to her before he leaves their home are, "Maybe you couldn't of done one thing to help me, but you could of showed me what you was made out of by trying. Even if it was only to show me that you understood my intentions toward you by saying a word or two" (Seraph 262, emphasis mine). Jim desires a wife who demonstrates her adoration for and submission to him by performing stereotypically feminine behavior because in so doing, he is made more secure in his masculine (read: dominant) identity. His common refrain, "Hug my neck," is repeated no less than six times throughout the novel, and evidences his need for reinforcement of his masculine identity. He only says the words on occasions when Arvay has resisted his will, thereby calling into question his manhood and dominance in the relationship. His
mandate is intended to reassert her passivity and dependence on him, to neutralize the challenge Arvay has posed to his performance of masculinity. In the same way that Arvay needs him and their family to define herself as a woman, Jim needs Arvay's obedience and submission to define himself as a man. When Arvay fails demonstrably to be impressed with Jim's "performances," she denies him the means by which to validate his own masculinity. Both partners sadomasochistically depend on one another for the securing and acknowledgment of their gendered identities.

Significantly, in the more than twenty years they had been married, the snake debacle is the first time (and one of the only times) Jim Meserve tells Arvay what he expects from her as a wife. All of the other times, he has simply created occasions to test her love without expressing his expectations. The numerous occasions Arvay asks Jim what he wants from her, his tongue-in-cheek reply is "Well, maybe it'll come to you some day" (Seraph 193), denying her both the answer she seeks to improve their marriage as well as placing all responsibility on her for deciphering his desires for their union. It is a game to him—a game of power and control. His refusal to provide answers to Arvay allows him the means to be "constantly innovative"¹⁹ in their sadomasochistic relationship. As long as he can keep Arvay guessing, riddling her with ever more challenging demonstrations of her love, he remains in control and the sadomasochistic dynamic of their union continues to fuel itself. To the extent that Arvay struggles to please Jim, even to the denial of her own needs and wants, she grants him the power to

¹⁹Chancer 56.
order their lives.

But it is not a power that the masochist, Arvay, necessarily enjoys or appreciates. Although she clearly has a "compulsive need . . . for psychic connection" with Jim, the control that he exercises in their relationship is a constant source of misery to Arvay. For as Lynn Chancer writes of the sadomasochistic dynamic, "how could the masochist not be enraged at the powerlessness foisted upon her . . . by the arrogant, cruel, demeaning, demanding . . . sadist?" "Love [to Arvay] meant to be possess as she was possessed," but she "never had . . . been sure that she possessed anyone" (Seraph 177). For her, Jim's power is a singular reality in their relationship. She is resentful of his position, but is unwilling to verbalize her discontent for fear Jim will leave her. Instead, she internalizes her anger and seeks to be more self-effacing and "feminine" than ever to please her husband. The only indication of Arvay's inner disquietude comes when she revealingly remarks of her daughter's interest in Hatton, "I hope my child don't fall such a slave to nobody that they can just handle her anyway they will or may, and she be so under the influence that she can't help herself. I don't never want her to know the feeling of that" (Seraph 177). Clearly her point of reference is her own experiences with Jim Meserve. Arvay truly feels herself "trapped in bondage to her husband," both by a force outside of herself as well as her own lack of ability and/or will to leave such a distressing

\[20\] Chancer 3.

\[21\] Chancer 61.

relationship. She feels helpless and dominated and does not want her daughter to have similar feelings within her marriage.

But nowhere is the sadomasochistic nature of Jim and Arvay's marriage more apparent than in an episode that occurs after Jim and Arvay return from seeing their son, Kenny, perform at a college football game. For one of the first times in their relationship, Arvay makes her desires clear and refuses to let Jim persuade or bully her into changing her mind. She "grits" out to Jim. "I'm going, and I'm going this minute. You can take me if you want to, Jim. Suit yourself. If you don't come this instant, I'm going anyhow" (Seraph 213). Her intentions are indisputable and her demand does not go without consequence. Jim is enraged by her assertion of will and refusal to back down, illustrating the truth of Chancer's observation that the masochist "faces severe repercussions" for waging challenges to the power of the sadist. For if the challenge is not immediately countered and the balance of power restored to the sadomasochistic relationship, it is in danger of expiring because the roles have been irrevocably overturned; the masochist will have discovered her own power and ability to exist outside of the relationship. Jim "cut through traffic like a razor" (Seraph 213) in order to frighten Arvay, thereby beginning a psychological and physical assault upon her designed to

\[23\] Studies have shown that women in abusive relationships often express despair at their plights, wishing to change their circumstances but unsure if it is possible or how to go about it. They are often tied to their partners due to financial dependency, or remain out of the desire to maintain the family structure for their children. The former seems to apply to Arvay's situation for she expresses the fear that Jim will leave her without financial means to support their children on several occasions.

\[24\] Chancer 3.
demean and humiliate her into submission once again. The scene that ensues after Jim and Arvay arrive home is worth quoting at some length:

Arvay staggered on into the bedroom, and sank down on the side of the bed in a lump, still shaking and crying. . . In no time, he came walking heavy over the floor. Hard heeling and coming fast . . . Instead of coming to her and trying to soothe her feelings, Jim just stood and looked down on her as if she were a chair. Arvay quit sobbing and leaped to her feet. . . "I think to much of myself to kill you like I ought to, but I'm through with you Jim Meserve, I'm just as through with you as I is with my baby-shirt."

She ran to the closet, snatched down her nightgown and headed for the door. Jim. . . let Arvay get as far as the door. Then he . . . flung her back into the room so forcibly that the back of her legs came up against the bed and she sat down without planning on it. Jim stood over her and glowered. (Seraph 214-215)

Arvay threatens the stability of their sadomasochistic relationship when she finds her voice and the courage to say she is leaving their marriage, even if it is clear that she has no intention of doing so. In order to undermine her burgeoning self-confidence and assertiveness, Jim has to remind her of her inalienable need for and desire to be with him; she has to be made to doubt her strength once again. He orders her to undress and when she refuses because her "fighting blood got up" (Seraph 216), he forcibly strips her. She is forced to stand naked before him for the duration of his onslaught, thereby increasing
her vulnerability to him. He continues his domination by telling her that he made a mistake by not "beating [her] just as soon as [he] married [her]" (Seraph 215), leading Arvay to believe by his tone and actions that it is an oversight that he presently intends to remedy. He reveals his true thoughts about and contempt for Arvay's position within their marriage when growls, "You're my damn property" (Seraph 216), effectively asserting his right to control her every thought and act. He never strikes her, but by every other act and word he speaks he beats Arvay's will into submission.

Jim's verbal and physical assault has the effect of rendering Arvay afraid, doubtful of herself and longing for Jim's acceptance and love once again. For although he never verbalizes it, Jim's ultimate threat to Arvay is that he will leave her. He withholds himself from her, demanding that she hug and kiss him until he says she can stop, but refusing to reciprocate any affection to her.\(^{25}\) Arvay understands Jim's coldness as evidence that he does not love or want her anymore. She believes her greatest fear—that Jim will desert their marriage—is being realized, and it overshadows any concern she has for Jim's role in their disagreement or her own safety. She is distraught because she "can't kill nor hurt [him] in no way at all" (Seraph 218), and does not believe herself

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\(^{25}\)There is some suggestion at this point in the text that Jim and Arvay actually have sexual intercourse during this revealing argument. In this alternate reading, the description of Jim "stretch[ing] himself full length upon her, but in the same way that he might have laid himself down on a couch" (Seraph 217), is actually a metaphor for the sexual act. This reading is further supported by Jim's description of Arvay's eyes, "that greenish infusion" that "mingle[d] with the sky blue of her eyes" (Seraph 219) that usually indicated her sexual arousal. In the event that this scene does culminate in sexual intercourse, my reading of the sadomasochism that permeates and characterizes this exchange is made even more poignant because Arvay's psychological suffering leads to her sexual arousal. Further, Jim uses coitus as an extension of the punishment he subjects Arvay to at this moment.
strong enough to leave their marriage. Hence, she seeks to subjugate herself to his
demands and expectations, convinced that she has no power of her own. To her admission
that she is not sure Jim loves her, he, "with a kind of happy arrogance" (Seraph 219),
kisses her and falls asleep. Arvay is left to her suffering as Jim, his sadistic control of
Arvay's emotional life reaffirmed, denies his masochistic partner the avenue to the peace
and security that he has.

But the deepest desire of the partners in a sadomasochistic relationship is not,
ironically enough, the complete and total enactment of either the sadist's or the
masochist's role. Jim does not want to completely dominate Arvay at all times just as
Arvay does not want to be submissive and self-effacing at all times. Chancer argues, "the
sadist's best kept secret from self and others is extreme dependency hidden behind a front
of apparent independence and strength, the masochist's analogous secret is far greater
relative strength and independence than she or he perceives, hidden behind a front of
apparent and extreme dependency."26 When compounded with the dynamic nature of
relationships, these "best kept secret[s]" have the potential to quite transform a
sadomasochistic interaction. For the ability of relationships to move and change suggests
that the sadist and masochist might also transform themselves, that in time and/or
circumstance the masochist might assume the position of sadist and vice versa. This very
switching of positions occurs between Arvay and Jim by the end of the novel, a

26Chancer 59.
denouement that critics have struggled with given their expectations for Hurston's work.\textsuperscript{27} But the ending makes perfect sense when viewed from the conceptual framework of sadomasochistic theory. And when viewed from this vantage point, the ending also illuminates much of the discord that had plagued the Meserve marriage throughout the novel.

As we have seen, Jim's primary complaint was that Arvay did not acknowledge his efforts to provide for her and their family. By the end, however, it becomes clear that the source of Jim's frustration was that he was prevented from assuming a certain role in their relationship--ironically, not the dominant role he secured through his bullying and violence. Arvay's attitudes and actions effectively prohibited him from transforming himself within their relationship. He was always forced to put on a guise of masculinity, in public as well as private, as opposed to being able to be "someone else" when not on display. He was trapped in the role of sadist when the more natural progression of their S/M relationship might have allowed him to assume a less dominant role on occasion. Indeed, Jim all but acknowledges this latent desire on one occasion when he is thinking about leaving his marriage. He muses that Arvay reminds him of his mother and that he liked the fact that he could "rest his head on Arvay's bosom and go to sleep of nights" (\textit{Seraph} 105). During this same interior monologue, Jim comes to understand Arvay's

\textsuperscript{27}Most scholars who have denigrated this novel have done so largely because they compare \textit{Seraph} to \textit{Eyes}, casting the former as a failure because it is not easily recuperated (as is \textit{Eyes}) into a feminist camp. Notable exceptions to this trend in scholarship include Deborah G. Plant, who boldly suggests that neither of Hurston's texts ever articulates a break from traditional patriarchal and gender politics, and Ann duCille, who argues that both novels can be read as validation of female subjugation to erotic love.
power over him, that something "reached to him and delivered him into her hands tied and bound" (Seraph 105). And although he does not "consider himself weak in being overcome like that" (Seraph 106), he decides not to let Arvay know the power she has over him for fear that it might irrevocably transform their relationship. In other words, Jim fears that he will lose his sadistic power over Arvay should she ever discover his unalterable need for her. What he wants is the ability to maintain sadistic control even when he has relinquished that role—a transformation of himself within the relationship, not the power dynamics of the relationship itself.

As for Arvay, there are clearly instances in which she appears to abdicate her power in favor of a more submissive role to her husband. In these moments, she chooses to remain in a masochistic position even though on some level she knows she has the strength to stand alone. She first exhibits her power when she turns away suitor after suitor by feigning religious fits in order to retain control over her own destiny. She once again accesses this self-determination when she returns to Sawley with the full intention of continuing her life as a single, independent woman; she considers employment and living arrangements that she can make that will allow her to be comfortable in Sawley. But after her experiences in her hometown, Arvay comes to realize that she desires the physical comforts that her life with Jim Meserve have provided her. Consequently, she chooses to subjugate herself one final time and to return to her husband. But the problems wrought in their relationship are an outcropping of this fundamental friction: each of them is trying to hide from the other (if not from themselves) their desires to switch positions/roles within the relationship.
The Arvay that returns to Jim, however, seems anything but contrite and timid. Rather, she boldly engages in playful banter and teasing with her husband. She realizes after twenty years, "She was not the only one who had trembled. All these years and time. Jim had been feeling his way towards her and grasping at her as she had been toward him" (Seraph 348). Arvay finally recognizes the power and control that she has over her husband --his most guarded secret--which transforms her into a more dominant partner than she had previously been. She remains outwardly submissive to him, but is aware that this stance is just a role that she plays for the benefit of Jim and their relationship. This new understanding infuses her with strength and she immediately determines, "not [to] let him know what she had perceived" (Seraph 348). Instead, she looks up "innocently afraid and scared" (Seraph 348) in order that Jim might retain his sense of masculine dominion over her. She acts out the role of passive femininity that Jim has demanded and come to expect. Yet this secure and confident Arvay is not compromised by the role-playing or her submissive position within the marriage. Once the potentially dynamic nature of gendered roles within a sadomasochistic relationship has been revealed, Arvay is comfortable in her secret knowledge that she has a significant degree of control over her sadistic partner. With Jim nuzzled like a baby in her arms, the transformation of the roles within this relationship is complete and finally the Meserves can live happily ever after.

Interestingly, however, Arvay does not ever accept or seek out more superior positioning in relation to Jim Meserve. Indeed, she actively resists having more control over her life and marriage. If it is, as I have suggested, that Jim is discontent in his
marriage because Arvay stifles his ability to assume a different position within the relationship, then one might rightly ask why Arvay never suffers from the same discomfiture. If the deepest repressed desire of the partners within a sadomasochistic relationship is to assume the alternate position within the relationship, then why does Arvay not covet the more powerful role her husband occupies? Why does she actively resist the dialectical nature of the sadomasochistic coupling? Unlike Jim who specifically states (if only to himself) his need to be nurtured and masochistically possessed, she never seems to desire a more dominant role. Instead, she narrowly defines herself as submissive and seeks only to be more self-effacing rather than less so, even when she realizes the power that she has over her husband. In order to answer these and similar questions, we must look past the dynamics of Arvay's marriage to other relationships that might provide her the outlet for sadistic control that she lacks in her relationship with Jim Meserve.

*Race, Rape and Sadomasochism*

The racial politics of *Seraph on the Suwanee* have gone largely untheorized and uncommented upon by scholars who have written upon this text. Instead, they have focused on the novel's gender politics, an understandable and justified preoccupation given Hurston's subject matter. *Seraph* invites gender critique in ways that it does not invite critiques of racial politics, or at least this would seem to be the case given the body of critical material on the novel. Only one critical essay engages specifically and directly
with the complex subject of "race" as it is presented in *Seraph on the Suwanee*; all other articles relegate this topic either to a footnote or a short paragraph or two within a larger argument about Hurston's critique (or lack thereof) of patriarchy. However, although Laura Dubek's article is corrective in its focus, it seems almost as narrowly conceived as other scholarship on this text. She focuses so much on racial issues in the text that she seems almost to miss the interplay between racial and sexual politics in the novel. While insightful, then, even Dubek's work leaves work undone.

The interplay between racial and sexual politics has perhaps been so pervasively overlooked because of two factors. First, no theoretical construct has been applied to *Seraph* that allows one to interrogate the connection between racial and sexual oppression. The three constructs that might have enabled this sort of textual insight—black literary criticism, feminist and black feminist theories—have each in their own ways largely dismissed *Seraph* as a text worthy of study. Feminists resist Hurston's sexual politics in this text because they take issue with Arvay's retreat from autonomy and self-respect while black feminists and literary critics disregard the novel because its protagonists are not African American. Hence, the conceptual frameworks that might have thought to critique both racial and sexual politics simultaneously have neglected or shied away from *Seraph*’s complex treatment of these topics. Secondly, scholars have seemed reluctant to discuss racial issues when the "race" that is represented is white; it is easier to discern and to make critiques of racial politics when the characters are obviously

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28I am referring here to Laura Dubek's article, "The Social Geography of Race in Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee,*" which is published in *African American Review* 30.2 (1996).
and traditionally "raced" (*id. est.* African American). This reticence is a telling indication of the degree to which critics still regard whiteness as a non-raced category, the standard by which every other "race" and ethnicity is judged.

While many critics have surmised that Hurston's choice of (white) protagonists signaled a moving away from savvy critiques of "race" that she was known for, I would argue that Hurston's presentation of the family drama of a white, upwardly mobile couple is well-considered and quite politically charged. She was castigated by critics and literary peers alike for representing black male domination in such stark terms and focusing her attention on the development of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Because Hurston had Janie walk away from one marriage (Logan Killicks), be severely critical of another (Joe Starks), and kill a black man (Vergible Woods) at the end of *Eyes*, she was charged with ignoring the "more important" problem of the widespread social and economic oppression of African American people. *Eyes* effectively raised the sexual domination of women as an issue worthy of consideration within black arts and letters, but it was a change in focus that essentially precipitated Hurston's blacklisting. Her critique was too easily coopted by dominant representations of violent black manhood.

In considering the same issues of sexual domination within a white family, however, Hurston attempts to sidestep some of the problematics associated with critiquing patriarchy within a black family context. As Dubek succinctly states, "While racist imagery constructs men of color as violent and sexually threatening, in *Seraph on the
Suwanee it is white men who pose the actual danger.”29 The assumption of white protagonists allowed her to continue her critique of patriarchy without seeming to affirm representations of black men as violent, strictly libidinous beasts. Further, her representation of the violent white rapist allows her to deconstruct the myth of the black male rapist with historical truth.30

Finally, the use of white characters allows Hurston more obviously to participate in a social critique of racism that was expected and needed in the late 1940’s. Hurston exposes and critiques the benign and overt racism of both Jim and Arvay Meserve toward people of other races and ethnicities. In so doing, Hurston makes some very astute observations about the interlocking nature of racial and sexual domination. Where Faulkner and Wright write about the white woman who is complicitous with and catalyst for acts of racial oppression and violence, Hurston shows this same white woman in the domestic setting, thereby revealing the violence and oppression that she too experiences at the hands of white men. Where the male authors of Chapter 1 are concerned solely with racist attitudes that victimize people of African descent, Hurston begins the project

29Dubek 347.

30Many scholars have documented the psychological and sociological reasons why the racist myth of the black male rapist arose at the turn of the century. In their acts of setting the record straight, these same scholars have called attention to the pervasiveness of sexual abuse and violation experienced by black women at the hands of white men during the time of slavery and beyond. Among shorter projects that engage in these acts of revisionist history are "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" by Angela Davis and Barbara Omolade's "Hearts of Darkness." Book-length works that thoroughly consider these two topics include Sandra Gunning's Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912, Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist Thought and Trudier Harris' Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals.
of bringing together anti-racist and feminist social critiques that shall be the hallmark of black feminist discourse and scholarship forty years later.

This "bringing together" is best illuminated by theories of the sadomasochistic dynamic. While clearly S/M theory allows us to make insightful feminist critiques about the oppression and self-subjugation of women within erotic couplings, this theory is also illuminating when considering how and why other forms of social oppression are perpetuated within society. Theodore Reik suggests why S/M theories might also be revealing of social relationships when he posits that social sadomasochism is actually the result of sexual sadomasochism. According to his theory, the masochist in a sexual interaction will seek to be sadistically dominant in other arenas to compensate for his/her powerlessness in the interpersonal relationship. Lynn Chancer revises this psychological approach by suggesting that social S/M is enabled by the same dynamic that causes sexual sadomasochism: the hierarchical structures of relation that are imposed on humans in interaction. Taking a strictly sociological view of social sadomasochism, Chancer posits that when "a particular power differential can or does spring up between two parties. . .a sense of superiority is simultaneously seized upon by one of these parties, the other belittled and intimidated by contrast."31 This situation would be most likely to occur between those considered authorized insiders because of race, sex or economic status and those marginalized in society due to their non-conformity to these same markers of identity. In other words, there is no reason not to expect social

31Chancer 156.
sadomasochism to exist in societies that engender the expression of sexual sadomasochism; they are part and parcel of the same dynamic. Whatever the origin of social S/M, however, what becomes clear is the connectedness between these two types of interactions; social sadomasochism is not completely divorced or distinct from the sexual sadomasochistic dynamic. It is my project to relocate the critique of racial politics in *Seraph on the Suwanee* not outside, but at the intersection of the public and the private, the personal and the social, the political and the sexual. Rather than there being a discontinuity and imbalance in the novel, Hurston actually evidences the radical interstitial reality that constitutes racial and sexual oppression within the sadomasochistic dynamic.

The racial critique of *Seraph* is at once obvious and subtle. It actually begins very early in the text with a description of Arvay's cultural background. I argued at the beginning of this chapter that Arvay's portrayal deconstructed the myth of the white middle class, effectively showing whiteness to be as much of a social construct as blackness. I want to extend that critique now to suggest how that deconstruction is accomplished. Arvay is a racialized character at the beginning of *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Her pride in her "cracker" heritage aligns her not with other white people, but with lower-class and uneducated African Americans. The description of her home and family life work to subvert any serious consideration of Arvay Henson as a white woman; she is not a member of the mythic white middle class. She, like African Americans and other people of color, is figured as "less than" white because she is aligned with the economically and socially debased category of "cracker." And although she might expect
"political power and freedom...patriarchal protection and white privilege"\textsuperscript{32} based on the fact that she lives in a racist society, she warrants those privileges and protections only in relation to "the heathens of China, India and Africa" (\textit{Seraph 5}). She and her community are able to assert and maintain their identities as privileged members of the master race because ethnic Others are positioned lower in the social hierarchy.

But this is a tenuous basis for identity, indeed, a fact evidenced by the relationship that she has with Jim Meserve. She is not an equal to him even though she is a white woman, and his interest in her is even more remarkable for the distance that separates their social classes. Jim is characterized as a refined white man who is charged with, through his marriage to Arvay, the task of raising her consciousness and social level so that she will become an accepted and acceptable white \textit{lady}. With this elevation of status comes an identity that is not built on maintaining rigid boundaries between various races. There is no need for Arvay to constantly separate herself from people of other races and ethnicities in order to assert racial privilege because she is now also distinguished by her upper-class socio-economic status. There can be no slippage or confusion between her and the equally as poor and uneducated African American individual. Hence, Arvay has to learn to be the epitome of a gracious, wealthy lady; she has to show magnanimity and largess toward those considered less fortunate. Arvay resists this reconditioning because to acquiesce would be the equivalent of denying the tenets of her racialized heritage: she is made secure in her racial elevation in direct proportion to the debasement and

oppression of ethnic Others. This struggle to resocialize Arvay is one of the real dramas of the Meserve marriage and of the novel. She must disassociate herself from her racialized identity in order to acquire the unassailable position of white lady and all the privileges and benefits that adhere to that category.

Arvay's racialized characterization takes on added significance when coupled with the sections of the novel concerning her son, Earl David Meserve. His portrayal is central to any attempt to unravel the racial politics of the novel for Earl embodies the instability that is inherent when considering issues of race as if they were solely biologically-based. Clearly he is not a black man, but he, too, suffers the fate of the dispossessed when he transgresses behaviors that are acceptable to one of his standing in the community, a stature that is compromised by Earl's mental and physical disability. Earl's racialization is due to his close association with his mother's family line, a point upon which Arvay and Jim agree. For Arvay, her first born son, "looked like her Uncle Chester, her mother's youngest brother. The one that they seldom talked about" (Seraph 68). Jim concurs with Arvay's sense that Earl is a product of her family genetic pool when he magnanimously informs her, "I don't hold you responsible for his condition. It come through your father's folks, but you didn't have nothing to do with that" (Seraph 125). Both of them mark the source of Earl's deprivation with Arvay's heritage because Earl, in his disability, is also "not quite white." He is prohibited from assuming the role of the white male protector because he testifies to the vulnerability and corruptibility of the white body rather than its power and strength. His demise in the novel at the hands of a lynch mob serves as testament to his ambiguous, racialized status.
Although Arvay and Jim ascribe Earl's "difference" solely to her lineage, he is actually a product of their union, perhaps even their first violent sexual encounter under the mulberry tree. Like Arvay, he is small and seemingly defenseless, his hands useless to protect himself, his legs and feet unable to carry him from danger. And as St. Clair has noted: "The baby's 'exceptionally small' mouth, with thick bottom lip 'thrust out at the world.' reflect the inarticulate, aggrieved face that Arvay presents; his ferocious appetite mirrors her incessant hunger."33 Most tellingly, though, Earl Meserve is a commonly silent, but easily frightened child, seeming to imitate his mother's passivity and timidity during Jim Meserve's initial courtship. But unlike Arvay, when the child is frightened by "any sudden movement" or the introduction of a "strange object," he "screams [with] terror" (Seraph 70). His voice functions as an alarm and as a means of protection, whereas Arvay's voice, when she "could have hollered for Pa" (Seraph 56), is smothered by "Jim's passionate kisses" (Seraph 51). Earl gives voice to the terrified scream that Arvay was never allowed to utter.

But though Earl is clearly akin to Arvay in many respects, he also has much in common with his father. Like Jim, Earl manipulates Arvay's emotions. And like his father, he is duplicitous and occasionally violent with others in his life. Most significantly, though, Earl's obsession with Lucy Ann Corregio is reminiscent of Jim's sadistic sexual "wooing" of Arvay, but Earl lacks his father's finesse. Where Jim was a "good catch" because of his attractiveness and willingness to provide for a family, Earl

33St. Clair 51.
clearly cannot support himself or any family he might acquire. Where Jim is able to seduce Arvay with smooth words and promises, Earl is basically mute. But the one thing they share is that where words and persuasion fall short, they resort to sexual violence to secure their desires. Jim rapes Arvay and calls it "marriage"; Earl attempts to rape Lucy Ann, but lacks the "big voice" (Eyes 48) and social standing to mask the truth of his violation. Earl's attempted rape replicates Jim's violation of Arvay although neither of his parents is willing to acknowledge the similarity between father and son.

Earl's racialization, then, serves manifold purposes in the text. First, it connects him with Arvay's racialized heritage and makes possible Arvay's first break with that past. As Jim sadistically pushes Arvay to sever her maternal connection with Earl upon his death, Arvay recognizes this as an implicit demand for her to distance herself from their violent and troubled beginnings. He expects her to immediately resume sexual activity with him, as if the only reminder of his violation has been erased from her memory. Further, Jim uses Earl's death to publicly transform his (Jim's) violent attack of Arvay into an expression of their "deep sweet love" (Seraph 155). Yet, it is more than ironic that the child born from that love comes to such a tragic end. Earl embodied the worst aspects of his parents and their union, and with Earl's death, Jim seeks to rewrite that past and chart a new, unflawed course for their future. However, had Earl not been so closely aligned with his mother (id. est. racialized), he never could have been a vehicle

34 While we are never made privy to the details of Earl's attack, it is clear from the position of the bruises (near/around female erotic zones such as the neck and thigh) that his was either an attempted sexual attack or his enactment of a sexual violation.
for the expungement of the violence of Jim and Arvay's relationship. One need only to recall the sharp and insightful critiques made by Trudier Harris in her text *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* to find testament to the similar function that black male disfigurement and death provided for lynch mobs at the turn of the century and beyond. Much like the violent rituals that Harris describes, Jim uses Earl's death (which is suggestively reminiscent of a lynching party) to usher in a public display of grief, mourning and closure. As a "not quite white" character, Earl serves as the vehicle for exorcising the demons from Arvay's and Jim's past.

Secondly, Earl's death calls attention to the prerogative that the majority exercises when it assumes the right to name and to define. Whereas white men have historically had license and power to rape at will, the black man has suffered terrorizing consequences when he was labeled rapist. Earl, because he is denied access to that white male cultural inheritance, is treated as a criminal when he transgresses the delineated boundaries for an unauthorized Other. Jim is able to legitimize his rape because he *can*; he has socially sanctioned power to redefine what constitutes sexual violation. It is for this reason that he boldly declares to Arvay, "Sure you was raped, and that ain't all. You're going to keep on getting raped" (*Seraph* 57). He redefines the meaning of the term rape, usurping Arvay's power to speak her violation. Earl is dispossessed and disempowered, virtually mute in the text, and like many black men who were the victims of lynch mobs, is prevented and unable to explain or justify his actions.\footnote{I do not mean to suggest that rape is defensible or justifiable under any circumstance. Rather, I simply mean to call attention to the similar positioning of Earl and African American
ambiguous (racialized) heritage, then, causes one to realize the cultural power associated with being an "authorized insider" in a racist patriarchy; the power to define strictly adheres to white men who are "all parts of a man" (Seraph 62).

Arvay responds to Jim's culturally-ascribed power by becoming more masochistic within their relationship, the same strategy, I would argue, that Earl utilizes to cover his cunning and somewhat violent nature. Like Arvay, he seems more enfeebled and powerless around Jim, struggling to do even the simplest household tasks. But although Earl may appear powerless, he actually is aspiring to the role and status of his father, and when offered an opportunity to become more dominant, immediately assumes that positioning. He attacks Lucy Ann who, because of her gender, is supposed to be a submissive and passive masochist in relation to his masculine sadism. Once his true aspirations have been revealed, however, there is no returning to his mask of passivity. Earl's final assertion of power occurs when he walks out toward his father with gun drawn—he seeks to arrogate power for himself by killing the family patriarch.

Arvay too seeks to be more assertive and to wield more control. But she compensates for her powerlessness within her marriage by becoming sadistic in relation to people who are socially and economically inferior to her rather than by directly challenging Jim Meserve. She takes advantage of the fact that within established social hierarchies, she is more powerful due to her race and upper-class economic status. As a wealthy white woman, Arvay "outranks" (or at least she believes she should) the Kelseys males who historically were accused of rape.
and the Corregios: she exercises control and authority over them vis-à-vis her position as (the wife of) a white employer. Lynn Chancer describes a situation that is analogous to Arvay's:

... a class relationship [is] involved between employer and employee...

...this relation is frequently sadomasochistically tinged... involving forms of "emotional labor" that give the employee little choice but excessive dependency. Here, the usually white female employer may herself be cast in a role of subordinate masochism toward her white male husband (in relation to whom she is relatively powerless) at the same time that she acts out predominant sadism in relation to the usually black female employee.36

It is for this reason that Arvay's greatest complaint to Jim is that he places more emphasis on the desires of Joe Kelsey and Alfredo Corregio than he does her wishes. In so doing, Jim denies her the opportunity to exercise sadistic dominance over a masochistically positioned other. In making this complaint, then, Arvay lays claim to her socially elevated position in relation to employees who are doubly disenfranchised because they are also people of color. Her ability to control and orchestrate the activities and people within the domestic sphere provides compensation for her inability to exercise control and dominance within her marriage. She is able to be self-subjugating and submissive in part because she has an outlet for her aggression in other areas. Where Jim cannot experience masochistic positioning in any of his personal or social interactions, Arvay is

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36Chancer 104.
able to assume a more dominant positioning vis-à-vis her social interactions with ethnic and racial others. Her ability and "right" to dominate her employees is a privilege that Arvay is not willing to relinquish without some other outlet being provided for her sadistic expression.

What Arvay does not acknowledge, of course, is the extent to which her economic and social standing are dependent upon ethnic others. While she seeks to sadistically control them, demanding their dismissal when they assert their independence from her authority, both the Kelseys and the Corregios are the source of the Meserve wealth. Joe Kelsey runs the whiskey still for Jim, assuming all the risk while Jim serves as a financial backer for the illegal enterprise, and Alfredo Corregio begins the shrimping business for Jim. Further, the land that Jim builds their Citrabelle home on is cleared by African American citrus pickers who work with Jim and later, the swamp is cleared by other African American men who are employed by him. Arvay's willed ignorance about the source of her fortune and her indebtedness to people of color is essential to her effort to maintain the boundaries between herself and those less privileged. If these social divisions are not maintained, according to Arvay's logic and previous experience, then her claim to white privilege is jeopardized. But more importantly for Arvay's present situation, the divisions provide her the means to express and exercise sadistic control over another, to balance and counteract her powerlessness within her marriage.

The sadomasochistic dynamic, then, explains not only the complex symbiotic relationship that exists between Janie and her husbands, Jim and Arvay, but also Arvay's seemingly petty and unfounded criticisms of her employees/neighbors. This theoretical
construct allows us to realize the ways in which sexual and racial oppression both support and engender one another in the lives of this white couple. But when looking more broadly for reasons why this dynamic might exist, one must analyze the society out of which these characters have inculcated their respective values. The predominant mode of cultural organization is one of dominance and submission, a hierarchical structure that infects human interaction at all levels of intimacy. This text indeed proves the feminist maxim that the private is political, but it also reascribes power to the fact that the public is private. It is virtually impossible to discern which came first; racial and gender oppression are so intertwined as to be virtually one. And Arvay, far from being a psychological aberration, seems more a touchstone for the social and personal issues that we all struggle with on a daily basis.

Gayl Jones picks up with some of these same issues in her text, *Eva’s Man*. While many have taken issue with her depictions of destructive relationships between African American men and women, few have considered them in relation to the attitudes and values of a dominant, somewhat alien(ated) society. We could certainly consider ways in which society’s hierarchical organization of people infects all levels of intimate and social interaction within *Eva’s Man*, and while I believe that Jones’s text could be well illuminated by the application of sadomasochistic theories for just this reason, in Chapter Three I move to a critique that seems to elucidate the more subtle forms of (racist and sexist) oppression that African Americans women (in particular) experience regularly. *Eva’s Man* is preoccupied with the violence of myths and images, metaphors that undermine female autonomy and subjectivity. The critique of these metaphors is more
apropos for this text because it focuses on the violence a single female psyche has encountered, both individually as well as communally. Eva Medina Canada is not a woman who defines herself within relationships as Arvay does (a point that makes Seraph ripe for critiques of the sadomasochistic dynamic), but one who struggles with the definitions of (black) womanhood that circumscribe her and pollute the heterosexual relationships in which she engages.
CHAPTER THREE

Incorporating Metaphors: 
Victimization and Empowerment in Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*

Finally, the uses of Crusoe's language, if not its grammar, become his own. The internalization is complete.

--Toni Morrison

In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness.

--Hortense J. Spillers

I'm Medusa, I was thinking . . . I'm a queen bee.

--Eva Medina Canada

The title of this chapter, "Incorporating Metaphors," is a pun on "incorporating." First, it is meant to refer, rather straightforwardly, to the psychological motivations and explanations of Eva Medina Canada, the title character in Gayl Jones' novel *Eva's Man.*1 Eva, through her internalization and transformation of stereotypical images of women, seeks to reconnect with both real and mythic female ancestors who have been stripped of their female power by a phallocentric social order that dictates and limits women to submissive, subservient and self-effacing roles and modes of behavior. Although not working specifically with this text, Maggie Kilgour, author of *From Communion to

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Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation, describes the process by which Eva incorporates these images into herself when she notes, "mental acts of identification" exist "by which the self knows, not things, but other humans, and takes them into itself to create its identity."\(^2\) Eva recognizes the ways in which women are defined in her society, and through constant confrontation with these images, she comes to define herself both in relation to as well as against these delimiting stereotypes. She selectively internalizes cultural sentiment regarding women and uses it in forging her multiple and shifting self-conceptions and identities.

The second meaning of the title resonates with Eva's subversive actions, the ways in which she literally incorporates these metaphors of female existence, or gives body to them. The female images that most characters in the text take to be evidence of a weakened and debased female nature, Eva re-empowers by literalizing\(^3\) the metaphors. She becomes Eve, not the temptress who introduces evil into the world, but the mother of all humanity, the precipitator of human redemption. She also transforms the images of Black Widow and Medusa in similar manners. Far from participating in a mimicry of


\(^3\)Both Keith Byerman and Carol Margaret Davison use the term "literalizing" in their descriptions of Eva's embodiment of metaphors of femininity. However, both of these scholars view Eva's appropriation of these stereotypes as evidence of her critique of the metaphors which she assumes. My reading of her action is more closely aligned with that of Madhu Dubey who argues that "black women characters in the novel often appropriate the stereotype because it offers them their only means of exercising power" (91). Unlike Dubey, however, in my reading of the novel only Eva consciously or effectively "appropriates" any metaphors of womanhood as a way of "exercising power."
these feminine models that "serves to perpetuate her cultural marginality,"⁴ Eva participates in a transformatory and potentially revolutionary act: she accesses and appropriates the power that was once ascribed to these archetypes of womanhood in order to re-envision and reinvent herself, other women, and their relationship to one another.

The act of incorporation, then, is at least two-fold in this text, as outlined above. But incorporation is also multifaceted in that there is a great variety of things that can be taken into oneself, and just as many ways that those things can be incorporated. Both of the previous chapters of this dissertation speak to what I shall describe as mental acts of incorporation. In the first chapter, it is evident that the male characters discussed therein internalize dominant idea(I)s of masculinity in their own self-defined identities. Included in their definitions of what constitutes manhood are attitudes about and ways of relating to women that I have described as pornographic; they fail to see women as anything other than objects for their use and consumption. More broadly, I have argued that these authors--Faulkner and Wright--have created characters which give body to the racist fears of their contemporary societies. In so doing, these characters perform important social critiques and seek to debunk racist myths about black manhood. Similarly, in the chapter on Hurston I critique the ways in which women internalize and succumb to cultural definitions of female behavior and desire. In Seraph I look at the ways that the internalization of these definitions might affect one's relation to others who are circumscribed in particular ways by cultural narratives that seek to explain and justify

their positioning. In very important ways, although not specifically discussed in those chapters, all of the previously mentioned authors evidence the efficacy of psychological explanations of individual and community identity formation. On one level, the whole of this dissertation is about the ways in which we incorporate images and expectations within ourselves, either using them as models for our own behavior or resisting them in our attempts to create a fuller identity for ourselves within or at the margins of hegemonic discourses.

My use of the term incorporation as well as the larger discussion of the connection between communion and cannibalism that provides the theoretical basis for my reading of Jones' text rely heavily upon the paradigm established by Maggie Kilgour in her seminal text on metaphors of incorporation. Kilgour acknowledges the plethora of possibilities that exist within the scope of her work by examining the varieties of incorporation "from the literal to the metaphorical" and through the classification of these forms of incorporation as a hierarchical continuum. At the lower end, Kilgour posits, "are images of eating and ultimately of cannibalism that insist on total physical identification"; at the higher end of the stratum are mental acts of incorporation in which "people take in outside material to construct themselves."5 Kilgour identifies other forms of incorporation that fall within these two extremes: sexual intercourse which arises from a desire to become one with the sexual partner, and language usage which comes from the body and may be metaphorically "consumed" by the listener. And like sexual

5Kilgour 16.
intercourse, language can be a way of uniting with another individual, a way of erasing
difference and incorporating another by virtue of their being made "the same as" oneself.

*Eva's Man* is all about incorporation, especially of metaphors of identity and in
the violence that often attends this human impulse. This novel dramatizes what happens
when discursive constructions of self are based upon binary opposition. In this case, the
whole of Eva's saga is enabled by the fact that both her gender and race are figured as
ultimately Other within hegemonic discourse. Eva is constantly in danger of being
consumed or sublimated by the dominant group in its attempts to "create an illusion of
unity," specifically, the illusion of cultural homogeneity and coherence. Kilgour argues
that in situations in which individual identity is predicated upon one or more groups
being defined as Other, "[T]he inside [is] the superior...The outside is considered
secondary, extraneous--and yet ultimately threatening...in order to maintain a situation
of centripetal control, what is outside must be subsumed and drawn into the center until
there is no category of alien outsideness left to threaten the inner stability." Applying
Kilgour's model, Eva, as black woman, is figured then as a threat that must be controlled
and ultimately subsumed by dominant cultural constructions--most readily effected by
inserting her into predetermined narratives that explain her position in and relation to the
dominant--so that she will cease to be a threat to the identity of the dominant group.
Such a violent act Kilgour would rightly term "sublimation," "a complicated move in
which opposition is simultaneously denied, resolved, and raised up to create an illusion of

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*Kilgour 4-5.*
unity which is, however, essentially an affirmation of the identity of the dominant term."\(^7\)

In other words, sublimation allows for the incorporation of the lower so that the higher might view itself as more unified, more whole, more complete. It circumscribes the ability of members of the "inside" to understand and connect with someone who is different from them. Further, it limits the possibilities for the "outsider" to understand and create his/her own identity. Sublimation is, finally, an act of cannibalism in that it consumes the possibilities for unrestricted human interaction, communication and understanding.

While Kilgour's formulation and discussion of the connection between metaphor and incorporation is intriguing and enlightening in terms of the texts that she discusses, the schema seems only partially explanatory when applied to Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*, a text that would seem clearly to invite the kind of theoretical framework that Kilgour provides. For example, while Kilgour's pertinent discussion of inside and outside, identity and incorporation, can fruitfully be applied to Jones' work, Jones' text illuminates the confusion that can occur between the literal and the figurative, metaphorical and actual forms of incorporation. Certainly Eva's central act of the text, the murder and dental castration of Davis after they have had several sexual encounters, confounds any easy distinctions between at least three forms of incorporation: communal consumption of food, sexual intercourse, and cannibalism. But Alfonso, Eva's cousin, also collapses differing levels of meaning when he makes the analogy between sexual intercourse and

\(^7\)Kilgour 17.
food and male anatomical parts and food. On at least two occasions Alfonso refers to penile penetration and ejaculation as "having the meat and gravy," and in his admonishment to Eva that she is "too old not to had the meat" (57-58), he echoes the officer who laughingly jokes, "Somebody better put a note [on Davis' frozen sexual organ] saying "This ain't a piece of sausage"" (65). In both cases, the male body is equated with a food product that, due to the influence of Freudian psychology, has become identified with the phallus in literary theory and popular culture. Davis has a similar lexicon of sexual and anatomical reference as he tells Eva, "when the vinegar touches the egg it smells like . . . a woman's smell" (18). He goes on to say that the scent of the egg alone smells like the scent of menstrual blood and that because women have ova inside of them their menstrual cycles smell "like fuck" (18). These comments evidence the way in which metaphoric language seeks to make the uncanny canny. In this case, the mystery of the female body--its different scents and ability to reproduce--is brought under masculine linguistic control, made familiar by metaphors which purport to explain and control its defining difference(s). The equating of the human body, both male and female, with food, assumes, of course, that only food is actually ingestible. But the numerous references to oral sex and Eva's own act of castration call into question and undermine the truth of this assumption. This text would seem to suggest that in a society that fears and demonizes persons outside of the self, bodies, like language, are vulnerable to violence and ingestion by another, not just on a metaphorical level but on a literal one as well. The discrete forms of and divisions between types incorporation that Kilgour privileges do not hold in Eva's Man.
Similarly, the relation between at least two products of consumption--food and the misogynistic dribble of Eva's lover, Davis--is an intimate one. Rather than one type of incorporation being more elevated than another, the relationship between these two products evidences how one type of incorporation often enables another. Davis feels that he can insult Eva with comments like, "You a hard woman, too, ain't you? I know you got yourself started" (8)--defining her ability to find solitary sexual satisfaction as hardness, undesirable because it does not adhere to traditional feminine characteristics--because he is "paying for her," providing for her basic physical needs for both food and shelter. He adamantly refuses Eva's offer of monetary contributions either for her own subsistence or to assist him with the rent that he is unable to pay; he feels that his complete support of her, even though it is forced upon her, defines him as a man.

Further, he seems to feel that his support gives him license to insult and degrade her. Eva, perhaps for the same reasons--but probably more so because of the models of female behavior that she has witnessed--does not verbally resist Davis' gender-based insults. She seems to expect his negativity and to conform herself to the role of passive and accepting woman. As Davis supports her on at least two levels, it seems to buy him sanction (in both their minds) to abuse Eva.

But Eva's silence is far more complex than it initially appears. It soon becomes clear that her non-response suggests a possibility in which a lack of speech can be used as a form of resistance. She uses silence as a way to subvert Davis' attempts to sublimate and/or consume her. Indeed, Eva's lack of voice is not matched by a lack of thought about her situation, for during this time she is attempting to participate in a communion
ritual with Davis that will liberate him from his misogyny and ultimate fear of the Other. She tries to enlighten him to her humanity by consistently exceeding his expectations. But once this initial attempt at connection fails, as evidenced by the fact that Davis continues to see her as the flat character-type of "whore," her desire to connect with him on one level degenerates into a cannibalistic incorporation. As will be discussed later in this chapter, her cannibalism is meant to revise and replace the failed model of a male-oriented and -based communion.

Thus when one considers the question of what Eva is actually consuming through her mental acts of incorporation, one must come face to face with the fact that language, sex, and the body are so intimately intertwined in Eva's Man that the query is almost unanswerable. Practically all things which are outside of a self can be incorporated into the self, and Jones' novel illustrates the fact that even the most culturally elevated of human bodies, the male body, is not inviolable or sacred. It, too, can become food in a hegemonic discourse that posits things outside of the self as alien, Other and consumable. More directly, everything that Eva consumes, both literally and metaphorically, specifically contributes to the formation of her gendered, and to a lesser degree, racial identity. This fact is given more credence when one realizes that for more than one half

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8In Kilgour's discussion of various texts, the connection between various types of attempts at incorporation maintain a more discrete and autonomous character. Certainly mental acts of incorporation intersect with just about all other forms, but nowhere in her text are issues about sexuality, language, religion and identity collapsed upon one another in a single discussion. In Jones' text, however, the lines of demarcation between one type of incorporation and another are often blurred or completely obliterated.

9While the whole of the text dialogues with ways in which black women are created in hegemonic discourse, more than one scholar has noted Jones' lack of extensive discussion
of this novel, it is not clear that Eva is not consuming all that is offered to her without
discrimination. She seems completely to have been coopted into the ideological premise
that women are complicitous in and responsible for their own victimization. It is not until
the central scene of the text that readers finally discover that Eva has rejected some
products of consumption as poisonous to her conception of self.

Although the men in Eva's community are also considered outsiders to the
dominant society because of their race, their beliefs about women, specifically black
women, are very much authorized in American culture. The attitude that regards women
as consumable and disposable objects for male pleasure arises from eighteenth and
nineteenth century representations of women as, "bottomless pits of desire, whose entire
bodies were reduced by metonymy to a hole that no single man could ever fill."10 This
vision was only intensified in reference to black women who, because of the history and
legacy of American slavery, were portrayed as "Jezebels" and harlots with insatiable
sexual appetites.11 Eva is bombarded with these negative images of black feminine

10 Kilgour 90.

11 Discussions about the representations of black womanhood and their historical basis are
numerous. Some of the texts and articles which have been influential in my own thinking
include Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought*, Mae Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues:
Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," Rennie Simson's "The
Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity," and
Gloria Wade-Gayles' *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction.
Kimberle Crenshaw, Paula Giddings, Wahneema Lubiano, Nellie McKay, Nell Irvin Painter, and
identity and sexuality that she must reconcile herself with when seeking to define herself as a black woman in a racist, masculinist, logocentric social order. But these stereotypes are more than images that she can simply reject as false or inconsequential. Rather, these cultural portrayals of women have a direct bearing on Eva's physical well-being--her body--because these representations put her in direct sexual danger from predatory, misogynistic men. The men Eva directly and indirectly encounters justify their violence against women by taking refuge in images of them (women) as lascivious and degraded, deserving and in need of punishment.

Kilgour argues that as long as meaning is produced through binary oppositions like man/woman, black/white, spirit/flesh and culture/nature, then the identity of the dominant term will often be achieved "through the subordination, even annihilation" of the inferior term. This premise is at the heart of Kilgour's understanding of the connection between communion, an act which is meant to establish community and identification with an other (among other things), and cannibalism, an act which is meant to eradicate the other by consuming it. The foundation of the term communion is steeped in religious significance, a ritual that attests to a significant change in the way that people imagined their relationship to others. The Eucharist, a communal reenactment of The Last Supper in which Christ offered bread and wine (symbolically his body and blood) for the redemption of human sin, was a ritual of remembrance, a way to commemorate

Christine Stansell all discuss current manifestations of these stereotypes and how their legacies were used to discredit and disempower Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

\(^{12}\)Kilgour 3.
the sacrifice that a male god made for his people. The Last Supper and later communion rituals were meant to bring together men who believed in Christ's sacrifice so that they could acknowledge and celebrate his gift regardless of the differences that might otherwise separate them. But the heart of this benign and well-intentioned observance contained within it its own antithesis. For although Christ's sacrifice suggests that the proper relation between the self and the other is one of tolerance and community, his offering was commemorated by the metaphorical consumption of the host's body and blood. This consumption of another, specifically the host, actually evidences the very real anxiety that existed about the status of strangers. It is the former function of communion--recognition, connection and welcoming--that Eva seeks to access for three days with Davis. What she comes to believe, however, is that the schism between she and Davis cannot be healed in this way because antagonism is embedded in the ritual itself. The Eucharist exists because people saw each other as strangers and outsiders rather than family and friends. Hence, Eva attempts to replace a religion and mode of human interaction that is based on father-son rivalries\(^\text{13}\) with one based on mother-daughter recognition and connection.

But in order to fully appreciate Eva's act of self-creation and re-empowerment, one must begin at an ancient, even primal moment, in social and cultural history. Eva

\(^{13}\text{Kilgour explains of the Christian religion that it is, "with great care [that]. . .the relation between father and son [are revised] in order to prevent cannibalistic antagonism" (14). It is both her contention as well as that of Theodore Reik that the Genesis story of the Bible is a covert enactment of Freud's Oedipal complex. As Kilgour explains, "when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of knowledge to be "as gods," they are really devouring the father to become him" (14). It is this fear of being devoured and/or replaced that the communion ritual attempts to diffuse.}
Medina Canada's story takes place in a world in which women are devalued, debased and marginalized. Her reality is that women are always already whores and bitches, objects of male desire and sexual fulfillment; young women, no more than five or six, are preyed upon by older men who masturbate to ejaculation before young eyes full of fear and lack of understanding. Eva's own sexual initiation was at the hands of a young boy (her own age) who "zamined[d] her with a dirty popsicle stick" (14) in an abandoned apartment. But women are endangered every day in Eva's world by abusive husbands, lecherous cousins, passive and unprotecting adults and disengaged parents. In this contemporary American society, being a woman is being in constant physical, emotional, and sexual danger.

But the images and archetypes that are used to define and delimit women recall a crossroads, a point of change in the way society was structured. Archetypal figures like Eve and Medusa evidence this very change. What came before, as many feminist sociologists, archaeologists, and cultural historians have argued, was a society in which women had more socially ascribed power, if indeed they were not part of a matriarchally structured society. What came after was a social structure in which men were dominant and women relegated to the periphery of social organization. One Biblical scholar, John Phillips, notes that prior to the emergence of a masculine centered religion, ancient religions centered around the figure of the Mother Goddess, who, "by whatever name she was called was honored and worshipped with the title 'the mother of all the living'."14

Eve is a derivation of a Hebrew word which means "mother of all the living," suggesting that Eve was once a powerful goddess who was attributed with the birth of the world. But the names of the Bible also evidence the masculinizing of ancient religion, the defeat of feminine deities by masculine ones. By the time she is written into the Genesis story, Eve is simply a woman, one without any of the attributes of a goddess; her function as creatress is completely usurped by a male God, Yahweh, whose name has the same derivation as Eve. According to Phillips, "we cannot understand the history of Eve without seeing her as a deposed Creator-Goddess." By the time that Eva Medina Canada lives, the image of Eve that is most in currency is that of the temptress who causes the separation of humankind from a male God. When Davis mistakenly renames Eva "Eve," it is this image of fallen woman, destroyer of men, that he accesses. Eve's previous central role as the Creator-Mother has been completely lost to women and men of Eva's time.

One can likewise trace the mythic origins of the woman known as Medusa to a bedrock which is much more steeped in female regenerative and mythic power than is commonly associated with this character. Medusa was once known as a member of the powerful female triad called the Gorgons. The names of the three goddesses--Medusa, Stheino, and Euryale--meant wisdom, strength, and universality, respectively. Medusa

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15Phillips 3.

16For intricate discussion of the preclassical content of the Medusa myth, see Annis Pratt's *Dancing With Goddesses: Archetypes, Poetry, and Empowerment.*
was also known as "mother of all the gods, whom she bore before childbirth existed."\(^{17}\) She was believed to have magic blood that could create and consume life; hence she represented the death- and life-giving properties of the female body. According to an inscription at Sais, a temple in North Africa, she was "the past, present and future," a description that was later used by Christians in defining their male God, Jehovah.\(^{18}\) Medusa's formidable power, however, was stripped from her by later representations of her as a horrendous, snake-haired female whose gaze meant death to any who looked in her eyes. The prepatriarchal Medusa evinces female power, wisdom and strength, while the post-patriarchal Medusa, the dominant image in Eva's world, is a devalued, degraded and powerless woman who is constituted as such because of her monstrous visage. Her lack of sexual desirability renders her faceless and inconsequential in a social structure in which women are valued primarily for their ability to be physically and sexually pleasing to men.

Clearly the images of womanhood with which Eva is most acquainted are the ones that cast women as evil seductresses who corrupt, confuse and kill the men with whom they come in contact. Throughout her life Eva is taught this lesson about the danger of female sexuality from practically every man and woman with whom she comes in contact. This message is certainly embodied in the figure of the Queen Bee, a woman in the community whose lovers all die unnatural deaths. A related end awaits the men of


\(^{18}\)Walker 629.
just about every woman in the text. Eva's father is driven to violent sexual aggression in order to both punish his wife and to reclaim her attention from her lover, Tyrone.

Likewise. Eva's cousin Alfonso is provoked to beat his wife Jean, on a somewhat routine basis when she reminds him that she has had an affair. Her comment, "I had to think he was you before I could do anything" (92) sets in motion a ritual of exorcism\(^1\) that can never abate the anger and guilt of the couple.

While these lessons about women are certainly prevalent, they are not the only ones Eva learns. One of the pivotal moments in Eva's life as a maturing woman occurs at age eight when Miss Billie gives Eva a wooden bracelet which she tells Eva is an ancestral bracelet.\(^2\) Miss Billie accompanies the passing of this heirloom with the comment that, "there were two people you had to be true to--those people who came before you and those people who came after you" (22). In this moment Miss Billie identifies Eva, another woman, as one of the people to whom she must be true. This gift connects them as women, and importantly, it is the first time that Eva speaks of an experience in which she feels connection and comradery with another woman. When Eva

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\(^1\)Looking closely at the language of the scenes in which Alfonso beats Jean, Carol Margaret Davison characterizes their relationship as a blues ritual. Like the musical form, this violence expresses rather than explains the pain that exists within the couple. The term "ritual" applies because this is the mode through which the characters seek to find meaning and purgation within their relationship. While the two terms are very closely connected, my use of the term "ritual of exorcism" is meant to foreground the ways in which these two characters seek to alleviate themselves of negative and destructive emotions through ritualistic violence as opposed to other liberatory possibilities like music.

\(^2\) Bracelets have a similar significance in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstone*. In that text, baby girls are given bracelets as a way of connecting them with their maternal ancestors as well as their cultural heritage. The bracelets commemorate and celebrate the connection between female children and their mothers.
loses the bracelet a few weeks later, both she and Miss Billie are upset because it
symbolically represents and foreshadows a break with female ancestors and descendants.
The loss both augurs and sets into motion the thirty year journey that Eva must make to
rediscover feminine connection and power. The loss augurs what Miss Billie meant by her mandate that she be true to those who came before and after her.

Eva is also schooled in the ways in which women are objectified as well as the
process by which their humanity and subjectivity can be reascribed to them. The
negative images of women are so much in commerce that all characters of the text, but
especially female characters, must consciously extricate themselves from their power by
deconstructing such stereotypes. Only through this process can they come to see the
women of the community. Until one notable moment in Eva's memory, no one ever
considered the perspective of the Queen Bee. The fate of this woman's lovers
overwhelmed the imaginations of men and women alike as it literalized the metaphors of
women which cast them as dangerous and lethal. As a young woman Eva does not
realize that the Queen Bee was not a bee who "went around stinging men" (44), both
evidencing Eva's childhood innocence as well as the ways in which stereotypes strip

21It is interesting to note the significance that the loss of the bracelet assumes. As is the case
with Eve and her apple, the loss of the bracelet augurs a undesirable separation from one's
ancestors. But it also serves as a necessary first step to the avenue of redemption, in this case, a
feminine redemption. And just as Eve's reception has varied in religious and critical circles, so
too has Eva's acceptance fluctuated. In the early reviews of the book she was believed to have
sought the "total destruction of manhood" (Gayle 50). The most recent critical scholarship of her
career, however, reads her as a force who desires "the remembering of a community
sensibility specifically associated with the female..." (Davison 407).
individuals of their humanity. When Eva sees the Queen Bee for the first time, she is surprised to realize that she is a regular-looking woman. This first encounter marks the moment in which the Queen Bee becomes human for Eva. But other women in the text are not so innocent: rather they are indeed guilty of the same types of objectification that men in the text perpetrate against women. She is simply "the Queen Bee," nameless and lacking interiority in the minds of even the women of the community.

The process of the Queen Bee's rehumanization is therefore even more significant for Eva because it is effected by other women. In one particular moment the cultural construction of woman is challenged by Eva's mother who feels compassion for the Queen Bee. Instead of focusing on the bodies and psyches of men, Eva's mother claims, "she would be more scared to be the Queen Bee than to be any of the men" (41). Stepping for a moment inside of her "sister's" shoes, Eva's mother posits that the fear of killing someone you love is at least as disturbing as fearing that you might be killed by someone you loved. After this exchange, Eva feels liberated to ask questions about the life of the queen bee, finally granting subject status to a woman whom no one seems to know. Now when Eva sees the Queen Bee on the street, she senses, even if she cannot articulate it, the connection between them as women. Through the act of empathizing with someone who is constructed as Other within this community, Eva's mother and Miss Billie provide an opposition to phallocentric social structures that define non-male (and non-white) as Other. These women offer a type of identification with the Other which goes beyond the structure of tolerance of difference as a model of social cohesion.

But it is a long and painful process to find a feminine identity that allows access
to power in a culture that routinely denies women that knowledge. What Eva witnesses and experiences throughout her life confirms the cultural constructions of women as either powerless victims or rampant sexual objects which must be controlled by the power of a man. Time and again Eva is confronted with women who seem to acquiesce to physical, mental, emotional, and sexual abuse as if they deserve the punishment they receive at the hands of men who are supposed to love them. When Eva's father finally confronts her mother about the affair she is having with Tyrone, Eva hears him say, "Act like a whore, I'm gonna fuck you like a whore" (37), but she does not hear anything from her mother during the whole of the episode. Eva fears that his violence will escalate until he would start tearing her mother's flesh, but only a few nights later, she hears her mother say to her father, "Never know how you're going to love me" (40). Rather than resist her husband's anger and violence, even if it is precipitated by her own actions, Eva's mother accepts her punishment and is apologetic for goading her husband to such extremes.

Likewise, when Eva and her mother confront Jean about her acceptance of Alfonso's physical abuse, Eva's mother comments, "You a good woman," presumably for continuing to stay with a man who mistreats her so. However, Jean denies her innate goodness and worthiness to be loved by responding, "Naw, I ain't good... I love him a lot" (56). As first suggested by Hurston in chapter two, women often subjugate themselves to the idea of being loved, even when their experience of love is not affirming or sustaining. Like Eva's mother, Jean feels responsible for the violence her husband exposes her to and is quite willing to remain in the abusive relationship as penance for her ostensibly evil nature. These latter-day Eves believe they occasion men to fall from grace
by provoking them with their own (the women's) disgraceful and explosive actions. Eva learns through the examples of these two women (as well as others) that women should be self-effacing when confronted with the anger and violence of men. Her models of feminine behavior provide that the love of self is an invidious distraction from the proper object of a woman's desire--"her" man.

Closely related to the ways in which women subjugate themselves in abusive relationships are the ways in which they are held accountable for male sexual desire by larger social and cultural constructions of female desire. For it only follows that in a culture that constructs "female sexuality... [and] situates it as a force that women can't control," women would also be held "responsible for satisfying the [excessive] male desire they have evoked." Eva experiences this lesson firsthand with Davis' claim that he joined her in the club because of something that he saw in her eyes, a pretense duplicated by Tyrone when he explains to Eva's mother why he approached her. When Eva intervenes and subverts this predetermined narrative of female responsibility by reminding Davis that he could not see her eyes when he first approached her, he remains undaunted and replies, "I could smell you wanted me" (46). This tendency to blame Eva for a level of sexual desire that makes him uneasy continues as Davis claims, on one occasion, that Eva cannot leave him alone although he is clearly more anxious to consummate their relationship than she. In another instance, he blames her for his erection although she has done nothing to arouse him. In this way, Eva is made captive

\[22\text{Robinson 174.} \]
to his sexual desire. The outrageous claims that both Tyrone and Davis make serve to deflect the truth of their own excessive sexual desire, in this case, the equivalent of blaming the victim for her own violation. This text suggests that it is not women at all who are hypersexual, but their male counterparts who are seeking to mask the immoderate nature of their own libidinous drives by projecting their (masculine) desire onto women.

The aforementioned instance of repetition (the similar comments made by Davis and Tyrone) is certainly not the only one of *Eva's Man*. Indeed, the whole text has a feeling of déjà vu as comments, people and acts are repeated in Eva's experience and the reader's memory. For Eva as well as the reader, these repetitions serve to fuse past and present, acts of memory and imagination, fantasy and truth. On one level, this novel argues for the fallacy of linear thinking, a sort of tunnel vision that serves to efface the interconnectedness of human experience. Questions about the truth of Eva's memories or the sequencing of events come primarily from male characters who represent figures of authority and logocentrism. For these characters, Eva's narrative is simply incoherent; they cannot see its intertextuality as revelatory or significant because it defies male conventions of narrative coherence. For them, it simply evidences her insanity. For those of us outside the text, however, the repetition of events functions as a eerie reminder of the ubiquitous nature of female victimization and male dominance in the text. We are made aware, even as we seek to impose order upon Eva's tale that hers is not an insane act. Rather, it seems an appropriate response to the insane world in which she lives. In other words, the repetition forces us into the position of cultural critics, realizing the
excess of female violation and alienation that exists within Eva's world. And in the moments we are most inclined to dismiss Eva's ramblings, the repetition of the text reminds us what is at stake if we continue to label and marginalize people whose stories we cannot make sense of because they are different from our own.

But the repetition also serves another function in the text, which is suggested by the example that Tyrone and Davis provide when they give essentially the same reasons for approaching Eva and her mother, "there was something in [their] eyes" (46). In Eva's mind, the duplication of events and language in her life and those of other women connects her narrative to the experiences of other women, both real and mythic. It allows her to commingle her story with the experiences of others, to learn from experiences that are not her own, but incredibly similar. She learns what is expected of female behavior and how to react to male attention, but she also learns that passive acceptance of male brutality does not stop the continuation of this victimization for future generations of women. And it is Eva's sense of the overwhelming oppressive quality of female life that confirms Eva in her nascent belief that there must be a form of feminine resistance that can change the future for those who come after her. For Eva's fear is not completely her own; rather it is a composite of all of the women in the text, both real and imagined. It is Miss Billie's childhood and adult fear of Mr. Logan and his leveling stick, the Queen Bee's fear of truly loving a man, and Medusa's fear of being sacrificed for a heroic male who does not deserve her power. Ultimately, the fear of rape pervades the lives of all of these women because they are prohibited from expressing desire that is not structured and corrupted within the discursive domain of phallocentric heterosexuality. And just as
Eva's fear is not only her own, so continues the possibility that as long as cultural constructions of women remain unchanged, other women will be made captive to a fear not completely their own either, but justified nonetheless. Repetition allows Eva to recognize the connection that she shares with all women and teaches her the necessity for social change.

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If, as Kilgour argues, the self incorporates outside material to create itself, then all that Eva sees and hears during the thirty years that separate the loss of her ancestral bracelet and the murder of Davis can be said to provide the ideological base of her new religion. Her experiences help her to create a blueprint in her mind for how women might pass on more than fear to female posterity. Her great-grandmother's connection with the gypsy, Medina, is one that offers a redemptive possibility for female connection and power. First, Medina is a disruptive force to logocentric order because she is an indeterminate character; she subverts and disrupts hegemonic discourses by transgressing roles that are typically assigned to women. She travels freely like a man and provides the primary financial and material support for her family. But perhaps the most significant aspect of this character is that she offers a counter-narrative to linear time that is held and controlled by men. Medina claims that she has time in her hand and asks Eva's great-grandmother to kiss the palm of her hand in order to share it with her. The requested kiss is a very intimate act which both acknowledges their connection as women and suggests an erotic possibility between women. Eva's great-grandmother believes the gypsy's
claim and consummates her faith with "a kiss in the center of her palm" (49). Contrasted with his this leap of faith, however, is Eva's great-grandfather who scoffs and laughs at his wife's belief in Medina's claim. His rational, skeptical, sexist mind prevents him from giving credence to Medina's words, supporting Madhu Dubey's assertion that Medina represents "a distinctly feminine possibility." Eva and her great-grandmother recognize the possibility that Medina offers even though they are unsure of how to bring it to fruition. Nonetheless, her promise of feminine power and connection is preserved and passed on by the great-grandmother to her daughter, who in turn christens Eva with "Medina" as a middle name. This act of naming through the matriarchal line effectively counteracts the great-grandfather's sole (masculine) dominion over time and meaning.

Eva clearly identifies with her namesake. Like the mobile Medina, Eva wanders from city to city, from job to job, claiming the rights and freedoms that are typically reserved for men. But the most direct connection between Eva and Medina is the former's infatuation with time. Both consciously and unconsciously, Eva plays with the

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23 Madhu Dubey, Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 98. All subsequent references to this text will be indicated by the abbreviation BWN.

24 Madhu Dubey argues in his article, "Gayl Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition," that "the mother's name can only invoke a biological connection, for patriarchal social practice fixes a daughter's identity on the paternal rather than the maternal name" (260). While this claim is certainly true of a patriarchal society, it is interesting to note the number of scholars who have written on this text that refer to Eva simply as Eva Medina, omitting her father's surname, Canada. Gloria Wade Gayles takes this enlightening omission to the greatest extreme when she mistakenly refers to Eva's mother as Mrs. Medina. What this tendency to disregard Eva's "proper" surname testifies to, however, is the critical fixation on the matrilineal tradition in Eva's Man, an issue that is ironically dismissed by Dubey as "peripheral" in reference to this text. This critical myopia also ignores the significance of Jones' choice of surnames. Historically Canada was the site of freedom for enslaved Africans and African Americans, suggesting that Eva has similarly found a space free of (gendered) oppression.
sequencing of her life, ultimately suggesting that she too can hold time within her power. But it is a control that she does not immediately master. The circularity of her experience bespeaks her victimization as she is unable to exist in one moment: her present is always infused and infected with pasts she has experienced directly as well as indirectly through the observation of other women. Eva is haunted by pain that is both hers and not hers, victimized by men she knows as well as those she has never met. Throughout most of the text she seems trapped in a Dantesque timelessness in which she is condemned to forever relive women's brutal experiences with men. But her articulation of "Now" at the end of the novel marks a new power that she has acquired over time. She is able to experience her orgasm with Elvira as a singular moment. There is no shadow of female victimization to intrude on or mar this experience. Clearly lesbianism is not a sexual choice that Eva is comfortable with initially as she repeatedly resists Elvira's advances and tries to resurrect Medina's promise of power by kissing the palm of Davis' hand instead of another woman's, but despite her unease with a woman-centered sexuality, it is ultimately her sexual experience with Elvira that "affirms her continuity"\textsuperscript{25} with Medina's subtly erotic moment with Eva's great-grandmother. Further, in accepting Elvira as a lover on her own terms and timeline, Eva regains power and control over her own sexuality; she decides when she wants coitus rather than being used for male sexual satisfaction against her will. The significance of the "Now" that ends the text when viewed in this light cannot be underestimated, for Medina opens the possibility of a

\textsuperscript{25}Dubey, \textit{BWN 98}. 
positive and affirming connection between women which is not realized again until Eva accepts Elvira as a lover.

It is this possibility for feminine connection, then, that Eva finally authorizes. Her experiences and those of other women come to represent a reinvigorated communion experience as she comes to identify them as a more sustaining community than that which is provided by male companions. Significantly, it is a psychic rather than physical connection. She does not actually share food or wine with other women, but comes to identify them as a community that is worth establishing and sustaining nonetheless. One can see the process of Eva's enlightenment as the memories of her time with Davis unfold. One of the first comments that Eva makes, almost as an explanation of her actions, is "What Elvira said those people think I am, Davis probably thought so too. . . . He probably thought I was in the habit of sitting there in that dark corner just so men would. . . ." (9). As she reconstructs and reinvents her time with Davis, she comes to realize the reason that she feared him so. His power and desire to (re)construct her identity never wavered. Even after the three days in which they shared food, time and space together, Eva's departure from behaviors that would typically mark her as a prostitute were not acknowledged by Davis.26 So little regard did he have for the actual woman in his apartment that he misnamed (or renamed) her on two occasions, once

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26Davis' inability to see or hear Eva as she exceeds his stereotypically-defined expectations of female behavior is contrasted sharply with the vision of a female cellmate, Joanne Riley, who Eva meets after she is incarcerated for stabbing Moses Tripp. Joanne is immediately able to judge that Eva acted in self-defense because, as she says, "Well, I can tell by looking at you, sweetheart, you didn't go after him" (106). Instead of seeing only preconceived ideas of black womanhood (as all of the men in the text do), Joanne is able to see Eva's lack of experience and culpability.
referring to her as Eve, the other instance muddling her middle name to Medusa instead of Medina. His (Freudian) slips, however, clearly illustrate "that his views of women are informed by traditional Western female stereotypes."²⁷ Eva is effectively imprisoned in a history that is not of her own making and as her experience has shown her, so too are all women.

The use of Christian Eucharist symbology in the text has been characterized as "a complex yet ambivalent"²⁸ theme in the novel. The religious imagery in Eva's Man is difficult to tease out and even more thorny to decipher because it is a symbology in flux. As postmodern theory has informed us, the connection between the signifier and the signified is neither static nor direct. Although the religious references in the text are clearly to a Christian symbology, Eva puts them to different uses, thereby infusing them with a plurality of meanings. Certainly the Christian references are meant to call attention to themselves and remind us of their traditional uses. But where they deviate from convention, a careful reader must ask the question, "Why?" Eva effects an "imaginative transcendence of history"²⁹ through the process of deconstructively rereading and critiquing the masculine-centered Christian religion and rehabilitating a feminine religious concept. She replaces an Oedipal model of tradition which is based on generational rivalry with a feminine model of tradition which is based on recognition.


²⁸Davison 406.

²⁹Dubey, BWN 250.
familial and cultural connection.

The model that Eva first utilizes to liberate both herself and Davis from the mythological power of the phallus, however, is a traditional communion model. As discussed previously, this model carries with it its own antithesis as communion is effected by the metaphorical consumption of the host/God. In this way the God resides within each of his believers and they lose parts of themselves when they ingest his transformative power. Eva tries to access this power after she returns to Davis' home to await the completion of her menstrual cycle. The Christian communion model would dictate that Davis see connectedness between himself and another through the sharing of food, an act which exposes that all bodies lack autonomy in their need to "incorporate elements from outside itself in order to survive." But Davis never sees similarity between himself and his guest: Eva remains for him the ultimate Other, and everything from her scent to her hair mark her as outsider. He remains unable to see her in any terms other than the narrative which he has both inherited and created. She is whore, she is temptress, she is insatiable sexuality. She is Medusa. She is Eve.

Eva cannot access the power of a male God. Western religions— in this case Christianity—are based on the premise that things/people outside of the self are dangerous and untrustworthy. And although the religion seeks to mask its foundation of binarisms through rituals like communion, Otherness is ultimately privileged because of the ideological basis of the Christian doctrine. Davis projects negative stereotypes that

\[30\text{Kilgour 6.}\]
spring from the Christian concept(ion) of womanhood as evil and disruptive. Eva takes those images and embodies them, not by way of avenging his transgressions, but as a means of re-empowering herself as a woman. The first time Eva makes reference to herself as a Medusa-like figure occurs during a collage of memories that assail her during a psychiatric session. The doctor's question, "How did it feel, Eva" (77), sparks a barrage of other moments in which that same query was made of a woman. Interjected into this litany of memories is Davis repeating her name several times, immediately after which she asks, "My hair looks like snakes doesn't it?" (77). What is significant about this sequence is the way in which Eva's response floats in an unauthorized space, its meaning indeterminant and subversive to the hegemonic social structure represented at this moment by the psychiatrist. It initially appears by the positioning of her response that Eva is silently responding to Davis, that his memory has occasioned her to call up the image of Medusa. But upon closer inspection and reading it becomes clear that Eva has verbally addressed the psychiatrist in such a way as to deflect his queries. Eva's sense that her hair looks like snakes is a strategic engagement with Medusa's mythic image, one that she accesses as a means of strengthening herself against the aggressive, intrusive and ultimately reductive acts of emissaries of the dominant power-structure of which the psychiatrist is a major figure.

This idea is further supported by another instance--when first she has been arrested for Davis' murder--in which Eva imagines her hair is turning into snakes. One of the detectives comments that she looks dangerous to which the captain replies, "They all look dangerous" (51). When confronted so blatantly by a feminine discursive
construction, she seems almost to mutate into this image of feminine power as a way of protecting and defending her female identity. Eva's simple yet profound thought at this moment is, "My hair was uncombed. It was turning into snakes" (51). The final and most direct time that Eva refers to herself as Medusa occurs after she has poisoned and castrated Davis. Her identification with Medusa in this instance marks the degree to which she feels she has successfully subverted the cultural constructions of womanhood. Significantly, this is the only occasion that her hair is not turning into snakes; she has actually become Medusa. I recognize her "acting out" or literalizing of this metaphor as her transformative feminine energy at work. She may be forcing Davis and other men to confront their worst nightmares about women, but she does so by resurrecting the promise of feminine connection first suggested by Medina and feminine power once attributed to Medusa.

The castration scene, however, is important not only because it is the scene in which Eva imagines herself as Medusa, but also because it is the instance of her most complete working out of her feminine-based religion. As Gunilla Kester writes, Eva's Man "presents a powerful revision of the eating-of-the-forbidden-fruit story, a revision that inscribes both a female perspective and an African American perspective."31 The act of castration as well as all that happens within and surrounding the scene reenacts the process by which a masculine religion replaces a feminine one. Eva incorporates into

herself the masculine power that was once Davis'. just as Perseus assumed Medusa's strength when he beheaded her and used her visage to defeat his enemies. In this way Eva reacquires the power that was once the domain of women by symbolically taking into herself Davis' masculine, culturally ascribed power. She, who was previously figured as "Bitch" (127) to Davis, usurps his power to create her in a particular image: Davis becomes her "Bastard" (129). In this way, through the act of castration she becomes "like a man."32 Significantly, however, Eva assumes this power without ingesting the penis, technically moving it out of the realm of cannibalistic incorporation. She does not want complete physical identification; she desires the biological construction of men and women to remain unchanged. Hence, she returns Davis' penis to him wrapped in a silk handkerchief. Far from evidencing a desire to "reduc[e] the black man to eunuch" hers is an attempt to wrest from him the mythological power of the phallus that adheres to him because of his gender. Hers is not an act of hatred at all, rather an attempt to liberate women and men from the oppressiveness of masculinist ideology.

But in order for the transformation of masculine religion to be complete, Eva must also reattune the symbols of that religion. When she bites into Davis' penis, she imagines she is biting into an apple, significant of course because of its Judeo-Christian religious references; it is the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But the knowledge that Eva has

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32As one critic has noted, "according to the system Eva constructs, when she kills and mutilates Davis she attempts to erase the difference between their bodies and their positions in language; she desires to make him similar to her. In so doing, she also makes herself similar to him; she behaves like a man" (Kester 235). While I agree with the fundamental point that Kester makes here, I would amend her argument to suggest that Eva makes herself similar not to Davis, but to a god in her ability to take on the characteristics and powers of another individual while retaining her own distinct sensibility.
acquired is quite different from that which Eve acquired with her transgression. Instead of learning of her own lack and inadequacy to aspire to a god-like status, Eva learns the futility of resisting hegemonic discourses in their own terms. She comes to understand not her own lack, but a new strategy of resistance that will allow her to attain the goal that Eve initially desired, to become a goddess. And toward that end, the apple that was Eve's downfall is transformed into "a swollen plum in my mouth" (128). The plum, generally associated with female genitalia, marks the entrance into a new symbolic order, a new religion, that she believes is different from what has preceded it. Where gendered difference structured the Christian religion that she attacks, all bodies are made the same in Eva's transformed creed. Davis becomes, both literally and figuratively, a female, menstruating body. In Eva's topography, they are equal, both coming from female bodies as well as returning to female bodies. It is a transformation into equality that never could have been achieved in the male Christian religion based as it is on competition and fear of the Other. Eva seeks to replace fear with identification. She has effectively taken back the power of the deposed goddess to offer life, redemption and, when necessary, death.

But perhaps the greatest testimony to the efficacy of Eva's transformation occurs in the pages after the castration. Eva fantasizes scenes in which men consume her body and blood--suggestive of the possibility of their redemption. Her breasts, which would be viewed only as aspects of the erotic feminine identity in her community, now offer life on a spiritual plane for mankind; her breasts are loaves of bread on one occasion, filled with blood on another. Whereas she was ineffectively Christ-like as evidenced by the fact that she imagined, "Big rusty nails sticking out of my palms" (95) when Davis
reveals to her that he is married, now she has assumed the male deity's power to change the future, this time focusing on African American heterosexual relations. It is for this reason, I believe, that Eva is so resistant to consummating a relationship with Elvira. The whole point of her ritualistic crime was not to replace men, but to enable a more sustaining and positive relationship between women and men. Elvira represents for Eva, initially at least, a circumvention of her intent in castrating Davis. It takes considerable time for her to realize and accept a lesbian relationship as one possible and logical outcome of a social structure that is based on identifying with and being empowered by one's relations with women. In other words, Eva has to come to see that when one presumes all bodies are essentially the same, that lesbian sexuality is one possible extension of that premise.

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Eva's psychological transformation at least seems complete. She has reconnected with female ancestors and regained strength by literalizing the metaphors of women that

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33There is one possibility of affirming heterosexual love presented in the novel, the relationship between Miss Billie and her husband, whom she calls "Sweet Man." Miss Billie's marriage is only mentioned once by Eva and acts as a set-piece of which nothing more needs to be said. Miss Billie is happy and secure in her marriage, proud to showcase "her" man. This relationship suggests the way that things could be between men and women. But even in the last fantasized conversation that Eva has with Davis he has not been rehabilitated. He still labels and objectifies her ("I know what kind of woman you are...I like the way you wear your hair, but I forgot your name") and coerces her into sexual relations ("I can't do it, Davis...He laughs. He holds my shoulders again"). He requests that she, "Put your head in my lap" (174), but has stated earlier that he does not perform oral sex, and when she hesitates from fear, he "pushes [her] face into his lap" (174). His attitude is contrasted sharply with Elvira's who, although she has pursued Eva "like a man," desires to give sexual pleasure to Eva. And of course, his misogyny and self-absorption does not enable the kind of coupling represented by Miss Billie and Sweet Man.
are in circulation in her community. In becoming Eve, she eats the forbidden fruit of knowledge in order to begin the process of human redemption. In becoming Medusa, she accesses a power that allows her both self-protection as well as the defeat of her enemies. And in becoming the queen bee, she learns the necessity of drones, male worker bees, in exercising her own reproductive power. The final image that Eva embodies, which is not specifically mentioned in the text but which certainly informs cultural constructions of womanhood, is that of the black widow spider. Like this female spider, Eva symbolically consumes her mate after copulation in order to protect her descendants. She acts not out of anger, but from a need to nourish her own strength so that she might honor and sustain those who come after her. In connecting with these archetypes of womanhood, Eva finds and/or creates a community in which the basic truth of human bodies—that they are at root all the same in that they have similar drives for self-preservation—is realized and celebrated. The power of the mother has been restored and the creatress/goddess once again provides a principle of social organization that is based on the acknowledgment of the centrality of women.

Eva has also found a new control over time and her own sexuality that frees her from the need to be self-subjugating and self-effacing. Her experiences have taught her that passivity and acceptance of one's oppression seldom provide relief from that brutality. She structures a system of thought in which resistance is not only possible, but absolutely necessary for the healthy continuation of society. She does this not by asserting a definitive and static feminine identity but by assuming a shifting and pluralistic identification with the Other. Her ability to see and access humanity in images
in which it has been denied suggests a model of identification that might be more liberating for those who are marginalized in hegemonic discourse. Eva seeks not to consume her enemies and thereby annihilate their difference, but to incorporate the aspects of their personality that are both most promising and most dangerous to those positioned "outside" of structures of power. Where that strategy fails (she kills only once as a symbolic reclamation of power and resistance) she utilizes silence and narrative discontinuity to resist attempts to reassert her into predetermined narratives that deny her agency and autonomy. Eva knows very well the power of stereotyping; she seeks to move from "intervention to appropriation and revision of the dominant discourse,"34 and to model for others (primarily women) how effective resistance might be mounted.

Through finding the means to recast herself as an acting subject, Eva honors those women who have lived a disempowered life before and contemporaneously with her. She accomplishes a reconnection with mythic female power. But while her liberation and transformation of thinking seem secure, her act seems not to affect the lives of women and men (excepting Davis) around her. She and her act of defiance and re-creation remain easily assimilatable into master narratives of black womanhood; she is the scorned and abused woman who becomes insane as a result of her experiences. Indeed, the quip that summarizes this narrative most completely is, "Hell knoweth no fury like a woman scorned." And while Eva's silence provides her with the ability to slip in and out of

interstices of the master discourse, it does little to empower her on a larger scale, one which would allow her story to influence and empower other women or change the misogynistic attitudes of men.

Further, the central act of her new religion is based on the cannibalistic consumption of another, which raises important questions about the possibility of a feminine based religion being any more liberatory than a male based one. Kilgour's study finally leads her to conclude, "communion is really cannibalism."\footnote{Kilgour 233.} a premise that seems supported by René Girard's assertion, "Even the wildest aberrations of religious thought still manage to bear witness to the fact that evil and the violent measures taken to combat evil are essentially the same."\footnote{René Girard, \textit{Violence and the Sacred}, Trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 37.} The ideological base of Eva's new religion may indeed be centered around female connection, connectedness and familial ties, but in order to make this type of communion possible, the body of an outsider must be sacrificed, his power assumed by a new (or old) feminine deity. What then is finally different about the religion that Eva creates? Is it simply a repetition of the same structures of meaning-making that had oppressed her as a woman, the only difference being that the new victims are male? Certainly early critics of the text would argue that Eva's was primarily an act of revenge, and that even if the deep psychological justification that she used made her believe otherwise, that her act of violence was no different in quality than that which had plagued her and other women all of their lives. And while I would argue that Eva's intent
to equalize the bodies of men and women and to provide access for women to the ideological bases of power are more significant than her execution of same, I hesitate to take that argument to its logical extreme, which sounds much like "the ends justify the means." Finally, Gayl Jones reveals the very complicated nature of wrestling power from an oppressor and setting oneself up as the arbiter of a new moral consciousness.
CHAPTER FOUR

The "Disinterested Violence" of Distance
Feminism and Nationalism in The Bluest Eye

We have a lot of rage, a lot of violence; it comes too easily to us... The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do.
--Toni Morrison

Throughout this literary study I have concentrated on writers who have created either anti-racist discourses within their textual worlds or authors who have sought to prioritize feminist issues within their texts. While both Zora Neale Hurston (1937, 1948) and Gayl Jones (1948) make overtures of bringing the two discourses together, neither of them recognizes that goal as fully and exhaustively as Toni Morrison does in her first novel, The Bluest Eye.¹ Like Hurston, Morrison significantly and consciously revises her male literary precursors on the issue of physical and sexual violence against women. And like both Hurston and Jones, Morrison creates a book that has the "ineffable quality... that is curiously black,"² one that foregrounds black feminist critiques of black male sexism and misogyny. But Morrison is able, to a much fuller degree than either Zora Neale Hurston or Gayl Jones, to make feminist critiques while simultaneously acknowledging the effect that racism has on members of the black community. Indeed, the very form of The Bluest Eye (in its multi-voiced narration and use of the Dick-and-


Jane primer as chapter headers) welds anti-racist and feminist discourses in a way that no author discussed here has been able to duplicate.

Further, Morrison's text seeks to forge political alliances between various groups of people so that the resistance to oppression might be more effectively waged on all fronts. She shows through her revision of the primer text that oppression is not something that is imposed only from white dominant society. Indeed, in her scrambling of the primer text and presentation of black families that correspond to each aspect of the deconstructed primer, Morrison shows that one of the real tragedies of Pecola's story is that the black community has internalized dominant values to such an extent that it victimizes its own by comparing their lives to the "ideal" that permeates their individual and communal consciousnesses. In her revisions of male predecessors, Morrison critiques their oversights regarding the effect that physical and sexual violence has on women so that black and white men might be more willing and able to be women's allies in the quest for freedom from racism and sexism. By engaging with issues brought up in the texts of Zora Neale Hurston and Gayl Jones, Morrison seeks to show black women where they might extend their critiques of oppression so that a fuller and more encompassing freedom might be attained, again, for both men and women. And finally, in her glosses to the debates focusing on the possibility of cross-cultural sisterhood, Morrison responds to white feminists' blindesses regarding their own racism and their own status as oppressors. In targeting each of the groups mentioned above, Morrison seeks to liberate all people from the various forms of oppression that exist in this society. Her particular concern in *The Bluest Eye* is the multiple oppressions that black women
routinely experience due to their dual positioning within the nexus of race and sex, but if black women can achieve an uncompromised freedom through black feminist critiques of society, then other groups who are less complexly positioned might also find liberation therein.

In 1977 Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi offered one of the first sustained explanations of Morrison's use of the Dick-and-Jane primer in *The Bluest Eye*, arguing that the primer represented three levels of experience in America, a reading that has become almost *de rigueur* in critical analyses of the text. Ogunyemi argues that the opening paragraph of the novel "deals. . .with a white American ideal of the family unit," an ideal that "is desirable," but proves to be quite unattainable for the black families in Morrison's text. He goes on to assert that Geraldine's family is best represented by this opening paragraph, presumably due to the similarity of their financial status to that of Dick and Jane family. But the first presentation of the primer might better represent the MacTeer family, an association that seems more fruitful in terms of Morrison's project of deconstructing the applicability of the primer to the realities of many black lives. The first of the Dick and Jane paragraphs is clear and easy to read because it follows standard rules of syntax and punctuation; it is evenly spaced, correctly punctuated and grammatically correct. The words in the sentences, the grammar and syntax all support one another to make the paragraph easy to understand. Similarly, the MacTeer family, the first we encounter as we continue to read past page eight, also seems to be clear and

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easy to "read." This family unit operates in prescribed ways: the parents love and try to protect their children, Claudia and Frieda; the children respect and obey their parents.

Yet, there are some critical differences between the relations in this family and those present in the family of Dick and Jane. The financial situations of the two families are obviously different. For the MacTeer family, money is not abundant and one gets the sense that the adults work hard to make sure that their family has the essentials of life. Consequently, their dispositions are quite different from those of the fabled family. For instance, Mrs. MacTeer is a considerably sterner woman than the mother of the children's story; she has little time to play with her girls or to be "very nice" (7). Likewise, Claudia describes her father's face as a place where "winter moves. . .and presides" (52); he is concerned with stretching the meager resources they have, "giv[ing]. . .instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat" (52). Clearly, the MacTeer's signifying difference, their lack of financial resources, affects the interactions within this family. The MacTeer parents are not as accessible to their children and are clearly more interested in supplying their needs than their wants. But they are, nevertheless, protective and loving of Claudia and Frieda. By creating a black family that conforms to the Dick and Jane primer in some important ways (supportive family structure), but differs from the ideal in others (not affluent), Morrison critiques the classist assumption that financial comfort is a requirement for a viable family structure. She effectively (re)asserts the existence of the black family that is often effaced or
characterized as pathological by the criteria and definitions of dominant America. 

The second and third presentations of the primer, according to my reading of the text, are best represented by Geraldine's family and the Breedloves, respectively. The lack of punctuation in the second paragraph "shows some disorder in a world that could be orderly," just as Geraldine's family seems to have many of the attributes of the primer (a home, a mother at home, a father who works, relative financial comfort), although the caring and concern for one another that constitute a sound home are patently absent. Yet, just as one is able to make sense of the second primer despite its lack of punctuation, their family remains viable although it is missing the emotional cohesion that one might expect.

Geraldine is a woman who has gone "to land-grant colleges, normal schools" (68) and has learned "how to do the white man's work with refinement" (68). She also learns as a by-product of her education at those institutions to despise her own race. Desiring nothing less than total assimilation, Geraldine struggles to "get rid of the funkiness" (68), an association that is rife with racial and sexual connotation. "Funkiness" is a racial sensibility and attitude toward the world that both reflects and affirms one's ethnic and gender identity. Geraldine, however, is clearly alienated from both her racial heritage and

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4The Moynihan Report was one such "study" which asserted the unsuitability of the black family. Arguing that the black family is irreparably flawed because it often does not adhere to the dominant familial structure (patricrally structured family unit where the man outearns the woman), Moynihan introduced into common social parlance the dysfunctionality of the black family unit. For a more detailed discussion of his Report and its characterization of the black family, see Hortense J. Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" in Discritics 17 (summer 1987): 65-81.

5Ogunyemi 113.
sexual identity. She sees (her) blackness in the same way that dominant society does: as evidence of pathology, defect and lack. This view, in turn, causes her to be uneasy with her sexuality as the stereotypes of black feminine sexuality largely characterize the black woman as wanton and libidinous. She tries to distance herself from these images and associations by rejecting anything that might align her with other members of the black community who have not achieved her level of material and financial comfort. She believes that due to her education, middle-class status, and conservative mannerisms, she can disassociate herself from everything that is black, even in the minds of a dominant, Euro-American culture.

Because Geraldine despises her race and her racial self, she is even alienated from those who share her experience most immediately—her family. She refuses to express emotion with them, choosing instead to direct all of her emotional energy and nurturing toward a black cat with green eyes. This choice is, of course, symbolically significant because the only black creature that Geraldine is able to love unreservedly is one that has a pronounced characteristic of the white race. She is cold and distant toward her family, conscious only of her status within the community (or more correctly, status within dominant society) rather than her family's healthy emotional and moral development.

Junior is a product of Geraldine's failure to nurture a moral and racial consciousness in herself or her son. Although she sees to his every physical need and makes sure that his "other [non-emotional] desire[s]" (71) are fulfilled, it is not enough to prevent him from despising his mother, himself and other black children. Geraldine inculcates in Junior that which she has been socialized to believe—that white is right and
that the success of African Americans is measured by their distance from their racial heritage(s). Junior actually desires to play with black children his age, but Geraldine prohibits this sort of interaction because she fears how it will reflect on her. Hence, Junior becomes more cruel and spiteful toward members of his race in order to earn the approval of his mother; he imitates her attitude and stance exactly. Geraldine and her son are elitist and cruel, and their sense of themselves as privileged is clearly built upon the denigration of others who are not light-skinned, clean, well-dressed and moderately affluent. They see and value people the way that dominant society values people; the further one is from the mythic images of whiteness, the more despicable they are to Junior and his mother. The interchapter about the "cat that will not play" proves to be more about the family that cannot play due to their misguided desire to rise above "nasty little black bitches" (75) represented by Pecola. They "hate and fear her as a symbol of what they might become themselves and therefore cannot dare to pity."7 Hence, Geraldine's most vitriolic anger is reserved for Pecola when she wanders into her clean and orderly home.

The Breedloves are best characterized by the third paragraph which "demonstrates the utter breakdown of order"8 with its absence of punctuation and spacing between

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6My use of "play" here is akin to Morrison's term, "funkiness" in that it is meant to suggest the extent of this family's alienation from its racial identity that might enable meaningful interactions among African Americans of various classes.


8Ogunyemi 113.
words: this family is as difficult to "read" as the last Dick and Jane paragraph. As the primer is deconstructed, so too is the Breedlove family dismembered and taken apart, at once critiquing the applicability of the Dick-and-Jane myth to the reality of African American lives as well as raising the question of how/why the Breedlove family became so dysfunctional. Because the abuse that occurs within this family unit is so extreme, the narrator provides extensive histories and contextualizations of Cholly and Pauline, the two people responsible for putting their family "outdoors" (emphasis in original, 18). Like Geraldine, they are consumed and defined by their self-hatred. But unlike their middle-class counterpart, their self-loathing is only partially self-enforced. Clearly, there are also external forces—the predominance of "Euro-American cultural ideals"—that influence and infect not only the way Pauline and Cholly come to understand themselves, but also the way that they are regarded by others.

Although there has been some disagreement as to which families are represented by each of the primers, what has remained uncontested is the conviction that Morrison lays out a major theme in the first three paragraphs of the novel. By repeating the Dick and Jane story with slight alterations in the appearance of the text, Morrison critiques the system which makes a story like Pecola's possible. As The Bluest Eye continues to unfold, we become increasingly aware that the problems of black families, and by extension, the black community of this text, are exacerbated by their attempts to live up to Euro-American ideals concerning beauty and family that are represented by the Dick-

and-Jane story. The primer is Morrison's first engagement with a black nationalist agenda that seeks to liberate African American people from both external (racism) and internal (psychological internalization of negative portrayals of blackness) oppression. This internalization of white ideals causes members within a particular family as well as within the extended community, to loathe one another and to undervalue themselves.

One of the best examples of this phenomenon in the book, although *The Bluest Eye* is replete with variations on this scenario, occurs when three of Pecola's male schoolmates circle around her and tease her one day after school. Their chant of "Black emo. Black emo. Yadaddysleeps-nekked" (55) clearly reflects their self-hatred, a contempt that is then projected onto another that has less socially-ascribed power than they. Indeed, their elegant dance of alienation is an act of will, their attempt to impose (or participate in) a way of "seeing" on the world that positions them as accepted and authorized insiders. These young boys, by circling the defenseless Pecola, seek to assure themselves that they are not like her in any fundamental way.

But while the group of boys identify the difference between them and their victim as the pigmentation of Pecola's skin (and thereby reflect their uneasiness with their own racial selves), the signifying difference between them and Pecola proves to be a gendered one.\(^{10}\) The narrator suggests this reading when she observes, "that they themselves were

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\(^{10}\)On this point, I differ with at least two critics, Ogunyemi and Michael Awkward, who both read this passage in strictly ritualistic terms. They see this action as the boys' attempt to combat "the shadow that has been externalized" and for the group to "rid itself ceremonially of the evil that exists within both the individual member and the community at large." See Michael Awkward, *Inspiriting Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 75. While this reading, too, is compelling, I think it misses the material realities that are highlighted by this group of boys teasing Pecola about her
black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed sleeping habits was irrelevant. . ."

(55): neither of these factors set Pecola apart from her tormentors, proving to be a weak
ground for ostracizing her. But because they are young men, the fact of their father's
nakedness is less threatening to them than that same reality in Pecola's life. They can
aspire to the same type of behavior in their later years, can use their father's actions as a
sort of model for male adulthood. But Pecola does not have this same possibility open to
her. So while their words reflect their anxieties about their debased identities in a racist
and classist society, the choice of subject matter for the taunt (your daddysleeps-nekked)
also reveals their relatively privileged position as men in a patriarchal culture.

_The Bluest Eye_ is much concerned with the phenomenon of scapegoating,
especially as it is used by the community to alienate a young, defenseless and helpless
Pecola. The critique of scapegoating extends throughout the text because it is an
expression of what Morrison terms "disinterested violence," the act of victimizing
someone without regard for their particularity in an effort to feel better about oneself. It
is in an effort to avoid this type of violence, which Claudia regards as "repulsive because
it [is] disinterested" (22), that she narrates her retrospective tale. The true tragedy,
Claudia would seem to suggest, is the fact that no one asks the question "why or how did
this happen?"; the community simply uses Pecola's life to revel "in the fantasy of [their]
strength" (159). But Morrison does not allow readers to duplicate this same violence.
Through her blending of history and personal character narrative to communicate her

father's nakedness.
feminist and anti-racist agendas, she accomplishes the goals of (1) humanizing the
Breedloves and (2) implicating the reading audience in their destruction. For it is our
unwillingness to see them, to engage with them on a material level, that fosters their
"ugliness." Her style models for us the most effective process of interrogating violence
(and the agents of that violence) so that we might eradicate it in all its various forms.
Morrison does not allow us the luxury of enacting subtle violences against others through
our willed ignorance or "disinterest."

*The Bluest Eye* participates in a blending of anti-racist and feminist discourses at
the level of thematics. The primer engages directly and immediately with the racist
underpinnings of cultural representation (Dick and Jane) and the subject of the text, the
incestuous rape of a young girl, is a powerful reminder to feminists that the war against
female victimization has not yet been won. But on a more particular level, there are
several chapters in which Morrison merges her two concerns—anti-racism and feminism--
in one presentation. The first of these chapters centers around Pauline Breedlove, a
chapter that comes by way of explanation of her neglectful and abusive acts towards her
daughter when she (Pecola) spills berry cobbler on the kitchen floor of the Fisher home.
We are told that Pauline is a victim of an unfulfilled childhood need to feel as if she
belongs to the family of which she is a part. While she remembers that her siblings all
seem to have secure places in their family home, she wonders why "she alone of all the
children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny
things she had done; . . . why nobody teased her; why she never felt at home anywhere, or
that she belonged anyplace" (88). This need to belong drives her to marry Cholly and to
believe that she could create the kind of home she wishes for when she moves to the North.¹¹

Yet the North, too, holds its own brand of alienation for Pauline. She recognizes the difference between Southern and Northern blacks almost immediately: "Northern colored folks was different. . . Dixy-like. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, 'cept I didn't expect it from them" (93). What she expects is an implicit acknowledgment that they are in a struggle together although the circumstances may be different. What she finds instead are women who find her amusing and who snicker at her lack of refinement. She finds no accepting or affirming community when she moves to the North.

The lack of roots Pauline discovers in the North is symptomatic of a larger psychic split in the black subject. In the North, African Americans are separated from a more sustaining folk community, one that suggests by their very survival alternative, more positive definitions of blackness. This folk community is best represented in the South by the neighborhood women who make sure everything is taken care of for Aunt Jimmy's funeral. They "cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody. . ." and "enclosed [Cholly] in fastidious tenderness" (111). In their compassionate intervention into what might otherwise be considered a family affair, they exemplify

¹¹For a fuller treatment of Pauline's overly idealized expectations of romantic love, see chapter one of Denise Heinze's, The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness" in Toni Morrison's Novels. She argues that Pauline's fantasies regarding romantic love have the element of self-negation and loss of self-determination in them which engenders her dependence on Cholly and ultimately leads to the destruction of their marriage.
connectedness and concern for fellow members of the community. The prostitutes offer a similar possibility in Pecola's Northern home, but they are largely unsuccessful because they, too, are marginalized in a community that judges itself and others by a class and caste system inherited from dominant society. In a different place where blacks had not capitulated to the objectifying gaze of dominant culture, Pauline might have found a community that supported her. Instead, the North is the place where she learns self-loathing in addition to her feeling of displacement.

This initial lesson in the social norms of a Northern black community does not, however, completely eradiate Pauline's pride or strength of character. She still has enough fortitude to resist a seemingly benevolent invitation by her white employer to liberate herself from an oppressive and abusive relationship with Cholly. While this moment is ripe with possibility for a cross-racial feminism that seeks to support oppressed women of all races, Pauline understands the complexity of her position as a black woman and the choice she is being pressured to make. As Pauline explains, "She [the employer] said she would let me stay if I left him. I thought about that. But later on it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman" (95), especially, I might add, a white woman that Pauline believes is ignorant of sexual pleasure. This quote begins a subtle sexual undercurrent of the conversation that Pauline has with her employer. For what Pauline realizes during this conversation is that her employer sees men/husbands in completely utilitarian terms, as traditional providers.

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12 Both Ogunyemi and Eleanor Tignor, among others, in their respective articles, acknowledge the nurturing relationships that exist between the prostitutes and Pecola.
for the family. Her explanation to Pauline is revealing: "it was [Pauline's] husband's duty to pay the bills, and if he couldn't, [she] should leave and get alimony" (96). Because the employer acknowledges no other useful or important role for a man, she questions, "What good is he, Pauline? What good is he to you?" (96). Yet Pauline, who notes of her employer, "She married a man with a slash in his face instead of a mouth" (96), and who has held her legs so tightly together during their exchange that she has pains in her groin when she leaves, understands marriage more holistically. Being similarly positioned as Cholly in their poverty and social marginalization, sexual pleasure takes on a greater importance to her because it is one of the few moments that she feels pretty, young, and powerful (103). It is this reality that Pauline can only communicate non-verbally to her employer, this way of valuing her husband that is expressed in her clenched legs. No matter how hard Pauline tries "to make that woman understand" (96) this simple difference in their lives, the gulf between their experiences proves to be too wide to traverse.13

So although the employer claims only to have been thinking of Pauline's best interest, her position is clearly compromised by her refusal to pay Pauline for the work she has done. Instead, she intertwines sexual and economic politics without regard for the particularity of Pauline's experience and how it might differ from her own. In effect, she uses the reality of Pauline's sexual oppression to facilitate her own ability to exploit her on an economic front. As Elliot Butler-Evans succinctly states, "Racial solidarity

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13I am indebted to Dr. Lucille Fultz for bringing the sexual components of this exchange to my attention.
forces Pauline to remain with her husband and tolerate his abuse, while economic circumstances compel her to continue working for her employer.\footnote{Elliott Butler-Evans, Race, Gender and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) 75.} Pauline is caught in the web of racial and gender-based oppression; as a black woman she is doubly marginalized and violated by those who have more social power by virtue of their race (white woman) or gender (black man). Morrison calls into question the possibility of cross-racial feminist solidarity in this scene, a distrust that is born out of white women's unwillingness to confront their own participation in a racist patriarchy that grants them privilege and status based on their race.

Although Pauline resists her employer's attempt to fit her into a feminin(e)ist mold regarding heterosexual pairings, it is not long before Pauline capitulates to and internalizes dominant values. She surrenders to the ideas of romantic love and physical beauty that are broadcast all around her, but that are most especially disseminated in the movies she frequents. Like her daughter, Pecola, Pauline looks for a definition of herself outside of her own experience. But in comparison to these mythic images, her life and experiences seem lacking because they do not adhere to the ideal. Consequently, she becomes further alienated from both herself and the black community that is also not represented by American corporate image-makers. Jane Kuenz's observation about Pecola is also relevant to her mother, Pauline: she experiences the pleasure of her own
body through a process of "transubstantiation and, ultimately, transformation"\textsuperscript{15} whereby she "becomes" the white figure she sees projected all around her. Pauline must erase her black body to experience joy. Morrison suggests through the repetition of this pattern of behavior\textsuperscript{16} the lack of black images has a tremendous impact on members of the black community, young and old. The racism they routinely face is constituted as much by passive acts of omission as it is by active acts of aggression and social oppression. She critiques, as she did with the Dick and Jane primer, the image that has no correlate in this black community. The only way Pauline and others can approximate this ideal is by denying their own bodies and negating their own experiences.

While Pauline is at one time very astute about employer exploitation, by the time she is employed by the Fishers, her sensitivity to and willingness to resist subtle oppressions is numbed. This family becomes a surrogate for Pauline, assuaging her need for order, cleanliness, status. She commands respect as a Fisher servant, "refus[ing] beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed" and "slightly reeking fish" (101). And


\textsuperscript{16}Clearly Pauline is not the only figure in this novel who internalizes white values as they are represented by publicity and advertising images. As suggested above, Pecola follows the pattern set by her mother, most notably when she stares adoringly at the Shirley Temple cup from which she drinks while at the Breedlove home. But her consumption of the Mary Jane candies, with the picture of a "Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her. . ." (43), suggests the same impulse to consume and thereby become the image that she sees. Maureen Peal, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer all have the same adoration for and desire to become their white idols. Yet, to the extent that these girls embrace these images, they implicitly deny their own worth. Unfortunately, this is a tendency that is encouraged within the black community by well-intentioned adults who buy children white dolls (19) and pay them compliments by referring to them as Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers (17).
in that home, she feels she belongs, is indispensable, because they speak highly of her and have given her a nickname. But the granting of a nickname actually serves to twist the traditional function of nicknaming—evidencing incorporation into family and community-identified by Trudier Harris. The Fishers pervert the celebratory nature of nicknaming because their use of the diminutive "Polly" is the marker of the condescending affection bestowed upon a subordinate. Their act of naming replicates the colonial prerogative of naming the conquered. But it is the other valence of naming that Pauline longs for when she laments that she is the only one in her family that has no nickname or anecdotes that are told about her. She feels ostracized and homeless because she is not claimed in this way. But Pauline's history and unfulfilled childhood needs preclude her understanding their act of naming as anything other than a mark of affection. Sadly, by this point in her life Pauline has ceased to make the piercing critiques of attempts by dominant culture to objectify and victimize her that had characterized her as a younger woman.

Gloria Wade Gayles, in a similar vein, argues that "there is an unmistakable resemblance between...Pauline Breedlove and the traditional image of the black mammy." Insofar as Pauline chooses to remain loyal to the Fishers to the neglect and denial of her own family, she does bear a striking resemblance to stereotypical images of black female servants. She takes great pride in the relative power that she gains from being a Fisher servant as compared to her invisibility as a poor black woman; she covets the abundance that is afforded her in her employers' household. So when Pecola enters

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this ideal home and disrupts the normal flow of activity, Pauline, somewhat
understandably when viewed in this light, expresses her anger, frustration and fear on her
daughter. As one critic has noted, Pauline "has fallen into a trap of protecting that which
she is capable of protecting, that which she has some degree of control over, and that
which she can claim proudly as her work..." Pecola reminds Pauline of poverty,
dirtiness and lack, and by rejecting her daughter and all that Pecola signifies, Pauline
seeks to make her position in the Fisher family more secure. But here again, as
elsewhere, Morrison explodes the stereotype to reveal the motivations of this character, to
humanize her rather than to allow Pauline to remain objectified and absent as a person
from our consideration. The reader remains aware that Pauline's actions are motivated by
a deep-seated hatred of her racial self that has been engendered by a racist American
society. Whatever our final estimation of Pauline's failures as a wife and mother, they
should be tempered by a sensitivity to her self-alienation and social victimization.

Pauline's history is marked by her sense of not belonging, of not having a home or
family to claim her in a positive way. Her story also evidences the fact of racial and
sexual victimization in her life. The communication of her history is the only avenue

18Karla Holloway, "The Language and Music of Survival," New Dimensions of Spirituality:
A Biracial and Bicultural Reading of the Novels of Toni Morrison, eds. Karla F.C. Holloway and

19Pauline's reaction to Pecola is strikingly similar to the rejection that the young girl
receives from Geraldine when she finds her (Pecola) in her home. Both of these women exclude
Pecola from their orderly environments because they fear what the young girl represents and
reminds them of. Likewise, the anger of both these women is engendered by their racial self-
loathing and their attempts to elevate their own positioning in a racist, sexist, and classist
American society. In both cases, Pecola is made scapegoat for an adult's (somewhat failed)
attempt at social assimilation.
through which we view scenes that have contributed to her personality, significantly, told primarily in her own voice. She emerges as a person through the act of our reading, her particularity in bas relief. The narrative technique that Morrison uses in this chapter gives us objective information, but blends it with Pauline's experience of herself as a black woman. It invites us into her consciousness, makes us carefully consider any estimation of this character we might make. Morrison's feminist insights ask us, like Hurston's twenty-two years earlier, to consider critically the problems that exist between Pauline and her husband. But Morrison's critique goes further, daring to imply that society is complicitous in corruption the Breedlove family. This nationalist critique (of the effect of racism) with which Morrison engages is significant if we are to account for Pauline's early determination to challenge dominant conceptions of race. Further, this black nationalist agenda helps us to understand how such a transformation in character happens--how a healthy racial consciousness becomes a debilitating self-loathing. Morrison forces the reader to see more than the exterior of this character, and these insights prevent us from engaging in acts of "disinterested violence" whereby we make facile moral judgments that elide the complexity of Pauline's positioning.

The presentation of Cholly Breedlove adheres to many of the principles Morrison establishes in her treatment of Pauline. The communication of his story, coming as it does right before he rapes his daughter, suggests that it is meant to offer some explanation of his actions toward her. Yet what is painfully apparent through the experience of this text is that there is no explanation that satisfactorily addresses our need to know where Pecola's life went awry; as Claudia suggests, "since why is difficult to handle, one must
take refuge in *how*" (9). The shaping of Cholly Breedlove's personality is an intricate feature of the "how" that Claudia purports to communicate to the reader. For Cholly's victimization seems the central act that neither reader nor victim can assimilate. Yet his story is essential to any attempt to understand Pecola's tragedy.

On the surface, it is simple to castigate Cholly for the sexual abuse of his daughter. But Morrison forces us to suspend our judgment for a time so that we might understand the circumstances that precipitate such a heinous act. Cholly rapes Pecola after coming in drunk, barely recognizing her in his stupor, and giving little regard to the effect that his actions might have on her. His thoughts betray his preoccupation with himself as the fused omniscient narrator/Cholly consciousness reflects: "The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. . . . Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. . . . What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect. . . .? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach . . . " (emphasis mine, 127). Clearly, the predominance of Cholly's ruminations concern his failure as a father; Pecola enters his consideration only as the mirror that reflects his perceived impotence. As his "discomfort dissolve[s] into pleasure" (127), his actions transgress the long-established taboo against incest, thereby situating him outside the human community. His posture as he approaches Pecola reflects his alienation from

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While it might be argued that Ralph Ellison also encourages readers of the Trueblood scene in *Invisible Man* to suspend their judgment of the molestation, in actuality, he invites readers to excuse the act, to focus their attention on the historically significant dream that Trueblood has while incestuously raping his daughter. Morrison's technique, on the other hand, seeks to acknowledge historic oppression of black men while simultaneously critiquing their treatment of black women.
humanity, calling to mind the historic associations of black sexuality with primal instincts and bestiality: "Crawling on all fours toward her," he catches her and "nibble[s] at the back of her leg" (128). This sexual experience is so transgressive that Cholly seems transformed into the animal that stereotype has always held him to be. But the myth is both confirmed and subverted. Here is uncontrolled sexuality, but it is not a signifier of potency or virility. Rather, this incestuous rape is the result of confusion, guilt, and impotence.

Although Cholly's initial impetus is to give something to his daughter that would "make her smile," something that "could be useful to her" (127), the disparity between his intentions and his actions is glaring. It is a discontinuity that is foreshadowed by his psychological merging of Pecola and her mother in this scene as well as his conflating images of tenderness and violence toward Pecola. In a compelling argument about Morrison's narrative technique, Butler-Evans writes:

While the narrative focuses on the rapist rather than the victim, what becomes clear in the passage is a textual deconstruction in which the description becomes an ironic one. Central to this strategy is the recurrent use of tender and tenderness in a context that is clearly meant to be ironic. The fusion of tenderness with acts of fantasized and real violence is experienced by the reader as a contradiction.

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21Diana E.H. Russell cites this psychological confusion as one of the contributing factors to child sexual abuse, particularly in cases of incest.

22Butler-Evans 79.
While I agree that the reader experiences the fusion of tenderness and acts of violence as a "contradiction," I am not sure that Morrison intends the language to be ironic. Rather, the discordant terms call attention to themselves, highlighting the fact that compassion and love motivate Cholly rather than anger and hatred. As Morrison has said, "I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left." 

Readers are therefore forced to confront his socially-imposed and facilitated impotence, the fact that he has nothing else to give his daughter. Hence we come to realize that this father's desire to reach out to his daughter is pure and honest, but that society has participated in the corruption of that desire in this black family. As much as we might like to demonize Cholly as an aberrant individual acting of his own volition, the truth is that American society shares responsibility in creating his monstrous visage--his socialization has influenced the way he interacts with anyone, particularly women. But even further, American racism has both limited the definitions of masculinity available to Cholly because of his race, and prohibited him access to the means of securing that identity. Therefore, his sexuality is one of the few venues left for him, as a black man, to assert his manhood. It is no wonder then, that we should find Cholly's expressions of love degraded and debased. For as Claudia notes, "Love is never any better than the lover" (159), and this society has failed to create a man who is anything but sexual, weak and violent. Cholly's love reflects these inadequacies, ones that have been compounded

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and exacerbated by his position in a racist, sexist and classist society.

The compounded social realities of racism and sexism have infiltrated even the most intimate of Cholly's experiences—his first sexual act. When he and his cousin, Darlene, engage in his first sexual experience, it is initially characterized by playfulness and eager exploration. But the initiation becomes more sinister when they are interrupted by two white men with guns and are forced into a macabre performance that is meant to approximate their earlier enthusiasm. They both look for ways to shield their eyes as if the lack of sight might end what was happening to them. But "there was no place for Cholly's eyes to go," and as he looks at Darlene's hands that remind him of "baby claws" (117), he begins to hate her rather than the white intruders. The narrator says of Cholly's displaced anger,

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, and helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal... For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his

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24 The desire of both Cholly and Darlene to shield their eyes (and souls) during this traumatic experience prefigures Pecola's attempts to do the same when her parents argue. Their actions reveal an unconscious belief in the power of the viewer to appropriate and internalize the object of his/her gaze. In each of these cases, however, the object/image that they would appropriate is violent and/or degrading. Therefore they attempt not to participate in this colonizing gaze. Ironically, though, this power is categorically denied to each of them in American society because of their race, and additionally, in the case of Darlene and Pecola, because of their gender.
impotence. (119)

Darlene becomes the classic scapegoat for Cholly; he projects on to her what he intuitively (and mistakenly) identifies as his own weakness. Awkward's explanation of Pecola's function in the community is enlightening in this context also. He states, "scapegoating results from the necessity for the self...to rid itself of the 'guilt feeling' inherent in any individual or group failure to attain the 'acknowledged values' of that group." In this case, Cholly fails to protect Darlene and himself from the humiliation of forced intercourse for the voyeuristic entertainment of two white hunters. Although his "desire to 'protect' her was the desire to create himself as the protector," Cholly acutely feels his inadequacy—his failure to attain the values of manhood.

One must acknowledge that Cholly's victimization has had a clear effect on him throughout his adult life. He has had no model of parenthood, and consequently, he felt no "stable connection between himself and the children...he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment" (127). The fact of his father's rejection so traumatizes him that he never again searches for or allows a close, nurturing relationship with an adult. He has no idea how to be a parent. As he crawls over to Pecola, it is not his daughter's foot that he sees, but that of Pauline on their first meeting. He tries to recapture the sensation of his own masculine presence by replicating an action that had made him feel tender and protective toward a woman, feelings that he had all but

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25 Awkward, *Influences* 74.

eradicated after his encounter with Darlene. From that point forward, women were only useful to him to "give him back his manhood, which he [took] aimlessly" (125). He completely absorbs cultural valuations of women--they are objects meant to reflect and enable a man's vision of himself:

Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt--fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or week. Free to sleep in doorways or between the white sheets of a singing woman. . . . Free to take a woman's insults, for his body had already conquered hers. Free even to 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. He was free to drink himself into a silly helplessness, for he had already . . . picked a woman's bullet out of the calf of his leg. He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when of which held no interest for him. (125-126)

He responds to his daughter as he does to every other woman in his life--with little regard or care, concerned only for how he feels at that moment.

Although knowledge of Cholly's history does not relieve him of the responsibility of Pecola's violation, it does provide readers with evidence of extenuating circumstances

27Madonne Miner differs from me on this point in that she believes Cholly tries "to regain an earlier perception of himself as young, carefree and whimsical" (88). Although he certainly was younger, the other adjectives do not seem accurate characterizations of his initial contact with Pauline.
which prevent us from engaging in acts of "disinterested violence" that erase the
particularity of experience. It is incumbent upon us to realize that "he is no less a victim
than she." However, the fact that readers are allowed to sympathize with Cholly
because of the victimization he has experienced does not negate the fact that he violently
invades his young daughter's body. Contrary to one critic's claim that Cholly's violation
is "partially obscured, becoming the middle term in the structural confrontation between
the white racist system and the black feminine victim," his violation is hauntingly
central to this text. For while readers are aware of Cholly's own troubled transition into
manhood, all other considerations come only as an afterthought to the experience of
Pecola's rape. And although Morrison presents Pecola's rape from Cholly's point of view
(thereby seeming to undercut any feminist revision of the impact of sexual violence to the
female victim), the scene remains a strong feminist response to male portrayals of rape.

First, Pecola's distance from society increases greatly after the rape, suggesting
that as her most intimate spaces are corrupted (the home, represented by the synecdoche
of the kitchen, and her body), her connection to community is also irreparably damaged.
In other words, the rape impairs Pecola's ability to interact with others. Further, Cholly's

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28Donald B. Gibson, "Text and Countertext in The Bluest Eye," Toni Morrison: Critical
Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York:

29Madhu Dubey, Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic (Bloomington:

30I am thinking here specifically of Ellison's Trueblood scene, but the claim also applies to
Morrison's revision of archetypal accounts of rape identified and discussed by Miner in her
article, "Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in The Bluest Eye."
stream-of-consciousness narrative highlights Pecola's innocence and vulnerability, just as her silence emphasizes her victimization. Cholly's thoughts reveal the level to which he has objectified his daughter and the degree of his self-absorption that enables his violent action. In response to her father's double affront, Pecola's voicelessness is the ultimate indictment. Her "paralysis and silence during the rape powerfully convey her absolute helplessness as a victim of sexual abuse;"¹ thirty-one her body's language is the only part of her which is able to speak Cholly's violation. What Morrison has done, finally, is to offer readers a way to re-ascribe power to this victim's silence.

Yet there have been other critics, most notably Houston Baker and Michael Awkward, who have failed to acknowledge the full significance of Morrison's successful execution of literary revision on key texts of the African American literary canon. Awkward argues that Morrison's The Bluest Eye has a "parodic relation" to the Trueblood scene in Ellison's Invisible Man, a connection that I believe is more accurately defined as a signifying relation. Where Ellison creates an incest scene in which the female voice and response is all but eradicated, Morrison focuses on and highlights the effect that an incestuous relationship might have on the female victim. Where Ellison creates a scene in which incest is all but excused due to the historical element that he incorporates into the scene (i.e., the dream that Trueblood is having while raping his daughter), Morrison reveals the foundation of incest and other forms of sexual violation:

¹Dubey 36.

²Awkward, "Roadblocks" 62.
lust, objectification and violence. Where Matty Lou lapses into silence after her father's transgression, Pecola eventually finds a voice, although it is one that communicates her madness. In these signifying changes as well as others that occur between Morrison's and Ellison's texts, Morrison uncovers what Awkward labels "male (mis)representations of women." 33 Ellison's asserts through his lack of commentary that incest has no consequences for female victims. But by inverting the phallocentric order that effaces female subjectivity in Ellison's text, Morrison effectively executes a feminist critique of the Trueblood scene.

Interestingly, although while Awkward offers a savvy reading of Houston Baker's engagement with both Ellison's and Morrison's novels, arguing that Baker replicates the phallocentric preoccupation and bias of Ellison's text by marginalizing and trivializing the significance of the rape to Matty Lou, 34 he is not able to recognize his own oversights in reference to the reading of these three texts. Awkward belies his own definitional prejudices when he asserts that Morrison does not give her scene of incest any "historically symbolic significance." 35 While it may be true that incest does not have symbolic weight in Morrison's novel, history is very much a part of the text that she creates. She has said in numerous interviews that she was quite interested in Cholly's history, where he came from and the events of his life that helped create him as we see

33 Awkward, "Roadblocks" 62.

34 See also Hortense Spillers, "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(Pha)llibly Straight': In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers" for a critique of Bakers' reading of the Trueblood scene.

35 Awkward, "Roadblocks" 65.
him when he rapes his daughter. As she points out in an interview with Claudia Tate,

I tell you at the beginning of The Bluest Eye on the very first page what
happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you
get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a
thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost
irrelevant. . . .36

In another interview with Jane Bakerman, Morrison characterizes Cholly as a "broken
man, chained by poverty and circumstance."37 It is that "circumstance" that the novel
seeks to communicate and only the sharing of Cholly's past can accomplish that goal. His
freedom (and his danger) lies in the fact that he is unconnected, that there is no family or
community which provides grounding or support for him. She wants us to see more than
just the act, although the rape is centrally horrific; Morrison also wants us to see what has
proximately caused the rape--the victimization by a larger society which renders Cholly
incapable of connecting with another person. While Morrison certainly executes a
feminist revision of Ellison's scene of incestuous rape, she expands her critique to include
the circumstances that helped to create the rapist, including a general social devaluation
and objectification of female bodies, minds and spirits.

Hence history gets played out in Morrison's text on an extremely individual level.

It is less about large trends and movements than it is the playing out of history in

36Morrison, interview with Tate, 125.

37Jane Bakerman, "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison,"
Conversations with Toni Morrison, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of
Mississippi, 1994) 41.
individual lives. While there is no dream of a white woman playing in the head of the
assaulter, there is nevertheless floating in the reader's mind an awareness of Cholly's
violation and humiliation at the hands of white hunters who command him to perform his
first sexual act for their entertainment. Cholly's history tempers our response to his
violation of his daughter: his lust is surrounded by "a border of politeness" (128) a desire
to "do [something] for her" (127) that would have meaning or give meaning to both of
them. In Ellison's incest scene, history is offered as an excuse for Trueblood's action; in
Morrison, history can help us understand action, but it is not offered as a
rational(ization) for the victimization of another.

So it seems that despite Awkward's piercing reading of oversights and elisions
that Baker engages in when reading the rape scene in Invisible Man, he cannot see his
own myopic biases toward The Bluest Eye. His understanding of the term "historically
symbolic" is so narrowly defined that he ignores the predominance of history that
constitutes this novel. Like many economic and military historians, Awkward only
seems willing to understand history as "his-tory"--large political and/or conflict-laden
engagements, history "from the top down." 38 Morrison, on the other hand, focuses on the
effects that historical and political interactions have on individuals, how they shape the
personal histories of everyday people. As one critic has noted, "The most basic myths

38 Bonnie Smith discusses the "gendering" of history in her article, "Gender and the Practices
of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century," pointing
out that there long has been a debate surrounding the issue of the proper subject for historical
study. Smith argues that the "history of the mundane" (1164) was deemed inappropriate for
scholarly consideration as a direct result of the effort to restrict women's admission into the
profession of historiography.
and the broadest geopolitical conceptions have their origins in the experience of people.\textsuperscript{39} As a cultural historian, she emphasizes many histories rather than one monolithic construction of the past that affects all people equally or in the same fashion. This interplay between distant socio-political movements and personal reactions to that history constitutes the mitigating circumstances that Morrison suggests should reflect the judgments passed on individuals in a moralistic society.

As we are forced into Cholly's mind prior to and during his violation of Pecola, readers, to the extent that we recognize in the rape Cholly's fusion of his violated past and violent present, are likely to realize that Cholly is both victim and victimizer. Because he is a victim in one arena, he seeks to assert control over those things and people that he can dominate, thereby transforming himself into one with power over others---a victimizer.\textsuperscript{40} Rather than existing in isolation, Morrison illustrates the symbiotic relation that often exists between oppressed and oppressor. In a sense, Cholly exhibits dual personalities, but not the double-consciousness that might have provided him critical insight into his status as victimizer.

Looking at the issue of double-consciousness through several African American literary and theoretical texts, including W.E.B. DuBois' The Souls of Black Folk,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{39}Gibson (emphasis mine) 165.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{40}This idea of the victimizer who is also victim was first raised in Chapter Two in my discussion of the sadomasochistic dynamic. The application of that theoretical construct here would obviously be illuminating of the ways in which disempowered people seek to assert what limited power they have over others who are even more marginalized than they. For a fuller discussion of this dynamic as it pertains to intimate and social interactions, see pages 89-103 of this dissertation.}
Awkward argues (closely following DuBois' sociological formulation) that double-consciousness is a state that African American novelists strive to reconcile. For according to this DuBoisean formulation, double-consciousness is the result of being racially devalued in American society because of one's African heritage and being forced to deny that cultural legacy for a whitewashed American identity. With this sociological framework in mind, Awkward argues that "the sacrifice of Pecola--a young girl who measures her own worth in terms of idealized white standards of beauty and morality, and goes mad as a result--is. it would appear, necessary for the achievement of the Afro-American expressive ideal of merged consciousness, of unified voice."\textsuperscript{41} Yet he obviously elides the precondition for unification that DuBois sets out in his classic text. What DuBois claims that the African American desires is the ability to express both of his/her cultural legacies equally, to unify the "two warring ideals in one dark body."\textsuperscript{42} But due to Awkward's emphasis, which he also supports with an anthropological reading from Victor Turner's \textit{Dramas, Fields and Metaphors}, he cannot readily see how Morrison refigures even this legacy from African American sociological thought.

Where double-consciousness is figured in Turner's text as being a situation of "betwixt and between,"\textsuperscript{43} Morrison suggests that double-consciousness might actually have saved Pecola from the madness to which she finally succumbs. It is Claudia's doubleness, her ability to sense value in herself although she does not see it reflected or

\textsuperscript{41}Awkward, \textit{Influences} 95.


\textsuperscript{43}Awkward, \textit{Influences} 66.
validated in larger society, that, in part, accounts for the strength and endurance of her character. Unlike the DuBoisean subject, Claudia does not seem to desire acceptance into American society for she intuitively knows that to do so in the social climate of 1941, she would have to relinquish and/or deny her blackness. Merging in this social context could only mean capitulation to dominant values that denigrate blackness. Here, double-consciousness is figured as a healthy response to a racist society.

Claudia's double-consciousness prompts her to investigate and try to understand the source of society's fascination with whiteness as the measure of beauty, value and worth: it accounts for her destruction of the white dolls that are given to her at Christmas. She desires to find the source of their attraction for others without ever seriously considering why her response to those same gifts is so different from that of other people. In this instance, Claudia's double-consciousness is the very avenue by which she achieves the distance and strength of character it takes to question society's system of valuation. She sees her blackness as whole and complete, and it is that awareness that allows her to identify and resist self-negating social images. And even after she has learned to love white baby dolls, little white girls and Shirley Temple, she characterizes it as a "conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love," a change that "was adjustment without improvement" (22). She acquiesces because it is difficult to continue hating when everyone around her encourages her to adore these white images. However, her resistant questioning as a child, even when it seems to cease, gives her a foundation of strength that Pecola never has. As an adult, Claudia continues her resistance to dominant symbolic systems as she turns her attention from the
de(con)struction of white dolls to the (re)construction of Pecola's life. Through her "work with" Pecola's life, however, she discovers love and adoration that is not forced or feigned. Pecola, the black doll that Claudia never receives as a gift, commands her constructive attention while all of the other representations of (white) beauty only elicited "disinterested violence" (22).

Pecola, on the other hand, wholly succumbs to society's valuation of her as a young black woman. It is for this reason that she drinks so eagerly from the Shirley Temple cup and gorges herself on Mary Jane candy, believing that she might somehow imbibe or ingest the essence of whiteness. It is her inability to accept and appreciate her dual heritage that dooms her to the self-destructive desire for blue eyes. Pecola, in the words of DuBois, "look[s]...at [her] self through the eyes of others" and "measur[es] [her] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." 44 She has no self-consciousness because she has no roots to the substantive values of the black community. Consequently, when she fails to see herself reflected anywhere as a person of value (because the image is not disseminated), she equates that iconic absence with her own sense of invisibility, ugliness, and lack of worth.

Awkward also mistakenly argues that Claudia's double-consciousness is represented throughout the text by the double-voiced narration. As we have previously seen, he collapses the two--consciousness and voice--in his assertion that the narration is unified through the medium of Pecola's madness. But in an ironic reversal and obvious

44DuBois 215.
act of signifying on Morrison's part, double-consciousness begins to equal mental health for the African American person in the United States. While Claudia shares the narration with an omniscient narrator (among other characters who also speak in the text), this sharing is not easily collapsible into an issue about double consciousness. Indeed, double-consciousness and double-voicedness seem to serve different rhetorical ends in Morrison’s novel. Although Claudia clearly has a double-consciousness, her voice is never split in the way that Pecola's is. Pecola, on the other hand, has only a double-voice, and lacks the double-consciousness of the kind discussed above that might have preserved her sanity. The polyvocality of the text, Claudia's sharing of narration in this novel, is evidence of an intact and healthy psyche, one that is not disturbed or challenged by other voices adding to or complementing her narrative. We are left with her sole voice because Claudia seems the only one to realize the extravagant price African Americans pay for assimilation. She reminds us that the kind of social unity spoken of by DuBois should be achieved only when the black individual ceases to prioritize America's racist standards of being over any other cultural legacy that (s)he has. Claudia's lone voice at the end of *The Bluest Eye* is meant to guide us to this moral, and perhaps many others.

While critics in the 1990's such as Wilfred D. Samuels, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Karen Carmean and Madhu Dubey, among others, have made significant progress in

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45 There are actually two levels of double-consciousness at work with Claudia. The first has to do with her awareness of the devaluation of blackness in dominant society as well as within her own community. The second level concerns the mechanics of the novel. Claudia narrates this story as an adult who tries to recapture the "feel" of her childhood, trying to honestly and accurately communicate her thoughts and emotions at that time of her life. Consequently, Claudia has a double-consciousness which is reflected in this attempt to recapture her youth.
recognizing Morrison’s dual critical vision, one concerning racism and the other having to do with sexism. There is still considerable energy being devoted to deciding which of these political issues is prioritized in *The Bluest Eye*. But this question is basically unanswerable. Morrison seeks to reascribe female subjectivity to those that have been victims of male attempts to write their masculine being on the female body. She demystifies rape as a moment of historical significance and forces readers to deal with this violence in its contemporary form, as an exercise of power and control over women. As a feminist, she also tackles the thorny question of the viability of feminist cross-racial sisterhood that attempts to secure the freedom of all oppressed women. Without flinching Morrison indicts white women for their continued racism, showing how/when this group of women benefits from the subjugation of their sisters of color.

Simultaneously Morrison shows her concern for the continued social oppression the black community experiences in a racist society. But more significant is her realization that through the internalization of dominant values and images, members of the black community enact horrendous violence upon themselves and others who are similarly positioned in society. Where once members of a community acted as a self-sustaining and supportive network to counter white hostility (usually initiated by and centered around the elders of a Southern black community), the contemporary black community is rootless and scattered, and more vulnerable for their lack of connection to one another and a folk tradition that teaches them the value of their own black experience. African Americans now see themselves through the same lens dominant society has always viewed them. In one way, this self-alienation is the real cause of Pecola’s tragedy.
But as we see, these two forms of oppression—racism and sexism—are not mutually exclusive and attempts to counter them cannot be myopic either. Cholly and Pauline Breedlove becomes the victimizers that they are, in part at least, because of racism that they encounter in their lives. In order to assert some control and power, Cholly and Pauline abuse those who are less powerful than even they. Most often the least empowered and most vulnerable of any society are women and children, so one might anticipate that these groups would suffer more in societies that stratify people based on race, ethnicity and class. *The Bluest Eye* shows this hypothesis to be sound. Pauline is subject to abuse by Cholly because he is a man and by her employer because that woman is white. Pecola, as a child, is victimized by only her parents, but it is significant that Pauline participates in this abuse too because her children are the only people over whom Pauline has control and power. Having no one whom she, in turn, can vent her frustrations upon, Pecola is the ultimate victim.

Finally, Morrison models for us a strategy for recognizing and countering both types of oppression (racism and sexism), one that hinges on the recognition of individual specificity. She suggests that these forces cannot be successfully fought in the abstract, but only in the particular encounters with them. In order to change society, one must not succumb to disinterested violence or facile analyses of oppression. Rather, as Claudia has learned in the retelling of Pecola's story, one must pay attention to individual lives and intervene on the behalf of people. Socio-political realities take care of themselves when one focuses on the particular needs of particular people. While these insights are perhaps not new, they are more effective for their dramatization in this novel.
As Madhu Dubey has argued, *The Bluest Eye* charts "the impossible area of overlap between sexual and racial oppression, an area occupied by the black woman in general, and Pecola in particular."\(^{46}\) Morrison artfully weaves together the threads of her character's narratives and histories in order to show not only their victimization in a sexist, racist, and classist society, but how those experiences cause them to oppress others who are weaker than themselves. And through the retrospective narration of Claudia, we come to see our own acts of disinterested violence, the times we take refuge in our disconnectedness to relieve us of the responsibility of intervening in the lives of Pecolas in all walks of life. It is this final point, I believe, that is Morrison's greatest accomplishment.

\(^{46}\)Dubey 37.
CONCLUSION

On the Subject of Feminism(s): The Beginning Revisited

This is to call for, then, a decentered vision (theoria) but a centered action that will not result in a renewed invisibility.

—Nancy K. Miller

In becoming feminist...women take up a position, a point of perspective, from which to interpret or (re) construct values and meanings. That position is also a politically assumed identity, and one relative to their sociohistorical location... 

—Teresa de Lauretis

The multivalence interests of The Bluest Eye offer a blueprint for the direction that much of black feminist criticism has taken since the 1970's. In a text that is at once concerned with issues of feminine identity and subjectivity, violence that is perpetrated against women in black communities, as well as the continuing racist formulations of black subjectivity that affect and inflect the African American conception of self, it is a theory that is imbricated in all of the markers of identity that affect human subjectivity. Black feminist theory is therefore a fitting approach to address the multiple positioning (and possible multiple oppressions) of individual lives.

But black feminism is but one voice in a myriad of voices that constitute feminism. And it is some portion of this pluralism of concerns, theoretical approaches, and convictions that I hoped to capture in this dissertation. For a consideration of the variant theoretical approaches to these five novels offers several interpretive lessons
about female subjectivity and the enterprise of "truth-making" in feminist and black feminist theoretical discourses. What one must first note is the movement of the chapters from women who are not given voice and subjectivity (*Light in August* and *Native Son*) to female characters who are authoritative speakers of their own lives (Claudia MacTeer of *The Bluest Eye*). William Faulkner and Richard Wright, because of their focus on anti-racist discourses, are unable and/or unwilling to acknowledge and convincingly render female subjectivity. For them, concern for a more representative characterization of women would seem to undermine the tasks that they have set before themselves. Here, as with traditional pornographic materials, women only serve as backdrops to men, either for their pleasure or as a mirror for masculine psychology and subjectivity. However, although these are roles that these authors would try to limit women to fulfilling (and as one might expect with actual people), these female characters often exceed the roles that even their creators have envisioned for them. Three of the central female characters in *Native Son* and *Light in August*—Bessie Mears, Mary Dalton and Joanna Burden—remain compelling and interesting despite their limited roles in the texts. These characters refuse to be circumscribed within a masculinist narrative that renders them only important as victims for/of Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas. They speak, not necessarily or solely with their voices, but also with body language, astute intuitive skills, and accurate assessments of self and society.

Female writers since Faulkner and Wright have largely made the "question" of female subjectivity central to their texts. In this literary study, we have gone from Zora Neale Hurston, who was the first to assert and represent the inner lives of women, to Toni
Morrison, whose focus has broadened to include the representation of subjectivity in men and women, black and white. As one might expect, then, given the increasing authority that women have assumed in their representations, these literary portrayals have become increasingly complex. Where Wright and Faulkner sought to delimit and circumscribe female subjectivity, as if women were creatures that could be completely known to another, subsequent authors have created more complicated female characters who escape a reader's easy or complete understanding.

While Wright and Faulkner implicitly assert that women are not subjects, Hurston "creates" the female subject in her texts. Janie and Arvay are characters who are mostly available to us, thereby "proving" their subjectivity in important ways. Although they rarely speak of their thoughts and beliefs, we are made privy to their conceptions of self through interior monologues, omniscient narrators, and free indirect discourse. Although outwardly voiceless, their struggles for increased voice and autonomy within their relationships and communities are communicated to the reader through linear narratives about/from them.

Eva Medina Canada is also mute, but where voice was one of the primary markers of subjectivity in Hurston's texts (so that although characters rarely speak, their desires are inscribed in the texts), Eva's actions bespeak her interiority. Perhaps because Jones assumes (black) female subjectivity, voice ceases to be the only marker of that interiority. She no longer needs to articulate it to "prove" that it exists. Indeed, the relative silence of Jones' main character suggests that this subjectivity cannot be contained in or fully communicated by voice. There is no omniscient narrator to guide us through Eva's
psyche or to explicate for us her thoughts and feelings; we are relentlessly limited to Eva's voice (one that is characterized as "mad" in the text), unable to discern truth from fiction. We are only able to know her (to the extent that we do) by what she does, not by what she says. Eva's voice is decentralized as an accurate indicator of her thought-processes, replaced by her physical acts of resistance.

By the time we get to Morrison's text, however, Pecola's silence is complete. Claudia MacTeer must reconstruct the events of Pecola's life and speak on her behalf because Pecola only speaks to and with herself. Pecola's subjectivity is unknowable to Claudia or to readers; we presume to understand her motivations and the source of her victimization, but this victim is unable to confirm or contradict our conclusions. What little we do learn about Pecola, however, is important, for Claudia realizes a connection to her that readers are meant to recognize also. In narrating her young friend's life, Claudia finds voice not only for herself, but for another who was unable to speak for or defend herself. Claudia acknowledges the importance of connection between women and of speaking for and with the dispossessed and silenced, the possibility that is engendered, I would argue, in feminist sisterhood.

Importantly, though, Claudia is not "laid open" to the penetrating gaze of reader and/or society either. She has a clear sense of herself as an African American woman in a racist, sexist and classist society (an understanding that Pecola fails ever to achieve), but what we know of the adult narrator is extremely limited. The information we receive is restricted to that which Claudia chooses to tell us about herself. What we see, then, in the progression of the narratives is the decentralization of voice as an accurate indicator
of human subjectivity; voice becomes "less" as it is confronted with the complexity of human "being." Black female characters in particular are becoming less known to readers as writers like Morrison and Jones refuse to presumptuously cast these characters as psychologically simple, facile and available for readers' consumption. Building on the foundation of literary predecessors like Hurston, who irrevocably changed the representations of women, and feminist literary theory which challenges masculinist textual formulations, these two writers have given characters much greater control over what readers discover about them. This shift in narrative techniques reflects an increasing conviction that the subjectivity of all people, especially black women, cannot be represented it in its totality. This claim stands in contradistinction to racist presumptions and pornographic representations that assert the simplicity of black identity and the ability to absolutely "know" the African American (female) character.

The pornographic representation of feminine identity—one that Eva Medina Canada struggles against in Eva's Man—is meant to cast women in strictly limited roles such as sexual tease, whore, or (willing) victim of sexual attention and aggression. Yet women, even when they are victims of masculinist aggression, are not necessarily limited to that one role. Eva certainly resists this narrow positioning when she murders Davis, misogynistic representative of the masculinist view of womanhood that has oppressed Eva and other women throughout her life. She believes she is able to intervene in and reinvigorate images of female power as a counterforce to the debilitating images of womanhood that circulate in her society. Hurston further illustrates the multiple positioning women often hold in her characterization of Arvay Henson. Arvay is subject
to the violences that her husband enacts, but she is also victimizer in her relations with people of color that work for and around her. Arvay tries desperately to maintain the divisions between herself and people of color (as well as those of lesser economic statuses) because in this way she is able to maintain some measure of control and authority in her life. Sadomasochistic theory helps us to understand her desire to maintain power over another as an aspect of her own identity. In this case, her status as aggressor is reflective of her disempowerment in her marriage and her desire to have more autonomy and control in her life.

But this is not a move that is strictly limited to white women who are using racial and economic privilege to maintain a certain status in their personal relationships or in society. Bigger Thomas and Joe Christmas use women to assert masculine dominance in societies that marginalize them due to their race. And Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Geraldine, as well as the whole of that community, use Pecola in much the same way in an attempt to claim a position in society that is denied to them because of American racism. What we see, then, is a pattern of behavior that is illuminated by sadomasochistic theory and engendered in a hierarchically structured society. While jockeying for advantageous positioning, each of these characters often scapegoats those who have less socially-ascribed power in order to strengthen their own claims for prestige and power. Yet this move is what Claudia MacTeer terms "disinterested violence." Speaking of her own realization about why Pecola's tragedy happened, Claudia's warning not to ignore the particularity of experience is applicable to the other writers discussed in this dissertation as well. What this resonance highlights is a social reality that has not changed much over
time and that crosses lines of race, gender and class. It suggests a need for ways of formulating human subjectivity and constructing social organization that are not based on the debasement and denigration of another. What Claudia learns through the course of her narration is her own role in Pecola's victimization, a necessary realization if she hopes to avoid either replicating or intensifying her friend's victimization. Disinterested violence is a "condition" that can only be resisted through knowledge of and honesty about one's self and others.

Claudia also learns some of the proximate causes for Pecola's tragedy, most especially the debilitating effect of racial self-loathing on the African American psyche. This realization represents a broadening of interest and concerns among these narratives. In Faulkner and Wright as well as the novels of Hurston and Jones, there was little or no attempt to make simultaneous critiques of racism and sexism. As we have seen, Faulkner and Wright completely ignore feminist issues of female subjectivity and violence against women, while Jones's critique of racism is implicit and subtle, a subtext in Eva's Man. Hurston comes closest to a simultaneous critique in Seraph on the Suwanee, but if one is not looking for the imbricated discussion, or does not have a critical tool that allows one to explore both issues, then it is easy to overlook Hurston's insights about interlocking and mutually-supporting oppressions. Morrison, on the other hand, sustains both critiques, subjugating neither to the other. Indeed, one would miss a great deal and do the novel considerable injustice by seeking to prioritize one social critique over the other.

Morrison's narrative technique is sensitive to the complexity of the positioning of African American men and women, indicating her more encompassing concerns for all subjects
and the efficacy of black feminism as a critical tool.

II.

Putting various feminist voices in concert with one another seemed a fitting way to suggest and explore the continuity and diversity of feminist vision, to acknowledge the plurality of feminist actions while still working toward the collective feminist goal of the liberation of human subjects. I traced one theme, violence against women, through the lens of several theoretical approaches and fictional texts to examine what these theories and texts suggested about the status of black and white women in American society as well as the relations between these two groups of women. I was interested in the ways that these theories spoke to one another as well as what they suggested about future attempts at feminist social intervention. And finally, I was concerned about how far feminism has come in theorizing human subjectivity (but in particular that of women) in all of its wonderful variety.

What this methodological approach revealed to me is the complexity of feminist visions that dare to reimagine and reconstitute the world. This transformative vision is not contained within feminism, but articulated by feminist approaches to social construction. It is embodied in our attempts to see differently, to realize other ways of authorizing human expression and subjectivity that are not arbitrarily circumscribed and/or determined by a “ruling class.” In this thematically structured work, I anticipated that the critiques of violence against women would be somewhat uniform, that the major differences between these texts would be constituted around historic transformations in
female oppression. But had I remained wed to this conviction, looking only for what I expected to see, I would have missed the much more interesting story these texts had to tell me. I would have missed the variety of feminist theoretical approaches that apply to these texts, illuminating them in varied, sometimes contradictory, but always revealing ways. I would have overlooked the various ways that violence was enacted against these female characters because I wanted to focus on those violences that are typically considered and discussed; I would have ignored the variety of subtle and overt enactments of female resistance because I was looking for the mythologized “female victim.” I would have reinscribed these female characters into positions that they often subvert and/or deny themselves because I needed to see them in certain ways, fulfilling certain roles. In short, I would have become a purveyor of logocentrism, asserting my voice and vision regardless of other ways of seeing and understanding that the texts suggested. I would have missed the ways in which characterizations of women are growing, changing, becoming fuller and more complex. And I would have neglected to ask myself the question, “Why?”

What this dissertation has ultimately allowed me to value is the diversity of feminist voices that (can and often do) work in tandem to transform the real lives of women. Because we are sensitive to the particularity of female experience, our critiques must be both particular and manifold to offer support for the efforts of women who want a transformation in both their private and public lives. We must become more open, more broad in our concerns and interests, more representative and welcoming of women from various walks of life. Feminism must become an inclusive umbrella that allows for
varying desires for change, multiple and shifting expressions of the feminin(e)ist self—a conviction that defies labels. Only through this process of ever-increasing expansiveness and redefinition can this movement hope to meet the needs of such a diverse group of people.
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