

TRACING THE SUBALTERN(ATIVE) DISCOURSE OF BODILY NARRATIVES:
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING
AND THE AUDACITY OF "I"

THESIS

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Master of ARTS

by

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the spring of 2009, while a master student in literature at Texas State University-San Marcos, I enrolled in a seminar course—Medieval Women Writers—under the direction of Dr. Susan Signe Morrison. At the time, I had yet to formulate a thesis topic, and in fact, remained uncertain as to what field of literature in which to specialize. Little did I know that what took place in this single semester would so profoundly affect not only the conception of my thesis, but would carry into the way I begin to understand, and study women's unique writings. Students were compelled to delve into a diverse array of critical works covering both the seminal scholarship with regard to medieval women's writing, as well as learning to apply a transdisciplinary approach to primary texts. It happens that during one of these challenging sessions, a peer questioned the authorship of a particular work believed by scholars to have been written by a female troubadour, but had yet to substantiate this assumption through textual or other evidence. This single question grew into a remarkably rich and vital discussion that extended throughout the remainder of the semester, and ultimately changed the course of my graduate tenure at Texas State. Indeed, from that moment forward I found myself engrossed with the idea of finding more nuanced methods for reading and understanding women's writing, looking for their expressions of identity in places I never thought to look before. I remain indebted to the remarkable group of peers

whom I was lucky enough to join in this seminar, and whose collegiality and passion for scholarship never failed to drive me to higher levels of research and writing, to Dr. Morrison and her dedication to the field of medieval literature, and most importantly, to the medieval women writers themselves, who invariably deserve the largest credit for showing me ways to engage theirs and other women's work not merely with a critical eye, but with an open mind and ear to the fullness of their stories.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Writing *on* the Body, Past and Present

The dominance of the past, which returns like a nightmare to hang over the unredeemed present, can only be smashed by the analytic power of a form of remembering which can look calmly at what has happened as history without seeing it as morally neutral.

—Jürgen Habermas, *On Society and Politics: A Reader*

In her much-anticipated photograph on the cover of *Vogue* magazine in March 2009, First Lady Michelle Obama appears seated in half-repose on a soft-beige sofa, her left arm tucked restfully under her chin, wearing a sleeveless magenta silk gown. Although it is a truly stunning photograph, and she is the first African American First Lady, there is nothing particularly surprising about the *Vogue* cover spread or her decision to take part in it. Indeed, her photograph is but one in a long tradition dating back to 1929 when Lou Hoover, wife of former President Herbert Hoover, became the first to appear in the magazine. However, attached to this historic photograph is a controversy much older than the *Vogue* tradition, one symbolized in literal fashion by Michelle Obama's sleeveless dress.

Months before the *Vogue* cover, amid a flurry of reportage attempting to capture the mood of a country still reeling with the news of its first African American president, an unlikely story stole front-page attention. During her husband's inauguration ceremony, Michelle Obama appeared—daughters Sasha and Malia tucked by her side—on the balcony of the White House in a sleeveless black dress. A barrage of shocked

commentary immediately flooded the presses. As Judy Kantor reports in her recent weblog entry for the *New York Times*, one of the first remarks to hit the airwaves came from Cindi Leive, editor of *Glamour* magazine, who sent a shocked email message exclaiming, “Oh my God. . . . The First Lady has bare arms in Congress, in *February, at night*” (*The Caucus*, emphasis added). Adding to what would prove for some to be insult to injury, Mrs. Obama continued thereafter to appear in public wearing sleeveless apparel. The ensuing controversy, wittily dubbed by an unnamed source the “Right to Bare Arms,” might appear amusing if Leive’s shock at Mrs. Obama’s apparent fashion *faux pas* represented the worst of the reactions printed by media. Unfortunately, Leive’s remarks were only the beginning.

Just after the cover for *Vogue* went to press, several others in the media joined the discussion. For example, the award-winning *Washington Post* journalist Sandra McElwaine was apparently so bothered by the post-*Vogue* “arms sighting” that she wished aloud in print for someone to “tell Michelle to mix up her wardrobe and cover up from time to time” (*The Daily Beast*). But some of the most troubling revelations came from Pulitzer Prize-winning op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd. In her head-turning *New York Times* column on March 7, which begins with the titular question, “Should Michelle Obama Cover Up?” Dowd made public several troubling statements floating around Washington D.C., including a few of her own.

First she reveals that during a private taxi ride shared with her colleague David Brooks, it came to her attention that he felt “it was time for her [Mrs. Obama] to cover up” (WK10). In Dowd’s recreation of their conversation Brooks seems to skirt his comments behind the idea that Washington insiders would be too judgmental of Mrs.

Obama's un-conservative fashion choices, and that because they preferred "brains" (10), she "should put away Thunder and Lightning" (her bare arms) to avoid being "known for her physical presence" (11). And the First Lady's *physical presence* had other effects as well. Dowd's article goes on to say that the "V-neck, sleeveless eggplant dress Michelle wore at her husband's address to Congress . . . caused one Republican congressman to whisper to another, 'Babe'" (11).

Dowd does take Mrs. Obama's side in all of this, making sure to point out that while there "was talk in the Obama ranks that Michelle should stop wearing sleeveless dresses" during the campaign, "because her muscles, combined with her potent personality, made her daunting," in Dowd's opinion Mrs. Obama's "arms, and her complete confidence in her skin, are a reminder that Americans can do anything if they put their minds to it . . . show[ing] us what can be accomplished by a generous spirit, a confident nature and a *well-disciplined body*" (11, emphasis added). Dowd's article went a long way toward quieting remarks such as those of Brooks, not to mention setting off a veritable firestorm of American women from across the country and abroad who spoke out in defense of the First Lady's right to "bare arms." But "sleevegate," as Dayo Olopade refers to the arms controversy, is not just about gender or sexuality. In fact, it brings to light far more than a pair of uncovered arms (*The Root*).

Regardless of which side of the sleeveless gown controversy we examine, the traces of legal, political, and social rhetoric from a past many might like to forget seems to lurk just beneath their surface, reminding us of a drama white America has been playing out on the black female body for a very long time. For example, the public disapproval highlighted by Brooks's discomfort with Michelle Obama's too visible

physical presence, and the too strong black woman suggested by his labeling of her arms as “thunder and lightening,” appear to be eerily similar to fears generated in 1965 by the Moynihan Report and its theory of black matriarchy.

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, at the time assistant secretary in the Department of Labor under President Lyndon B. Johnson, produced a government report entitled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Accomando 190). Ironically issued at the height of the Civil Rights movement, Moynihan’s report linked the problems of African Americans not to racism or discrimination, but to “family structure” (qtd. in Katzmann 202). Drawing on the language of sickness in the section he titles “The Tangle of Pathology,” the report argues:

In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards progress as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well. (qtd. in Katzmann 202-203)

According to Christina Accomando, the phrase “has been forced” implies that slavery *may* have been initially responsible for blacks’ “pathological” family structure, but since slavery had already been abolished the fault for all the woes of the black community resoundingly lay in its “matriarchal structure” (191). The blame is thus cast solely on the too strong black woman. Moynihan’s report goes on to repeatedly juxtapose his theory of black matriarchy (what could instead be termed strong black womanhood) alongside descriptions of “slums,” “crime,” “danger,” and “disorder” (qtd. in Katzmann 203), clearly leaving the reader with the impression that as long as strong black women are in

charge of “Negro family structure” (qtd. in Katzmman 202), only poverty, crime, and sickness could be the result. Moynihan concludes that although “[t]hree centuries of injustice . . . brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American . . . the tangle of pathology” is so deeply engrained that it is “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world” (qtd. in Katzmman 203-204). Not only does Moynihan practically negate white responsibility for slavery through this polemic, he further reframes “racist oppression” as “assistance” that the “pathology” of strong black women renders useless (qtd. in Moynihan 194). With this historical context in mind, Brooks’s apparent distaste for Michelle Obama’s exposed and physically fit arms begins to unravel, revealing that underlying strings may be attached to much older sexist and racist ideologies. As Accomando reminds us, reading without this historical context would never bring to light the underlying issues significant to the public uproar over the First Lady of the United States of America wearing a sleeveless dress (203-204). Although the black female body may be as discursively open to Brooks as it is for Michelle herself, both are in some sense caught in the struggle of rewriting on the body at present that is influenced by the ideologies of the past.

The same sort of connection emerges in an inspection of Dowd’s remarks as well. Although on the surface Dowd’s statements are clearly meant to be sympathetic to Michelle Obama’s side of the “sleevegate” controversy, certain facets of her article also denote underlying beliefs at work. For instance, before she cheers the First Lady’s courage to “bare arms,” which, incidentally, Dowd sees as acceptable only so long as the arms in question remain “*well-disciplined*” (*New York Times* WK11), Dowd makes

another statement that seems closer to Moynihan's theory than one might suspect on a cursory reading:

Let's face it: The only bracing symbol of American strength right now is the image of Michelle Obama's sculpted biceps. Her husband urges bold action, but it is Michelle who looks as though she could easily wind up and punch out Rush Limbaugh, Bernie Madoff and all the corporate creeps who ripped off America.

(10)

Dowd's repeated focus on Michelle's prominent muscles works to masculinize her, a construction that in light of Moynihan's arguments seems to give black women no alternative for selfhood outside of an either/or paradigm in which they are either slave victims or black matriarchs. Furthermore, Dowd's statement also seems to imply that in order for it to be "okay" for Mrs. Obama to go sleeveless she has to be physically able to fight for it. Legal scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that many of the controlling images today "originated during the slave era [and] attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression" (7), a trend that seems to emerge when we compare the discursive body exemplified through Michelle Obama's "right to bare arms" controversy with dominant discourses of the past. As Collins makes clear, "[F]rom the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the . . . ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers . . . the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women has been fundamental to their oppression" (68). Although Michelle Obama may be, according to Erin Aubrey Kaplan, "cruising the coattails of history to present us with a brand-new beauty norm," her new "norm" is up against longstanding constructs that have been writing *on* the black female body since slavery (*The Root*). Just

as slave ideology hinged on the construction of race and gender in an attempt to “erase black subjectivity and frame black sexuality as dangerous and illicit” (Accomando 18), Obama’s uncovered, muscular arms have entered this discursive realm of ideological inscription.

But the body is not necessarily a passive site for such constructions. Carla L. Peterson argues, “[B]lack women have been and are now engaged in the process of rethinking and reassessing their own bodies, which are historically and culturally fraught with a significance that goes to the heart of national, if not Western identity” (13). Michelle Obama’s refusal to “cover up” in deference to the values of a white public might be understood as one example of such a reassessment. And although her arms controversy serves as a good example for the way real human beings in their lived bodies resist either/or models of being, insisting instead on multiple possibilities for expressing identity, she is by no means the first black woman to do so. This process is explored perhaps most notably by African American writers, beginning with the slave narratives.

Writing and Reading *through* the Body

I had never seen any paintings of colored people before, and they seemed to me beautiful. .

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents*

Questions of authenticity, identity, subjectivity, and indeed even of humanity pervade the African American literary tradition. Such questions remain a significant feature of African American literature, not only for the fact that a white critical, often hostile, reading public sought to define black authors by their answers to these questions, but because black authors use these questions to define themselves through an array of sophisticated, diverse, and multivalent responses. However, the argument that lies at the

root of these questions— slavery’s denial of black humanity—continues to prove especially insidious in regard to black women’s identities. At least one possible reason for this persistence has to do with the totalizing control the institution of slavery attempted to impose on the black female body.

The victimizations of black women in American chattel slavery were multiple, not only stripping away claims to their minds, but further removing any rights to their own bodies. Carla L. Peterson explains that the black bondswoman had to perform both the physical work of the slave alongside her male counterparts, thus masculinizing her body, and the sex work of the slave industry—simultaneously satisfying the slave holder’s lust and his desire to replenish his human stock (xi). As a result, the black female body was both masculinized and sexualized, rendering it grotesque in the eyes of the dominant culture (xi). Moreover, the same legal definitions of race that bound black men to servitude extended even more invasively onto slave women’s bodies because children followed the “condition” of the mother. Thus, the horrors of miscegenation by intimidation and rape, the constant threat of the auction block, and the ultimate destruction of family came to be universal markers of suffering peculiar to the slave woman alone, all of which would have a profound and lasting effect on African American women’s identities and the way African American women sought to redefine themselves.

One of the most significant mediums that African American women would adopt and adapt in this mission is literature. Beginning with the work Angelyn Mitchell describes as the “Ur-text of African American women’s writing” (9), Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, African American women

authors have developed strategies that challenge their audiences to rethink the material and social conditions of black women by writing through the body. Jacobs's autobiographical narrative will serve as the inaugural work for her narrative, and for future bodily narratives, challenging the dominant culture's constructed view of the black female body by revealing the realities of slavewomen's exploitation and by reversing enforced silences. This thesis argues that by applying the primary characteristics that Mitchell identifies in both postmodern fiction and ex-slave narratives to the way we read African American women's writing—"fragmentation, non-linearity, discontinuity, and cognitive disruptiveness,"—readers can open up the embedded stories of bodily agency that have been silenced or overlooked by more traditional reading practices (11). This thesis seeks to view the body as multiple, as a lived physical reality, as a primary site of ideological inscription, and as a discursive tool for agency in subaltern literature, one which black women writers use to write their own subaltern(ative) discourses—bodily narratives—in attempts to re-authenticate, redefine, and reclaim a whole identity, and to express their own unique audacities of "I."

II. HARRIET JACOBS'S *INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE* *OF A SLAVE GIRL: A BODILY NARRATIVE*

To begin to read the story of American slavery we need to develop new reading strategies and seek out different sorts of texts.

—Christina Accomando, “*The Regulations of Robbers*”

Each chapter of this thesis opens by juxtaposing a different telling of slavery, race, or gender to create and reveal multiple consciousness between and within these works. As Christina Accomando points out, such methods “provoke a more nuanced understanding . . . of works and can help uncover narratives of resistance” in the primary texts or events studied (22).

American chattel slavery launched an assault against African American women’s bodies that continues to have profound and devastating effects on the way they are viewed and presented in society. Drawing on the constructs of race and gender, American enslavers created denigrating fictions specifically directed at slave women’s physicality. These stereotypes worked to shroud and rationalize the physical, sexual, and emotional brutalities slavery committed against African American women. The first portion of this chapter will trace the emergence of these raced and gendered constructions about the black female body.

Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is the first full-length autobiographical slave narrative ever published by an African American woman in the antebellum period², and the first slave narrative to expose in detail the realities

of slave women's sexual exploitation in American slavery. Jacobs's autobiographical narrative serves as the inaugural work for her, and future bodily narratives, challenging the dominant culture's constructed view of the black female body by revealing the realities of slavewomen's exploitation and reversing enforced silences. This chapter will focus on the "different story" (Jacobs 116) Jacobs presents in her narrative and the incidents she draws on to wage a sustained and sophisticated critique of nineteenth-century discourses about the black female body. This chapter will also apply the primary characteristics that Mitchell identifies in both postmodern fiction and ex-slave narratives—"fragmentation, non-linearity, discontinuity, and cognitive disruptiveness"—to the African American women's literature examined throughout this thesis, to reveal the embedded stories of bodily agency that have been silenced or overlooked by more traditional reading practices (11).

A Different Story

We could have told them a different story.
—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents*

As Christina Accomando points out, "[S]lavery necessarily produces an uneven record, marked by silences and suppressed narratives" (21). The "official" texts of slavery did not focus on slave voices. It was in the best interest of slavery to propagate the myth that African Americans had no voice, offered no resistance, and were wholly dominated by their masters. For enslaved African American women, this situation was compounded by the abominable sexual exploitation waged against their bodies. Yet viewing slave women as only victims replicates the silences of slavery fictions about them. Slave women were victimized, but they also resisted slavery, and to uncover this agency we have to read for their "different stor[ies]" (Jacobs 61).

Perhaps nowhere are these distortions and erasures better illustrated than in the life of another antebellum slave woman, whose act of physical resistance to fight for the worth of her body led to one of the most sensational courtroom dramas in the slave state of Missouri. In 1991 historian Melton McLaurin published *Celia: A Slave*, which retells the true story of a Missouri slave girl who was purchased at the age of fourteen by Thomas Newsom, a wealthy Missouri farmer. Very little is known about Celia. Where she came from, who her family might have been, and how many times she was bought and sold before she came into Newsom's possession all remains a mystery, silenced and suppressed by the official records of slavery. What we do know, however, is that Newsom, a widower, raped fourteen-year-old Celia for the first time on the wagon ride back to his property. Once there, Newsome apparently established his new slave in a small cabin, where he proceeded to continue his sexual exploitation over the course of the next four years. Celia eventually bore two children by Newsom, and in 1855 was sick and pregnant again. Celia resisted his advances. When Newsom refused to stop his assault, Celia picked up a large stick, apparently struck him twice, and killed him. Celia was tried, convicted, and hanged.

According to McLaurin, her attorney mounted what seems to have been a strong argument on her behalf, claiming self defense against Newsom's repeated sexual assaults. The attorney hoped to convince the jury that the existing Missouri law, which allowed for self-defense in cases of rape against white women should be applied in Celia's case. The trial judge, however, disagreed. He instructed the jury that it was impossible for an owner to rape his property, and that Celia was criminally liable for an act of murder. The jury agreed. On the afternoon of Friday, December 21, Celia was hanged for the murder

of Newsom. Celia's story is an appalling reminder of slavery's insidious use of race and gender to construct the black female body as rapeable, content, and silent. Yet there is another troubling aspect of this story that concerns McLaurin's presentation of the facts.

For example, McLaurin never mentions what Celia might have had to say in her trial. After all, she and Newsom were the only ones present at the alleged crime, and he was dead. We have no idea what her level of participation was in the trial. Did she take the stand? If so, what was her testimony? What did Celia, the defendant in this trial, and *subject* of McLaurin's book, have to say? We simply do not know. According to Accomando, in cases where slaves were defendants they were generally allowed to testify in their own behalf (134-35). Yet McLaurin remains curiously silent; and, consequently, so does Celia. However, McLaurin does give extensive voice to another figure in his book. He spends the majority of *Celia: A Slave* focusing on her white master.

In fact, we learn all about Newsome, whom McLaurin describes as a hardworking, yeoman-farmer success story, and much of his story is delivered in an almost Faulknerian-like prose reminiscent of a scene from the Old South. To be sure, McLaurin provides socioeconomic background of Missouri's rise from a territory to a slaveholding state in the Union (the cows, sheep, swine, and cotton are all mentioned). But there is almost nothing about the slave woman. In the end, a suppression of Celia's resistance, her claim to her body, is suppressed in McLaurin's account.

Such are the narratives Harriet Jacobs sets out to remember. Jacobs writes the "different story" (Jacobs 61) African American women lived in slavery and witnesses for the body that tells the stories of what they endured.

Witnessing the Body

Not only do many Americans now know of Frederick Douglass, Richard Allen, and George Washington Carver, but they embrace these outstanding achievers, along with Kunte Kinte and Chicken George, as examples of the heroic spirits once enslaved. Mention the slave woman, however, and noble images fade. They see her as victim—to be pitied, perhaps—but neither respected nor emulated. In the popular imagination, she stands on the auction block, nameless, stripped to the waist, her infant just sold from her arms, waiting to be claimed by yet another licentious master.

—Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*

By almost all scholarly accounts, Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical slave narrative—*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*—is an extraordinary work. In fact, Jacobs's story once prompted the distinguished African Americanist scholar and founder of Yale university's African American Studies program, Charles T. Davis, to remark that "[w]hether it was written by a black woman or white woman, *Incidents* is still a very peculiar book" (qtd. in Yellin xxi). Davis was not the only reader who found *Incidents* "peculiar." Throughout most of the twentieth century, Jacobs's narrative was considered by many scholars to be either a work of fiction or written by the book's editor, abolitionist Lydia Maria Child. It often seemed that the more critical attention Jacobs's narrative received, the more critics seemed to wonder just what kind of literary production *Incidents* was. While most of these doubts were laid to rest with historian Jean Fagan Yellin's 1981 publication of a cache of some thirty letters that finally established that Jacob's work was indeed "Written by Herself", several questions about her narrative continue to linger.

For example, Frances Smith Foster points out that "Harriet Jacobs has more than once been accused of having omitted or distorted details of her own life in order to enhance her personal reputation or to achieve artistic effect" ("Resisting *Incidents*" 323).

Historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese seems to agree with Foster. In 1988 she declared that Jacobs's "pivotal authentication of self probably rested upon a great factual lie, for it stretches the limits of all credulity that Linda Brent actually eluded her master's sexual advances" (292). Clearly, Genovese did not believe Jacobs could possibly have resisted her master; a slave woman, it seems, had to be a victim.

The African American slave woman, as Foster's trenchant observations make clear, has not exactly enjoyed celebrity status. In fact, both slave women and slave women's narratives of the mid-nineteenth century are arguably the most misunderstood, misread, and misrepresented groups and generic categories of women's writing. Although female slaves of the antebellum period (1830-1865) such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth have received a great deal of attention in scholarly publications and college classrooms, their iconic status has done little to change the image of the majority of African American women slaves and female slave narrators. By and large, they have remained the voiceless figures of Foster's example, women who do not measure up to the heroic standards that figures such as Frederick Douglass, Tubman, and Truth represent. As a result, they are often grouped into a category that most Americans would prefer not to think about: African American slave women are overwhelmingly assumed to be victims.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, these women were profoundly victimized. Foster points out that "the forced selling of children away from slave mothers and the rape of slave women were frequent events" (*Witnessing Slavery* xxix). In fact, "the violation and exploitation of the enslaved Black woman's body is," according to Angelyn Mitchell, "one of the most pervasive themes in African American

history” (23). Enslavers realized early on that not only did the black slave woman’s body offer great profit potential, but slave women could also be used in other ways as well. As Angela Davis explains, “[T]he license to rape emanated from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was a gruesome hallmark of slavery” (175). But the “gruesome hallmark” did not evolve on its own. For that, slavocracy and its agents would deploy the constructs of race and gender to develop an insidious and, over time, pervasive mythology against the black female body and black female identity that rationalized and shrouded the multiple violations white enslavers committed against slave women.

Mitchell points out that historians have traditionally focused on the institution, rather than on the culture, of slavery and secondarily on the enslaved black male, so much so that feminist studies of the institution have been only quite recent (23). One of the first historians to focus on women was Deborah Gray White, whose comprehensive study *Ar’n’t I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* analyzes “the enslaved black woman as the embodiment and continuation” of the African cultural practices, customs, and heritage that “she preserved in . . . constructing her African American culture” (66). White also traces the construction of damaging race and gender stereotypes to early European travel reports, arguing that male authors of these reports were clearly not interested in correctly interpreting the African peoples they encountered or attempting to understand their unique cultural practices and behavior. Instead, they had their own agendas for inscribing African women in very specific ways. White explains:

[t]he idea that black women were exceptionally sensual first gained credence when Englishmen went to Africa to buy slaves. Unaccustomed to the

requirements of a tropical climate, Europeans mistook seminudity for lewdness. Similarly, they minister African cultural traditions, so that polygamy was attributed to the Africans' uncontrolled lust, tribal dances were reduced to the level of orgy, and African religions lost the sacredness that had sustained generations of ancestral worshippers. (29)

Mistakenly conflating traditional behaviors with sexual lewdness, the European travelers both perverted the African woman's body and devalued Africans cultural practices. In one generalizing move, race and gender constructs were applied to the black woman's body and identity. White points out that these early slanders would serve as the primary source of two of the most prevalent and reductive myths used to mark the black female body—the Jezebel and the mammy. The Jezebel, White explains, “was the counter image of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her” (29). Clearly, one can see that slave patriarchy constructed the Jezebel stereotype in a very intentional opposition to the dominant codes of nineteenth century white womanhood by creating a fictional figure whose animalistic and uninhibited desire appeared to be a threat to the idealized virtues of purity. But Mitchell points out that in reality “her body was the site of White licentiousness and economic desire” (Mitchell 25). These white men's stereotypes, in other words, worked to displace their own predatory sexual desires onto innocent slave women.

By contrast, White concludes that the mammy was the “the personification of the ideal slave, and the ideal woman. . . . Mammy was an ideal symbol of the patriarchal institution” (58). Not only did the mammy take on almost mythical qualities next to the

Jezebel, Mitchell points out that she generally “managed the household and cared for the physical and emotional needs of her owner and his family. . . . In later years, the mammy . . . generally held a position of respect within her surrogate family and a position of power within her community” (25). However, while she may have been the ideal image of the paternalistic myth, Mitchell explains that the mammy figure was actually constructed as an “obedient, long-suffering, dehumanized, and asexual” woman (25). Just like the Jezebel, the racist and gendered stereotype focused back on her body, her sexuality, and the needs of the master. Whether Jezebel or mammy, the slave woman’s body was specifically and narrowly constructed to meet economic, sexual, and reproductive desires.

Although Jacobs may have been up against a number of dominant constructs and discourses, they do not seem to have dissuaded her from challenging them. For one thing, she sets out with two very different and two very clear focuses in mind. Her first goal is to write about, and for, slave women. In fact, Jacobs’s narrative is often correctly described as a woman-centered text. Indeed, it is arguably because of *Incidents* that critics have been able to gain new understandings of women’s community, motherhood, family dynamics, and constructions of womanhood, all issues that Accomando rightly reminds us have often been “downplayed or treated differently by male [slave] narrators” (114). And while it may seem surprising that a woman’s writing a text for and about women is “new,” it is nevertheless unprecedented. Not only was Jacobs’s narrative the first published full-length slave narrative written by an African American woman in the antebellum period (often also called the “golden age of slave narratives”), hers was also one of only sixteen written or dictated by an African American woman of more than one-

hundred and sixty published slave narratives written or dictated by men. Jacobs was the first.

Jacobs's narrative is, in fact, a deliberate and tremendously effective witnessing act for slave women. And it is more so when she adds her second monumental goal, to expose the sexual violation and exploitation of slave women. Although, by the mid-nineteenth century, abolitionist writers in general, and male slave narrators more specifically, were well-known for exposing gruesome violations of slaves, often the women in these narratives are presented inaccurately. As Foster points out, "[M]ost slave narrators stereotyped women as sexually exploited victims" (*Witnessing Slavery* xxx), reinforcing the dominant myth that all slave women are pathetic, helpless, and degraded victims. Jacobs, however, rarely gives us any indication she is. Moreover, she does not moralize on the women who suffer multiple brutalities in her narrative. Instead, she witnesses for them, often switching at a moment's notice to an accusatory sentence. This is precisely what she does in her "Preface." "I want to add my testimony," the narrator announces, "to arouse the women of the North" of "the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (5). But as an added corrective at the end, lest these women of the North consider themselves the superior white, bourgeois readers who will judge whether the lowly slave woman is credible, Jacobs presents a declatory statement that claims total authority: "Only by experience can any realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations" (5).

While direct addresses to the audience are common to nineteenth-century writing, Jacobs's use of the technique is astounding. In the instance above, for example, she

makes a declaratory statement. Yet she also adds some literary elements to the mix. The sentence itself is replete with synaesthetic imagery: “deep . . . dark . . . foul” (5): it is physical and material. The reader is invited to lose balance from the “deep” hole Jacobs suggests, to stumble in the “dark[ness] of this hole, and to breath and smell the “foul” air of this space. When we combine the various elements of the “Preface,” however, another bodily implication seems to come through as well. Indeed, this is perhaps one of the most consistent and consistently overlooked of Jacobs’s rhetorical strategies in *Incidents*.

For example, Jacobs repeatedly—in the “Preface,” and elsewhere in the narrative—varies sentence structure—from declaratory to accusatory—to insist that the audience pay attention to a point she is making. These commands typically begin with the word, “Reader . . . ,” though this is not always the case, and engage the audience in dialogue, sometimes implying, as Robyn R. Warhol argues, “imperfections in the narratee’s ability to comprehend, or sympathize with, the contents of the text, even while expressing confidence that the narratee will rise to the challenge” (qtd. in Foster 814). As mentioned above, Jacobs often draws on these occasions to employ rhetorical tropes such as imagery, symbolism, and metaphor to underscore what she is stating. She deploys a syntactic stratagem to further develop or add authority to her narrative. This syntactic stratagem, according to Jeanne Kammer, is common in oratorical performances and is intended to “move the listener to the desired conclusions” (qtd. in Foster 159). Jacobs allows her narrator to intrude into the text: as “Reader, be assured” (5), and “I want to add . . .” (5), often following with remarks that stress the narrator’s authority, as we see in the prefatory sentence, “Only by experience. . . .” (5). These oratorical devices bring narrator and reader face-to-face.

Robyn Warhol observes that Jacobs's use of these syntactic interruptions are very much like those employed by three other well-known nineteenth-century women writers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot—who applied the device within the conventions of sentimental fiction “to inspire belief in the situations their [texts] describe” and “to move readers to sympathize with real-life slaves, workers, or ordinary middle-class people” (qtd. in “Resisting *Incidents*”). Warhol asserts that these writers use the narrator as a “surrogate” to “engage ‘you’ through the substance and, failing that, the stance of narrative interventions and addresses to ‘you’” (qtd. in Foster 813). But through this narrative interruption the author is also stepping into the text, engaging the reader in a personal dialogue, telling us to sit up and take notice, and requiring that we listen to what she is saying because we have absolutely no way of understanding it without her intervention.

The only authority we can trust, therefore, is Jacobs. She alone has the personal experience necessary to tell us what happened, to lead us through the “deep, dark, and foul” lies that slavery has created, and to help us begin to reformulate an understanding about slave women and slavery that acknowledges the “strictly true” (Jacobs 5) version of events Jacobs is supplying. By invoking these dialogic exchanges, ones that Kammer identifies as oratorical speech types, Jacobs is also creating a bodily presence in the text. Not only is she stepping in by suddenly calling us out, “Reader . . .,” but she is also grabbing us by the shirt collar, reminding us that she is right there with us, and that because she has physically experienced the horrors of slavery the narrative describes, we must listen only to her because the slave's body is the only true authority. As Sandra Gunning points out, it is “[b]ecause of her [Jacobs's] own experience in slavery” that she

alone “can claim the power of bodily interpretation” (351). Thus, in one short page, Jacobs has drawn on grammar, syntax, and a sophisticated use of rhetoric, to invoke a bodily presence into her narrative. Furthermore, the authoritative bodily presence she is bringing into the text is no victim. She is a slave woman witnessing from the site of ultimate authority about women’s experiences in slavery: her body.

Further in both the “Prologue” and Jacobs’s first six years of life that follow, Mitchell’s disordered postmodern world meets the slave narrative to reveal a still deeper and more troubling, bodily narrative. Mitchell argues that in the slave narrative self realization is marked by fragmentation, memory by non-linearity, history by discontinuity, and culture by cognitive disruption. That in one page alone we can trace these themes in Jacobs’s life seems startling. Yellen has established that Jacobs was born into slavery in 1813 in Edenton, Chowan County, North Carolina (Jacob 3), she writes that she did not realize until “six happy years of age” that she was a slave (*Incidents* 9). In fact, contrary to what we know from so many slave narratives, Jacobs’s early years of life seem unique for a slave girl living in the antebellum South. Jacobs had a supportive and loving family presence in her life. During her first six years, she lived with both of her parents “in a comfortable home” with her younger brother William (Jacobs 9). She also had an extended family that included her maternal grandmother, a younger uncle very close in age to both herself and her brother, a maternal aunt, and an older uncle, all of whom lived in the same town. Jacobs reports that although she and her family “were all slaves” (6) she was “so fondly shielded” (6) by them that she never dreamed she was “a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of

them at any moment” (9). Indeed, it was not until her mother died that she learned for the first time “by the talk around [her] that” she “was a slave” (10).

Jacobs also provides critical details about the experience of her grandmother, who she writes was “the daughter of a planter in South Carolina,” and whose own “mother and his three children” were set free “during the Revolutionary War,” only to be recaptured, “and sold to different purchasers” (9). Her grandmother “was sold to the keeper of a large hotel” in Edenton, where she “became an indispensable personage in the household, officiating in all capacities, from cook and wet nurse to seamstress” (9). In one of the most compelling and significant early passages of her narrative, we also learn that this grandmother—Aunt Martha—gave birth while she was a slave to five children who were eventually “all divided” among the children of her owner when he died “in order that each heir might have an equal portion of dollars and cents” (10). Jacobs writes that Aunt Martha was attempting to save money through the sale of baked goods for the purchase of her last child, ten-year old Benjamin, “a bright, handsome lad, nearly white,” but that he was sold out from under her for “seven-hundred and twenty dollars,” and that, not surprisingly, “it was a terrible blow” (10). This information not only tells us a great deal about the seemingly commonplace destruction of families in slavery but, more specifically, reveals that at least for her grandmother in what we learn from this passage, one slave woman’s self, memory, history, and culture met in the disordered postmodernist world Mitchell describes. Aunt Martha was kidnapped and sold away from her family, became the invaluable slave yet saw all of her children sold away, and now faced the same misery in a young granddaughter whose mother has just died. Ironically, Accomando points out “The structure of slave law that erased families

developed at the same time as family law governing white households. Nineteenth-century law was beginning to address with specificity regulations around marriage, divorce, spousal roles, and other details of white family life. Slave families, however, were outside this structure” (Accomando 164). For this slave woman, the psychic disorders of slavery are continually rewritten on the kidnapped, commodified, separated, and reborn bodies of slaves; but the white world that benefits from her labor and sexual commodification is solidifying its order and safety.

Reclaiming the Black Female Body

You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sounds of his footsteps, and trembled at the hearing of his voice.

—Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents*

While Jacobs may have mastered witnessing the physical body of the slave through language, her adoption of the sentimental mode of writing to tell her story of slave women’s sexual exploitation has not always met with positive reviews. “Especially with African American women,” Foster reminds us, “reader resistance seems neverending” (“Resisting *Incidents*” 329). In fact, Jacobs’s use of the sentimental mode has been consistently debated, doubted, and criticized by numerous scholars since Vernon Loggins first plucked *Incidents* out of virtual obscurity by including it in his pioneering literary history of African American writers, *The Negro Author*, in 1933. William L. Andrews explains that before Yellin’s authentication of Jacobs’s narrative, “[C]ritics (especially male) . . . persistently and reductively equated [*Incidents*] with mere

sentimentality,” which they associated with *Incidents*’ editor, Lydia Maria Child (268). Unfortunately, these negative evaluations continue to pervade Jacobs’s scholarship.

Andrews’s study reveals that “in the first sustained literary evaluation” (268) of *Incidents* after Yellin’s authentication of the text², “Jacobs is viewed as having failed” (268), according to Annette Niemtow, “to write openly about her own experience,” because she gave into the demands of “the domestic novel” (qtd. in Andrews 268). Andrews argues that Niemtow reads Jacobs’s use of the sentimental mode as a “trivializ[ation]” (qtd. in Andrews 268) of her brutal experiences in slavery by “apologizing for it at the end of the story” (Andrews 268). This same sort of criticism is repeated in Katherine Fishburn’s study of embodiment in slave narratives, *The Problem of Embodiment in Early African American Narrative* (1997). Fishburn argues that Harriet Jacobs “hastened the underground movement of the African American body-self “by beginning a tradition “associated with the Genteel school of writing [that] hid the black body from view because they no longer felt they could trust their (white) readers” (95-96). Fishburn contends that “this narrative distrust had its literary origins in Jacobs’s antebellum autobiography. . . .” (96). Yet again and again we see African American women writers following a lead that Fishburn and others discount. This lead belongs squarely to Jacobs, who, despite the restrictions that sentimental fiction’s conventions and dominant audience clearly imposed on her, nevertheless appropriated this mode of writing to her own ends with tremendous literary sophistication. Yet few seem to realize what agency her choice to do so represents. Perhaps, as Michelle Burnham points out, “[I]t is because Harriet Jacobs inhabits a structural site where the practice of power seems so unlikely that she is able to get away with her resistance to and manipulation of her

master” (284). For a black former slave woman to employ the novel form most closely associated with middle-class white womanhood, to write within its expectations of delicacy and propriety, is one thing on its own; but to do so and also portray sexual exploitation is an audacity well worth noting.

Given her focus on women, and the fact that she was directing her story to a gender-specific group of Northern readers—middle-class white women—it is actually, however, hardly surprising that Jacobs chose the sentimental mode for her narrative. In fact, the characteristics of sentimental literature were in many ways highly appropriate for delineating both the experiences of slavery and the interests of women. Sentimental fiction, Mitchell explains, “emphasizes feeling and emotion” (25), and slavery is an emotionally charged subject. Thus Jacobs’s appropriation of the sentimental style helped her to emphasize the dehumanizing effects of slavery while simultaneously effecting audience sympathy for her cause. Jacobs was also able to draw on the sentimental mode to reach her white female audience. The dominant discourse of white female sexuality, as Hazel Carby has shown, were often employed by black women writers throughout the nineteenth century to address, transform, and on occasion subvert dominant ideological codes that worked against them (*Reconstructing Womanhood* 20- 21). By calling on the conventions of the sentimental novel, Jacobs was centering her narrative squarely in women’s sphere (the domestic or private realm). Aligning the stories and sufferings of slave women with white women’s experiences as women will be key to Jacobs’s rhetorical success in *Incidents*. In the skilled pen of Jacobs, the sentimental mode opens a route into the hearts and minds of white Northern women that compels them to take account of the humanity and suffering of the slave woman’s body.

At one of the most pivotal points in her early, but disjunctive life as a slave girl, Jacobs's mistress suddenly dies. While Jacobs tells us she truly cared for her mistress and would "sit by her side for hours, sewing diligently, with a heart as free from care as any free-born white child" (11), she is not so happy to find after her beloved mistress's will is read that her fate is now the prosperity of a child. But Jacobs turns the characteristic piety of the sentimental mode to her advantage telling the readers, "My mistress had taught me the precepts of God's Word: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' . . . but I was her slave, and I suppose she did not recognize me as her neighbor" (11). Jacobs uses biblical authority not only to chastise the mistress that "as a child" she "loved" (12) but to highlight the hypocrisy of a woman who was her mother's half sister. In fact, in only two pages, Jacobs has likely worried not a few of her delicate white Northern readers' ears. She has revealed her mother, "a slave merely in name," (10) was the mistress's half-sister, and that the mistress had vowed an oath to Jacobs mother that her children should never suffer for anything" (11). Yet now Jacobs found herself bequeathed to someone's five year-old child.

Jacobs is not quite through using the power of the sentimental mode to indict a supposed Southern Lady (which by implication arguably connects the "true" Northern female readers to the indictment) and to make full use of this bourgeois literary style.

Suddenly we learn that not only is miscegenation apparently not a problem for this particular slave-owning family—Jacobs's mother was a "slave in mere name" (10), and seemingly allowed a fair amount of liberty—but also that this loved mistress has broken deathbed promises not only to a half-black sister, but even to a "mammy" figure, Jacobs's grandmother, who had given the mistress's family a "long, faithful service"

(12). Here, not only does the Southern slavery stereotype fail to pay its faithful servant, the payment is obscene— all five of the woman’s children— hardly the fulfillment of the ideal Southern stereotype of the mammy. Aside from Jacobs’s powerful use of metaphor in “Godbreathing machines,” and the fear-provoking symbol of the “auction block” (12), there is also a profound use of bodily imagery. And perhaps most powerfully for female readers, there is a violation of the maternal role between two families when they “[share] the same milk that nourished her mother’s children” (12) and Jacobs’s grandmother’s children simply taken away like “cotton . . . or horses” (12). Here, Jacobs uses a genre that many critics claim fails her abolition message to indict the ideologies of slave paternalism and the Southern Lady to unpack the inhumanity of slavery in all of its horror, and, perhaps most importantly in terms of her own narratorial themes, to witness for and from the bodies of slave women. We are left with childless mothers, cruel ingratitude, broken promises, a tangled web of miscegenation and mother’s milk, and a twelve-year-old narrator given to a little girl. One would be hard-pressed to use the sentimental mode more effectively for discussing slavery. As Mary Helen Washington aptly observes, Jacobs “eschews the sentimental novel’s passive stand for one of power and authority” (“Meditations” 6).

Jacobs intimates one of her most central stories of sexual exploitation after she arrives at the home of her new master and mistress. A familiar theme in sentimental fictions involves a young girl, chased by a lecherous man, who would rather die, in “true womanhood” style, than succumb to the loss of her prime virtue of purity. Jacobs reverses this familiar thematic. Once she arrives at the home of her five-year-old owner, she realizes that a truly lecherous older man lives there. Not only does he begin to

sexually harass her, but Jacobs will later reveal numerous other incidents of sexual exploitation he has committed on his slaves. But for the present, Jacobs finds herself facing “one of the greatest dangers for a Black woman in antebellum America . . . [becoming] the sexual object of White male sexual and economic desire” (Mitchell 30):

My master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master’s age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made him bear this treatment for many months. . . . (27)

But Flint refused to give up his sexual assaults against Jacobs:

He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my young mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned away from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. (27)

While this incident was clearly a pivotal and painful point for Jacobs to recall from her life as a slave girl, it is also a critical point in the slave narrative. Indeed, even those critics who find agency in Jacobs’s appropriation of the sentimental mode often find this situation inappropriately framed in the form of sentimental fiction.

For instance, Washington argues that Jacobs finds herself “[l]ocked into the conventions of the sentimental” (“Meditations” 30) when she reveals the story of Dr. Flint’s abuse and is forced to present him as “a jealous lover and herself as a vulnerable young girl going through a ‘perilous passage’ rather than a slave whose exploitation was legally sanctioned” (“Meditations” 30). Yet, one could also look at this incident as a

painful, yet pivotal point in Jacobs's life, one in which the function of sexuality [serves] as an impetus of enlightenment for the enslaved woman" (Mitchell 30). In fact, Jacobs will have a similar awakening of sorts after her daughter is born; she concludes, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (61). Perhaps the lesson for readers, however, since Jacobs has already lived through these horrors, is that this is one of the irresolvable realities for the slave woman. There is no literary technique, no rhetorical argument, and no solution to this victimizing reality for readers or slave women as long as they are potential objects of a slave owner's sexual lust or sexual commodification. Foster writes:

As victim [Jacobs] became the assailant, since her submission to repeated violations was not in line with the values of sentimental heroines who died rather than be abused. Her survival of these ordeals and continued participation in other aspects of slave life seemed to connote, if not outright licentiousness, at least a less sensitive and abused spirit. . . . (*Witnessing Slavery* 131-132)

As Accomando points out, "Although anti-miscegenation laws made consensual sex between men and women of different races illicit and illegal, the law failed to protect slave women from forced sex committed by white men." (156).

Jacobs continually shifts perspectives, forcing her white Northern female audience to reconsider their preconceived notions of black womanhood. Jacobs "becomes the literal embodiment of the slave as sexual prey," according to Nell Irvin Painter, presenting herself as "bodily proof" in the "testimony of slaves" (307).

The bodily proof Jacobs provides is not always limited to women either. In fact,

part of the power of *Incidents* has to do with the fact that Jacobs is able to expose the how the violations against slave women contradict not only the myths of Southern paternalism and the moral superiority of the Southern family, but also those interconnected ideologies of patriarchy, domesticity, and true womanhood propagated by the North. One method Jacobs returns to again and again to do so involves juxtapositioning incidents alongside one another to reveal two very different versions of events.

Jacobs also stresses the stark differences between black fathers and white fathers in her text. Whenever slave fathers appear, as in the critical early example of her own father, who calls into question the idea of “real” parental authority as opposed to the unjust and constructed “paternalism” of slaveholders, they are inevitably usurped from their proper parental roles. For example, Jacobs tells us that “I had seen several women sold, with his [Dr. Flint’s] babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife” (47). In this incident, Jacobs presents the white “family” as false and constructed. Flint and his legal wife are married, but she is party to his crimes of infidelity. The only way to relieve their guilt over their dual complicity in the sexual exploitation of female slaves and the destruction of a “real” family is to sell off Flint’s “real” children. As Sandra Gunning correctly observes, “[U]nder this system of reversals the pregnant slave bears the guilt of sexual misconduct . . . the protection of Flint’s private life as husband and father is predicated on the exposure and punishment of black female bodies” (341). Parentage for slaveholding men is confounded by contradiction; “his babies” are “sold” while still “at the breast” of their real mothers (55). Jacobs situates slaveholders’ legal, yet immoral, marriages against the real, but illegal, marriages and families of slaves, demonstrating the paradox of the

sacred institution of marriage for Southerners and the bodies of slave children that it sacrifices to keep its secrets. Although Katherine Fishburn contends that by failing to explicitly talk about the black body Jacobs “loses its representative potential as a sexualized body” (122), one could argue that Jacobs makes particularly effective use of the black female body by strictly describing these victimizations against black women in terms of parentage and offspring. Instead of further disrobing the slave women’s raped bodies before us, Jacobs brings the very real victims of slavery’s violations to light by showing children ripped away from their mothers and fathers. Not only does their physical presence take on a more empowering meaning in this way, it refuses to degrade their bodies further than the white perpetrators such as Flint have already done.

Critics have debated the extent to which Jacobs’s affair with Sands was an actual victory, whether she even chose to sleep with him or was seduced, and whether she slept with him at all. While the variety of readings is interesting to some degree, it seems the important information is available in the text itself. Jacobs relates several important points in this section, telling us that “all my prospects had been blighted by slavery” (46), and that “I was desperate” (47), and of course the often quoted explanation “It seems less degrading to give oneself than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you” (47), and finally “I knew it would outrage Dr. Flint so much so as to know that I favored another; it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way” (47). If we read these comments in order, we can trace Jacobs’s thoughts as she presents them. It seems she is deliberating about her limited options, and that she vacillates somewhat between desperation and a limited victory. Yet it is the last comment that appears for this project most telling.

In the end Jacobs refuses a romanticized view of her affair with Sands, pointing out that she knew it would outrage Dr. Flint . . . to know that I favored another” (47). Jacobs is not opting for the commonly called on sentimental mode’s romanticization of male/female relationships. She seems to see that her own status as a slave woman negates any legal, political, or social power that a white woman might enjoy from having sexual relations outside of her class. While a white woman might be able to claim, for example, some status because of her affair with an upper-class white male, particularly if they bore children together, Jacobs realizes that as a slave woman she has no such possibilities. Nevertheless, she uses Sands’ body and her own to demonstrate to Flint that her choices, her needs, and her body matter. Jacobs’s choice to sleep with Sands is an act of authority and authorship to write her own body as she wishes. Jacobs is telling Flint and readers that the black woman’s body does indeed matter. Moreover, Jacobs reminds us, it matters most when black women are writing it. Jacobs uses her affair with Sands to fight back, to resist, and to make her own body and her own sexuality “triumph even in that small way” over Flint and slavery’s attempts to totally exploit black women’s bodies (47). And Jacobs’s use of that particular description, “small way,” calls for some deliberation.

It seems unlikely that Jacobs is talking about her physical body, which after all, she is writing this narrative about. Slave women, including Jacobs, were well aware of the truths about the worth of their bodies and what it would mean for slaves to have control over their physical persons. But if that is true then it appears likely she is talking about her sexuality, which as she states, she would choose “to give” rather than to have taken. Thus we might conclude that the “small” victory reflects the fact that even in

resistance slave women are caught by double-jeopardy. Even in that small way, after all, Jacobs gives herself physically to a white man to emotionally survive the institution exploiting her. However, there are victories to be found in this section.

Jacobs radically subverts nineteenth-century ideologies of womanhood and sentimental conventions when she openly admits to having an affair with Sands. While she seemingly conforms to the standards of true womanhood by appearing to apologize for her actions, she simultaneously declares that these rules do not apply to slave women. She writes, "No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards of others" (55-56). Furthermore, she openly challenges her readers by pointing out that they can never understand her situation. She invokes limited bonds between herself and her white female readers, flatly warning them that their duty is to assist slave women by joining the cause of abolition. They can become sisters to black women only with conditions attached. Accomando argues that "[T]he audience she invokes is the stereotypical construct of the virtuous (white) woman, morally bound to feel sympathy for her suffering sisters" (161-62). Jacobs is underscoring to her readers the idea that "virtue" is merely a construct just as are the slave laws that protect Flint, even though he is a rapist. She implies that white women have laws protecting them from these victimizations even though they may not be "virtuous." Jacobs alternates perspectives, switching mid-thought from imperative to accusatory in her address: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it was to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel"

(55). Accomando argues that by making the audience the subject of these sentences—“[Y]ou never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding snares . . . of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps” (55)—she emphasizes the knowledge of the narrator and the ignorance of her readers about the realities of slave women’s suffering (Accomando 163).

In the chapter “Still in Prison,” Jacobs once again uses imagery to her advantage to expose the profound contradictions she faces in her grandmother’s garret. The narrator uses the trope of irony to reflect upon the very real bodily irony she faces. In her attempt to preserve her “pride of character” (31) and the slave woman’s inclination to “be virtuous” (31) by avoiding Flint’s attempts to sexually harass and rape her (31), she reflects on the fact that her victimizer has the justice of slave laws on his side: “the laws allowed *him* to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here, as the only means of avoiding the cruelties the laws allowed him to inflict upon me!” (112, author’s emphasis) Jacobs is suggesting, that “living in such a situation is worse than being a criminal” (Accomando 161). Jacobs upsets received notions about both the “justice” of Southern law and the identity of those whom the readers think of as criminal. The body, that has been most clean, one might say, is the one that slavery finds most guilty.

Although numerous scholars have interpreted Jacobs’s ending as either a capitulation to the irony of “freedom” in which she may never have a home like other white women, or as ambiguous, which would indicate she is attempting to show that she has done everything nineteenth-century constructs of true womanhood require yet still does not have a home, the ending might also be read as a challenge. She begins by

addressing the audience one last time, again reflecting her power to call the reader out and command her attention: “Reader,” she opens her enigmatic last paragraph, “my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage” (201). Jacobs’ freedom is physical; she owns her own body, as opposed, the statement implies, to those white women who are no longer in control of their bodies or their sexuality. Jacobs is indeed using a powerful literary trope; but rather than ambiguity, it is irony she powerfully evokes. The difference at the end of her story is that *she* is no longer the recipient of that irony. In the end, Jacobs is a free woman. She is not physically bound in “marriage,” but has realized real “freedom,” the right to use, and own, and care for her body as she chooses.

While Jacobs remains ambivalent throughout the narrative about her white Northern female readers’ abilities to act as sisters to black women, she nevertheless seems to remain open to the possibility of a kind of solidarity based more on friendship between women who share common experiences of womanhood, such as those of mothers, sisters, and daughters; but she rarely seems to offer this view without very quickly showing a negative example of a white Southern woman. However, by the end of her narrative Jacobs does seem to let this door remain open to white women who earn it. For white women of the North to share a friendship with black women, they must demonstrate both their loyalty and their willingness to sacrifice. For example, Gunning points out, “[B]y breaking the Fugitive Slave Law, Mrs. Bruce invites imprisonment and financial penalties and in doing so she demonstrates a willingness to sacrifice for her dear friend” (150). And it does appear that Jacobs never forgets this dedicated, self-sacrificial act of real friendship.

There is a clear melancholy in the tone of the final lines, which seems absent elsewhere in her text:

It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them if I could. Yet the retrospect is not altogether without solace; for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea. (156)

Although Jacobs may mean this passage to be ambiguous, her skill of rhetoric elsewhere in the narrative seems to suggest it would be more powerfully rendered here. The great victory for Jacobs may be that she witnessed for herself and so for many others exploited and victimized, and suffering in bondage. She gave voice and significance and value to those women whose bodies have been so victimized. Like Celia, Jacobs writes a bodily narrative, not of victim, or of stereotypes, or of heroes, but of the audacity to call herself an "I."

III. NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING* AND THE ILLEGIBILITY OF THE FLESH

Reading the Mulatta

She's no whiter than you see.
—William Wells Brown, *Clotel* (1867)

. . . Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, and individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and underserved. Surely, no other people were so cursed as Ham's dark children.

—Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

In Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*, she examines the “the veil of color caste” that W.E.B. Du Bois argued would plague persons of African descent well into the twentieth century (qtd. in Davis ix). Larsen, however, will interrogate the collateral issues of not only racist, but also gendered constructions that Du Bois fails to address. Through her biracial co-protagonists—Irene Redfield Westover and Clare Kendry Bellew—Larsen adapts the popular literary trope of racial passing and the “tragic mulatta” tale to trace the effects of racist and sexist constructions of black womanhood on their psychological well-being. In *Passing*, Larsen unpacks the dichotomous models of black womanhood that emerged out of the New Negro movement's efforts to redefine black identity during the 1920s.

This chapter will argue that *Passing* presents these models as narrowed and assimilationist, offering black women the same kind of either / or categories of identity they were objectified and subordinated through in slavery. Instead of enjoying the freedom to explore new paths of identity that the male leaders and artists of the New Negro movement created for themselves, Larsen's novel suggests that black women during the otherwise liberating 1920s found themselves constructed as either genteel figures of the black middle-class or as mulatta figures whose mixed race signified the violations against black women during slavery. Larsen reveals how these untenable paradigms ultimately lead to the erasure of black female subjectivity when one of her female co-protagonists realizes she is unable to fashion her visible body to meet the standards of white womanhood the New Negro movement's images have constructed for her. In the end, Larsen demonstrates that racist and sexist stereotypes continue to center on the black female body, constructing it to meet white and black male needs regardless of the costs to black women's identities.

Christina Accomando reminds us that "racial hierarchy and racism are not aberrations or accidents but are instead systemic and institutionalized" (10). For African Americans, this meant that the end of legalized slavery in the United States would mark the beginning of their battle to claim the actual liberty and equality that the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution were meant to protect and ensure. Indeed, from 1865 until the culmination of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, African Americans lived in the shadow of a paradox in which the Declaration of Independence claimed equality to "all men," while the white American power structure continued to frame blacks as less than equal. Much like the race and gender constructs

American enslavers used to stereotype African American women's bodies in order to justify the myriad violations against them, the dominant culture began their work of framing blacks as inferior long before the Civil War.

"In the nineteenth century," Accomando explains, "anxieties about defining race led to greater efforts at categorization as condition, color, or origin failed to provide simple dividing lines" (9). "The lines were never simple of course, and grew increasingly problematic as mixed-race and free-black populations increased" (Accomando 9). By 1896, white supremacists gained their greatest victory (and black Americans another seventy years of legalized discrimination) in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision. Homer Plessy was an African American man and Louisiana native with white ancestry and visibly white features that made it possible for him to "pass" as white. In 1892, Plessy and the Citizens' Test Committee set out to challenge the constitutionality of the 1890 Louisiana Separate Car Act which legally justified the social separation of blacks and whites on intrastate railroads (Davis vii). Because Plessy's physical appearance made him indistinguishable from the majority of the population, he was a perfect test subject for the case. Davis reports:

[Plessy's] lawyers constructed his social self and legal identity in close proximity to white America, believing that the justice system would recognize both Plessy's whiteness and the absurdity of separating him on the basis of so artificial a designation as his "race." (vii)

On May 18, 1896, the Supreme Court saw things differently. In its now infamous ruling, the high court ruled eight-to-one in favor of the Louisiana statute that ensured a "segregated society with two classes of citizens, each of which was more cognizant of the

rights, benefits, and privileges denied blacks and granted whites” (Davis viii). *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the Supreme Court’s nefarious “separate but equal” ruling marked the first time since the end of the institution of slavery that the Supreme Court specifically undermined the rights and protections established for black Americans under the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. As Thadious Davis points out:

The *Plessy* decision virtually ensured that Americans with even the smallest fraction of African heritage would continue, through the remainder of the nineteenth century and part of the twentieth, to function within a legally segregated and unequal environment designed to keep them in degradation and servitude. (xiii)

Davis argues that the phenomena of “passing,” “the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white racial category or white social identity, is one of the far-reaching consequences of *Plessy v. Ferguson*” (x). Once again, black Americans were framed by white racism and the legal system in contradictory ways that defined them as “citizens” with a second-class status based not only on the visible color of their skin, but on the illegible flesh marked by African American ancestry. *Plessy* serves as a legal record of whites’ obsession with reading what they believe to be racial inscriptions on and through the African American body.

On February 25, 1928, the esteemed fifth avenue New Gallery in Manhattan, New York opened its doors to an exhibit they billed as “the first one-man show of a negro artist,” featuring selected works by the painter Archibald J. Motley, a rising young star associated with the New Negro movement (Johnson xiii). The gallery, however, was not shy about letting potential visitors know that Motley had been invited before

organizers realized that he was an African American. Nevertheless, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson points out that “the curiosity of a solo exhibition by an African American artist fueled . . . sensationalist promotions of the show” (xiii). In fact, Johnson asserts that “[j]udging from the laudatory reviews in the *Crisis* and the *New Yorker*, it must have been an extraordinary evening (xiii). “The period known as the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing” (Johnson xiii). Indeed, Motley’s art seems to have conveyed more than simple fascination with a “negro artist” being featured in a posh, “separate but equal” Manhattan gallery. As Johnson correctly observes, “Motley’s work engaged the uplift aesthetics of the New Negro movement and the rage for the primitive sweeping the American and European art scene” (xiii).

Yet it was one specific painting of Motley’s that seems to have been the ultimate show-stopper for gallery viewers. Although Motley had several paintings of mixed and ambiguously raced women in the exhibit (Johnson xiii), it was the provocatively titled painting *A Mulatress* that most captivated visitors (Johnson xv). In fact, it must have captivated the promoters of the showing as well, because a photograph of the woman’s image takes up almost an entire page of the New Gallery advertisement for Motley’s show. And the image is both enthralling and troubling.

Motley’s portrait is painted in simple black and white tones, which work to highlight the fact that the female subject of his piece is biracial. The painting depicts a biracial woman who appears to be in her twenties, wearing bobbed hair which places her among the stylish flapper figures of the 1920s. The young woman is dressed in a long, form fitting, sleeveless gown, with matching pearl necklace and earrings, and is seated in a straight back Queen Anne-style chair that appears to accentuate her relaxed posture. In

fact, Motley has his female subject positioned almost provocatively in the chair, with one arm rested against her body, and the other draped across the left arm of the chair. But what is most evocative, it seems, is her facial expression. She is staring straight at the viewer with her lips puffed in what appears to be a pouting expression, and one that conveys a flirtatious, yet sullen attitude. In other words, she is depicted with subtle sexual markers that are heightened by the fact that she is a mulatta woman, which implied miscegenation and sexual transgression. The painting did not last long. By the end of Motley's showing, *A Mulatress*, and most of the other works were sold out. As Johnson points out, Motley's art "appeal[ed] to art aficionados with an appetite for the exotic and the avante-garde. . . ." (xiii). The New Negro movement was in its heyday and Motley's work seemed to be promoting its message.

The New Gallery pieces were not the only works that Motley painted of biracial women. According to Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, Motley also won a gold award from the Harmon Foundation in 1928 for another mulatta figure titled *Octoroon Girl* (822). Although Motley's personal position on subjects of mixed race remains ambiguous according to Wintz and Finkelman, Motley seems to have preferred to paint biracial subjects "whose different skin tones and facial features," he pointed out, "made African American subjects far more attractive and interesting . . . than European-Americans" (822). But what seems most compelling about Motley's portraits of biracial women are his descriptions of the works themselves. Motley states that his subject for *Octoroon Girl* "was the possessor of an extremely fiery temper, a very temperamental person. I have tried to express her personality in the physiognomy of the face and the

personality in relation of the hands to the face. I have also tried to express the true mulatress" (Johnson xvi). Motley's statement begs the question, just who, or what is the "true mulatress?" It seems that Motley believes, as the New Negro movement's dichotomous discourses of primitivism and bourgeois respectability imply, that there is some essential race and gender quality visibly definable about the biracial woman. In other words, he seems to be connoting that the mulatta's body can somehow be painted to show what she is really like. How does Motley read the mulatta body? How does he want his viewers to read her? Did Nella call on the supposedly readable mulatta body to explore models of black womanhood in *Passing*? Whether she took Motley's model or not, Larsen does interrogate the New Negro movement's narrow paradigms for black womanhood. Moreover, she does so by revealing not only its constructedness, but the emotional and psychological damage such raced and gendered constructions of black women's bodies and identities can cause.

Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* is both very different, yet very much in conversation with Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* on the topics of race, gender, and their effects on black women's identities and their psychological health. In fact, Larsen seems to both draw from the literary legacy that Jacobs's inaugurates, and to revise and extend Jacobs's work to suit the specific historical and social situation that Larsen is writing from in the late 1920s. For example, like Jacobs, Larsen will interrogate dominant discourses of motherhood, sexuality, domesticity, and patriarchy in *Passing*. Larsen will also address the precarious place that biracial women face in not only the white community, but the black community as well. And Larsen will give particular focus in her novel to the expectations and stereotypical assumptions about

black women and their bodies. However, Larsen does all of this with a definitive twist. Larsen's novel directs a critique of racist and gendered stereotypes not solely against whites, but also against the middle-class African American community and its adoption of assimilationist models of identity promoted by the New Negro movement.

In *Passing*, the mulatto figure will serve as the subversive character-type for Larsen to examine racist and gendered constructions that seem to be reiterated in the two dominant and dichotomous New Negro discourses of primitivism and cosmopolitanism, which for black women translate to either an identification with the figure of the mulatta or the disciplined genteel middle-class black woman. Larsen utilizes the mulatta figure to stress the falsity of these racist and gendered models by creating co-protagonists whose invisible interiors hide what the visible exteriors seem to imply. In other words, Larsen creates characters whose visible identities represent the dichotomous models of New Negro discourses but whose actual identities are not written on the outer black female body. By focusing on the apparently safe and popularized trope of the "tragic mulatta," Larsen is able to expose the ways that these masculinist models for black womanhood are shallow and reiterative of racist and gendered stereotypes about black women.

While one of Larsen's co-protagonists is the epitome of a "proper" and middle-class black woman, she is also rigid and fearful of being identified as too "black." In other words, she must mask her true self in order to meet the paradigm of black female propriety and gentility that New Negro thinkers are intent on promoting. Her life, therefore, is mired by thoughts she cannot express or reveal. She is, for instance, prudish about sex, even with her husband Brian. Irene is also strictly controlling about discussions of racism that enter her life. Not only is she unable to discuss serious racial

violence with her husband and family when her son asks what lynching is, but she also refuses to see her own internalized racism. Despite her uplift work, in other words, Irene seems to harbor a deep-seated fear of having anything to do with African Americans that she considers below her class status. She is trapped in an interior shell that ultimately pushes her over the edge.

Larsen's second half of this protagonist pair is just the opposite. She is the literal image of the mulatta that New Negro artists are promoting—urban, sexually alluring, and sophisticated. However, she is also linked to the forbidden desire and sexual excess of slavery and the mixed race black woman. Thus, she is subtly tied to the same raced and gendered model of black womanhood that whites constructed during slavery. Larsen manipulates this link to create a mulatto opposite in the character of Clare who is, according to Irene's reading of Clare's body, hypersexualized, shallow and selfish, and is allowed to be seen through only a visible exterior and nothing more. Her body is a commodity and fetish for black and white men alike, replicating the victimization of the black female body initiated in slavery.

Clearly, each of these models of black womanhood are limiting. The black woman is either a disciplined bourgeois body who hides her feelings on the inside, or she is a sexually licentious and undisciplined body whose mulatta flesh signifies her as a commodity and object. By setting up this inside and outside identity for her protagonists, Larsen is able to carefully and subtly interrogate the psychological effects of racist and gendered paradigms for black women that inevitably focus on the legibility of their bodies. In the end, Larsen will expose the fact that neither race nor gender are definable or codifiable on the black woman's body because they are nothing more than social

constructs that assume skin color and sexuality can be read and ruled. In reality, Larsen reveals that bodies' appearances are performances and all we can be certain of is the illegibility of the flesh.

The artistic explosion of the Harlem Renaissance is often referred to as a period of great cultural awakening for African Americans. The period (1919-1941) marks a number of important firsts for black artists, writers, and performers. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance was the great heyday of black artists from every conceivable field. Blues greats such as Bessie Smith, Broadway performers like the legendary Josephine Baker, concerts by stage singers such as Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, and Roland Hayes, as well as concerts drawing unprecedented crowds into Harlem due to the rise of a new music created by African Americans called jazz, were all common occurrences during the 1920s. In fact Jazz generated such unprecedented popularity by white Americans that the 1920s came to be known as the great Jazz Age. But all of this certainly did not happen overnight. Although historians argue that there are a number of factors during the early part of the twentieth century that undoubtedly served as catalysts for this great cultural change, including "the Great Migration North, World War I, industrialism, urbanism, nationalist liberation movements, and the growth of internationalism following the Bolshevik Revolution" (Dawahare 22), the fact remains that the Harlem Renaissance marks the first time in modern history that so many remarkably talented African American artists and thinkers were gathered together for such a sustained period of time.

The thinkers that helped to shape the ideologies and artistic themes of the Harlem Renaissance belong to the New Negro movement. The New Negro movement brought a spirit of change and optimism to the early twentieth century, one that emanated from the

enthusiasm of the men and women that formed its leadership. With a diverse array of creative leaders from A. Philip Randolph, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Marcus Garvey, to Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Charles S. Johnson these New Negro intellectuals “sought to redefine the African American identity that had appeared on the scene” (Dawahare 22). Anthony Dawahare points out that these important thinkers claimed that the New Negro:

belonged to a modern generation of black Americans shaped by the great events of the teens and twenties. . . . and heralded the arrival of the New Negro as the beginning of a new phase of American history in which the production of black culture would assist African Americans in winning respect long overdue in the United States and abroad. (22-23)

However, Locke and other black intellectuals were also aware that white Americans were not familiar with the realities of African Americans’ lives. As the unofficial, but clearly defined central spokesperson for New Negroes, Locke made clear in a literary anthology that served as an intellectual centerpiece of the movement—*The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925)—that African Americans intended “to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the negro in America that ha[d] so significantly taken place” over the decades since the turn of the century (“Foreword” ix). The *New Negro* anthology “was an effort by Locke to intervene in the process of representation, [and] to add to the available images of African Americans, and to publicize new ideas about African Americans” (Carroll 1).

These leaders, however, were not always in agreement on who this new African American was, or how he or she should be represented (23). Although Dawahare asserts

that the New Negro movement coalesced around the idea that “black Americans belonged to a unique race of human beings [with] a distinctive and invaluable racial identity and culture, [and that they] had thrown off the yoke of prejudice that equated blackness with barbarism, and w[ere] proud of [their] race and heritage,” contradictions arose over how to represent this image (23). In fact, there were two very distinct, and in many ways dichotomous discourses that arose among New Negro intellectuals. Dawahare explains this dichotomy by pointing out that New Negro leaders and artists believed African American identity was “shaped by modernity yet retained in some way a racial essence or character that preceded modernity” (23). In other words, the New Negro was somehow both modern and premodern, a member of the new urban scenes of the Harlem Renaissance, but also part of an older past associated with the South, slavery, and Africa. This idea of a modern and premodern essence of black authenticity serves to highlight the two strands of art that emerged in the Harlem Renaissance.

On the one hand, there were those artists who wanted to capture the premodern by tapping into what they saw as the black folkways of the masses. In order to achieve this goal, they looked to what they saw as essential blackness as it was represented in the popular music of blues and jazz during the 1920s, to the masses back “home” in the American South, or to the cultural practices and beliefs from black Americans’ African heritage. The artists who developed this theme created what would become a sub-movement during the Harlem Renaissance known as primitivism. On the other hand, there were those artists and leaders of the New Negro movement who believed that authentic blackness should be best reflected through the new cosmopolitanism of the Harlem Renaissance period, and its upwardly mobile black bourgeoisie. These thinkers

and artists were wary of what they saw as exoticism in the primitivist movement, and worried that such depictions of black identity would inevitably lead to a return of white stereotypes of African Americans as ignorant, culturally backward, and indeed, as sub-human. For African American women, however, neither of these dichotomous discourses opened up new models for black womanhood. In fact, they tended to replicate much older paradigms with racist and gendered stereotypes about black women's identities that inevitably focused on the body. However, black women were not necessarily included in shaping this paradigm of modern black identity.

In fact, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson argues that black women, particularly those of the middle-classes, lost much of the freedom that earlier artists and political activists enjoyed during the last decades of the nineteenth century:

In their attempts to counter stereotypes of black women as subhuman, immoral, and hypersexual . . . African American . . . writers continued the project of reconstructing black womanhood begun by nineteenth-century authors. . . . This was actually a regression from the . . . visibility of activist-writers such as Ida B. Wells Barnett and Frances Harper, who worked side by side with male abolitionists. (xvi)

Instead of black women achieving more equality with the end of slavery and the legalized sexual exploitation of their bodies by white patriarchs, it seems that attempts to counter negative images of black womanhood stemming from antebellum stereotypes of race and gender, the New Negro discourses worked to restrict models for black women's identities. Bourgeois images and ideologies meant to improve African American's sociopolitical status and counter racist stereotypes, in other words, tended to push black

women into a role of the genteel lady that white women had been struggling to escape for more than a century.

Mar Gallego argues that “[Nella] Larsen’s writing not only presents the figure of the mulatta as a continuous transgression of the racial barrier, but a rupture of the last sexual taboo, miscegenation” (129). Representing the forbidden sexual product of two races, the mulatta figure becomes the sexual and racial ‘other’” (Flitterman-Lewis 47) wherein the constructs of race and gender are precariously and permanently bound together. Taking on none of the risks of the mulatta slave woman—the original black female body of racial sexual violation—but all of her inherent transgression, this chapter argues that *Passing* appropriates and adapts the literary trope of the mulatta to explore “other infractions of the social code affecting the realm of sexual definition, with special reference to the expression of her own sexuality and the acceptance of the traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother” (Gallego 129).

In order to explore this argument, this chapter will draw on the theories of the abject as expressed by Julia Kristeva in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, and Deborah McDowell’s challenges to body studies’ critics to connect their ideas about the outside, visual body to the inside psychological identity of black women. A number of critics including George Hutchinson, Judith Butler, Jacqueline McClendon, Gayle Wald, Kathleen Pfeiffer, and Deborah Grayson have all analyzed Larsen’s novel as a psychological study of the effects of racism and sexism on black women, drawing variously on theories from Michael Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, among others, and this chapter seeks to extend these studies by focusing on the way Larsen seems to be specifically targeting the way New Negro discourses of black

womanhood unconsciously seemed to have adopted race and gender constructions that inevitably focus on reading the black female body to determine black women's identities. Thus, Kristeva's theory will be applied along with black feminist critical theory in order to take account of the mutually constitutive constructions of race and gender as Larsen seems to explore them in *Passing*.

The Ins and Outs of Race and Gender

. . . Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, and individual, on one's own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. It was a brutality, and underserved. Surely, no other people were so cursed as Ham's dark children.

—Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929)

In her "Afterword" to *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, Deborah McDowell contemplates the limits of the body to fully represent the "self" (309). McDowell cites Toni's Morrison's *Beloved* to make the point that the "dispersed pieces of the body can only partly represent the 'self,' and are not irreducible to the to the 'self.'" The shortcoming McDowell hones in on the *Recovery* essays is one of the most troubling issues for feminist body theorists, one which she breaks down with pinpoint critical alacrity.

McDowell questions the viability of a theory of the body that focuses entirely on the "outside," the "surfaces," the "exposed . . . fetishized parts," that have so often been used to stereotype black women (309). She argues that without an account of "the reciprocal relations between exterior and interior . . . the outside and the inside body," theories of the body in relation to the "self" fall short of their purported goals (309).

McDowell's warning is worth delving into with regard to Larsen's novel for several reasons. First of all, more than any other critic, McDowell might be said to share a kind of intimacy with Larsen. Akin in many ways to Jean Fagan Yellin's research which helped to reauthenticate Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* as an American slave narrative, McDowell worked to re-publish, reify, and reaffirm the Harlem Renaissance era African American female phenomenon Nella Larsen's only two novels in 1986, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. It is arguably due to McDowell's own cutting-edge analysis of *Passing*, "'It's Not Safe, Not Safe at All': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," which accompanied the republication of these two classics that really caused scholars to stand up and take notice of Larsen.

McDowell's edgy reading argued that *Passing* should be understood as an exploration of female sexuality; but not the kind usually discussed in terms of Harlem Renaissance novels. And certainly not the kind of sexual expression attributed to the genre Larsen's novel belongs to—the passing story. McDowell, however, makes a convincing argument. She asserts which she develops based on the Larsen's dual protagonists, Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew. Her case hinges on the assumption that "theirs are sexless marriages" (xxiii), which in Clare's case, McDowell attributes to her travelling banker husband, John Bellew, and the fear that a second child between them might reveal the fact that she is African American (Clare is permanently passing as white, unbeknownst to Bellew). As for Irene, McDowell argues, correctly, that the "narrative strongly indicates her own sexual repression is at fault" (xxiii). McDowell's conclusion is that because of the apparent dysfunction of these relationships, Larsen can safely "flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship

between them” (xxiii). This reading catapulted Larsen back into the mainstream, and has opened up an array of diverse and compelling scholarship. As Gayle Wald points out, by “focusing on the specifically eroticized relationship between Larsen’s protagonists . . . [McDowell is able to] recuperate *Passing* from decades of critical neglect through an emphasis on the text’s modernist articulations of ambiguity and irony” (31).

Nella Larsen did not begin her adult career life as a writer. In fact, she had several careers before coming to writing from a professional nurse to a librarian. But when Larsen did turn to writing, there was no turning back. Deborah McDowell has observed that almost from the beginning of her writing career:

Larsen received instant praise, and very soon found herself touted as one of the Harlem Renaissance literary movement’s writing stars. . . . [In 1928,] Larsen won second prize in literature in 1928 for *Quicksand* from the Harmon Foundation, and [praise from] W.E.B. Du Bois’s [review of] *Passing*. (xi-xii)

As if all this overnight success is not testimonial enough of Larsen’s remarkable talent as a writer, in 1930 she was awarded a Guggenheim, the African American woman writer ever to be honored with the award. Not long after this, Larsen would disappear again; but this time, for good. While there has considerable speculation by biographers and critics about the reason Larsen left the literary scene, it is safe to assume that several personal and public tragedies were likely the cause. At the time she was writing *Passing*, Larsen discovered her husband, Fisk University physics professor Elmer S. Imes, was having an affair with a white staff member, and over the next three years their relationship would deteriorate, ending in a what in a very public, and humiliating divorce for Larsen. Around the same period of time, she wrote a short story entitled “Sanctuary”

which was accused of plagiarism. Though she was eventually found innocent of the charge after an ensuing investigation, according to both Davis and Hutchinson, the incident clearly devastated her. As Nell Sullivan explains, the doubled “affair[s]” of “Sanctuary” and Imes “provoked her disappearance from public life” (Sullivan 374). Larsen moved to Brooklyn, took a nursing position at Bethel Hospital, and remained there until her retirement (McDowell xv). Sadly, the one-time too dark child and later overnight shining star of the Harlem literary Renaissance scene, died in virtual obscurity in 1964.

Nella Larsen clearly shared with other writers the central goals of the New Negro movement: to wrest control from the dominant white culture the language used to define black subjectivity; to express what it meant to be black under their own terms; and to redefine themselves through their own definitions and meanings. Larsen and her fellow Harlem Renaissance writers were intimately aware of the constructedness of terms defining race, sex, class, and gender, and much of what these years of remarkable literary production represent is an attempt to challenge the negative, confining meanings of these terms with respect to black identity. As Anne Elizabeth Carroll aptly observes, the writers and artists of the New Negro movement “were on the cutting edge of ideas about representation and identity,” and I believe Larsen’s work may be one of the movement’s finest examples (220).

The unique modernist problem Larsen is trying to explicate in her novel is that by the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans believed they had done what whites wanted, they had assimilated enough to get a piece of the American pie, and for black women, maybe a sliver. But whites did not seem to agree. Thus, in confronting these explicitly

racial issues, and specifically female issues, Larsen is exploring the depths to which black women must go to be a part of modern “white America” and its capitalist “tradition” of the American dream. She claims the modernist thematic of the fragmented self to delve into the mind of who I believe to be her far more central character, Irene Redfield. But it is the way she does it which very clearly links her to the modernist aesthetic, and to our discussion of the “inside”/ “outside” connection of body and mind.

Larsen separates her novel into three separate chapters, entitled “Encounter,” “Reencounter,” and “Finale,” which Davis, McDowell, Hutchinson, and others argue mirrors a play or performance. The “play,” *Passing*, which I use to stress the performances of the protagonists as well as another trope on “passing,” takes course over a period of two years after two former acquaintances—Irene Redfield Westover and Clare Kendry Bellew—accidentally run into each other at the rooftop restaurant of a posh Chicago hotel, where unknown to either them (or us) for several pages, they are passing for white.

Before we get there, however, the novel opens with a mysterious letter (two more will follow, each at the beginning of an “act”/chapter) which the narrator describes as contained in a “long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien. And there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it. . . A thin sly thing . . . Purple ink. . . Foreign Paper” (9). With these opening lines, we are introduced to Clare Kendry, or at least to the way Irene sees her. As the description of the letter demonstrates, Clare is repeatedly objectified by Irene and everyone else in the novel, she is repeatedly connected to symbols and metaphors which stress her as “foreign,” “illegible,” “mysterious,” and “sly,” all of which very clearly

mark her as an Other (9). In fact, we also learn that Clare is “always stepping on the edge of danger,” an opinion set forth in the opening lines of the novel that carries forth to its end when Irene thinks to herself that “Clare . . . remained what she had always been, an attractive, somewhat lonely child—selfish, willful, and disturbing” (73). The ingenuity of this technique is that because we must read the novel through either Irene’s or the limited narrator’s voice, there is a kind of silencing and masking of Clare. She remains just as mysterious as Larsen needs her to be. Moreover, this narrative trick works to disorder the narrative. This works perfectly as action continues because we remain unsure if Clare is actually sleeping with Irene’s husband, as she come to suspect in the final “act,” and critically, if Irene actually murders Clare in the grand “Finale” of the novel. As Beatrice Royster aptly observes, “Irene is an ideal choice of narrator of a tale with double meanings. She tells the story as the injured wife, betrayed by friend and husband; she tells it as a confession to relieve her conscious of any guilt in Clare’s death” (qtd. in McDowell xxiv). Indeed, it is Irene’s own failure to see the truth, her deep need to remain in total control of what seems more and more as the novel goes on to be a fantasy of her life that makes her powerful reaction to abjection possible. As McDowell points out, “Irene is often hypocritical, not always fully aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader” (xxivi).

Yet despite the fact that the information we receive is always limited, and always assumably skewed, Larsen’s skillful manipulation of keeping us from what may or may not be true, forcing us to see only the surface of Clare through Irene and the unreliable narrator, “a lovely creature” (17), “rather catlike” (10), “so daring . . . so ‘having,’” “someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity” (80), makes the final confrontation

with abjection all the more powerful. It is precisely because our eyes are filtered through Irene's "blindness" (34) that we too fail to take account of something Irene states early on, but never seems able to remember: "Appearances, she knew now, had a way sometimes, of not fitting facts . . ." (22).

(Sur)Passing Constructed Markers

[F]rom its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him) it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject.

—Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*

Larsen's novel is often read in terms of its subversion of the passing trope; the act of passing for white, in other words, takes on multiple refigurations in her novel. In troping the trope of passing, I argue, Larsen is able to subsume her critique of various hegemonic systems of "normativity" from a safe distance. *Passing*, would have denoted, for whites and blacks at the time, the idea of an African American crossing the color line. Thus the most obvious critique of race, or rather white racism, might be understood through the fluidity of the passing individual, one able to fool whites because, in the end, skin color does not make the person. But then there is the pesky ending of the novel—either Clare falls, jumps, or is pushed by John Bellew or Irene. In other words, Larsen complicates her ending in a cloud of ambiguity. Critics are very clearly divided on whether "someone did" or "did not" kill Clare, and often, regardless of which side they end up on in the ambiguous ending debate, Larsen invariably faces criticism. For example, McDowell has commented that the end of *Passing* evinces Larsen's trouble with closing out her novels. It seems then, that many critics find this ending a reason to discount or argue that Larsen undermines / negates her critiques of racism by killing her most fluid and empowered character. "Race," racial politics, patriarchal expectations of

black women's literary production, as well as the issue of gender oppression, are of course central and interconnected themes in Larsen's novel. That they appear at times to be hidden or submerged should not be a surprise given the realities of the constraints facing black women writers in terms of maintaining a positive reputation in both the eyes of New Negro leadership and peers. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the dominant social codes, particularly for black women writers in the public arena of writing, restricted their treatment of subversive challenges to such norms, a factor in which Larsen was certainly no exception. Indeed, "normative" gender expectations, as well as subversions of them, had to be very carefully addressed by female writers. As Hazel Carby has pointed out, we must take special care in Larsen's novel to pay attention to gender and racial politics, as these issues are not only woven into the central theme of *Passing*, but are also the central theme in many African American women writers' works, and often require deeper attention to detect in pieces from earlier periods.

If Clare jumped, the only escape from racism is death, just as we see in the attitudes of many slaves in Jacobs's autobiography. So this is not an option for upholding the novel as a race critique. Bellew killing her could work, as he is an admitted racist in the novel, going so far as to tell Irene when he does not know she is passing that "I don't dislike them [blacks], I hate them" (Larsen 40). But, if Bellew killed her, it would undermine Larsen's plot considerably, and I would venture to say that this is especially true for any positive effect it might have on white readers. After all, one could argue that Clare deceived him, had a child with him that is now biracial, all against his knowledge, knowledge that if he had had, would, assumably since he is a self-avowed racist, would never had agreed to. But the real problem comes if we see Irene killing Clare.

According to numerous critics, this makes no sense for *Passing* as a novel which critiques race. I disagree. The psychoanalytic subtheme that Larsen imbeds in *Passing*, and particularly her exploration of abjection, is exactly why this novel works as a critique and examination of untenable markers such as race, class, and gender, and their constituent ideological codes.

For example, *Passing* challenges the racism of whites through John Bellew who proclaims there will be “[n]o niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (40), yet, unbeknownst to him, he is happily, as far as the novel implies, married to a black woman. He has no idea Clare is black, undercutting the construction of “race” and its attenuating stereotypes constructed by white culture. The novel is equally unafraid of interrogating the bourgeois black community that Irene represents. Irene, her husband Brian, and even their white, upper-class friend Hugh Wentworth, who Davis argues may be loosely based on Larsen’s friend Carl Van Vechten (xiv), are all the parodic butt of Larsen’s sardonic jokes on the middle-class black community, who she presents as acting out the same racist ideologies that whites are using to prevent black equality. For example, Larsen creates domestic servants who work in Irene and Brian’s home that are decidedly dark-skinned: “Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured creature, brought in the grapefruit” (54). Yet we learn that Clare has a white maid, implying either that Clare may be afraid a black worker would suspect her true identity, or perhaps that it is Irene, the light-skinned, mulatta “race woman” who seems to need reinforce her class superiority by employing darker-skinned blacks.

Larsen directs even more scathing attacks at Irene during a conversation her protagonist shares with Hugh Wentworth at a fashionable, interracial mixed party Irene

has organized to raise money for the Negro Welfare. In the midst of her *dedicated* sacrifices for the uplift of her race, Irene and Hugh engage in a discussion about the white female attendees dancing with black men, to which Hugh responds that “the usual thing’s happened. All these others,--er—‘gentlemen of colour’ have driven a mere Nordic from . . .” their minds (76). Hugh’s racist views are palpable, as he can barely keep from finishing his thought to Irene that “all these . . .,” leaving one with little doubt that instinct was to simply let a negative racial epithet drop easily out of his mouth. Momentarily, their discussion turns to Clare, who is dancing with “an unusually dark” black man. Since Hugh has no idea that Clare is actually black, he motions to Irene that Clare is “a case in point,” but then wonders, “[o]r is she (77)?” Although Irene does not reveal Clare’s secret, she nevertheless goes on to imply to him that “there are ways . . .” to tell if someone is passing, “not definite or tangible,” but “just something . . . a thing that couldn’t registered” (78). But this very clear impression she leaves Hugh, and I would argue readers as well, is that she, as a black woman, alone has that ability, an ability that reinforces race essentialism. It is also untrue: she had no idea that Clare was white several years earlier on the Drayton Hotel rooftop. In fact, she was worried Clare was going to expose her (Irene): “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” (16).

Deborah Grayson has argued that because Clare and Irene are able to pass for white, they are able to subvert the dominant gaze, and moreover, “as third-person story teller, Irene is the creator of Clare; and in this sense, she becomes the proper middle-class author whose attitude toward the passing mulatto and the literary genre in which she appears shifts so that Clare’s death imputes to the title multiple levels of meaning”

(Grayson 93). In other words, killing Clare “symbolizes the demise of the genteel heroine and the novel form which perpetuates her” (Grayson 93). But if this is correct, then we must wrangle with the difficult ending, the reality of what Irene is returning to—the domestic life of a “genteel heroine,” “proper race woman,” and one who, like her nineteenth-century true womanhood white models of the past, cannot deal with the realities of a life spinning out of what is most important to her, control.

Larsen hands down an equally harsh judgment on expectations of womanhood, using the illusive figure of Clare to make her point: “Children aren’t everything . . . There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it . . .” (81), a comment that Davis indicates Clare is choosing instead “the unencumbered world associated with men, as opposed to the home relegated for women” (xv). However, Davis delimits the possibilities of this statement by assuming that Clare is only refusing narrow options for herself, and not taking account of the possibility that Clare could have lesbian desires, as both McDowell and Butler’s convincing analyses demonstrate. While I agree with Davis that Larsen definitely uses Clare to challenge women’s gender roles in terms of domesticity, I also believe there are other possibilities. Clare’s sexuality is never really fixed, she could desire Irene just as much as Irene seems to have repressed feelings for her in the novel. Davis also asserts that “Clare’s sexuality is read both as improper and as exotic. . . . so often linked to the eroticism of black women” (xvii). Yet I would aver that it is equally significant to note that Larsen’s point in keeping Clare’s sexuality hidden may have been to interrogate black women’s internalization of such stereotypes that prevented them acting freely on their desires, for men or women, and for white men or white women. Indeed, it is this deep repression,

whether due to her expression of sexual desire, the restraints imposed on her by domesticity, or the expectations of bourgeois life and its myriad social and behavioral dictates, that begin to unravel when Irene finally reencounters Clare. Clare is the free white/black other who has escaped the restrictions Irene has chosen to abide, but begins to unconsciously regret after Clare reappears. Finally, Larsen is also demonstrating through Irene's growing unease with her own life, her barely conscious understanding that the socially imposed markers on her body, the stereotypes of living beneath white racism and misogynistic constructions of women are integrally linked to our "insides." Larsen's brilliant decision to filter the characters' focus on appearances, racial stereotypes, classist judgments, and repressed desires is a reversal of the flesh, connecting the way the body's outside cannot be separated from our psychical self.

Larsen reverses the visible racial markers of the flesh—turns the flesh white—through adopting the passing trope, allowing her co-protagonists—Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew—to enter the market place of dreams. Yet she simultaneously pulls off a double-reversal of the flesh, keeping us attached to the "inside," Irene's psyche, and like Ralph Ellison would do so with such force much later in *Invisible Man*, Larsen forces Irene, and her readers, to face the impossibility of her desires (the Other, the abject), figured through the white permanently passing (outcast) body of her rival/object of desire, Clare. Clare, despite her reversed white flesh, is outcast; she is neither white nor black. Moreover, she is, by her own admission, miserable, longing for a homecoming; she is, what I will argue, the abjected Other.

From the Outside, Looking In

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark, revolts of being directed from a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, and the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which nevertheless does not let itself be seduced. Apprehensive, desire turns inside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful—a certainty of which it is proud holds on to it.

—Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*

In the field of psychology, all identity formation and many psychiatric disorders are believed to be linked to the Subject/Object/Abject distinction. This is a classic psychoanalytic identity model used to understand individuals' earliest subject formation of identity. If we apply this model to Irene and Clare, with Clare as the abject, we can begin to understand how Larsen explores the connection between the unconscious inside and the bodily outside. According to Julia Kristeva in "An Exile Who Asks, 'Where,'" "[t]he one [person] by whom the abject exists is . . . [already] a] *deject* who attempts to *place* [herself], *separate* [herself], *situate* [herself] in the center, and therefore *strays* instead of getting her bearings . . ." (8). For the marginalized persons in a society who try to be a part of the dominant group, what we might say is taking place with the black bourgeoisie Larsen parodies in *Passing*, there is always a kind of Otherness in the way the dominant group relates to them. In other words, they never really fit in. Kristeva calls the person who tries to join the dominant group the exile. What is more, Kristeva argues that this person can never go back to his or her community. They are not the outcasts, the Others, in terms of one's mental health. The exile, then, is always an Other. When they try, like Irene, to move into the white world (without passing) and become full citizens, full subjects, they must come to grips with the fact that Jim Crow racism

denies this assimilation, which would end in their seeing themselves as only objects, black Americans denied full equality—a debilitating and psychically threatening death of the “I.” Both the white subjects, and the left behind Clare/object realities, therefore, must be controlled in a separation, a double-consciousness, that simultaneously represses some of the painful realities of this situation, but allows them to remain psychically functioning. In this psychoanalytic scenario, Kristeva’s subject might represent a Hugh Wentworth or a John Bellew, the exile would clearly be Irene, and the object would be Clare.

Kristeva likens these repressions by the exile as akin to death; the exile either has to kill the object (Clare) or the white (Subject) in order to maintain her sort of fractured identity from moving into a foreign place, such as into the dominant culture. However, the repression need not be understood as “literal” murders. The now assimilated exile can maintain her “I” (identity) without killing off the white person or the African Americans they left behind. Although this scenario is played out a little differently in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. But Larsen, who George Hutchinson points out in his superb biography, “turns [in *Passing*] to some of the methods she used on her early short story, “Freedom”—techniques for treating abjection, fetishism, and psychic disavowal³ through her ingenious use of the third-person limited point of view,” is clearly going for the ultimate erasure to make her point. To maintain the separation necessary for psychological stability, these distinctions, which for Irene figures into for herself as the bourgeois, assimilated “race” woman married to a respected physician, must be maintained. The poor blacks must be kept, psychologically, out of her world. We can see her thinking this out about Clare: “no matter how often she came among them . . .

remained someone apart, a little mysterious and strange, someone to wonder about and to admire and to pity” (80), someone will ultimately have to go. Because the reality of Irene’s outside bodily self is stuck in a world that ultimately casts her out as the Other, African American and woman, and because the inside affects the outside, the only way out that Irene can find to maintain this distinction in the end is to kill the one she sees as her other.

The telling, dangerous moment for Irene proceeds in rapid succession once the novel begins. And the warnings, many of which occur in Irene’s own musings, never seem to click. For example, she refuses to face the signs that she desires Clare, that she wants something, she is not sure just *what*, that Clare has, is, or *represents*. These are relayed to us at several points in the three “acts” of the play/novel, with one of the first coming when Irene realizes she, too, wants to know more of passing, and perhaps, to permanently pass:

The truth was, she was curious. . . . She wished to find out about this hazardous business of “passing,” this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment . . . [and] how one felt when she came into contact with other Negroes. (24)

Interestingly, Irene unpacks what lies at the bottom of her personal connection with abjection in this passage, the fantasy she has of being both apart, and coming into contact with regular “Negroes” (24), of those not satisfactorily “classed”(15) to fit into her imagined notion of the perfect life as a bourgeois black woman mimicking white life. She also realizes, but represses again and again this feeling of desire for someone whom she never really liked as a child, and in fact, cast out along with her other middle-class

black friends. In fact, Irene and her better-off friends always assumed when Clare disappeared from living with her racist white aunts that she must have prostituted herself to get by. Clare admits to Irene that she is well aware of these false accusations, and how much they hurt during their first reunion at the Drayton: "I once met Margaret Hammer in Marshall Field's. . . . [and would] have spoken, . . . but she cut me dead. . . . by the way she looked through me, even I was uncertain whether I was actually there in the flesh or not" (21). Clare's reentry into Irene's life brings this memory to the edge of her consciousness, to just outside the view of her "unseeing eyes," (90) and represents what she most detests and desires. Clare as the young, black, poor, abused, helpless abject girl with no recourse but to pass, and Clare as the beautiful, dazzling, wealthy, free white/black woman; these two sides of Clare are Irene's abject, what she cannot accept in her narrowed vision of her own life, and what Clare will eventually treat unconsciously

neurosis

While nineteenth-century artists are responsible for inaugurating the "passing" genre, they have nevertheless often received less than auspicious reviews from many literary scholars. One reason for this is that these earlier works hinge on what Gayle Wald has identified as a "homecoming"/"race progress" thematic (46-47). In other words, the typical nineteenth-century passing novel features either a female passer who eventually realizes she is miserable as a "white" person, longs for her community and family and thus, eventually returns home. Conversely, a male passer is created who painfully and permanently gives up his community and family because of the stifling social, political, and economic conditions blacks face in light of white racism. Larsen complicates this, or one might say that she is signifyin(g) on earlier models. She forces

us to consider the degree to which white racism so limited African American's education, employment, housing, geographic movement, and ultimately, their freedom to reach the American dream in the 1920s, that they must "pass," lose part of who they are, in order to "cross" the color line and be a part of society with some sense of equality.

Critics overwhelmingly see the two protagonists, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield Westover, as "doubles." I do not dispute this, and feel certain that Larsen is very clearly playing with Freud's, "The Uncanny," a groundbreaking article that caught the especial interests of many modernist authors in the 1920s. Freud describes the uncanny as both that which "makes us fearful," due to its strangeness and difference, and that which is eerily similar, as something we have repressed ("The Uncanny" 119). Hence the double is experienced as something uncanny because it calls forth both a repressed content and because it is *like us*, eerily similar. But it is Clare, and not Irene, who is clearly the uncanny character. She is eerily similar, but not quite like anyone else. And it is Clare's uncanniness, I contend, her fluidity in terms of occupying these doubled spaces, that ultimately "passes" her from near, to the same, to exactly the person Irene rejected in childhood, the poor white/black girl with an alcoholic father, the girl who "used to go over to the south side" and long for what Irene had. As Clare forces Irene to face, "I used almost to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others'" (26). With this revelation, Irene is on her journey to see Clare not as uncanny, exotic, desirable, inconsiderate, as the bothersome former acquaintance that she, Clare, is bound by "race loyalty" to protect as a passer, but as her deepest fear and desire, her abject.

In fact, it is race, this dangerously abject untenable marker, that Irene so desperately wants to escape. At the critical point of the novel when all of this seems to be coming to Irene's conscious awareness, when she is realizing Clare is not the Object, but is really just like her, Irene, in the eyes of white society; she is *just* a black woman to the John Bellevs of the white-controlled American dream, she realizes, I contend, that this reminder of her vulnerability must be erased. For if Clare is able to make her homecoming, to return to the black community, Irene believes all is in danger, not because she believes she will lose Brian, but for the fact that she may lose herself.

Claudia Tate contends that *Passing's* ending shrouds Clare's death in ambiguity and that we cannot be certain who killed Clare or if she jumped to her own death (145). Yet the proliferation of clues to the contrary seems to suggest otherwise. We are barraged with a series of metaphors, symbols, and reactions by Irene that signal the upcoming disaster. For example, there are clues in the opening chapter of the "Finale" that correspond directly to the on the first few pages of the novel. Some of these are repeated, and others inverted, all to foreshadow what is about to take place. First of all, it is December in first section of finale; but it is not, apparently, usual for the time of year. Irene muses over this fact, thinking, "It wasn't, this mild weather, a bit Christmasy . . . It was . . . soft, as like April, as possible. The kind of weather for Easter. Certainly not for Christmas" (85). By contrast, the first chapter of the novel the weather is unbearably hot, it is August "with a brutal sun pouring down rays like molten rain" (12). Irene, we learn, is in downtown Chicago on a shopping mission to pick out some gifts for her two sons when she sees a man literally pass out in the middle of the street: "About the lifeless figure a little crowd gathered. Was the man dead or only faint? Someone asked her. But

Irene didn't know and didn't try to discover. . . . Suddenly, she was aware that the whole street had a wobbly look, and that she was about to faint" (12-13). In both chapters, the weather, I contend, works either symbolically. The first chapter presents us with stifling heat, a man collapses. Irene witnesses the scene, is part of the crowd standing over the stranger, but she refuses to take action, and ends up nearly fainting only feet from the scene. There is a clear parallel of this scene and the final scene of the novel. Clare falls/is pushed out of the window, and Irene mysteriously, or suspiciously, "stays behind" (111). If we look at the symbolism of the first scene to the latter, the man collapsing, falling, and Clare "falling," the act of abjection seems to be quite literally playing out. As Kristeva points out, abjection can be attached to anything; a food, an idea, a fear, a person. But the ultimate abject is death. It is death we cannot face, and it is death we are finally fascinated, preoccupied, and repulsed by. At the outset of the novel, Irene turns from the near or actual death; she rejects it, abjects it. And again in the ending, though likely also out of guilt, she cannot go to Clare, the once black, poor girl on the wrong side of the tracks. Clare is the Negro that Irene has left behind, abjected long ago, who she simultaneously desires but is repulsed by; and once gone, for this second time, Clare's order is returning.

The weather may be an even more telling symbol. In the final part of the novel, it is December. Yet the weather is unusual, more like Easter than Christmas, Irene observes. The symbolism here is important, that Easter, and not Christmas, is symbolic of rebirth, of Christ's Ascension; however, it is also connected to Judas Iscariot, to betrayal. In keeping with her constant use of symbolism in place of real answers, it would appear that these are intentionally included by Larsen. But it is the very last scene,

the last moment that seems so clearly to underscore the process of abjection.

The culmination of Larsen's tightly controlled story, her careful placement of symbolism and imagery, the elisions, parallels, and Irene's growing paranoia masking her need to expel Clare, her abject, are at long last ready to unfold. All the necessities to drive the plot to its ironic cathartic end are in place. Bellew is suspicious of his wife's race, and will crash the party. Irene is at her breaking point, and they are all going to meet at Felise Freeland's high rise Harlem apartment. But we are none the wiser, because everything has been so carefully masked, filtered through Irene's "unseeing eyes" (90).

Bellew bursts into the apartment:

"So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" His voice was a snarl and a moan, an expression of rage and of pain.

Everything was in confusion. . . . [Clare] seemed unaware of any danger. . . . There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips. . . . It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. . . . She couldn't have her free.

What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly.

One moment Clare had been there, a vital, a glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone.

When we return to the earliest scene of fainting, Irene's inability to deal with her husband's desire to move to Brazil in hopes of escaping racism, her failure to discuss, lynching, her sexually dysfunctional relationship with her husband, and simultaneous

desire and repulsion of Clare, paired with her refusal to see Clare's past and present vulnerabilities, it is difficult to call Larsen's ending, as Robert Bone has argued, "a false and shoddy denouement" (102). And the Easter symbolism too, comes into view. This was, in fact, a rebirth of sorts for Irene, but one that will likely be temporary. For it was not the sexual betrayal she feared, but Clare's association with a "blackness" Clare could not accept, a "blackness" that reminded Irene of her own vulnerability as a black woman in the racist 1920s. But the symbolism that it seems unlikely even Irene can repress is her betrayal, of her race, of Clare, and of her own fears. She *is* Larsen's main character, the self-defined "race woman," bourgeois wife and mother; She is also the ultimate Judas of this three-act abjection, the character who Larsen's uses to stress that the ins and outs of race and gender are no easy matter for African American women in the 1920s.

The passing novel⁴ is one of the most critically underexamined genres in American literature. Again and again in these works, race, sexuality, gender, and class are presented in such ways as to suggest not only their convergence, but as Butler convincingly shows in her reading of *Passing*, to invite the question of "whether one cannot be constituted without the other" (168). Deborah Grayson's summation of *Passing* seems to provide a good way in which to conclude:

Larsen invites us to examine how we speak the unspoken legacies of race, gender, and the body. . . . by (re)presenting the 'blackness' of her two central female characters as 'whiteness.' . . . [and in doing so she] gives us the opportunity to address how our use of language in this context silences discussion of the complexity of ourselves and our texts" (Grayson 29)

While Larsen does indeed challenge the constructedness of terms such as race, sex, class, and gender, it seems that *Passing* does tend to demonstrate how “our use of language . . . silences a discussion of the complexity of ourselves and our texts,” (29). Yet Larsen’s embedded critiques of race and gender do underscore the need for black women to be defined by more than stereotyped bodies, skin color or gender. Clare and Irene open a discussion of the multiple subjectivities these terms impose because neither of their outer markers fit neatly into constructed views of identity. Larsen use the tragic stories of Clare and Irene to demonstrate the ways that white patriarchy’s and white racist’s have constructed markers that have insinuated themselves onto the black body, and how African American women writers continue to contest and subvert these dominant discourses to (re)present themselves. *Passing* offers not only a critique of the inefficacy of race, gender, and class, and they have fractured black women’s views of themselves, but further gestures toward more nuanced ways for how we might *read* women’s writing for what their *bodies*, “inside” and “outside” are telling us. The inside cannot be ignored in Larsen’s novel, and its connection to the exterior is repeatedly brought to bear on her central character. These “inside” messages are purposeful forms of the bodily narrative, reminding us that identities are inscribed and performed not only on our visible, bodily exteriors.

Reading Larsen’s interrogation of the effects that a racially marked and gendered body can play on our psychic life and identity formation opens new questions about the ways we must learn to think about not only our own, but all bodies. In Irene’s bodily narrative there are both external borders created by the dominant white culture which deny her full realization of an “I,” as well as internalized, interiorized borders that she has

constructed to attempt assimilation, to fit in to the Jim Crow world that casts African Americans out as the Other. Ultimately, these borders threaten her very existence as a fully functioning “self” when Clare arrives on the scene. Clare is the original castaway, the repressed Abject that allowed Irene to separate herself as a “class” apart, the Other that Irene has rejected in her assimilated life, representing the poor black community, the helpless, abused, poverty-stricken black girl that Irene refused to face for fear she herself could be like Clare. This abjection, this internalized border of survival for Irene, finally ended in death.

In *Recovering the Black Female Body*, McDowell relates a rarely told side of the iconic Sojourner Truth, pointing out that while she is often “called on” by writers to make an eye-catching point, the story of her interior suffering is rarely referred to: “I have born thirteen children, and seen ’em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard me” (qtd. in Bennett and Dickerson 309). As McDowell points out, these cries originate in the body’s inside parts, even if they are registered on its “outside” surface, suggesting the importance of a view of the body that perceives the reciprocal relation between exterior and interior . . .” (309). Larsen’s characters in *Passing* also tell the story of suffering on the inside, stressing not a readable, visible body, but the illegibility of the flesh. Through her subalternative approach, Larsen reminds us that the outer surfaces do not reveal black women’s whole identities, and that attempts to define the black female body by racist and sexist constructions can have devastating results. *Passing*, like *Incidents*, defies outside inscriptions on the black female body, arguing that African American women’s identity is not definable by stereotypes, or models, or ideologies. Instead, Larsen’s bodily narratives

deny and defy the vocabulary of the body, reminding us that black female identity must be allowed to iterate its infinite diversity, and to express its audacity of “I.”

IV. TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*: "ANOTHER WAY OF KNOWING"

Most folks concede that marriage is down all around. Few agree on what can or should be done about it. Get people off welfare? We've done that. The drastic welfare reform Newt Gingrich proposed and President Clinton signed nine years ago has succeeded beyond expectations. More welfare mothers are working. Fewer black children live in poverty. Yet while black child poverty has declined, black marriage has not increased. Part of the problem? Black men continued to leave the job market despite welfare reform and the '90s economic boom. Welfare reform has done a good job of putting welfare mothers to work. But 40 years after Moynihan dared to ask in his memo, the question lingers: What about the fathers?

—Clarence Page, "Out-of-Wedlock Births in Black America" (2005)

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), met with mixed critical reviews, did not sell well, and subsequently fell out of print by 1974. However, with each novel her critical recognition grew and she received the National Book Critics Circle Award for her third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977), and the Pulitzer prize for *Beloved* (1987). In 1993, Morrison was also awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and the Swedish Academy described her work at the time as bringing "life to an essential aspect of American reality."⁴

For Morrison, the black writer holds a responsibility to the black community, one that she attempts to meet in her own work by "bear[ing] witness" to the black experience (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 265). Morrison believes that "all good art has been political," and for the black writer this means capturing "the something that defines what makes a book 'black'" (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 153). She states that a central

characteristic of black writing features “a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 55). Morrison’s fiction often “suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why,” compelling readers to take a hard look at “what was legal in the [black] community as opposed to what was legal outside it” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 215).

This final essay analyzes Morrison’s second novel, *Sula* (1973), in terms of its (re)presentations of African American women’s experiences, and more specifically, for the ways that this work seems to capture the significance of the black female body as central to the survival and expression of her characters’ identities. Morrison has argued that African Americans were able to survive slavery, the violence that led them to migrate from South to North, and the legalized discrimination and institutionalized racism once there, by:

taking that which is peripheral, or violent or doomed or something that nobody else can see any value in and making value out of it or having a psychological attitude about duress is part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent, and irony is part of that—being able to see the underside of something, as well.

(*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 175)

It is this irony, what Morrison has described elsewhere as “another way of knowing,” an “other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there” that this essay seeks to explore (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 226). Morrison has argued that black people have always been seen as the Other, the *pariah*, which is a central theme in *Sula*. Morrison blurs the lines between good and evil in this novel, creating for readers complicated characters that do not fit into the “normal” view of how things should be, or

how people should react in a given situation. Morrison explains this quality of her fiction by pointing out that:

[t]here are several levels of the pariah figure working in my writing. The black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs. The civilization of black people that lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilizations is a pariah relationship. . . . But a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community. (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 168)

Sula presents a disordered world where blacks are deceived, shunned, and treated like pariahs by whites. Nevertheless, the black community of the novel survives in their own way, often by handling situations with decisions that may make little sense to the reader. Furthermore, these extreme situations cause the characters, especially the featured female characters, to make certain choices that inevitably seem to involve their bodies, again challenging readers to reexamine the way racist and gendered stereotypes have forced African American women into untenable positions in order to protect their own bodies from victimization.

As we have throughout this thesis, this chapter will continue to explore presentations and (re)presentations of the black female body, applying Angelyn Mitchell's postmodern characteristics to find the stories and narratives of the body that may be silenced or embedded due to racist and gendered stereotypes. Race and gender are key features of the black women's experiences in African American women's writing, and *Sula* is certainly no different. Yet motherhood, individualism, female sexuality, and marriage are presented in very different ways in *Sula*, reminding us that

African American women writers continue to challenge and subvert white racist and gendered stereotypes that have worked to rationalize and justify the objectification, subjugation, and victimization of black women's bodies. Morrison's challenges to these racist and gendered stereotypes in *Sula* are particularly relevant to the framing subject this chapter features, and reminds us that raced and gendered stereotypes continue to distort the way the dominant white society views and attempts to control African American women's bodies and identities.

Decoding Rhetorics of Race and Gender

Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The struggle black women began in the nineteenth century to challenge and transform white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ways of seeing black womanhood must continue.

—bell hooks, "The Integrity of Black Womanhood"

Christina Accomando reminds us that "[e]ven before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock in their escape from European oppression, European ships were bringing enslaved Africans to the American continent. At the same time that the Founding Fathers were writing about 'life liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' many of them were also fathering slaves (187). This thesis began by exploring a curious controversy that arose in 2007 over the First Lady of the United States—Mrs. Michelle Obama's— choice of clothing and the troubling similarities that linked comments made by highly respected white journalists to the white racist and sexist report espoused by White House Aide Patrick Moynihan in 1965. Unfortunately, that was not the end of the Moynihan story and its far-reaching effects on African American women.

As Accomando points out, “the Moynihan Report shaped debates over slavery for years”; but to add to this, it also infiltrated into significant government policies that directly affected the reproduction rights of African American women. Furthermore, these U.S. Government reproduction policies were connected to Moynihan’s claims that the “pathology” of the black family and its misaligned “matriarchal” structure (Moynihan 29-30). For example, in 1989 the *New Republic* proclaimed “Nearly 25 years after Daniel Patrick Moynihan was pilloried for saying so, it is universally accepted that black poverty is heavily the result of family breakdown” (18). The *New Republic*’s rhetorical persuasive tricks are worth taking a look at. First, the phrase “universally accepted” connotes something that we all agree with, a logical fallacy. Second, the invocation of the highly charged term “pilloried” (one might recall the sentimental mode Harriet Jacobs used with honesty and effectively in the nineteenth century), immediately calls on emotion and throws into doubt the validity of anyone who challenged Moynihan’s white racist and sexist views in the first place. These are only two examples of the wrangling or finagling of legalese, and very reminiscent of antebellum laws that gave a slave owner the right to rape Celia. But again, this is only the beginning of the Moynihan Report’s devastating reach.

In 1991 the contraceptive Norplant was released for use in the United States, largely after being tested on women in developing nations for many years. Norplant did not enter the U.S. without a reason. Along with the original Moynihan Report that detailed the destruction of the African American family via black women, earlier sections of the report were headed with fear provoking titles such as: “Almost One Fourth of Non-White Families Are Headed by a Woman,” and “Percent of Women with Husband

Absent,” and finally, “Fertility Rates for Nonwhite Women Are One-Third Higher Than Those for White Women” (Accomando 235). The fear tactic was directed overwhelmingly toward the poorest sections of America, largely minority, and mostly African American. Norplant, a five-year contraceptive inserted under the skin, was approved by Congress in 1991 for free distribution in low-income areas. The side effects for Norplant, devastatingly, had not been figured thoroughly enough before large amounts of African American and other minority women were convinced of the advantages of the drug.

In 1996 Norplant was discontinued in the U.S. after more than fifty-thousand women filed federal lawsuits, including seven class action suits against the pharmaceutical company Wyeth that produced the drug (*New York Times* A1-15). According to the *CBS News* report titled “Medical Device Lawsuits” covering the best-known African American woman’s case against Wyeth and the U.S. Government—Erica Johnson—there is no certainty how serious or widespread the long-term health effects of the contraceptive may turn out to be; the jury, it seems, is still out on that (*CBS News* 1 April 2003). The Norplant tragedy reminds us of America’s legacy for using racist and gendered constructs to justify exploiting African American women’s bodies both sexually and reproductively, one that stems not merely from the Moynihan Report, but from our country’s history of legalized slavery that African American women writers are still addressing and fighting to overcome today. From slavery to Norplant to the First Lady of the United States, it is becoming quite clear that being black and being female is a dangerous combination.

“Dangerously Female”

I know what every Black woman in this country is doing. Dying, just like me. But the difference is, they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods.

—Toni Morrison, *Sula*

I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female.

—Toni Morrison, “*Unspeakable Things Unspoken*”

The experiences of the female characters in *Sula* highlight the paradox that African American women have faced in attempting to survive in a country where severe race and gender stereotypes have constructed the black female body as an object of derision open to outside control and victimization. *Sula’s* female characters will both fall prey to, and defy, this reality throughout the novel. In other words, Morrison underscores the body’s centrality to her female characters’ experiences in *Sula* by creating situations in which these characters must make decisions regarding their daily lives and their bodies that are often profoundly ironic. Yet Morrison maintains a removed and ambivalent authorial presence in this novel, leaving readers to examine and work through the myriad of ironies and ambiguities she creates. Indeed, the black female bodies presented in *Sula*, and the black female body explored, lived to the fullest, and then (re)presented by Sula, all express an audacity about them. Morrison’s female characters’ stories all relate to the experiences they have gone through and are going through emotionally and psychically. Because these are African American bodies, relegated from the auction block to the

stumbling block by an America that continues to see them through the lens of white racism and sexism, the bodies in *Sula* are paradigmatically problematic.

Morrison's *Sula* also appears to share an intertextual connection with both Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, recreating the stark realities African American women have faced due to racist and gendered stereotypes both outside and within the black community. Morrison's female characters, like the real women in *Incidents* and the fictional women in *Passing*, are not always successful in resisting the often extreme circumstances they are forced to face; yet, in each work there is an attempt by the author to bear witness to black women's experiences, revealing both the victimization and challenges of black women to the untenable choices they must make to survive. Morrison seems to extend and expound on the ways her female characters live, wear, and express their bodies in *Sula*, looking back to those black women writers who came before as models for new ways of telling the story of the body. *Sula's* bodily narratives, this chapter argues, are a continuation and reevaluation of the way African American women's writers have sought to reclaim and narrate the black female body, daring with new audacity to claim the right for black women to define their own bodies and identities.

Sula is a story of friendship between two African American women—Nel Wright and Sula Peace—set in the fictional town of Medallion in the hilltop neighborhood of land somewhere in rural Ohio they call the Bottom. The novel is divided into two main sections of eleven chapters, all of which chronicle the events in the protagonists and supporting characters lives. Part one traces an eight-year period from 1919 to 1927, and progresses from Nel and Sula's girlhood to their womanhood. The two young girls

become intense friends during childhood, but eventually separate from one another when Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, Jude Greene. In addition to the lives of Nel and Sula, several other characters enter the plot that offer their own unique, often tragic, and ever ambiguous and/or ironic contributions to the overall theme.

For instance, one of the earliest characters we meet is Shadrack, "[a] young man hardly twenty, his head full of nothing and his mouth recalling the taste of lipstick" when he leaves for World War I (7). We learn that Shadrack leaves Medallion in 1917 to go to war, and in chapter two we follow him crossing the dead man's zone in the war-torn fields of France where he turns just in time to see "the face of a soldier near him fly off" (8). Not surprisingly, Shadrack is traumatized by this event but his recovery is thwarted by the profound bigotry he endures from whites when he is sent to a military hospital. Once Shadrack finally returns home, he remains shell-shocked for the rest of his life. The only thing that likely prevents him from completely losing his sanity is his creation of a bizarre annual holiday which he names National Suicide Day. Every year Shadrack takes part in a one-man parade, marching through the streets of Medallion, beating a drum, and calling out for volunteers to come out and die.

We also meet Sula Mae Peace, the extraordinary protagonist of the novel who shares a dark secret with her young friend Nel for the rest of their lives when the two accidentally swing a young boy named Chicken Little into the river and he drowns. While the two girls are each other's only companions to counter lives with emotionally distant mothers and either absent or dead fathers, by the end of part one they have permanently ended their friendship because Sula decides to sleep with Nel's husband Jude. Yet shockingly, it is Sula who feels most injured over this event because Nel cannot

understand that her friend only wants to continue sharing everything as they always had. Sula will leave Medallion after this break up with Nel, traveling and attending college before she finally returns. In part two Sula seems to return with a vengeance about her, setting off an almost gothic series of events that eventually ends in her being both the community's pariah and redeemer.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, the African American woman has historically and continually been compelled "to experience her body as the damned and notorious device of someone else's construction . . . relegated to the auction block instead of the pedestal . . . constructed as the ugly end of a wearisome Western dialectic: not scarred but profane, not angelic but demonic, not fair lady but ugly darky" (Dickerson 196). Morrison's work conveys the problems of racist and gendered visualization by bringing to bear not only the wounded psyches of victimized African American female characters, but their socially constructed and denigrated bodies as well. Yet she also creates one of her most controversial, if not remarkable, female characters in *Sula*/Sula whose often highly ironic and ambiguous actions continue to generate diverse readings of both her and the novel itself. In fact, Maggie Galehouse argues that "[i]n many ways, *Sula* goes as far as Morrison's *Beloved* in describing the extent to which one woman's rejection of every available social script generates tangible, even fatal, public tension" (28). Sula reminds us repeatedly that she does not intend to be a victim of raced and gendered expectations, but a "dangerously female" individual following her own path for better or worse.

Upside-Down Bodies

The inversion of pierced white basins and other vessels is common in many Kongo cemeteries. Indeed, the verb, “to be upside-down” in Ki-Kongo also means “to die.” Moreover, inversion signifies perduance, as a visual pun on the superior strength of the ancestors, for the root of *bikinda*, “to be upside-down, to be in the realm of the ancestors, to die” is kinda, “to be strong,” “because those who are upside-down, who die, are strongest.

—Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*

Morrison’s use of inversion in *Sula* is often considered one of the novel’s trademark insignias. The “Bottom” is the top, the name Peace is marked by turmoil, the Wright women appear to be wrong, and “truth” is always open for interpretation. Cheryl Wall’s observations are particularly relevant to understanding these apparent ironies, in that she focuses on how *Sula* brings together characters whose “other ways of knowing,”⁵ come from experiences in their “disremembered”⁶ past (Wall 20). Wall contends that “writing from . . . alternative epistemologies” allows contemporary black women writers such as Morrison to “reclaim and reconnect” with the fragmented pasts they have inherited, “extend[ing] definitions of the family . . . lineage . . . [and] literary tradition” along the way (24). These “rememories” of the African American community’s collective past are what Morrison calls on in all of her work to describe how the collective consciousnesses of multiple individuals re-membering all contribute to the reconstruction of a past that has been discredited by racism and the passage of time. In *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu points out that the idea of “rememory also includes place, as well as a cyclical notion of time” (208). Thus, Morrison calls on the past of African American ancestors—in this case, slaves—whose memories are very often “unspeakable” (too terrible or horrific to remember)

("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 377), to demonstrate in *Sula* that blacks very often have another way of knowing and surviving that is very different from those who do not share the painful and fragmented past wrought in slavery. Inversion allows Morrison to develop these interlocking features of her oeuvre in order to create a complex series of individual black women's stories that challenge and recreate new models for black womanhood. Morrison's begins her upside-down world of inversion and fragmentation immediately in *Sula*, opening with the story of a slave. The slave in this case is offered his freedom and a plot of land in the fertile valley area known as the Bottom if he will only complete some difficult work for his master. The slave, as we might assume, enthusiastically agrees. Unfortunately, the master changes his mind once the work is done. The narrator tells us that "[f]reedom was easy—the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. . . . [H]e told the slave that he was very sorry that . . . he had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom" (5). Naturally, the slave was confused and responded that he "thought valley land was bottom land" (5). But the master lied, "Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile. . . . [W]hen God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is" (5). Thus the white man carries out a grand dupe on his slave. Instead of giving his slave the land in the fertile valley as he had promised, the master tricks his slave by telling him that the "real" Bottom is located on the hilltop. However, the black community describes it differently, in a way that bears another way of knowing from which they draw to survive:

A joke. A Nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, . . . the part they called the Bottom. . . . Just a nigger joke. The kind white folks tell when

the mill closes down and they're looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when rain doesn't come, or comes for weeks, and they're looking for a little comfort somehow. (4-5)

Although Morrison initially makes us think that the blacks have been cruelly cheated, that "[t]he nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter," she also provides several points that infer there may be another way of viewing this incident (5). For example, the narrator completes the story about the trick played on the slave by reflecting on what the black community did with this land and how it changed whites' perceptions about it:

Still, it was lovely *up* in the Bottom. After the town grew and the farm land turned into a village and the village into a town and the streets of Medallion were hot . . . those heavy trees . . . sheltered the shacks up in the Bottom. . . . And the [white] hunters who went there . . . wondered in private if maybe the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it *was* the bottom of heaven. (6, emphasis added)

Morrison complicates the white man's apparent deceit by telling us that the landscape of the Bottom turns out to be perfect for sheltering the city the blacks build. She tells us that the hunters were not so sure about who had actually been duped. Perhaps the white farmer is the real fool in the end? Furthermore, we learn at the end of the novel that the whites do eventually change their mind, paying off the black residents of the Bottom handsomely so whites can build a golf course and turn it into the suburbs (166). And even if he isn't, the joke ironically seems to work for the black residents. It amuses them even if they redirect it at themselves. However, there may be an even deeper level of meaning

implied by this story, one that seems to bear out in the numerous binaries this opening narrative introduces and are interrogated throughout the text.

Whites in the novel seem to ignore the black community of Medallion. They have no knowledge of what Irene's Place of Cosmetology, Edna Finch's Mellow House, The Time and a Half Pool Hall, Elmira Theater, and Reba's Grill mean to the blacks up in the Bottom. Any thought that the blacks have created a rich community with a culture all their own seems to completely elude the whites in the valley. For example, the narrator informs us that while a white valley man might come to the Bottom "collecting rent or insurance payments . . . [and] see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messaging around,'" he would likely never notice what this apparent celebration actually meant to the black residents (4). In other words, the white man would fail to notice that the "black people watching" the dancing woman would respond with a "laugh" that made them "rub their knees" but never see "the adult pain hidden somewhere beneath it" (4). The white man would never figure out that "the laughter was part of the pain" (4). To the white valley residents, the laughter they might occasionally overhear from the Bottom was no more significant than the songs of the slaves had been long before the blacks began living up in the Bottom. Morrison's inversion in this early story works to unpack these embedded meanings. And perhaps more importantly, it introduces a number of dichotomies— free/enslaved, black/white, good/evil, tragic/comic, real/fantastic, and literal/metaphoric—that will suggest there is another way of knowing what these binaries appear to mean. In fact, the scene where the white valley man sees and hears the dancing, music, and laughter of the

blacks up in the Bottom but fails to understand the meaning behind it is eerily similar to the ignorance whites had with regard to slave songs. As Melvin Dixon explains:

[N]ot only did the spirituals identify the slaves' peculiar syncretistic religion, Sharing features of Protestant Christianity and traditional African religions, but They became an almost secretive code for the slave's critique of the plantation System and for his speech for freedom in this world. (298)

Slave songs became a secretive and powerful tool that persons of African descent used to communicate with one another outside the knowledge of their supposedly superior white masters, as well as being a way to maintain the cultural practices they brought with them from Africa. Indeed, the slave songs are but one remarkable example of the ways that enslaved persons were able to appropriate language and rework its meanings to suit their needs, including their creative expressions. As Deborah McDowell puts it, "[w]e enter a new world [in *Sula*] . . . that demands a shift from a dialectical either / or orientation to one that is dialogical or both / and, full of shift and contradictions" (60). The world of *Sula* is full of contradictions that require readers to investigate how another way of knowing that—a "nigger joke," the Bottom is up, and a slave song—have different meanings than what they imply on the surface.

Rewriting the "Condition of the Mother"

The problem, for us, can perhaps be usefully stated in the irony implicit in the attempt to posit a "black self" in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation. Ethnocentrism and "logocentrism" are profoundly interrelated in Western discourse as old as the *Phaedrus* of Plato, in which one finds one of the earliest figures of blackness as an absence, a figure of negation.

—Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*

I want women to have their rights. In the courts women have no right, no voice; nobody speaks for them. I wish woman to have her place voice there among the pettifoggers⁷. If it is not a fit place for women, it is unfit for men to be there.

—Sojourner Truth, “*Address to the Equal Rights Association*,” (1867)

One of the central uses of the trope of inversion in *Sula* is to (re)present and (re)cover the stories of African American women. Morrison employs inversion to stress the complex experiences that her black female characters faced as a result of raced and gendered stereotypes that began in, and extend from, American slavery. Thus these characters’ individual narratives are often profoundly ironic, their decisions ambiguous, and require deeper readings that reflect upon the situations they face in making certain choices. Moreover, the stories of these women are innately tied to the physical realities of their lives; the body is not separate or other, but always a part of how the black women in *Sula* live and relate to the challenges of their world.

For instance, the mothers in *Sula* are anything one might expect to find. Helene Wright is a mother who is anything but “right.” She is obsessed with blotting out the image of her own mother who was a “Creole whore” (17). Helene is well aware of the pervasive stereotypes about black women that have historically cast them as either Jezebel or mammy figures, and she is intent on avoiding any hint of physical behavior that might lead men—white or black—to assume that she is like her mother, a Jezebel. Therefore, Helene is consumed with disciplining her body. She walks around with her “head high and arms stiff,” wears her “[H]eavy hair in a bun,” and “loved her [orderly] house” and “manipulating her daughter and husband” to meet her strict physical standards (18). In fact, she even attempts to control her daughter Nel’s body. Although Helene is pleased when Nel is born that “her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were

substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the flat broad nose of [her father] . . . and his generous lips,” Helene nevertheless forces Nel to wear a clothespin on her nose to prevent it from appearing too much like other African Americans’ noses. Yet Nel privately resists her mother’s attempts to impose distorted white middle-class values on her and declares, “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.” (28). This incident will prove to be a crucial early expression of selfhood that Nel discovers too late that she shares with Sula. Hidden beneath the recovered and reinvented stories of black motherhood, Morrison is also extending the versions of black female identity that Jacobs and Larsen began. She is offering yet another way of knowing the black female body and black women’s individual identities that claim a new way of iterating the “I.”

In “Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*,” Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek argue that “*Sula*’s exploration of female experience *fleshes* out the still emerging psychological schema” of women’s relationships (62). In fact, the body is central to understanding the psychological workings of Morrison’s female characters in the novel, but perhaps even more significantly, the flesh is central to how she uses inversion to appropriate the entire logos (meaning) of the body. As Gates insightfully explains in the epigraph to this section, the very language of white society has worked to erase blackness, to mark the black body as a sign of absence that reinforces and validates white bodies as somehow better, more attractive, and more deserving of positive attention in the media, of protection in the legal system, of the best medical care, etc. Morrison uses inversion to turn the tables on the status quo’s power of the white logos, drawing on her female characters’ bodies to elaborate another way of knowing

how to survive, how to live, and how to express a full identity even in the face of exploitation and oppression. Morrison creates extreme situations for her female characters that draw on both supernatural and historical context to reflect the intense irony of what black women have had to deal with in a country that continues to use sex and gendered stereotypes to justify their objectification and victimization. Morrison follows the lead of writers such as Jacobs and Larsen to rewrite the role of motherhood drawing on another way of knowing that includes the black female body.

For example, Eva Peace never tells her children she loves them; but when her daughter accidentally catches herself on fire and is burning to death, Eva Peace throws herself out of a second story window in a vain attempt to save her. This is not the action of a mother that doesn't love her daughter, but a poignant display of extreme devotion to her child. We also learn that Eva Peace is left in a desperate situation because of her race and gender. She cannot find work or assistance to support them. Not only does Eva refuse to marry again, the expected action for an African American woman in the Post-Reconstruction era, but she suddenly drops her children off with a friend for several months and leaves. This is not what we might term acceptable under the white logos of motherhood. Eva, however, has another way of knowing what it means to survive and protect her children as a black woman and mother. She returns several months later with an amputated leg and ten thousand dollars, enough to take charge of children again and build them a home that operates as boarding house to support them. Morrison is telling us more than a story about sacrifice, one, in fact, that iterates a bodily narrative. Furthermore, this bodily narrative gestures to the "condition of the mother" that slave women had to endure.

Harriet Jacobs tells us a similar unimaginable story in *Incidents*. Not only does she allow Mr. Sands to purchase her children in hopes he will free them because they are his biological son and daughter, but she also leaves her children when the opportunity for escape from slavery finally presents itself. This does not seem logical within the white logos, yet for a slave mother whose children are relegated into a life servitude based on the “condition of the mother,” these decisions make perfect sense. Jacobs and other black women have another way of knowing that they must depend on themselves and their own bodies to survive in an America where a sexed and gendered system of justice means injustice for the black woman. These are black women’s bodily narratives that make no sense unless readers look deeply for the silenced truths and embedded meanings. Eva’s actions require us to look for a historical context that the reality of slavery, Jim Crowism, lynching, rape, and the “official” records such as the Moynihan Report tell us. While these bodily narratives may not be easily reconciled within the white logos, a deeper inspection that applies multiple consciousness to these texts tell us otherwise and bring out the contradictions, gaps, and slippages in the raced and gendered discourses that have attempted to erase the physical resistance of black women. Keeping in mind these clear discrepancies between the “truths” of white logos and the reality that requires black women to rely upon another way of knowing, we can make a clearer reading of the mothers’ actions in the novel. Eva Peace is a perfect example of the reconstructed roles of motherhood that Morrison challenges us to examine in *Sula*.

Eva is the matriarch of the Peace clan, and one of the most significant and memorable female characters of the novel. Eva’s story begins when she is abandoned, “after five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage to Boyboy . . . who liked womanizing

best, drinking second, and Eva third” (*Sula* 32). BoyBoy leaves Eva with the responsibility of supporting her three children alone, a task that would have been almost impossible task for any woman in the 1920s without an education, job skills, or some other form family, friend, or governmental assistance to call on, let alone an African American woman. The narrator also makes it a point to inform readers that “[W]hite people in the valley weren’t rich enough then to want maids; they were small farmers and tradesmen and wanted hard-labor help if anything” (33). Without any viable means of supporting herself, Eva would have few possibilities in the Jim Crow world of the 1920s. But the situation will get drastically worse as time passes.

After nearly a year of severe struggles to keep her children from starving to death, Eva’s youngest son, Plum, “stopped having bowel movements” (33). Eva assumes “something must be wrong with [her] milk,” (34) and attempted to treat the problem with all she could think of, some warm water; but Plum’s condition continued to deteriorate and “his shrieks were pitched high in outrage and suffering. . . . At one point, maddened by his own crying, he gagged, choked and looked as though he was strangling to death” (34). Eva, with the ingenuity and dedication that highlights her devotion to her children, used the only things she had on hand to save her son— some lard, her finger, and a mother’s love. In one of the most poignant and loving acts of the novel, the narrator describes how Eva:

rushed to him and kicked over the earthen slop jar, washing a small area of the floor with the child’s urine. . . . She wrapped him in blankets, ran her fingers. . . around the lard can and stumbled to the outhouse with him. Deep in its darkness and freezing stench she . . . exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food

she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. (34)

Practical, loving, and determined, Eva Peace puts her baby at ease:

Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. (34)

It was at that moment in the freezing cold outhouse that Eva resolved to make only the first of several deeply moving, and certainly at times, shockingly problematic, sacrifices to her children. Two days later she left her children with a neighbor with the promise she would be back. Eva Peace seems to have simply walked away.

However, Eva Peace is not gone for long:

Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin" where she had lived for more than a year after he left her. (34-35)

Morrison not only draws on the intensely physical bond that takes place between and mother and child, but she further inverts the idea that a white logos would likely argue is just as indicative of any white mother's willingness to sacrifice for her children, even through her own death if necessary. But in Morrison's recreation of the black woman's world, Eva demonstrates another way of knowing.

For example, she might have found some way while she was mysteriously gone to get the money necessary for perhaps a life insurance policy that would have ensured her

children's care and thus, sacrificed her life to cash in and, out, in the ultimate show of motherly love. This would in no way have been shocking, as death is a not only a central theme in the novel, but also ever-present. Yet Eva was not about to abandon her responsibility. The women and mothers that live up in the Bottom do not follow the epistemology afforded a *white* logos. Eva made a deeper sacrifice that she would have to both live with, and overcome on a daily basis, all the while remaining there to raise and care for her children. As Paula Gallant Eckard aptly note, "[t]he sacrifice that Eva makes in order to provide for her children casts her as 'the victim of white-and male-dominated society'" (55). However, the "mutilation of her body [also] serves as an indictment of these forces and suggests that there is a cultural responsibility to set maternal limits and prevent such sacrifices" (55). Whatever reasoning or logic we may attempt to apply, the fact remains that Morrison does not make this bodily narrative easy for us to understand or accept. Instead, she compounds the dominant culture's lens that imposes the white logos, adding layer after layer of complexity to any right or wrong model for the black maternal.

Indeed, Morrison even refuses to reveal to readers what happened to Eva's missing leg. And to make matters more confusing, we are faced with more irony when Eva seems to celebrate the fact that she only has one leg remaining. The narrator points out that "[W]hatever the fate of her lost leg, the remaining one was magnificent. . . . It was stockinged and shod at all times" (31). Astoundingly, Eva took pride in both her one remaining leg and the one missing, refusing to "wear overlong dresses to disguise the empty place on her left side" (31). Moreover, Eva appears to enjoy listening to, and even participating in, the Medallion community's tall tales about what actually happened to

her leg, and she often “began some fearful story about. . . [H]ow the leg got up by itself one day and walked away” (30). But Eva never reveals what really happened. The white logos will undoubtedly look at Eva’s actions as grotesque, viewing her proud display of the missing leg as inappropriate and vulgar. Eva Peace, however, has another way of knowing that has taught her differently. As Carolyn Denard points out, Eva is not preoccupied with alien standards of physical beauty or self worth” (qtd. in Eckard). Eva’s bodily narrative speaks the irony of a black woman’s existence and leaves the answers for how she deals with them closed to easy understanding. Ambiguity pervades because the white logos does not fit the “unofficial” record of black women’s experiences.

Yet, Eva’s actions are not always explainable, even when we take into account the realities of the raced and gendered system black women had to defend themselves against. Thanks to Eva’s devotion and physical sacrifice, her son Plum will survive the early trials of a poverty-stricken childhood. Like Shadrack, when Plum is a young adult he joins the military and leaves to fight in World War I. But much like Shadrack, Plum will be deeply affected by the traumas he witnesses in combat and the racism he faces on his return home. He eventually cannot deal with these problems and becomes addicted to alcohol and heroine. The narrator explains that Eva and her daughter watched and waited:

[until Plum] began to steal from them, tak[ing] trips to Cincinnati and sleep[ing] for days in his room with the record player going. He got even thinner, since he only ate snatches of things at beginnings or endings of meals. It was Hannah who found the bent spoon black from steady cooking. (45)

Night after night, Plum remained in this tragic condition, wasting away before his mother's eyes.

But "late one night in 1921, Eva got up from her bed. . . . [H]oisting herself up on her crutches" (*Sula* 45). She practiced until "she could manipul[at] herself down the long flights of stairs[,] and "swinging and swooping like a giant heron, . . . she arrived at Plum's door and pushed it open with the tip of one crutch" (46). Eva "sat down and gathered Plum into her arms," rocking him like she had when he was a child while she thought (46). After a while Eva "dragged herself to the kitchen," and when she returned Plum "felt something wet "travelling over his legs and stomach with a deep attractive smell" (47). Plum imagined it was "some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing. . . . [and thought] [e]verything is going to be all right" (47). Eva "rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick . . . lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" (47). Eva quickly shut the door and was back in her room when she heard Hannah burst in screaming, "Plum! Plum! He's burning, Mamma!" (47). "The two women did not speak, for the eyes of each were enough for the other" (47). This scene arguably defies an easy answer, though critics have certainly offered many. Yet the one that seems to answer the illogic may be best answered through another bound in its own way to a similar paradox.

Margaret Garner was an actual slave at the Maplewood Plantation in Richwood Station, Kentucky. She and her husband Robert and four children attempted to escape on a bitterly cold night 1856 by crossing the frozen Ohio River. They were unsuccessful. When approached by slave catchers who intended to return Margaret and her family to her slave master, who Karen F. Stein argues likely fathered as least some of her children,

Margaret Garner smothered her infant daughter to protect her from a life of slavery (107). The case gained national attention in the press, serving not only as what would prove to be an unsuccessful challenge to the Fugitive Slave Act, but the institution of slavery as a whole (Stein 108). Unfortunately, as it had been with the young slave woman Celia, Margaret Garner's case was unsuccessful. She was returned to her master who sold her as a slave to a plantation owner in New Orleans. As Stein reports, [i] 1858, four years before the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves," Margaret Garner died of typhoid fever (108).

There is no easy answer to either the real story of Margaret Garner who thought death was better than slavery for her female child or the fictional attempt by Morrison to recreate a black woman's understanding and choice to kill her youngest son rather than see him waste away as a drug addict. Both cases seem to represent the profound paradox of black women's lives in slavery and the institutionalized prejudice and legalized discrimination that followed, offering perhaps at least one reasonable answer for the ultimately unreasonable: Margaret Garner and Eva Peace had another way of knowing beyond the comprehension of those who were not there. As Jacobs so compellingly declared in *Incidents* in 1861, "slave women ought not to be judged by the same standards as others" (55-56). It seems that Morrison may be implying that to some degree black women's bodies and experiences carry the memories of slavery. We are compelled to wonder, do they also require the same consideration? Regardless of how we judge either incident, Eckard's trenchant observation appears to make sense: "Eva's body provides the central metaphor of love and sacrifice in *Sula*, adding both mythic and inverted dimensions to the maternal" (53).

The final mother *Sula* introduces is Eva's daughter Hanna Peace. Like Eva, we learn that Hannah is a very different kind of mother, one who clearly does not fit into a white logos of the maternal. Morrison's narrator explains that "It was manlove Eva bequeathed to her daughters. . . . those Peace women loved all men" (41). However, "while Eva tested and argued with her men, leaving them feeling as though they had been in combat with a worthy, if amiable, foe, Hannah . . . made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" (43). Hannah "would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied . . . commitment. . . . So she ended up a daytime lover" (44). As Barbara Christian asserts, "Far from being the seductress traditionally dressed in red, who manipulates men to her own ends," Hannah has "funky elegance" and "remains independent in herself" (80). It was from her mother that Sula learned "sex was pleasant . . . but otherwise unremarkable . . . [and like Hannah] how to break up a marriage before it had even become one" (44). However, Hannah, like Eva, is also unable to express her love for Sula verbally. This will lead to a crucial event in Sula's early life when she overhears Hannah remark that she does not like her. What Sula fails to listen for only a few moments later is that Hannah does love her. Unfortunately for Sula and Nel, their mother's love, however deep, proves inadequate to help them make the right decisions for lives that have moved beyond the tragedies of their ancestors.

Sula is a novel that begins by linking the lives of Medallion to slavery. The knowledge of those who live up in the Bottom is derived from a time when survival demanded a complex relationship with the fragmented world only known to the enslaved. The role of motherhood and Morrison's fictional mothers simply do not fit into a white

logos paradigm in *Sula* because the models from which these women have learned follow a devastating history linked to rape, the auction block, and the cruel tip of the slave master's lash. Morrison transforms the "condition" of this disremembered mother to the site of ultimate sacrifice and devotion in *Sula*; the body is inscribed with the pain, love, and sacrifice that the children are expected to read. We are invited to hear the pain of the slave mother in this tale, denied the ability to protect her children from physical, sexual, and emotional assault slave mothers attempt to instill their daughters with only that knowledge they needed to survive. Morrison adapts this cruel reality in *Sula* with mothers who do whatever is necessary to provide the material and physical needs for their daughters, but fail to give them the emotional comfort necessary to survive. The result is that they seek out alternative means to fulfill this void, often with men who simply replicate the patriarchal crimes of the past. The black men in *Sula*, perhaps with the exception of a physically and emotionally wounded Shadrack, are all as emotionally absent as the maternal figures. There are no role models for Sula and Nel to develop or pattern themselves after as black women. As a result, they often look for these models in all of the wrong places.

"Something Else to Be"

Nobody knew my rose of the world
but me. . . . I had too much glory.
They don't want glory like that
In nobody's heart.

—The Rose Tattoo

Nel and Sula become fast and perfectly suited friends in their childhood. The girls were "Solitary and lonely, . . . the only children of distant mothers and

incomprehensible fathers” (52). Sula and Nel liked each other, fittingly, in keeping with Morrison’s inversions, exactly for what the other’s family life had to offer. Nel could not wait to escape from her mother’s rigid control to visit Eva Peace’s always hectic boarding house. Nel thought of Sula’s place as a kind of paradise in comparison to her own home:

[a] woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in . . . and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (29)

And Nel loved Hannah Peace precisely because her own mother did not. Helene Wright referred to Sula’s mother as “sooty,” which seemed to be just fine with Nel (29). In Sula Nel found a chance, at least in the beginning, to “cultivate a friend in spite of her mother,” perhaps part of “her new found me-ness” (29). For Sula, it was just the opposite. “When she first visited the Wright house, Helene’s curdles scorn turned to butter. . . . Her daughter’s friend seemed to have none of the mother’s [Hannah’s] slackness” (29). The dreaded red-velvet couch that Nel so despised because Helene said it could not be ruffled for fear of sudden important company, Sula adored. She would “sit on [it] for ten to twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn” (29).

Nel, however, found another reason to care for Sula, and not just her different home life. This reason solidified Sula’s own willingness to sacrifice for those she loved, and defined her singular physical fearlessness, a bodily narrative that eventually turned her into the town pariah. On the way home from a visit to Edna Finch’s Mellow House for an ice cream treat, the girls are confronted by several new residents to Medallion, four white immigrant boys whose “place in this world was secured only when they echoed

[the valley residents'] attitude toward blacks" (53). The boys had one thing on their mind, to terrorize the outcast black girls to make themselves feel good about who they were. But Sula had other ideas on her mind. She pulled out a pocket knife, and [h]olding the knife in her right hand . . . she slashed off . . . the tip of her finger" (54). She then coolly and quietly asked the bigger boys, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you" (55)? Sula's bodily narrative did the trick; the boys decided it might be best to leave her alone, as "toughness was not their quality" (55). Sula's bold action not only recalls Eva's amputated leg, but, according to Vanessa D. Dickerson, prefigures "Sethe's decapitation of her own child in *Beloved* (205). Dickerson astutely points out that "Cutting off her finger, Sula makes a statement about owning her own body and her capacity to act upon the bodies of those who would assault it" (205). From that point forward, Sula earns for herself the reputation of "somebody potent, dangerous, and different" (qtd. in Bennett and Dickerson 204).

But the girls would soon share another secret that brought them even closer than they could ever realize being. While playing by the river, a five-year old boy named Chicken Little came wandering alone where the two girls were daydreaming. Still reeling from overhearing Hannah say that she did not like her daughter, Sula seemed to be feeling impetuous. After convincing the little boy to climb a tree with her, Sula picks up Chicken Little and begins to spin him around; but he ends up slipping into the river. Before the girls knew what to do, Chicken Little's body was long gone. He had drowned in the river and they decided it best to keep the whole thing a secret.

Years later when Nel catches Sula down on all fours having sex her (Nel's) husband Jude, a situation that Sula understands differently—Nel should have shared—

Nel recalls the church service for Chicken Little and one of the most moving bodily narratives in the novel:

But it seemed to [Nel] now not a fist-shaking grief they were keening but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead. . . . The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss. (107)

The anonymous women are expressing another way of knowing and dealing with their dead. This is an expression of grief and loss that cannot, in fact, it is one that refuses, to deny the body's place in life and death. It seems that Morrison's aesthetic is one that calls on and recuperates the "colonized flesh/body" that Jacobs and Larsen realized so clearly was denied black women within the discourse of true womanhood and bourgeois gentility (qtd. in Bennett and Dickerson 198). Morrison rewrites the black female body's discursive ambiguity into a material expression that enables the literature to make the recovery. Sula is black women's writing doing the body, making the flesh into word that can be read, and felt, and experienced as vital to the self.

Sula's difference does not end with the affair with Chicken Little or Nel's husband. She leaves Medallion for ten long years after the incident with Jude; but she comes back "accompanied by a plague of robins" (*Sula* 89). While Sula may have left the town ambivalently figured, when she returns there is no doubt, at least to everyone judging her in Medallion, that she is pure evil. And it is here that Sula's ever-evolving metaphorical body does its most ironic and important work for the Medallion black community:

Sula's evil changed the town in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together against the devil in their midst. In their world aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. . . . (117)

The folks up in the Bottom, however, did not run Sula off just because they thought she was evil:

[But] [t]hey would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula. (117)

Indeed, Sula had changed. Whether she was truly evil or not is certainly up for debate in a novel based on a debate between white, "normative" definitions of good and evil. Yet one thing was for certain; Sula's everything had somehow morphed into something inexplicable and her body was at the top of the list.

Morrison describes Sula's curious physical attribute when she and Nel first meet, a birthmark located near "the middle of her eyelid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose" (52). This birthmark, however, changes considerably with each strange action that Sula makes in the novel. By the time she returns to Medallion from her ten-year hiatus, the birthmark has taken on a life and meaning all its own to those in Medallion who gaze upon it. As Dickerson explains, "Sula's birthmark—variously perceived as 'stemmed rose,' 'rose mark,' 'scary black thing,' 'copperhead,' 'rattlesnake,' 'Hannah's ashes,' and 'tadpole'—makes legible her community needs to

express its own access to hyperdisplacement” (287). Dickerson argues that the birthmark is a signature of Sula’s body,” one extra, complex, “a site of multiplicity and the ‘changing same” (qtd. in Bennett and Dickerson). Sula’s birthmark, in other words, is everything the community saw it as, and none of those things. Her body became a site of inscription, marked and read differently by those who needed it to become what they wanted. She was a pariah and the birthmark matched—copperhead, rattlesnake, Hannah’s ashes, and scary black thing. She was Nel’s friend once again, and the birthmark was merely a rose tattoo. But perhaps within and outside of all of these interpretations, Sula’s birthmark is best represented by what Shadrack saw it as, a tadpole. The tadpole means new life, changeability, and beauty of a kind. More than any other reading of her body’s story and its marks, this seems to best express the narrative that is Sula’s physical being. She is the new model for black womanhood in the novel. She is undeniably different, changeable, and beautiful because she is unique. Her one flaw may be that of the tadpole as well, for she is vulnerable to so many who cannot accept or relate to her other way of knowing her body, her self, and her “I.”

In a key confrontation with Eva after she returns to Medallion, Sula spells out her ultimate desire in life. Eva begins:

“You ain’t been in this house ten seconds and already you starting something.”

“Takes two, Big Mamma.”

“Well, don’t let your mouth start nothing that your ass can’t stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you.”

“I don’t make somebody else. I want to make myself.” (92)

Sula is not interested in the models of black womanhood handed down to her. She rejects the condition of the mother, and demands a new way of being her complete self. But as Morrison reminds us, Sula did not have the necessary tools to find the path toward this model of being. “[H]ad she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for . . . all she yearned for. . . . [but] like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous” (121). Sula’s danger and her promise are reflected in her paradigmatic black female body, one that will only find its purpose in ceasing to breathe.

Becoming the Ancestor

That this remarkable concert of Black subject, Black poet, Black photographer, and Black artist focuses on the dead is significant for it is true what Africans say: ‘The Ancestor lives as long as those who are there remember.’ *The Harlem Book of the Dead* . . . cherishes that remembrance and enlightens us only as memory can.

—Toni Morrison, “Foreword,” *Harlem Book of the Dead*

Death is an ever-present theme in *Sula*, and one that bears on the ending in the form of a lesson. The inversion trope that Morrison has developed throughout the novel is finally realized in the end, bringing together both the importance of the past and the needs of those looking to the future. In other words, Morrison seems to be saying that the ancestors’ narratives may no longer serve as the model of black womanhood for those living in the present. This is part of the work that Sula begins, but because she had no art, which we might take to mean that she had no model, she was ultimately unable to find the route to become her full self. She dies, or at least it seems, alone, in pain, and without her dearest friend. Yet Sula does not completely leave when she dies. Morrison’s mix of real and supernatural gives her protagonist the opportunity for one final grand transformation, one last fulfilling role before she makes her final exit.

Sula is certainly not like anyone else in the novel. Even death will prove to be different for her. Indeed, Dickerson argues it will serve as “yet another venue by which to explore the body” (207). And yet, this is somehow not as extraordinary as we might think, that is, not for the residents of the Bottom. For, as the narrator has already explained, the physical experiences of the Bottom were not like they were in the valley. In the Bottom, blacks had to find “a little comfort somewhere . . . somehow,” and “adult pain . . . rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of their hand, somewhere behind the frayed labels, somewhere in the sinews curve” (*Sula* 4-5). Thus when Sula suffers through her own last experiences of pain, she “suffers with a difference” that Dickerson argues gives our enigmatic black female protagonist one last “opportunity to test the limits of her body” (207). As Sula settles in to focus on the illness writhing through her body, she analyzes “the wires of liquid pain . . . identifying them as waves, hammerstrokes, razor edges or small explosions,” as a “pain that took hold” but did not manage to prevent her from reading it (*Sula* 148). Dickerson argues that “Even the heightened bodily experience of pain cannot fix or transfix Sula, who eventually feels more boredom than agony: ‘Soon even the variety of the pain bored her and there was nothing to do’” (207). In the end, we are left coming to terms with another kind of passing, though in this case no one pushes Sula out of a window as we saw with Clare Kendry in *Passing*. But Morrison sets up a bit of a Larsenian trickery herself, one that figures in and through the discursivity of one of her most ambiguous characters.

Dickerson observes that during her last moments of life, Sula lies in “a weary anticipation” of “termination” and the unassailable finality” of death (*Sula* 149, 148);

“however, Morrison questions this finality, giving Sula a postmortem textual resilience” (qtd. in Bennett and Dickerson 208). Indeed, Morrison appears to confuse the deathbed scene considerably because she allows Sula to realize that while she has stopped breathing, “Her body did not need oxygen. . . . [Because] [s]he was dead” (149). The problem is, as Dickerson reminds us, Morrison “extends Sula’s body, relocating it . . . and writes through the textual gap recovering Sula’s senses and her mind” (208). In short, Morrison keeps Sula there with us: “Sula felt her face smiling. ‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nell’” (149). In a supernatural feat that one could argue prefigures the work in *Beloved*, Morrison refuses to let one of her most troubling, most memorably, and most remarkable female protagonists simply fade away. On the contrary, Morrison brings Sula’s experiences to a place where they cannot be forgotten, where she can serve as rememory, and where she can become the ancestor.

As Nel passes Shadrack in the street something strange happens:

Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little.

“Sula?” she whispered, gazing at the tops of the trees. “Sula?”

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. (174)

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. . . . “We was girls together,” she said as though explaining something. “Oh Lord Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.”

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

For Morrison's *Sula*, the "unspeakable things" of her life—Chicken Little's bloated dead body, Eva's mutilated leg, Plum's fiery death, watching her mother Hannah burn, losing her friend Nel, and dying all alone—represent both the beautiful and the terrible of her corpus, the ultimate realization of the artistic sublime. In death, one could argue, Sula finally learns from the unspeakable and becomes an ancestor herself. Sula is transformed in order to show Nel how to transform, to take from the past what is necessary to make one's own version of selfhood in the present. Sula's death allows her to become a "rememory," and as such, she cannot be forgotten. Perhaps she is not meant to be understood or reckoned with easily, but to be remembered as a past that will never completely go away.

Bell hooks has bemoaned the fact that Sula is "not self-actualized enough to stay alive [because she] has no conscious politics, [and] never links her struggle to be self-defining with the collective plight of black women" (48). Clearly, Morrison meant for readers to engage this text and take part in the multiple meanings and outcomes that are possible. After all, Sula is not the only black woman in the text who has something to say. The un-representable, racialized, and victimized black female body is rediscovered and recovered through the bodily narratives in *Sula*, serving as a bridge between the private and the individual, the communal and the historic. In other words, the material body is translated into the discursive body in this novel, one that Morrison links to both the stories of Jacobs and Larsen, but likewise seeks to move beyond. In *Sula*, and through Sula, Morrison writes another way of knowing, yet reminds her readers that the models of black womanhood must continue to change and adapt. The audacity of Eva

and Hannah and Sula serve as the bodily narratives for Nel to pen her own unique audacity of “I.”

V. CONCLUSION

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

—*The Declaration of Independence*

African American literature, it might be said, is built around both the breaking and remaking of “tradition.” Surely its writers were not blind to the gravity of such a task. Harriet Jacobs certainly did not underestimate the gravity of her undertaking. She knew that she lived in an America built on the premises of liberty and equality, but whose laws and tradition of slavery denied her any right to such privileges. She knew that she was up against an almost impossible task in taking on laws, ideologies, and traditions that denied her the right to possess her own body. She knew that white America in the South denied her humanity, and in the North wondered to what degree an inkling of humanity could be granted the African American. She knew that most white readers would think, without even reading her narrative, that she was incapable of telling a “true” story.

When Jacobs first sent her drafts for *Incidents* to Amy Post, some questions apparently were posed by the latter as to whether certain aspects of the story were “true.” Even this inimitable abolitionist, a white “woman of the North” (Jacobs “Preface” 5) who for all accounts was a dedicated activist committed to ending slavery,

who knew Jacobs had been compelled to write her story under the pseudonymous name of Linda Brent, to change certain names, dates, and places to protect both white and black persons involved with her daring escape from bondage, and whom Jacobs truly counted as her friend— even in light of all of this, Post doubted certain things. She needed confirmation from Jacobs, and she had to determine if Jacobs was telling the truth. In response to such questions in 1853, Jacobs wrote these lines in a letter to Post: “[As to] [t]he request in your letter, I told you it was true in all its statements except its being my mother and sister. But *we grew up together*. The answer to the slave’s being outlawed in North Carolina [is] I was home when the poor outlaw was brought home with his *head severed from his body*” (“Letter to Amy Post” 173, emphasis added). Jacobs, as this thesis contends she does repeatedly in *Incidents*, uses the only proof that former slaves had to counter those who doubted the veracity of the horrors they experienced as enslaved people, the only written record they had at hand in lieu of their intellect and memory not being enough for white readers such as Amy Post. Jacobs offered up the slave body. She unpacked the physical, material, visible presence of the slave’s brutalized and decapitated body for Post to see for herself. Jacobs’s narrative is, according to Christina Accomando, one of the most sophisticated sustained legal discourses against slavery ever written, a story which took on the falsehoods used to justify the institution by exposing the fact “African American women’s sexual and reproductive bodies were an integral part of the Southern slave economy” (115). Jacobs presented Post with a bodily narrative. It must have been enough. The attempts to seek out a publisher went forward. The body as authenticating document, it seems, is pretty tough to contest.

Slavery has left a mark on far more than American history. These marks register very clearly in African American literature as a whole, and arguably even more so in women writers' literature of this tradition. As Henry Louis Gates points out, "[w]hereas most black male writers deny any influence at all—or eagerly claim a white paternity—black female authors often claim descent from other black literary ancestors" (*Reading Black* 4). Alongside these ideas of Gates, Angelyn Mitchell argues that black women writers today continue to look back to slavery and to writers such as Jacobs, whose stories of slave mothers, families, and women's community resonate with their own experiences as black women in a literary tradition and an American tradition that continues to doubt the significance and authenticity of their stories (14-15). The significance of these stories is undeniably a part of the whole American experience, one wrought through, on, and in the body of the African American slave, one that must, and does, continue to be told in the work of African American women writers. This thesis did not set out to find such a connection. Its goal was to establish an argument for bodily narratives, to counter the hegemonic hold that white male "tradition" has established since at least Plato of a split between the body and mind that leaves us without a full understanding of our whole selves. This is not what emerged.

I originally endeavored to seek out these narratives through the application of complex theories that might work to counter those clearly on the winning side of any attempt to prove the body's ability to tell a story; the theories failed, but the bodies had a great deal to say. Not only were the theories inappropriate to these African American women writers' works and the stories of their bodies in slavery, in a segregated nation during the 1920s, and in the lingering racism and sexism of the 1970s, they were also

preventing the primary texts from speaking for themselves. When I gave up the theory and simply listened, I heard a story quite different from the one I had sought with theory.

African American women's bodies are part of an ongoing white American drama, one played out in the legal system, debated in the political arena, and judged by the American public in newspapers, magazines, blogs, advertisements, on television and film, and in literature. This drama begins with slavery, white racism, and its systems of discrimination and continues to frame the way we think and attempt to construct bodies that do not belong to us. African American women writers and African American women have had and continue to have something say about their own bodies. The trick is, white Americans have to listen. One way to think through and listen for bodily narratives may include a study of the way that the discourses of slavery on the black body continue to find their way into American literature, public policy, the legal system, and countless other cultural artifacts. One possible key to removing the frames that distort pre-conceived ideologies about the body is to juxtapose narratives of the past and present alongside literature that seems to address narratives of the body, and to explore the critical connections and discrepancies that this kind of multi-conscious reading makes visible. And the need to apply such readings, indeed, to develop any way possible to read and better understand the effects of racism and sexism and its antecedent in the institution of American slavery, is important not only for academic enlightenment, but political, social, and human enlightenment as well.

Frederick Douglass wrote that "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance" (*My Bondage, My Freedom* 239), and it appears that his words continue to apply. Since 1989 Representative John Conyers, Jr., a duly elected democratic public official serving the

state of Michigan, has proposed legislation that would finally address the issue of slavery in America. He has proposed that a commission be established to examine slavery and its consequences on our nation. The proposition has never been given serious consideration. However, in an act that seems to signify in some way on our First Lady's refusal to cover up her arms, Representative Conyers has continued to submit his recommendation to Congress every year since 1989. He insists that the narratives of history are playing out in the present. In the face of those who might like to forget our collective memory of the brutal institution we call American slavery, the failure of Reconstruction, the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, the Watts and L.A. riots, the beating of Rodney King, the 1998 dragging death of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas, and the 2009 debated "inalienable right" of the First Lady of the United States to wear clothes of her own choosing, Representative Conyers refuses to quell his "I."

If we are to make serious attempts to come to terms with slavery, to begin to understand the way it lingers in arguably every aspect of American culture, to ask why we are debating any African American woman's right to portray her own body the way she sees fit, then it is imperative that we take the advice of Douglass and stay vigilant. "The past is never dead," according to William Faulkner's character Gavin Stevens in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951), and in fact "[i]t is not even past" (595). Our journey in this thesis would seem to confirm this idea by bringing the ever-present "rememory" (*Beloved* 244) of slavery to the fore. It seems difficult to bring to a close a subject so necessary to keep open, one this thesis found written on the body of texts analyzed here, and the texts of bodies that witnessed and narrated it. Perhaps this end might endeavor, in some small way, to follow the lead of Harriet Jacobs, to make a beginning in which this student

scholar and others continue to read for bodily narratives and to respect the rights of everyone to express an audacity of “I.”

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NOTES

¹ See *The Slave's Narrative*, "Texts and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*," (263).

² "Pettifoggers" are petty and unscrupulous lawyers.

³ Toni Morrison, *What Moves in the Margins*.

⁴ Cheryl Wall. "Disremembered" is a direct play on Toni Morrison's own innovation of the term "rememory."

⁵ The Swedish Academy "Press Release" on 7 October 1993 describes Toni Morrison as a writer "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality," on *Nobelprize.org*.

⁶ Toni Morrison, *What Moves in the Margins*.

VITA

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