Doktori (PhD) értekezés

Mothers in the Wake of Slavery:
The Im/possibility of Motherhood in Post-1980 African American Women's Prose

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Debreceni Egyetem

BDT

2021

MOTHERS IN THE WAKE OF SLAVERY:

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Értekezés a doktori (PhD) fokozat megszerzése érdekében

az irodalom- és kultúratudományok tudományágban

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Készült a Debreceni Egyetem Irodalom- és Kultúratudományok Doktori Iskola

(Angol és észak-amerikai irodalom- és kultúratudományi programja) keretében

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Az értekezés védésének időpontja: 2021 . ……………… …

Plágiumnyilatkozat

Én, Lénárt-Muszka Zsuzsanna, teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés önálló munka, a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült, a benne található irodalmi hivatkozások egyértelműek és teljesek. Nem állok doktori fokozat visszavonására irányuló eljárás alatt, illetve 5 éven belül nem vontak vissza tőlem odaítélt doktori fokozatot. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el.

………………………………

Acknowledgments

First and foremost I am grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Imola Bülgözdi, whose guidance and patience were invaluable throughout the stages of the research project.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Dorottya Mózes, Dr. Éva Federmayer, Dr. Lenke Németh, Dr. Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, and Dr. Péter Gaál-Szabó, for all the time, professional feedback, and insight they gave me in the past 5 years at various stages of research and writing.

I received a great deal of encouragement and inspiration from my colleagues, especially Babett Rubóczki and Dr. Balázs Venkovits, whose unwavering support was instrumental throughout the process.

Finally, I would like to thank my beloved parents as well as my wonderful husband and daughter. Without their love and support, this dissertation would not have been started, let alone finished. Thank you, with all my love.

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Összefoglaló magyarul

Az értekezés célja egy eddig kevéssé feltérképezett kortárs amerikai irodalmi terület kutatása: az anyaság reprezentációit vizsgálom afroamerikai írónők 1980 utáni prózai műveiben elsődlegesen a fekete feminizmus és az Afropesszimizmus keretén belül (a traumaelmélet, interszekcionalitás, és anyaságkutatások kiegészítő elméleti kereteit is felhasználva), azt elemezve, hogy a rabszolgaság hosszan tartó következményei milyen hatással vannak a korai anyai testi élményekre. Érvelésem szerint az elemzett, 1980 és 2011 között megjelent, általam *anyaszöveg*eknek (*mothertext*) nevezett regények és novellák—Alice Walker: „The Abortion" (1982), Sherley Anne Williams: *Dessa Rose* (1986), Sapphire: *Push* (1996), Kalisha Buckhanon: *Conception* (2008), Danielle Evans: „Harvest" (2010), és Jesmyn Ward: *Salvage the Bones* (2011)—az anyaság lehetőségének és lehetetlenségének kettősségére világítanak rá és azt vizsgálják, hogy a hátrányos helyzetű, gyakran fiatal, fekete, biológiai anyák hogyan élik meg az anyává válás és a korai anyaság testi aspektusait.

A fejezetek elsősorban Frank Wilderson, Saidiyah Hartman, és Christina Sharpe elméleteire támoaszkodva bemutatják, a választott művekben miként jelenik meg az anyai lehetőség (*possibility*, pl. az anyává válás lehetősége, a gyermekkel való boldog kapcsolat, az anyaság pozitív hozadékai) és a lehetetlenség (*impossibility*, tkp. az anya gyásza, kudarca, megaláztatása, a gyermek elvesztése, az anya lehetőségeit behatároló rasszista környezet által létrejövő erőszak). A lehetőség és lehetetlenség kettőssége jellemzi a korpuszt: a possibility és az impossibility tehát *im/possibility*vé módosul. A *Dessa Rose* címszereplője újraegyesíti a családját, mégis kénytelen szembenézni az anyaság lehetetlenségével is: bár az anyaság a gyógyulás lehetőségét is magával hozza, azt Dessa csak krónikus, egyéni, generációkon átívelő, és közös(ségi) traumák közepette tudja csak megélni. Mindezzel tisztában is van: a késztetést, hogy újra és újra elmondja a saját verzióját, a fekete életek törékenységét övező félelem vezérli, így maga a történetmesélés is a fájdalom és a túlélés kettőssége által befolyásolt wake folyamat.

A *Push* főszereplője, Precious, normán kívüli testének, viselkedésének, és betegségének köszönhetően *freak*ként (tkp. torz, társadalomból kivetett szörnyszülöttként) tételeződik, majd végigmegy az ellentétes folyamaton (*unfreakment*), mindeközben arra törekedve, hogy a lehető legjobb anyává váljon, azonban ő sem tudja megkerülni az anyai lehetetlenséget: betegségébe még fiatalon belehal, majd a fia többféle erőszak áldozatává és később elkövetőjévé válik. A *Push* tehát rávilágít a fekete anyaságban rejlő im/possibilityre: Precious rendkívüli erőfeszítései csak

rövidtávon bizonyulnak gyümölcsözőnek, és a hamar elillanó katarzis nem képes meg nem történtté tenni a rendszerszintű, mélyen gyökerező, rasszista kontextus által okozott károkat.

Imani és Angel, a „The Abortion," valamint a „Harvest" főszereplője, más-más döntést hoz: egyiküknek az abortusz hoz némi megnyugvást, másikuknak viszont a gyermekvállalás ad reményt. Egyik szereplő sem haladja meg az anyai lehetetlenséget, ám az anyaság valamelyest hozzájárul a főszereplők wake workjéhez azáltal, hogy áttételesen a rasszizmussal szembeni ellenállás formáit képezik.

A *Conception* a meg nem született gyermek—egy magzat—(utó)életeinek középpontba helyezésen keresztül reflektál a rabszolgaság utóéletére. A magzat többszörös, újbóli megfoganása a rabszolgaság idejétől a 20. század végéig reményre ad okot, azonban, mivel minden leendő anya tragikus körülmények között hal meg, a regény a lehetetlenséget is előtérbe helyezi, így mutatva rá az im/possibilityre. A mű szerkezete és az általa illusztrált nonlineáris temporalitás, számos szimbólummal karöltve, azt mutatja, hogy az anya-gyermek normatív egysége egyedi módon értelmeződik újra ebben az anyaszövegben.

A *Salvage the Bones* c. regény a fekete nem/lét és anyaság im/possibilityjét mozgatva ábrázolja a fekete anyák önértékelését befolyásoló rendszerszintű tényezőket, amelyek a főszereplő Esch anyai identitására is hatással vannak. A mélyszegénységben élő Batiste család a Katrina hurrikánra készülve szembesül az időjárás többrétegű jelentésével: a *weather* (időjárás) szó ugyanis Sharpe használatában a mindent átható társadalmi klímát jelenti, igeként használva pedig Arline Geronimus szerint a fekete női test lassú, fokozatos „mállását", leépülését is jelzi. A hurrikán közeledtével Esch kénytelen feldolgozni egyrészt édesanyja elvesztését, másrészt saját terhességének tényét. Azonban elszántsága és anyai pozíciójának elfogadása nem ad okot felhőtlen optimizmusra: Katrina utóélete, a rabszolgaság utóéletével együtt, továbbra is hatással lesz mind Esch, mind születendő gyermeke kilátásaira.

Mindegyik szöveg a fekete anyaság im/possibilityjét állítja középpontba, amely a fekete nem/lét állapotában gyökerezik: amennyiben a (jelen idejű) rabszolgaság alkotóeleme a felmenőktől és leszármazottaktól való elidegenítés és az ontológiából való kivetettség, a fekete nő már anyává válása előtt egy traumatizáló, szabadságát és boldogságát, sőt, túlélését, életben maradását akadályozó, ellehetetlenítő környezetben nem/létezik. Az értekezés újdonságát az anyai lehetőség és lehetetlenség kettősének feltárása adja: megállapítom, hogy bár mindegyik anyaszöveg feltár egy olyan olvasatot, amely reményt és optimizmust sugall, a választott művek a lehetetlenség valóságára is reflektálnak: a szövegek hiátusait, ki nem mondottságait, és implikált jelentéseit

vizsgálva felsejlik, hogy az a megelégedettség vagy akár eufória, amivel a cselekmény néhány esetben záródik, átmeneti, és csak részlegesen képes ellensúlyozni a fekete anyaság traumáit, akadályait, fájdalmát, azaz tkp. annak lehetetlenségét. A rabszolgaság utóéletének még mindig kikerülhetetlen szerepe van abban, hogyan tételeződik a fekete női, anyai test az amerikai kultúrában; ennek megfelelően maga a vizsgált anyaszöveg-korpusz is a lehetőség és lehetetlenség metszéspontjában létezik.

Summary in English

The aim of this dissertation is to respond to a void in the scholarship in the field of contemporary literary criticism: reading motherhood in a subset of the corpus of post-1980 African American women's prose in the primary frameworks of Black feminism and Afropessimism while also being informed by trauma theory, motherhood studies, and intersectionality, I highlight the importance of the reverberations of enslavement on early maternal embodiment. I analyze the ways in which the selected novels and short stories that I call *mothertexts*—"The Abortion" (1982) by Alice Walker, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, *Conception* (2008) by Kalisha Buckhanon, "Harvest" (2010) by Danielle Evans, and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward—foreground the dual nature of maternal possibilities and impossibilities.

Building primarily on the work of Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, the chapters analyze the trope of im/possibility in my chose corpus. In *Dessa Rose*, the protagonist heals from various kinds of trauma and is reunited with her family, but impossibility is still imbricated in her motherhood: while motherhood is capable of engendering new possibilities of healing, it is still lived in (the wake of) chronic, individual, transgenerational, and communal trauma, which Dessa is very much aware of: her compulsion to keep telling her story and her wish that the children remember it attest to the precarity of Black existence and to the need to hold a wake to all that has been lost.

After going through the process of enfreakment and unfreakment, Precious in *Push* is indeed the best mother possible; however, she dies young due to her illness, and her son ends up a victim who then slowly transforms into a victimizer. Thus, *Push* illuminates the notion of the im/possibility of being a good mother: her effort, while being extraordinary and leading up to a (short-lived) catharsis, cannot negate the multifaceted effects of deep-rooted structural issues.
Imani in "The Abortion" and Angel in "Harvest" make different decisions: terminating her pregnancy brings Imani some peace, while keeping the baby makes Angel feel rejuvenated. Neither story is one of unquestionable triumph over the impossibility of Black motherhood, but Angel's affirmation of the pregnancy and Imani's abortion do confront the im/possibility of Black motherhood and constitute resistance in the face of racism, representing a healing potential in the wake.

Conception, through its complex structure and reliance on disrupted temporality, reconfigures the afterlives of slavery by foregrounding the (after)lives of the unborn child, which

generate new possibilities and hope in the face of tragedies, thus shedding light on the duality of im/possibilities prevalent in the other mothertexts as well.

Salvage the Bones mobilizes the im/possibility of Black life and motherhood to portray the impact of the systemic denial of dignity to Black mothers that frames Esch's self-perception. The volatility of the weather is also foregrounded: the literal sense of weather, through the impending hurricane, intersects with its metaphorical meanings through the debilitating, weathering effects of the racist social climate that consigns the Batistes to the Pit. The wake of the hurricane and the wake of slavery thus coalesce to produce a uniquely vulnerable position for Esch and her baby, in which the restorative potential of her decision remains in question.

The mothertexts bring into relief the im/possibility of Black motherhood that stems from the Black experience as described by Afropessimists: if slavery involves natal alienation (Patterson 5-7) and is a condition entailing social death and banishment from ontology (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 18), then the Black woman is left with impossible choices in an ever-hostile environment that stresses and traumatizes her before she even considers becoming a mother. The main novelty of this dissertation lies in identifying and tracing this trope of im/possibility in the subcorpus. While all the stories have endings that are carefully crafted to instill a sense of optimism in the reader, I demonstrate that they also reflect on the im/possibility of Black motherhood: even though the mothers do forge a unique path for themselves that may leave them with a sense of contentment or even euphoria at the conclusion of the plot, a consideration of the gaps in the texts reveals the disruption and impossibility of Black motherhood. Kevin Quashie's claim that "the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all" (66) thus means that in spite of the regenerative possibilities that becoming a mother may open up, impossibility is still very much a part of the reality of the characters, as corroborated by either the respective narrators' overt reflections on a racist and misogynistic environment or subtle clues in the descriptions of the diegetic world.

I. Introduction

Writing (about) Women and Mothers: Challenging the Default Perspective

Western scholarship, including white feminist theorizing on the various meanings of motherhood, has tended to center the concerns of a very particular set of women while speaking of a generic, unmarked "woman," failing to recognize that not all women are beneficiaries of the same privileges, among them racial, ethnic, or economic ones. These sweeping generalizations, however, fail to do justice to diverse groups of women and girls, or in the words of Saidiya Hartman, "by assuming that woman designates a known referent, an a priori unity, a precise bundle of easily recognizable characteristics, traits, and dispositions, [one fails] to attend to the contingent and disjunctive production of the category" (*Scenes* 99). The aim of this dissertation is to respond to a void in the scholarship: reading motherhood in a subset of the corpus of post-1980 African American women's prose in the primary frameworks of Black feminism and Afropessimism while also being informed by trauma theory, motherhood studies, and intersectionality, I highlight the importance of the reverberations of enslavement on early maternal embodiment. I analyze the ways in which the selected novels and short stories that I call *mothertexts*—"The Abortion" (1982) by Alice Walker, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, *Conception* (2008) by Kalisha Buckhanon, "Harvest" (2010) by Danielle Evans, and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward—foreground the dual nature of maternal possibilities and impossibilities.[1] Before providing the socio-cultural and literary context of the new corpora of Black feminist theory, criticism, and fiction, I find it necessary to briefly establish the fact that womanhood and motherhood have been culturally problematic concepts in the framework of white feminism as well. The following overview aims to highlight the scale and the scope of the issues that plight Black women and mothers.

The Western patriarchal discourse of motherhood and its normative codes have been made up of and informed by a number of theories, beliefs, and interests, all intent on policing women's bodies and behavior. These beliefs lend themselves to essentialism, which, "recontextualised within feminist philosophy . . . comes to denote the view that there are properties which are

[1] As per the conventions of Black studies, I use 'African American' and 'Black' interchangeably to refer to characters and authors who are either descendants of North American (US) slaves, or were enslaved themselves. I offer further clarification when relevant.

essential to women . . . in that any woman must necessarily have those properties to be a woman at all" (Stone 22-23). Furthermore, in the binary oppositions that subtend the Western philosophical tradition, women have been positioned on the "nature" end of the nature/culture spectrum presumably because of their "direct bodily involvement with procreation" (Glenn 22). The rise of industrialization also necessitated the association of women and the private sphere—a site of reproduction instead of production—even though their lived experiences show that this categorization is not an accurate reflection of the day-to-day lives of the majority of women even in the 19th century (Glenn 14).

The conflation of 'woman' and 'mother' derives from the normative patriarchal framework. According to African studies scholar Remi Akujobi, "although maternal ideals are entrenched and valorized in all cultures," it is mainly patriarchal and patrilineal societies that posit reproduction as the main "function" of a woman, thus suturing motherhood and womanhood (4). Therefore, the domains of nature, emotion, and the private have become attached to (white) mothers as well (4). The figure of the mother has also been thought of as "a transgression of the patriarchal sense of self and law, marginal to its truth and rationality", as "movement, flux and undecidability . . . as a metaphor for tension, ambivalence and ambiguity" (M. B. Walker 135). Accordingly, "theories of deviant maternal behavior certainly proliferated during the eighteenth century" along with the idea that a strong maternal bond precluded women from being sacrificing and loyal citizens (Kipp 14-15). Political agendas such as patriotism became intertwined with ideas of maternity, in the 18th-century US context specifically in the idea of Republican motherhood (Kerber 188). The 19th-century ideological construct of true womanhood and the cult of domesticity, complete with the archetypes of the Southern belle and Southern lady, simultaneously infantilized and romanticized women, among them mothers, to a considerable extent.[2] 20th-century advances in psychoanalytic theory postulated that the infant's mental health is predicated upon the constant presence of a single caretaker (Oakley, *Woman's Work* 186), stressing the importance of the nuclear family and cementing white women in the private sphere. Motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly argues that the "ideological assumptions" undergirding our contemporary view of mothering include not only essentialization or idealization, but naturalization as well—the belief that motherhood is driven by instinct and is natural to all women ("We Need to Talk" 65).

[2] The most salient effect and function of Southern ideological constructs about white womanhood were to define Black womanhood as animalistic and undignified and to thus frame it as something less worthy, as will be explicated later in the dissertation.

Parallel to the breakthroughs made in science and particularly in medicine, events and practices linked to motherhood became more and more medicalized in the Western world. In the 20th century, women were increasingly called to look to expert bodies of knowledge regarding issues of motherhood (Kukla and Wayne).[3] Medicalized pregnancy "involves interpreting pregnancy itself as a disruption to health that necessarily requires expert medical intervention" (Mullin 54). Medical advances such as development in ultrasound technology have resulted in the "decreased respect for the autonomy of the mother" (Bordo 91) in favor of the fetus's subjectivity (Givner 229-240), giving rise to new (bio)ethical dilemmas (Baylis et al. 97). As a backlash, feminists advocated for natural, unmedicated childbirth free from any technological or medical intervention especially starting with the 1970s (Moscucci 172).[4] Breastfeeding has also been subsumed under the surveillance of medicine, which has also invited backlash from the proponents of 'natural' feeding practices (Hausman, "Things" 479).[5]

Examining what discourses of religion, politics, law, and medicine prescribe to mothers contributes to the understanding of motherhood as an institution as explained by Adrienne Rich in her seminal work *Of Woman Born* (1976). Rich argues that motherhood as experienced by the individual is to be distinguished from the culturally constituted concept of motherhood, although the two certainly interact. Pregnancy and giving birth to one's first child are thought of as seminal, life-altering events partly because of their psychological impact on the mother, and partly because becoming a mother rearranges a woman's social circle by altering the family structure and bestowing on her a variety of new *social* responsibilities.[6] *Of Woman Born* called for a heightened emphasis on the *personal*. Accordingly, motherhood has been theorized as a personal experience by a variety of scholars from backgrounds as diverse as psychoanalytic theory or phenomenology. It has been posited that becoming a mother has profound implications on the sense of self of the

[3] Cases of pregnant women and women in labor being treated as patients and being denied bodily autonomy are available from 18th-century Europe and 19th-century United States as well (Cassidy 54-56) This was especially true in the case of poor and marginalized women (54).

[4] While the advocacy for natural childbirth grew to be a movement with national recognition in the US in the 1970s, it was not unknown before in the Anglo-Saxon world, exemplified by the work of British obstetrician Grantly Dick-Read, who coined the term in the 1930s, or the popularity of the Lamaze and Bradley methods in the US in the 40s and 50s. The ideas and methods of these men were often based on misogynistic premises (Slee), and they were (and mostly have been) available to (at least) middle-class, white, urban women.

[5] See two examples from as early as the 18th century, both arguing in favor of breastfeeding in light of newly available scientific knowledge on lactation: the 1752 treatise *Nutrix Noverca* written by the father of modern taxonomy Carl Linnaeus, and the 1762 treatise *Emile, or On Education* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.
For an analysis of the contemporary breastfeeding controversies, see also Hausman's *Mother's Milk* (2014).

[6] See *Birth in Four Cultures* (1992) by Brigitte Jordan for an anthropological-ethnographic analysis.

woman, resulting in decentered subjectivity (Kristeva 17; Young 160) and the re-organization of the personality (Leifer 42).

The turn-of-the-millennium liberal backlash to conservativism positioned motherhood within discussions on choice and personal freedom. It has been argued that becoming a biological mother is always already traumatic not only because of the often painful physicality of the perinatal period, but because of the restrictions necessitated by postpartum recovery and early childcare, which together render these experiences unnarratable (Shiffer 214-215). In much of the 20th century, the stance of white feminist intellectuals oscillated—along essentialist and social constructionist views—between hailing motherhood as a site of empowerment and rejecting it as restrictive (Glenn 22-25). The so-called "mommy wars" (Barston 15) of the late 20th and early 21st century have revolved around individual preferences along several axes including surrogacy, abortion, working outside the home, home birth, using infant formula, vaccinations, home schooling, nursing and more, fueled in no small part by late capitalist ideology. Motherhood, then, has been posited as a contested terrain both on the social and the individual level—mostly for white women, by white men and women.

Black Motherhood: A Brief Socio-Cultural Context

> "My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented." (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 65)

The majority of the scholarly work done in feminism and motherhood studies is centered on white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied mothers in Western societies, the experience of whom is, of course, far from monolithic, but the members of this group do share a variety of concerns. However, for those who fall outside of this category, such as for Black women, women of color (such as Latinas, Native American women, or Asian American women) and/or women of lower socio-economic backgrounds, mothering can take up vastly different meanings. The following overview of the dominant views and representations of Black mothers highlights in comparison the novelty of the mothertexts that I discuss in the thematic chapters of the dissertation (see each individual chapter for more in-depth discussions of the relevant issues).

When it comes to conceptualizations of African American motherhoods, it is to be acknowledged that the institution of slavery played an immense part in how ideologies of motherhood were constructed. Black women from the Middle Passage onward were excluded from

white spaces as white-dominant society was interested in them as laborers (Glenn 5). A variety of factors such as the time and place of enslavement, as well as the size of the plantation household and the nature of work needed there tinged the experiences of enslaved women, but what unified plantation life was the reality of reproductive rights abuses (Morgan, *Laboring Women* 3) enabled especially by the principle of *partus sequitur ventrem*.[7] The practice of 'breeding' was used widely as a means to increase capital across the South.[8] The resulting routine rape and imposed reproductive labor constituted an "essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave," far from merely being the result of the uncontrollable sexual urges of individual white men (Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* 153).

Mothers who belonged to the lowest strata of society had vastly different concerns regarding their motherhood and children than those belonging to higher classes in general; for enslaved mothers, in particular, the physical survival of children (Glenn 7) due to poor postnatal care of both the newborn and the mother (D. Schneider and C. Schneider 81) was such an issue. This led to a fear of childbirth (Neely 37) and of the pervasive practices of gynecological-obstetrical experimentation (H. Washington 70; Ojanuga 28–30).[9] Self–induced abortions, infanticide and gynecological resistance are also well documented from this era (D. Schneider and C. Schneider 85, 101; Neely 46). While slave owners had an interest in "breeding" new slaves, they also needed to extract as much labor as possible from mothers, among them pregnant and nursing ones (Glenn 18-19), often giving them extra allowances but punishing them if they fell behind while working (Neely 31-36). Plantation manuals controlled maternal behavior by, among others, regulating the particulars of breastfeeding (Dunaway 136). Enforced wet nursing, a practice under which the milk of enslaved women was appropriated for the benefit of white babies and at the expense of their own infants, also "represented the point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected" (West and Knight 37). Enslaved women were also tasked with caring for white children and performing household duties mostly on plantations; their 19th-century stereotyping as jocular and loving servants has occupied a steady place in the popular

[7] This legal doctrine stipulated that "all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother," establishing that a child born to an enslaved mother would also become a slave (Morgan, "*Partus*" 1). *Partus* was first instituted in 1662 in Virginia with the intention to solidify white planter society and white racialized and national identity (Martinot 87-91).
[8] For historical details and contemporary views regarding breeding and other forms of sexual coercion, see chapter 4 of Daina Ramey Berry's *Swing the Sickle for the Harvest Is Ripe* (2010); on the animalizing language used in descriptions of 'breeders,' see chapter 1 in Berry's *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh* (2010).
[9] The most notorious of these medical abuses are the ones aiming to find a cure for the vasico-vaginal fistula—a postnatal condition—led by J. Marion Sims without anesthesia in the 19th century (Neely 38).

imagination. Enslaved girls were also physically and sexually abused, uneducated, (over)worked, and incarcerated, and bore witness to the horrors experienced by those around them.[10] Thus, even in cases when both mother and baby survived and were not immediately separated, the conditions under which these women experienced conception, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and other aspects of motherhood, differed vastly from the circumstances of any other group in America.

The Antebellum South, however, was not the only site of the multi-faceted exploitation of Black women. They were deemed unfit mothers in public discourse even after *partus sequitur ventrem* ceased to apply (Davis, *WRC* 186, Paul 78). While Black men were most often lynched before and under Jim Crow, the most common form of retaliatory violence against Black women was gang rape;[11] and while men tended to work as indentured servants, often the only viable option for women was to work as domestics often taking care of white children. Black women were manipulated and coerced into sterilization (Davis, *WRC* 177, 179) and birth control (H. Washington 197) under eugenic influence in disproportionate numbers throughout the 20th century. Racial disparities persist into the 21st century in, among others, the quality and quantity of perinatal care as well as maternal and infant mortality rates.[12] There are differences in nursing practices; for instance, unethical marketing by formula companies in tandem with federal public health guidelines have biased many Black women against breastfeeding (see esp. Freeman, *Skimmed*, Chapter 2.). With regard to the 'mommy wars,' Black women have emphasized that these debates are made possible by the privilege of (at least) middle-class white women: while the latter tend to have the financial security to enter into discussions predicated on free will, the former struggle on the labor market in the face of systemic racism (Malveaux).[13] Another issue Black Americans are subjected to is police brutality and anti-Black racism that inevitably target Black mothers as well whether directly (as in the shooting of Korryn Gaines) or indirectly (as in the case of the Mothers

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[10] See Wilma King's *Stolen Childhood* (1998) and Crystal Lynn Webster's "The History of Black Girls" (2020).

[11] For the history of systemic sexual intimidation and violence against Black women, see *At the Dark End of the Street* (2011) by Danielle L. McGuire. While lynchings of women were less common, they did occur. A well-known example is the murder of Mary Turner, a Black woman who was 8 months pregnant and was lynched for protesting her husband's earlier lynching. After the mob tortured her, "a knife … was taken and the woman's abdomen was cut open" (White, Walter 222). The fetus was then murdered along with Turner. This incident has inspired a variety of reactions from Black artists and activists, and furthered the conversation regarding the lynching of women, see in esp. Julie Buckner Armstrong's *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (2011).

[12] For examples from both the 21st century and the end of the 20th century, see David and Collins; Creanga et al.; Geronimus, "On Teenage Childbearing" and "The Weathering Hypothesis;" and Schoendorf et al. For a discussion on the racial disparity in perinatal care in the wider context of medical racism, see Khiara Bridges's *Reproducing Race: An Ethnography of Pregnancy as a Site of Racialization* (2011). Also, on the historical relationship between Black Americans (esp. women) and the medical establishment, see chapter 4 of this dissertation.

[13] See also Jocelyn E. Crowley's "Unpacking the Power of the Mommy Wars" (2015) for a sociological study on the various factors influencing the extent to which American mothers tend to get involved in mommy wars.

of the Movement through the death of their children).[14] Statistics also show that Black children, apart from being as overpoliced as Black adults, are more likely to suffer from the racial bias of the child welfare system than children of other races: they are removed from their homes and placed into foster care in disproportionate numbers.[15]

Furthermore, starting with the figure of the Black Southern Mammy, various reductive controlling images[16] of Black women ossified into stereotypes.[17] The Mammy has been the subject of the greatest extent of racist stereotyping and appeared in diverse products of culture. Well-known examples include minstrel shows, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), and its film version (1939), and even advertisements featuring Mammy's characterological variation, Aunt Jemima (Varró and Virágos 109, 284). The Mammy's portrayal as a loyal, content servant failed to reflect on the realities of enslaved womanhood, what is more, it served to obfuscate the systemic harnessing of Black women's reproductive and childrearing capacities. These depictions often emphasize and use for humor the fullness of her figure, concealing that repeated forced childbearing might have contributed to her obesity (Richardson and Locks 7). Even though the figure of the Mammy is portrayed as an excellent and much-needed caretaker of white children, she rarely has children of her own or is unable to take care of them, suggesting her inaptitude as a mother, again obfuscating the violent severing of enslaved families. The short life expectancy of many enslaved women (around 33, as stated by Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 51) also makes dubious the authenticity of the Mammy figure's most popular portrayals as a woman around her fifties, even if we account for the domestic slaves' better access to quality food and hygiene in comparison to field hands. The image of the Mammy survived into the postbellum period as a significant number of Black women continued to work for—and was exploited by—white

[14] Korryn Gaines's shooting occurred in the presence of her son; police response was deemed disproportionate and unreasonable (T. Christian). On the Mothers of the Movement, see "'We know what it is to bury a child.'" See also the #SayHerName movement: *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women* (2015) by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie.

[15] For a discussion of how systemic racism plays into the mistreatment of Black families in the child welfare system, see Dorothy E. Roberts's *Shattered Bonds* (2002).

[16] On how gender-specific controlling images differ from stereotypes, see Patricia Hill Collins: "Representations need not be stereotypical and stereotypes need not function as controlling images. Of the three [i.e. representations, stereotypes, and controlling images], controlling images are most closely tied to power relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 350).

[17] The overview on stereotypes is based on the following sources (in addition to the parenthetical references): Bell et al.; B. Christian, *Black Women Novelists* and *Black Feminist Criticism*; Cole and Guy-Sheftall; Collins, *BFT*; Gilkes; Jordan-Zachery (esp. Chapter 2); Lubiano; Mullings, *On Our Own Terms*; Roberts, *Killing* and "Racism and Patriarchy;" Sparks; D. White; and Zucchino. On the stereotypes or scripts about young Black women's sexuality (usually not connected to motherhood), see Campos et al., and D. Stephens and Phillips. I capitalize the names of the stereotypes/controlling images following these sources.

households as domestic servants. In short, fictionalized depictions of women doing domestic care work not only fail to do justice to the historical reality of Black women but they have also been instrumental in solidifying a false image of Black mothers.

Other controlling images continued to emerge and devalue Black motherhood. From the 19th century on, the image of the sexually aggressive and provocative Jezebel served to cement the image of the asexual white lady on a moral pedestal and to justify various forms of sexual violence committed against Black women both by white and Black men, including rape and breeding. After the abolition of slavery, Jezebels were said to seduce white men for protection or money, that is, they were believed to be greedy in addition to licentious. While the image of Jezebel is only tangentially related to Black motherhood, her characterization as an immoral woman contributed to cementing the perception that Black women are not fit to become good mothers. Next, in the 20th-century, the construction of the sassy Sapphire—by the radio and television show *Amos and Andy* that ran, in various forms, from the 1920s to the 1960s—served as a counterpoint to the 'weak' and 'corrupt' Black man whom she controlled with her sharp tongue. Depicted as a nagging woman who emasculates the Black man, Sapphire is also purportedly the reason behind the high incidence of families with an absent father, thereby endangering their children.

Considered to be a variation of the Mammy, the Matriarch represents the Black mother in the Black household and contributes even more directly to the failure of the entire family than Sapphire. While the Mammy could mother the children under her care, she could only do so because she had white supervision; the Matriarch, despite being domineering, fails without it. According to the conclusions drawn in the Moynihan Report— Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 sociological study titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*—the Matriarch perpetuates the Black family's deviance due to her inability to control her partner and children, making her responsible for many of the perceived ills of Black people. While this (in)famous report acknowledges the effects of slavery and systemic racial injustice on Black families, it also subtly suggests that domineering mothers contribute to the perpetuation of "the tangle of pathology" (29-30).

A new controlling image emerged in the 1980s to reflect the changing social structure. The stereotype of the Black Welfare Queen, perpetuated by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, denotes an obese, lazy, and greedy woman who feels entitled to government aid, often going as far as having an excessive number of children in the hope of getting more welfare, thus placing an

undue burden on taxpayers and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.[18] The Urban Teen Mother, similarly to the Welfare Queen, feels entitled and shirks her maternal responsibilities, but she is markedly simple and completely oblivious to the consequences of her actions. The reason for her early childbearing is her uncontrollable lust, that is, she is similar to Jezebel as well.

Most of these images stem from the perceptions of the Black woman's supposedly inherent promiscuity, her lack of work ethic, and her tendency to emasculate her partner. Whether she is shrewd or simple-minded, her immorality and greed lead to the inability of the Black family to assimilate into 'proper' white society. These narratives offer a convenient view of the Black mother, who 1) mothers the white family's children but not her own, 2) breeds property, 3) is unable to provide her children with positive role models, thereby being responsible for their poverty and criminality as well, 4) and gives birth to multiple children, but her motives are far from pure: she merely wants to exploit the resources of the government. The majority of the stereotypes thus inscribes her unwillingness and/or inability to mother her children while conveniently masking the underlying, systemic causes of Black poverty and the centuries-long, institutionalized practice of fracturing Black families. These images—and many more not directly relevant for the purposes of this dissertation, such as the Crack Mother or the Baby Mama—constitute yet another manifestation of the afterlife of the trauma inherent in slave motherhood. Being denied maternal dignity, African American mothers have thus been in a singular position, which literature tried to portray while dismantling a host of controlling images in the process.

Literary Depictions of Black Womanhood and Motherhood before the 1980s

In the following, I briefly chart the history and main features of prose written by *and* about Black women—with a focus on depictions of womanhood and motherhood—in order to situate the corpus under analysis within the tradition of Black women's writing.[19] The objective of the overview is

[18] The beliefs about the irresponsible, conniving Black mother played a part in the overhauling of the welfare system in the 1990s; see Susan L. Thomas's "'Ending Welfare as We Know It'" (2001).

[19] While the focal point of the dissertation is prose—namely, novels and short stories—this tradition, of course, includes the artifacts of both oral and written cultural expression, from spirituals, work songs, folk tales, speeches, sermons, treatises, essays, diaries, letters, to poetry and drama. A few examples from the period under review in the next two sections, by Black women authors: speeches such as "A'n't I a Woman" (1851) by Sojourner Truth; essays and treatises by Frances Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Ida B. Wells; magazines such as the *Colored American Magazine* edited by Pauline Hopkins, short story collections and even a musical drama (*Slaves' Escape*, 1880) by Hopkins, or Alice Dunbar-Nelson's diary (1984) written in the 1920s-30s. On the widening of the canon that now includes various genres—including letters and rap lyrics—as legitimate examples of African American literary production, signaled by the 1997 *Norton Anthology*'s inclusive approach, see Lee-Price 249.

to underline that while pre-1980 Black women's writing did reflect on the social position and experiences of the Black woman and mother, it did not yet have the focus on the embodied aspects of early motherhood that the corpus in my dissertation is based on.

Until a few decades ago, literature did not explicitly elaborate on some of the experiences of these Black women for a variety of reasons. The silences, elisions, and understatements regarding certain walks of life in the literary or historical archive do not mean these experiences were not lived or even reflected upon—it does mean, however, that certain factors limited their expression.[20] Having been excluded from the realm of literacy for centuries and/or often living in abject poverty, most Black women lacked the time, material assets, and social capital required to write, let alone to get published. Even Black women who had access to these resources because, for example, they were born free or were freed relatively early in their lives, were less than vocal about the embodied aspects of motherhood. Toni Morrison establishes that the limitations set by literary and social conventions barred Black authors from expressing their experiences before the 20th century ("The Site of Memory" 101-24). Literary historian Carolyn L. Karcher argues that antislavery authors were often "hampered by romantic conventions and a code of gentility that barred 'vulgar' language, sordid details, and frank treatment of sexuality" (323). Similarly, Saidiya Hartman notes that "the strictures of decency, the pain of recollection, the resistance of the reader, and the conventions of sentimental literature" bespeak the elisions in narratives of sexual violence in 19th century female-authored slave narratives (*Scenes* 108). Certainly, the factors adduced by Morrison and Hartman are implicated in the laconic nature of early texts when it comes to portraying motherhood as well. Until about the middle of the 20th century, generic conventions and social expectations often allowed for the expression of certain experiences in stylized terms, tended to rely on rigid patterns, and featured characters whose actions and traits served to illustrate a certain cause. This is not to suggest that sentimental novels, slave narratives, or protest novels, for example, were less 'truthful' or that they did not attempt to rely on their specific narrative design, typology, and rhetorical strategies to respond to Black women and mothers' plight; however, pre-1980s texts, while in many cases revolutionary and daring for their time, were not as explicit and overt as the mothertexts under analysis.

[20] See Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (2019) for examples of daring, taboo-breaking Black women whose stories, nevertheless, were never published.

Slave Narratives and Pre-Reconstruction Prose

I wish I dried up
I wish every drop of my milk slipped passed those pink lips and nourished the ground
Where the bones lay
Of my babies
Starved while I feed their murderer
I wish I dried up
So the missus babies would dry up too
And be brittle
So I could crumble them to dust
Return them to the ground
Where all children of my bosom lay equal (Love)[21]

In the antebellum period, Black women's representations in literature by white authors is one-dimensional. Even white women's writing often counterposes minor Black women characters to white heroines in order to make the latter seem more dignified and lady-like: whereas the Black woman survives rape, the lady "would rather die than be sexually abused" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 34). A prominent example of Antebellum literature that features Black women characters is Harriet Beecher Stowe's bestselling sentimental novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which, while delivering a substantial critique of the American status quo and fueling abolitionist sentiments, is considered to be problematic as it frames womanhood and mothering by sentimental ideology, associates Black female sexuality with illicitness, and suggests that since the Black woman survives being raped, she is "less sensitive and spiritually inferior" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 34). Through the plight of Eliza, who runs away with her son to avoid getting sold, and Cassy, who was separated from her children and then committed infanticide to save her son from slavery, Stowe attempted to portray some tragic aspects of slave motherhood in a sympathetic light; however, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has

[21] African American poet Hess Love's untitled poem (2017) tackles the practice of wet nursing. According to Love, the poem generates controversy every year during Black Breastfeeding Week (the last week of August), when it goes viral on social media: many accuse Love of deliberately misrepresenting history or not being knowledgeable enough about wet nursing or even breastfeeding itself ("'White Women Think I'm Lying'—Why I Face Backlash During Black Breastfeeding Week").

also been criticized for popularizing harmful images, among them the Mammy stereotype (Carby, *Reconstructing* 34).[22]

Starting with the late 18th century, the principal genre written by African Americans was the slave narrative.[23] Consequently, women's contribution to literature by African Americans before the 20th century mainly consists of prose works.[24] Whether by men or women, slave narratives constitute resistance considering the enforced illiteracy of the majority of the enslaved population. The publication of a slave narrative is a political statement not only if it was written by the author herself or himself, but also when an amanuensis assisted with (or in some cases rather intervened into[25]) the process of transferring the story to the page. Even in the latter case, claiming narrative authority was still a radical act that went in the face of the then accepted scientific knowledge about the mental inferiority of Black people. Moreover, the performative nature of recounting these experiences to the amanuensis and in some cases in front an audience authenticated the narratives by attempting to inscribe their authors as subjects (Sayre 189).

The genre was a predominantly male one: a mere 12 percent of extant slave narratives were authored by women (Threadcraft 41). Women—if represented at all—have subordinate roles in the texts authored my men: they might assist the male characters in their escape but they themselves are left behind; they are pitied by the narrator when they are tortured; and they often fall victim to sexual abuse without the ability to reciprocate that violence in a way that, for example, Frederick Douglass eventually does (Threadcraft 41-42). The violence enacted by Douglass on the white male body takes on a regenerative quality in that it "restores his dignity and heals his wounded flesh" (Threadcraft 42), while the Black female characters in male-authored narratives remain not

[22] The novel's subversive, female- and mother-centered criticism of slavery and society has been hailed as well; see Zwarg 274-275 for an overview of the sources, the most notable among which is Jane Tompkins's *Sensational Designs* (1985), in which she suggest that possible reasons for some of the devastating criticism of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stem from misogyny and a misunderstanding of the workings of sentimental literature (124-125). See also *The Annotated Uncle Tom's Cabin* (2007) by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Hollis Robbins for a discussion of the novel's enduring impact, its role in antislavery efforts, and an overview of the multifaceted criticism it has received.
[23] On the conventions of the genre, on its relationship to autobiography and fiction, and its reception, see "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" (1984) by James Olney, and "Singing Swords: The Literary Legacy of Slavery" (1985) by Melvin Dixon. On how other genres such as pamphlets and treatises contributed to the whole of abolitionist discourse, see Dwight A. McBride's *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (2001).
[24] With the notable exception of the poetry of two former slaves, Lucy Terry Prince and Phillis Wheatley. Prince's ballad poem, "Bars Fight" about a 1746 incident was orally preserved until its publication in 1855. Wheatley's collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was composed later, but published earlier than "Bars Fight," in 1773 in London to great acclaim even though today it is considered controversial due to its sympathetic portrayal of white supremacist characters.
[25] On the heavy use of editing and editorializing by many amanuenses and publishers of both slave narratives and Indian captivity narratives, see Sayre 189-190. On how slave narratives were structured and edited according to the abolitionist sponsor's interests and wishes, see Sekora 496-497.

only enslaved, but wholly "unredeemed and unredeemable" (42). Even when they center Black or mixed-race women and mothers, novels written by Black men tend to show a similar lack of multi-dimensional and varied female characters, see, for example, *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, a novel written by escaped slave William Wells Brown and published in England in 1853), which, despite its heroic Black women characters, has been criticized for representing a narrow subset of Black women (Fabi 639) and depicting many of its female characters as only being the victims of sexual violence (Foster 66).

Concurrently, women's experiences with certain aspects of mothering are also sorely lacking from these texts. Narratives written by and about women, however, aim to fill this gap and feature characters on a quest for freedom with budding, albeit, of course, still heavily limited agency. These "authors placed in the foreground their active roles as historical agents as opposed to passive subjects; represented as acting their own visions, they are seen to take decisions over their own lives. They document their sufferings and brutal treatment but in a context that is also the story of resistance to that brutality" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 36), often by "mobiliz[ing] the narrative forms of adventure and heroism normally constituted within ideologies of male sexuality" (38). Considerations for keeping their families together had a bearing on their decision to perform these acts of resistance: enslaved women were less likely to escape, favored shorter absences instead, or they tended to run away together with their children (Threadcraft 54); accordingly, a number of Black female characters in slave narratives make a circular trajectory insofar as they end up at their point of departure (Pochmara 5).

Among the pieces of literature written by women during slavery, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is the most widely known (discussed in more detail below), but there are several more notable antebellum prose works, many of which with a complicated publication history.[26] The first such work written by an enslaved African American woman is believed to be *The Bondwoman's Narrative by Hannah Crafts, Fugitive Slave from North Carolina*, a novelized but probably autobiographical slave narrative, presumably written between 1853 and 1861 by Hannah Bond. The research done on Bond's identity is inconclusive: she is believed to

[26] Not all of them are about enslavement; some were written by women born free, such as the 1853 *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince*, an account of Prince's travels in Russia and Jamaica, considered a memoir, or Jarena Lee's religious autobiography (published in 1836 as T*he Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee* and after revision in 1849 as *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee*), which recounts her spiritual awakening and preaching as a widowed mother of two. Another born-free preacher, Rebecca Cox Jackson, wrote her autobiography between 1830 and 1864, but it was only published in 1981 (*Gifts of Power*, edited by Jean McMahom Humez).

have been a fugitive slave woman (Gardner, *Unexpected Places* 173), although some scholars believe she was free (174). What the majority of research concludes is that she was indeed an African American woman (Baym 317). The then-unpublished and forgotten manuscript was bought by Black librarian Dorothy Porter Wesley in 1948, then rediscovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 2001, who published it in 2002 to huge public interest. Critics have noted its abundant references to a wide range of literary works, among them Phillis Wheatley's poetry and Frederick Douglass's narrative (Gates, "Borrowing Privileges") as well as its stylistic and generic innovation (Fabian 43-45). The titular character is a fair-skinned, literate house slave, who exhibits agency by running away twice. She is not a mother, but the narrative reflects on gender through "the overwhelming preponderance of female characters and the female-centered domesticity of most events" (Baym 317).

Before the discovery of Crafts's novel, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* had been considered the first novel by an African American woman. Written by the born-free Harriet E. Wilson and published in 1859, it is certainly the first such published novel; it was then similarly rediscovered by Gates and republished in 1981. *Our Nig*'s 19th-century popularity was tarnished since white audiences deemed it unflattering (Gardner, "This Attempt" 242) and northern abolitionists found its assertion that northern states benefitted from slavery unacceptable (Ernest 424). Due to the plot structure, *Our Nig* is "regarded as an allegory of a slave narrative, a 'slave' narrative set in the 'free' North" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 43). The main character, Frado, is the light-skinned daughter of a white woman and a northern, free Black man. After being abandoned as a child and spending years as an indentured servant in the North, she becomes free, gets married and eventually gives birth to a child while her abolitionist husband is away. The narration, however, remains laconic when it comes to depictions of this event: "Then followed the birth of her child" (128) is the only sentence that refers to it.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, originally published under the pseudonym Linda Brent, is the most remarkable literary piece of the 19th century written by a Black woman for several reasons. Along with Douglass's narrative, it has become part of the canon, having "somewhat entered the 'mainstream' of American literature" (Gardner, *Unexpected Places* 8). *Incidents* is significant concerning its depiction of gender: it "is the most sophisticated, sustained narrative dissection of the conventions of true womanhood by a Black author before emancipation" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 42). Its explicit emphasis on the distinct Black female

experience not only distinguishes it from male-authored texts, but makes it unique within the genre since its extensive coverage of the sexual exploitation of enslaved women.

Furthermore, its focus on motherhood sets it apart from even the female-authored predecessors discussed above. The sources of the protagonist's strength and resilience are "not adopted from a reservoir of masculine attributes" but derive from her love for her children (Carby, *Reconstructing* 56). The narrator's explicit remarks on slave motherhood point out the contradiction between being economically essential for the survival of Southern capital yet often being kept in subhuman conditions. In Carby's words,

> Linda Brent was a demonstration of the consequences for motherhood of the social and economic relations of the institution of slavery. Jacobs recognized that plantation mistresses were subject to forms of patriarchal abuse and exploitation, but because they gave birth to the heirs of property they were also awarded a degree of patriarchal protection. (*Reconstructing* 54)

Enslaved women, in comparison, gave birth directly to property: the narrator is aware that insofar as they keep contributing to not only their owner's wealth, but to the "capital of the South" (54), they are considered to be of economic value. However, in keeping with the conventions of the day, reflections on the embodied experience of early motherhood are not present in the narrative.[27] Comparably, Elizabeth Keckley's narrative, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868), contains these telling lines about her rape and the birth of her son: "suffice it to say, that he [a white man] persecuted me for four years, and I—I—became a mother" (40), attesting to the need for euphemisms, the unrepresentability of the horrors of enforced motherhood, and the rupture ("I—I—became") it causes.[28]

[27] In an almost anachronistic gesture, *Incidents* does refer to the embodied experience of Black womanhood since it narrates the protagonist's affective and somatic reaction to the white man she finds repugnant.

[28] Similarly to Keckley's work, *The Story of Mattie J. Jackson: Her Parentage, Experience of Eighteen Years in Slavery, Incidents During the War, Her Escape from Slavery: A True Story* by Mattie J. Jackson (1866) is a narrative of a woman born into slavery often classified as a slave narrative or autobiography. A curious example of a publication with ambiguous authorship is *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a Coloured Woman, Taken Mainly from Her Own Lips in Her 97th Year* (1863), the story of a female preacher born into slavery, the details of whose life remain relatively unknown.

From the Reconstruction to Harlem Renaissance

"He took my mother to an auction-room on Main Street and sold her to the highest bidder." (Delaney 21-22)[29]

During Reconstruction, "slavery, as a topic, became unfashionable and unpopular," ostensibly because Northern abolitionists lost some of their earlier fervor for improving the lives of Black people (Carby, *Reconstructing* 64). Still, against the backdrop of the efforts of Black feminists such as Anna Julia Cooper (*A Voice from the South*, 1892) and Ida B. Wells (*Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, 1892) and other club women,[30] several noteworthy prose works, some of them autobiographical in nature, some purely fictional, were published by *and* about Black women. Continuing in the vein of pre-Emancipation slave and free narratives, these works aimed to serve as weapons for the betterment of the conditions of Black people (Carby, *Reconstructing* 95). They often center light-skinned characters—frequently tragic mulattas—who are mothers or daughters, frequently with a focus on racial uplift, education, miscegenation, and passing. They tend to follow the structure and plot of 19th-century sentimental, romantic, and domestic novels, using "stilted," genteel language (McDowell, "Generational Connections" 282). They usually feature exemplary, refined, and chaste women who emulate the virtues of white womanhood—or, in the words of Deborah E. McDowell, "they traded myth for countermyth" in an effort "to revise homogenized literary images" (284). Their "public" voice (282-284) and "outer-directed" language (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 173) was designed to appeal to white (female) audiences and aimed at refuting stereotypes of sexually immoral, depraved, aggressive, or dependent Black women. This quest precluded the "exploration of the self, in all its complexity" (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 173). Another recurring feature is "the search for and establishment of kinship," which was carried over from the slave narratives to other fiction of the 19th century and "expanded to become a figure for the dispersion of Blacks throughout the diaspora" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 136).

Lucy Delaney's 1891 memoir, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or, Struggles for Freedom*, is one of the few slave narratives published after the Civil War. It reflects on the heroism of the main character's mother, who goes to court arguing—successfully—that since she was free at the time of giving birth to Lucy, the girl cannot be a slave. Thus, it centers the heroism of a chaste, idealized female character who acts in accordance with the tenets of true womanhood. Kate

[29] The protagonist's mother is sold and thus separated from her daughter, all "to satisfy the anger of a peevish mistress" in Lucy Delaney's 1891 memoir, *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*.
[30] On the ideology of club women, see the chapter "Black Women and the Club Movement" in Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1983).

Drumgoold, born into slavery, also included the story of her mother in her memoir, *A Slave Girl's Story, Being an Autobiography of Kate Drumgoold* (1898), who re-united the female members of her family, thus constructing a female-only familial community and serving as a role model for her daughter.

From the Darkness served as inspiration for Frances E. W. Harper, the born-free author of *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), the novel that, before the re-discovery of *Our Nig*, had been deemed the first one written by an African American author. While its clear political intent is appreciated, its literary merits are debated today (Carby, *Reconstructing* 63). Modeled after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and using the genteel literary language of its time, it discusses complex issues of race and gender, and stresses the importance of familial ties and maternal kinship, but details of Iola's private life are "stripped of [their] intimate implications and invested with social and mythical implications" instead (McDowell, "Generational Connections" 286-287).

Other examples of fiction by Black women from this period include novels *Megda* (1891) and *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1895) by Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins, and the novels *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* (1900) and *Of One Blood: Or, The Hidden Self* (serialized between 1902 and 1903) by Pauline Hopkins. The latter two rely on the conventions of romantic novels to explore racial issues and the way Black children are "destined to follow the condition of their mothers into a Black, segregated realm of existence" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 144). The protagonist of *Contending Forces* is a mother who is re-united with her son after a series of traumatic events; however, the reader only has access to the story of her childbirth from a male character's point of view.

From the Harlem Renaissance to the 1970s

> "'My mother had nine children and was thankful for every one.' … 'But,' protested Helga, 'I'm always so tired and half sick. That can't be natural.'" (Larsen 276-279)[31]

[31] Helga, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, confides in her husband and women in her community that her constant pregnancies take a toll on her physical and mental wellbeing. What she gets in return is mostly paternalizing religious platitudes and the trivialization of her isolation and declining health.

The number and variety of African American female literary works grew considerably starting with the Harlem Renaissance.[32] Similarly to their predecessors, novels such as *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen, or *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1928), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933) by Jessie Redmon Fauset address issues such as harmful stereotypes, education, social status, and the hardships of mixed-race existence, in some cases continuing to rely on the trope of the tragic mulatta prevalent in 19th-century fiction. However, they tend to foreground Northern, urban middle-class characters who, instead of devoting all their energies to racial uplift as a social concept—or outright criticizing it—are preoccupied with their individual efforts.

Larsen's tragic mulatta and Fauset's upper-middle-class characters pave the way for the darker-skinned, everyday, middle- or working-class, often but not exclusively urban female protagonists prevalent in the 1930s. The most well-known example is Janie in Zora Neale Hurston's unconventional, ahead-of-its-time novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), whom McDowell identifies as a transitional figure between Frances Harper's tradition and the fiction of the following decades ("Generational Connections" 300). A not-so-tragic mulatta who manages to establish her own voice in a rural environment, she is in search of self-fulfillment and not of a political end.

Post-Harlem Renaissance Black female-centered fiction was increasingly written for Black audiences—Black female audiences in particular, since depictions of Black female characters by Black male authors continued to be either woefully lacking or one-dimensional. Well-known examples include Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy* (1948), Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), or Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966). While the tragic character arc of Lutie in *The Street* was relatively predictable (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 12), mid-century Black female prose featured more and more characters who do not merely provide the context for a societal issue the novel grapples with, but who are complex individuals (3), especially beginning with *Maud Martha* (175-176). While these novels tend to take a political stance and some of them are characterized as protest novels, they are less explicit and forgo the ever-present, biting political edge of Harper's or Hopkins's writing.

[32] Short stories by Zora Neale Hurston, poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, or Nikki Giovanni, lyrics by Ma Rainey or Bessie Smith, and plays by Lorraine Hansberry or Adrienne Kennedy are just a few examples of those products of literary expression by Black women from this period that are outside the scope of this dissertation.

As far as portrayals of motherhood are concerned in the period between the Harlem Renaissance and the 1970s, several of these novels enter the conversation about the destructive force of stereotypes and attack the image of the domineering matriarch. Women are represented as both daughters and mothers, such as in *The Living Is Easy* or *Maud Martha*. The maternal experiences and struggles of Lutie in *The Street* and Silla in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are central to the plot. Notably, *Quicksand*'s fresh and honest outlook on maternal suffering seems almost anachronistic: the narration is quite vocal about the suffocation and increasing desperation Helga feels as a reluctant mother of four and a wife in a loveless marriage, amid various patriarchal and religious expectations. The third-person narrator quickly mentions the "horrors" of childbirth (283) and that the midwife is "soiled" (284), and details Helga's mental breakdown and a bout of postnatal depression (283-286), then chillingly concludes in the last sentence of the novel: "And hardly had she left her bed … when she began to have her fifth child" (302). Still, the tidal wave of mother characters and the depictions of intimate maternal experiences that emerge from the 1980s on are not yet in the scope of these novels.

The 1970s and 1980s: Watershed Decades

A New Corpus of Theory, Criticism, and Fiction

> "The making of a literary history in which black women are fully represented is a search for full vision, to create a circle where now we have but a segment." (M. H. Washington 451)[33]

While my selected corpus started to emerge in the 1980s, the undeniably taboo-breaking nature of the 1970s needs to be acknowledged in order to understand the tendencies of the following decade. Even though Ashraf Rushdy identifies the 1960s as a seminal decade in which the key genre of the neo-slave narrative started to emerge and revitalize Black writing,[34] and the cultural and political changes of the 60s were definitely behind the development of the following period, it was the 1970s

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[33] Mary Helen Washington urging the unconditional and full acceptance of Black women's work into the literary canon in 1987.

[34] Bernard W. Bell identifies Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* as the "first major neoslave narrative" (sic, 289), but it is Rushdy's periodization that seems to have gained more critical traction. Rushdy argues that while many neo-slave narratives were first published in the 1970s, they were written during and/or inspired by the 60s (*Neo-Slave Narratives* 3-6). He identifies Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971, written in the 60s) as the first neo-slave narrative written by a Black author, but notes that *Jubilee* was instrumental in opening up space for fiction about slavery.

that was a watershed decade when it came to women's writing in general and Black women's writing in particular: it saw an "unprecedented explosion" in fiction written by them (Steiner 499), paving the way for the 1980s' Black mother-centered fiction. They started to write themselves into literary and political history to the extent that their emergence is considered a revolution not only in literary, but, due to problematizing the boundaries between history and fiction, and between private and public, in political terms as well (499-500). In tandem with the interest in female authors of fiction came a new fascination with feminist theorizing as well. The academia saw a boom in women-related courses and majors; and scholarly journals and even women-centered publishing houses appeared in the 1970s and 1980s (500-501), and this interest has undoubtedly continued in the following decades.

Due to emerging feminist voices, the corporeal aspects of womanhood and motherhood were no longer taboo. Apart from the vast body of feminist theory and criticism of the era (see the works of Elaine Showalter, Germaine Greer, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, and many others representative of the theoretical turn of feminism in the 1970s (Eagleton 111), the decade marks the beginning of the interest in the mother as well, seeking to redress the conspicuous absence of the maternal perspective in literature (Daly 4) and to "reclaim and revise maternity" (Jeremiah 22). This transition is signaled by the publication of key Anglo-American texts that approached the topic of the mother from philosophical, sociological, or historical perspectives.[35] French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva also made significant contributions to this field beginning in the 1970s, albeit often with an exclusive focus on white womanhood and motherhood.[36]

Comparably, Black feminist and womanist theorizing and Black feminist literary criticism made significant strides following the Civil Right Movement and Black Arts movement so much so that "arguably the most radical revision of the African American literary tradition was started by Black feminists in the early 1970s" (Lee-Price 260). Authors attempted to inscribe their perspectives into the body of texts by Anglo-American feminist theory and the predominantly male Black critical establishment alike. Critics sought to remedy the imbalance wherein the work of Black male authors was praised and interpreted as being part of a grand tradition, while literature

[35] Among them *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) by Shulamith Firestone, *The Future of Motherhood* (1975) by Jessie Bernard, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution* (1976) by Adrienne Rich, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) by Nancy Chodorow, and *Becoming a Mother* (1979) by Ann Oakley.
[36] For a contextualized overview of white feminism's ideas on motherhood, see "Motherhood to Mothering and Beyond: Maternity in Recent Feminist Thought" (2006) by Emily Jeremiah.

by women tended to receive "dismissive and condescending" reviews, if at all (M. H. Washington 442-443). Salient publications include the groundbreaking essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) by Barbara Smith, which called for a Black feminist political theory that should undergird Black feminist literary criticism in order "to give power or support to those who want to examine black women's experience" (412).[37] The same year also saw the publication of The Combahee River Collective's *A Black Feminist Statement*, offering the systematic theorization of issues of Black feminism. The essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974) by Alice Walker, and the edited collections *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) by Toni Cade Bambara, and *In the Memory and Spirit of Frances, Zora, and Lorraine: Essays and Interviews on Black Women and Writing* (1979) by Juliette Bowles also contributed to the body of feminist and womanist theory and criticism of the 1970s. Many of the authors mentioned above went on to have decades-long academic careers, and they paved the way for Hortense Spillers, Barbara Christian, Mary Evans, Patricia Bell-Scott, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Deborah E. McDowell, Nellie Y. McKay, Hazel Carby, Claudia Tate, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Valerie Smith, and many others in the 1980s. In the 1980s, theorists focused on establishing a history and tradition of Black women's writing, evident in, for example, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892–1976* (1980) by Barbara Christian.[38] Hortense Spillers's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" (1987), one of the most significant pieces of theory, is also a product of the 1980s.

Alongside the emerging critical canon, African American female fiction writers began to solidify their voice(s) as well: the 1970s also marked the second renaissance of Black literature,[39] during which Black female prose writers emerged (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 1)[40] with a voice "more urgently revolutionary" (Steiner 507) than that of their white counterparts. A broader

[37] Since its publication, the essay has received criticism for being reductive and positing an essential Black female experience; however, it is still being quoted as a fundamental piece of writing that posits a connection between Black feminist theory, criticism, and literature, and puts emphasis on the politicized nature of these fields. For details, see Carby, *Reconstructing* 9, or Keizer 155-157.

[38]Further examples include *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith; *Black Women Writers at Work* (1983) by Claudia Tate; *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983) by Alice Walker, or *Black Women Writers, 1950–1980: A Critical Evaluation* (1984) by Mari Evans.

[39] Canada, the Caribbean, and West and East Africa also saw a huge boom in the cultural production by Black women in this period (Quashie 11).

[40] Significant pieces of literary production from this era that are nevertheless outside of the scope of this dissertation include the poems of, for example, Nikki Giovanni, Audre Lorde, Alexis De Veaux, Maya Angelou, or Rita Dove; the plays of, among others, Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron, or Lynn Nottage; the oeuvre of Ntozake Shange that includes poems, essays, plays and choreopoems; or the later, genre-defying work of Alexis Pauline Gumbs or Saidiya Hartman. Following the example set by the 1997 *Norton Anthology*, one could argue that the widest definition of literature would include the work of lyricists, public speakers, podcasters, comedians, and screenwriters as well, arenas in which Black women have increasingly carved out space in the 21st century.

goal of not just this new corpus but Black studies in general, as put forth in 1984 and reiterated in 1992 by Sylvia Wynter: "We must now undo their [i.e. marginalized groups'] narratively condemned status" (70). This "literary explosion" of the '70s (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 128) began with the very year 1970 that saw the publication of several key texts.[41] This momentum carried over to the 1970s[42] and 1980s[43] as well.

The writers of the 1970s and 1980s constitute "a critical mass, not homogeneous in intent or result but nonetheless defining and definitive" (Quashie 11). The protagonists have exhibited a huge variety of characteristics in the fiction since the 1970s. Postbellum early writers, in an "effort to revise homogenized literary images," created an "alternative homogenization" (McDowell, *Generational Connections* 283) that resulted in, among others, the prevalence of the tragic mulatta. However, toward the end of the 20th century, typical features are harder and harder to pin down. According to Barbara Christian, "the heroines of the mid-1970s are socio-political actors in the world" with a rebellious stance and an altered consciousness (*Black Feminist Criticism* 179), but later, writers offered a variety of characters of diverse spatial, temporal, and socio-economic backgrounds, heterogeneous in their sexual orientation, age, education, physical features, and other factors. Literary historians identify as prominent themes of the 1980s literature by Black women the increasing emphasis on romantic relationships (D. Williams 80), the continuation of the work aimed at repudiating stereotypes (Lucky 255), the trope of healing (D. Williams 77), and the interconnectedness of racism and sexism (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 180). Novels tended to examine the Black woman at the intersection of race and gender, to problematize the

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[41] They include novels such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, and Toni Cade Bambara's anthology *The Black Woman*.
[42] Novels such as *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976) by Gayl Jones, *Meridian* (1976) by Alice Walker, *Kindred* (1979) by Octavia Butler, or *Sally Hemmings: a Novel* (1979) by Barbara Chase-Riboud soon followed. Anthologies such as *Tales and Stories for Black Folks* (1971) by Toni Cade Bambara and *Black-eyed Susans: Classic Stories by and about Black Women* (1975) by Mary Helen Washington, and several short story collections by Bambara, Jones, or Walker, as well as the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston by Walker also signal the nascent interest in Black women's writing.
[43] The 1980s saw various re-publications, such as that of *Our Nig* (1981) and the publication of the revised *Black-Eyed Susans and Midnight Birds: Stories by Contemporary Black Women Writers* (1980) edited by Mary Helen Washington; Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Gloria Naylor's novel, *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), and Audre Lorde's autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986). Walker and Morrison were also prolific during the decade: the former published, among others, *The Color Purple* (1982) and the short story collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1982), and the latter, *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987). Walker became the first woman of color to be awarded the Pulitzer Price (for *The Color Purple* in 1983), followed by Morrison (for *Beloved* in 1988) ("Fiction").
Many of these writers listed above continued to publish for decades to come. Others who were less prolific in the '70s—such as Paule Marshall—re-emerged in the 80s, and fresh voices such as Sherley Anne Williams, Sapphire, Phyllis Alesia Perry, Jesmyn Ward, ZZ Walker, Kalisha Buckhanon, or Danielle Evans came into view over the next few decades.

notion of community and solidarity with Black people in general or with Black women in particular, and to emphasize a new culture of women (B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 184).

The thematic pre-occupations of a number of these novels include the continuum between past and present, generational connections in general, and slavery itself in particular. This trend fits in well with the renewed interest in slavery in US culture: a "crucial shift" occurred in the last third of the 20th century, "from amnesia about slavery to a storm of commemoration" (Dubey, *Museumizing* 3) and debate (Davis, *WRC* 7). A result is the emergence of palimpsest narratives, defined as "those first-person or third-person novels in which a contemporary African American subject describes modern social relations that are directly conditioned or affected by an incident, event, or narrative from the time of slavery" (Rushdy, *The Oxford Companion* 535). Accordingly, fiction started to experiment with various devices, such as an encounter with the antebellum past through time travel or hallucinatory states (see *Kindred*, or *Stigmata* (1998) by Phyllis Alesia Perry), or through contact with ghosts and magical realism (see *Beloved* (1987) by Morrison, or *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) by Jesmyn Ward).[44] These works often Signify upon[45] their predecessors in that they enter into a dialogue with the structure or thematic points of the classic tradition of slave narratives. Other narrative techniques such as flashbacks, flashforwards, multiperspectivity, and free indirect speech, frequently involving the main characters' ancestors are evident in many of them (for example, *Corregidora*, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, or *Conception* (2008) by Kalisha Buckhanon).

A further characteristic of the corpus that has been emerging from the 1980s is its firm place in the literary canon: its move from occupying an interstitial textual space to being legitimated by awards, readership, and academic syllabi. The metaphors of interstitiality and the loophole of retreat are applicable in order to highlight the place of these works in the canon. As Green-Barteet explains, the garret where Jacobs hides for several months in *Incidents* is an interstitial place in the literal sense, while her life and narrative are similarly interstitial in the metaphorical one. As a fugitive, Jacobs is neither enslaved nor free, neither mobile nor without control over her body; and as a mother, she is not involved nor completely removed from her children's lives since she is at

[44] For a socio-philosophical approach to the theme of ghosts, inspired by Morrison and Jacques Derrida, see "Black Feminist Hauntology" (2015) by Viviane Saleh-Hanna. On how a subset of these novels can be characterized as post-neo-slave narratives, see "The Inside-Turned-Out Architecture of the Post-Neo-Slave Narrative" (2016) by Margo Natalie Crawford.

[45] See the concept of Signifyin(g) not as the vernacular practice here but as falling into a tradition, based on the theory set forth by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988).

least able to observe them. She calls the garret her loophole of retreat, which already reflects this in-betweenness: it is an escape, a relief, but merely a temporary one. The tension between being neither truly valued nor expendable as an enslaved woman is one of many examples of in-betweenness in *Incidents*. This existence as being "neither one thing nor another" (Green-Barteet 54) is mirrored in the narrative itself, which becomes "an in-between location, arguably more public than private, in which she is able to discuss private matters, such as motherhood, sexuality, and abuse, in a public forum. Addressing these issues in a highly public context, ironically, grants Jacobs a certain amount of freedom" (Green-Barteet 55). Just as Jacobs "uses the power of [the garret's] interstitiality to her advantage," she "casts her narrative as interstitial so that she can argue against slavery" (55). In a similar vein, I argue that a significant portion of African American women's writing is interstitial in that these narratives first functioned as loopholes of retreat: they exhibited the voice of a number of women from Jacobs and Harper to Petry and Brooks, but at the same time both the texts and the authors were dismissed, disbelieved, or outright discredited. Additionally, due to literary conventions, pressure from publishers, or simply because of a lack of access, these texts could only epitomize a limited scope of the Black female experience, thus being representative and not fully representative at the same time, echoing Green-Barteet's formulation of "neither one thing nor another" (54). However, the 1970s boom in theory, criticism, and literature, and the subsequent changes in the academia have meant that novels by Black women no longer occupy an interstitial space; rather, they continue receiving more and more public and critical acclaim.[46]

Black women writers have also become increasingly vocal regarding their intentions to put forward a new form of literature, which necessitated the birth of a new discourse: one that is specifically geared toward a Black female audience. While Harriet Jacobs and her contemporaries addressed white women in the hope of invoking empathy and thus stirring them to abolitionist action, and many white women authors wrote with a male readership in mind, Morrison articulated in an interview her determination to address a different audience: "I write for Black women" (Lester 46). Apart from positing Black women as viable readership, she also expressed her unifying vision for writers of her generation: "We are not attacking each other, as both Black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving loving way" (46). Her assertion that authors like her "are writing to repossess, rename, reown" (46) resonates with Alice Walker's aim to fill

[46] The legitimization of these emerging female voices happened in spite of the hostility of the Black male literary establishment that was reluctant to share "space in the literary marketplace" (McDowell, "Reading" 83).

the gaps of stories that could not have been written previously.[47] She says, "our mothers and grandmothers, some of them: moving to music not yet written. And they waited" (*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 232), implying that Black women writers are responsible to compose this music for their ancestors retroactively. Pointing out the privileged position of Virginia Woolf, Walker argues that having a room of one's own and financial means (the prerequisites for becoming a writer, according to Woolf) were unthinkable for "Phillis Wheatley, a slave, who owned not even herself," yet, despite her status and ill health, "had she been white, [she] would have been easily considered the intellectual superior of all the women and most of the men in the society of her day" (235). Similarly to Morrison, Walker expresses reluctance to criticize other Black women (and by extension, any Black women writers) (*In Search* 332), thus articulating her vision of intergenerational solidarity. Indeed, despite the variety of topics, characters, and narrative devices typical of the writers of the past 50 years, what links them is an alliance extending into both directions: just as Walker celebrated Hurston, and Morrison mentored Sherley Anne Williams in the 1980s,[48] younger female novelists express the admiration for and indebtedness to figures such as Walker and Morrison.

The explicit appreciation of literary precursors as well as the advocacy for the younger generation is linked to Black women writers' declaration of a matrilineal tradition, the manifestation of their "anxiety about cultural disinheritance" (Sadoff 12). Especially since the publication of Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974) and the eponymously titled volume (1983), "Black feminist literary critics have recurrently used the metaphor of matrilineage to authorize their construction of a Black feminine literary tradition" (Dubey, "Gayl Jones" 245). Understandably, "the Black feminist discourse on matrilineage seeks to unwrite a brutal history of rupture and dislocation and to write an alternative story of familial and cultural connection" (245). Also, referring to non-fiction by African American women dating from the 20th century, Karen Craddock notes the extensive use of motherhood metaphors that are employed "both descriptively and methodologically in reference to social change and transformation" (3). The concept of motherhood in Black women's literature has been used to discuss the importance of

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[47] A similar impetus to fill the gaps left by untold stories is also what drives Saidiya Hartman's genre-bending work: she relies on "critical fabulation" ("Venus" 11) to extrapolate the stories of the women whose voices are missing from the historical and literary archive. *Lose Your Mother* (2007) and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) are examples of this technique.

[48] For Walker's praise of Hurston, see the essays in *Mother's Garden*; on the friendly relationship between Morrison and Williams, see the interview with Morrison in an edition of *Dessa Rose* (Artman and Morrison 8-9).

nurturing and leadership in general, or to engage such topics as self-care versus self-sacrifice (Maparyan 62).

The fascination with genealogy applies to fiction as well since several works have brought to relief the image and legacy of the mother. Figurative and literal mothers abound in earlier and post-1970 novels as well, from *Contending Forces* and *The Living Is Easy* to *Meridian* and *Song of Solomon*. Matrilineal fiction often employs the figure of the mother as a metaphor, or mothers appear as repositories of ancestral history and wisdom; thereby, what is foregrounded is the mother's impact on the daughter, with the mother's own personal history effaced (Dubey, "Gayl Jones" 245-248). Matrilineal fiction thus tends to displace actual maternal experience, especially the early, embodied experience and practice of motherhood.

Intimate Descriptions: A Post-1980 Subcorpus of Mothertexts

"I could be a Black child soon. . . . But I must be born first." (Buckhanon 3-4)[49]

In contrast to the matrilineal tradition, many works by Black female novelists in the 1980s began to tackle narrating the experiences of the previously muted group of Black mothers, forming a subset of the corpus delineated above. They subvert the imperative contained within the matrilineal tradition insofar as the female characters they portray are not concerned with the legacy of their mothers; instead, they concentrate on the difficulties of coming to terms with the physical and psychological burdens of motherhood. The attention Harriet Jacobs devoted to her own maternal experience is strongly echoed in this subcorpus, but, due to the social changes brought about by feminism and the Civil Rights Movements, post-1980 writers have had unprecedented freedom in discussing the taboo aspects of motherhood, aiming to address a major lacuna: owing to the instrumentalization of the female slave body, early motherhood was the only phase available to most slave mothers, yet it was a phase and experience that literature could not reckon with for centuries.

Undoubtedly, the two literary giants, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, have contributed to the development of this maternal paradigm. While *Meridian* as well as the majority of the Morrison oeuvre contains references to topics such as pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding, the groundbreaking novels in which Walker and Morrison explore motherhood at greatest depth are

[49] The unborn child speaks inside the womb about being conceived again and again in *Conception*.

The Color Purple (1982) and *Beloved* (1987), respectively, both occupying a firm place in the canon. A sign of their popularity is their respective film adaptations (*The Color Purple* directed by Steven Spielberg in 1985, and *Beloved* by Jonathan Demme in 1998), while their canonicity is revealed by the abundance of critical literature published over the past few decades, including the extensive scholarship on their vision regarding motherhood.[50] The dissertation, while building on the results of this scholarly interest, looks to less frequently analyzed works.

There are a number of novels and short stories from the 1980s on that I call *mothertexts*. What makes this corpus novel is its focus on maternal embodiment: as I point out in the literature review, a considerable number of pre-1980 works by and about Black women center women characters, some of them center characters who are mothers, an even smaller number of them has characters who cope with early motherhood, but none of these early works zoom in on the new mother as much as the mothertexts under analysis do. This subcorpus lays even more emphasis not only on culture-specific forms of mothering, such as "othermothering,"[51] but also on first-time, early and biological motherhood, spanning the period from conception to breastfeeding. I use the term biological mother to denote a person who is a birth mother and a genetic mother at the same time, excluding surrogates, egg donors, adoptive mothers, and those who provide maternal care to children they have not carried and given birth to. The term biological mother is analogous to what Black feminist thinker Patricia Hill Collins calls "bloodmother" (*Black Feminist Thought* 178). Collins differentiates between bloodmothers and othermothers but does not specifically mention metaphorical mothers or such complicated cases as egg donation. In my usage, biological mother excludes everyone who is not a birth and genetic mother at the same time, not because I deem the excluded practices of care less valuable, but because my chosen corpus centers with startling frequency women who are biological mothers.

[50] Articles, book chapters, and monographs on Walker's treatment of the maternal—mostly in *The Color Purple*—include Chapter 3, "Romance, Marginality, Matrilineage: *The Color Purple*," of *The Other Side of the Story* (1989) by Molly Hite; "Celie's Search for Identity: A Psychoanalytic Developmental Reading of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" (1991) by Charles L. Proudfit; Chapter 4,"The Phallic Maternal: Alice Walker's Novels of Archetypal Symbolism," of *Maternal Metaphors of Power in African American Women's Literature* (2017) by Geneva Cobb Moore; and *Producing a Womanist Text: The Maternal As Signifier in Alice Walker's* The Color Purple (1996) by Janet J. Montelaro. On Morrison, see for example *Maternal Body and Voice in Toni Morrison, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith* (2002) edited by Paula Gallant Eckard, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* (2004) edited by Andrea O'Reilly, *Love and Motherhood in Toni Morrison's* Beloved (2011) by Zita Rarastesa, *Motherhood, Home, and Identity in Selected Novels of Toni Morrison* (2015) by Saman Omar, and *Toni Morrison on Mothers and Motherhood* (2018), edited by Martha Satz and Lee Baxter.

[51] For a definition and historical overview of the institution of othermothering, see Collins (*Black Feminist Thought* 178).

The mothertexts I analyze in this dissertation are "The Abortion" (1982) by Walker, *Dessa Rose* (1986) by Sherley Anne Williams, *Push* (1996) by Sapphire, "Harvest" (2010) by Danielle Evans, *Conception* (2008) by Kalisha Buckhanon, and *Salvage the Bones* (2011) by Jesmyn Ward. Even though the authors include Walker as well as others who have received literary prizes and enjoyed media attention, the works are less canonized than, for example, *The Color Purple* or *Beloved*, and they have certainly been the subject of considerably fewer academic studies as well. The tight thematic link between these novels and short stories counterbalances the relatively wide timespan: all explore what the embodied experience of motherhood feels like when it happens to an already traumatized, fragmented Black female body. In doing so, they contextualize motherhood in either slavery or its afterlife, amid social, familial, and gynecological violence as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in order to reckon with the reverberations of slavery and shed light on the continuous trauma caused by racism. They also re-appropriate and reflect on stereotypes connected to Black women and mothers (Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, Matriarch, Welfare Queen, and Urban Teen Mother), and highlight the importance of female solidarity. The pervasive erasure of Black mothers' stories and subjectivities throughout history reverberates in the fiction of the past few decades not simply as a renewed interest but as a lack, a void at the same time: even though plots often heavily rely on pregnancy and childbirth, happy mothers are few and far between in this corpus. Just as Black maternal suffering and the severing of the mother-child bond in slave narratives seem inevitable, the novels and short stories under analysis portray ruptures in mother-child relationships as well. Nevertheless, these works explore the trauma related to motherhood and its healing potential as well. Through thematizing motherhood, the texts aim to reclaim the collective trauma of Black women by invoking slavery directly or indirectly, thereby problematizing mainstream historiography as well as disrupting and re-appropriating the cultural master-narrative in order to heal the trauma of Black motherhood.

Several other prose works by and about Black mothers thematize some embodied aspects of motherhood, but since they do so to a considerably smaller extent, I do not identify them as belonging to my specific subcorpus. An early example is Toni Cade Bambara's short story "Survivor" (1972), in which Jewel, a pregnant actress living in an abusive relationship, is alienated from her body and seeks extreme bodily sensations as if to punish or re-awaken herself. She even considers suicide when her partner threatens to leave her. The water imagery—several mentions of rain, an impending storm, the pain of being submerged in icy seawater, and even vomiting—are reminiscent of the unforgiving atmosphere engendered by nature in *Salvage the Bones*. Jewel gives

birth while violent images of bodily harm permeate her consciousness, resembling the abuse committed by her late partner, which suggests that her maternal experience is tinged by the violence done to her body and its traumatic intrusions, while the textual layers opened up by the juxtaposition of this harm with the unstoppable forces of nature highlights the vulnerability of the Black female body. "Survivor" does not fit into my subcorpus as its main focus in domestic violence (Piper 55) and not the comprehensive account of a young mother's experiences.

Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* (1975) demonstrates the personal and generational trauma of the Black female characters on account of the first-hand experiences of slavery in Brazil and its reverberations in the next generations of women living in the US who are traumatized by hearing the victims' testimonies. After suffering a miscarriage and a hysterectomy, Ursa is unable to fulfill the imperative passed down through generations of female ancestors: to bear daughters and keep the memory of sexual exploitation alive. Consequently, she develops an ambivalent stance to motherhood, and the depictions of the ensuing anger and frustration destabilize the Sapphire stereotype, legitimizing Ursa's (and, by extension, other Black women's) anger. While she does not want to be enthralled to her ancestors' tragedy, she feels worthless without being able to conceive as she equates fertility with value. At the same time, she is haunted by her mother's story, who bore a child in order to quell her obsession with the imperative. The afterlife of slavery is thus brought to the fore through the very existence of Ursa as someone who was born to keep the memory of enslavement alive. Since Ursa herself does not give birth, *Corregidora* does not fit into the subcorpus of mothertexts but as critics have pointed out,[52] the novel certainly comments on the long-term effects of enforced childbearing.

Two additional novels, Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), utilize the motif of time travel to interrogate generational connections and the afterlife of slavery through scarred female bodies, thereby bearing some similarity to the works interpreted in this dissertation.[53] Dana, the protagonist of *Kindred*, finds herself suddenly and mysteriously transported from the mid-1970s to an antebellum plantation where she meets several of her ancestors. As she slowly realizes, she has to keep saving the life of a white man who becomes her great-great-great-grandfather after he buys and rapes a Black woman. Dana understands that if she fails and lets him die, she might ease the burden of the slaves he regularly tortures, but she will

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[52] On the role of memory, storytelling, victimization, and corporeal as well as psychic suffering in *Corregidora*, see esp. J. Collins, Freed, Goldberg, Li, Setka, and Passalacqua.

[53] Accordingly, *Kindred* and *Stigmata* have been compared to each and/or *Corregidora* (see L. Long; Passalacqua; Woolfork) and studied for their narrative strategies and treatment of the past (Duboin; Lacroix; Wood).

risk the life of subsequent generations, including her own. After each time-travel episode, she comes back to the present with the injuries she sustained during slavery. She and her white husband draw explicit connections between the two eras. In *Stigmata*, Ayo, a Black woman who claims to "come from a long line of forever people" who live "at the bottom of heaven … in the circle" insists on telling her story to her daughter, a somewhat reluctant listener at the end of the 19th century (7). Ayo dedicates her story to "those whose bones lay sleepin in the heart of mother ocean" (7), thus integrating it within Black American water-related mythology. At the end of the 20th century, Lizzie, her great-great-granddaughter starts communicating with her in dream-like states and suddenly 'inherits' her wounds—stigmata—as well. These hallucinatory states are prompted by Lizzie inheriting a quilt made by her ancestors and a diary that contains Ayo's written account of her experiences as an enslaved woman. Both in Butler's and Perry's novel, the past and the present thus take place simultaneously, with the psychic and bodily pain of (the afterlife of) slavery being the establishing links between several seemingly distinct temporal frames. Neither novel is a mothertext, though: Dana's great-great-great-grandmother is pregnant several times, but the focus is not on her; similarly, Lizzie is not a mother, and the visceral experiences of other characters' early motherhood are not present to the same degree as in my subcorpus.

While this dissertation focuses on novels and short stories with characters who identify as Black Americans, works of other genres and works by and about women identifying as mixed-race might also yield valuable results. Poems by authors such as Maya Angelou, Rita Dove, or Gwendolyn Brooks touch upon the struggles of new mothers and/or intergenerational connections.[54] Plays as diverse as Adrienne Kennedy's *Motherhood 2000* (1994) or Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood* (1999) thematize different aspects of motherhood, as does the story enacted by two characters in Ntozake Shange's *spell#7* (1979) that originally inspired the writing of this dissertation. Natalie and Alec narrate and act out the neurotic desire of a Black woman to stay pregnant even after giving birth, and reflect on the dual nature of the mother-fetus and mother-baby dyad (Shange 268-271). Prose works other than novels and short stories by Black women also challenge the dominant representations of the white mother: motherhood memoirs by non-white women, for instance, certainly complement the perspectives of such works by white mothers.[55]

[54] For a collection of poems and short fiction by and about Black women, see *Rise Up Singing: Black Women Writers on Motherhood* (2005) edited by Cecelie Berry.

[55] On the white-washed nature of 'mommy memoirs,' see Deesha Philyaw's "Ain't I a Mommy" (2008). A comparable phenomenon is the mainstream white-washing of the images of mothers in pregnancy magazines, pregnancy manuals, and parenting guides, with some publications intended for Black mothers but very few with crossover appeal; see the article "Where Are All the Books for Black Moms?" (2019) by Adiba Nelson. Even

Notably, an intersectionally minded analysis of Rebecca Walker's 2007 memoir *Baby Love: Choosing Motherhood after a Lifetime of Ambivalence* could speak to the challenges of raising a son as a bisexual, (somewhat) dark-skinned, mixed-race, middle-class woman in her 30s. The theme of queer(ed), non-normative ways of parenting, such as othermothering, is undeniably ubiquitous in African American fiction in general, further fragmenting the image of the heterosexual white mother. Other challenges not exhaustively covered in this dissertation but usually illuminated by motherhood studies (such as long-term mental health issues, the loss of a child, or gender fluidity, to name a few) might also become terrains of investigation. Analyzing the confluence of contemporary social movements and Black mothering would allow for explaining how the latter is able to shape the Zeitgeist. At the time of writing this dissertation, Demeter Press is preparing a volume on motherhood as lived in the time of the Black Lives Matter Movement ("Mothering and Motherwork"), further widening the scope of Black motherhood studies by examining current phenomena as they unfold.

Placing the Dissertation within the Scholarship

Using a Black feminist-Afropessimist approach to analyze a corpus that puts emphasis on those embodied aspects of motherhood that were taboo for a long time expands on both Black studies-driven criticism and motherhood studies.

A variety of monographs, mainly published in the past three decades, share some thematic points with my dissertation but deploy a different theoretical framework, focus on a different time period, or mostly or exclusively attend to white bodies. For example, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989) by Marianne Hirsch discusses the mother-child dyad from a psychoanalytic point of view in writing by white authors, although with the welcome but rather brief inclusion of analyses on Morrison and Walker. Hirsch points out that mother-daughter plots tend to elide the mother's subjectivity to focus on the daughter's experiences. Similarly, E. Ann Kaplan utilizes a psychoanalytic framework in *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992) to interrogate the fictional images of white, middle-class mothers. *Women Writing Childbirth: Modern Discourses of Motherhood* (1994) by Tess Cosslett theorizes maternal subjectivity in light of the intersubjectivity between the mother and the

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documentaries marginalize Black women and equate them with their bodies, see Jessie Givner's "Reproducing Reproductive Discourse: Optical Technologies in *The Silent Scream* and *Eclipse of Reason*" (1994).

fetus or baby. *Mother, She Wrote: Matrilineal Narratives in Contemporary Women's Writing* (2005) by Yi-Lin Yu uses the same approach to discuss matrilineal narratives and especially the mother-daughter matrix in American texts. *Romanticism, Maternity, and the Body Politic* (2007) by Julie Kipp observes the treatment of maternity by Romantic writers, while *Pregnancy in Literature and Film* (2014) by Parley A. Boswell gives a comprehensive overview of the history of the representability of pregnancy in 20th-century fiction and film, only marginally touching upon race and class issues.

The founding of Demeter Press in 2006 significantly expanded the scope of motherhood studies. Apart from the already mentioned collection *Toni Morrison on Mothers and Motherhood* (2018, edited by Martha Satz and Lee Baxter), Demeter has championed both theory and criticism on Black women by Black and white women as well by publishing such volumes as *Patricia Hill Collins: Reconceiving Motherhood* (2014, edited by Kaila Adia Story) or *Black Motherhood(s): Contours, Contexts and Considerations* (2015, edited by Karen T. Craddock). Outside of Demeter, some volumes by Black feminists have thematized motherhood and/or the reverberations of slavery in a corpus similar to mine, foregrounding motherhood, albeit with different foci or conclusions. Andreia Thaxton-Simmons's 2012 doctoral dissertation, *Rewriting the Mother Figure in Selected Novels by Contemporary African American Women*, analyzes the novels of Morrison, Walker, and Gloria Naylor, among others, and concludes that memories of an idealized but lost mother figure shape several characters' trajectories. Most prominently, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (2000) by Venetria K. Patton claims that in 19th and 20th century novels written by Black female authors maternity features as "a means to acknowledge [one's own] femininity and humanity" (150).

In sum, this dissertation offers socio-culturally situated analyses of a thematically linked, heretofore un(der)explored literary corpus, which it approaches with an interdisciplinary critical apparatus rooted in Black feminism and Afropessimism, thus responding to a void in scholarship.

The following section, "Theoretical Underpinnings and Method," expounds the theoretical framework that guides my analyses of the corpus delineated above.

II. Theoretical Underpinnings and Method

In order to interpret the depths of the early, traumatized, embodied, biological motherhood trope, it is necessary to reflect on the stance Black feminist theoreticians have taken with regards to motherhood (for a more detailed analysis of the relevant tenets see the individual chapters). What follows is an overview of how pre- and post-Emancipation motherhood has been theorized within the discipline of Black studies especially after 1970. I rely on the work of Black feminist theorists and critics, meaning those with a Black feminist perspective. While a central debate in the field has concerned the characteristics one has to have in order to 'qualify' as a Black feminist; or "whether or not one needs to inhabit a black female body in order to express a black feminist perspective" (Keizer 160), it would arguably constitute a form of theoretical-cultural appropriation if a white person—such as the author of this dissertation—were to call themselves a Black feminist. The theoretical groundwork primarily draws on the work on Black women, but includes the relevant views of those intellectuals (mostly Black men) who articulate Black feminist positions.

Black Feminism and Pre-Emancipation Motherhood

> "I am thinking of blackness's signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips, when words like *child*, *girl*, *mother*, and *boy* abut blackness." (Sharpe 80, emphasis in the original)

While the institution of slavery was in effect, the meanings of both 'woman' and 'mother' were disrupted and the gender construction of enslaved women differed from that of the mainstream. This rested on ideological grounds since the Black was conceptualized as the European's Other,[56] and, in the words of Toni Morrison, the "ego-reinforcing presence of [the] African population" contributed to the positive "self-definition" of white America (*Playing in the Dark* 45). If white women were positioned as irrational in order to ensure the ontological security of the rational male, and Black people were dehumanized for the sake of safeguarding the post-Enlightenment vision of 'human,' then Black women were rendered multiply 'Other;' indeed, they were depicted as

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[56] See Stuart Hall's "The Spectacle of the Other" (1997), which focuses on the early colonial visual representations of African people that influenced British (and, ultimately, global) concepts of the Other for centuries by relying on a "racialized regime of representation" (249). Comparably, "Passing for Human" (2005) by Kara Keeling relies on the work of Ronald A. T. Judy and James A. Snead to chart the conceptualization of Black as the Other starting from the writing of Kant and Hegel, putting it into an African American context.

animalistic, hideous, and sexually available even in pre-Enlightenment English travel writing, providing a blueprint for colonists through which they viewed the Black female body (Morgan, "Some Could Suckle" 191). According to Steve Martinot, the degradation of Black maternal bodies to political instruments served the interest of white supremacy through cementing inequality. Martinot argues that slavery renarrativized (and redefined) African (that is, African American) motherhood as economic production in order to be able to renarrativize English and white American motherhood as "'cultural production'" (86). In Martinot's reading, denigrating the Black maternal body was instrumental to elevating the white maternal body and positing it as dignified, and, in a more general sense, it was an essential factor in the "construction of a white racialized identity" (86). According to Carby, this process contributed more specifically to the construction of white female identity: "the cult of true womanhood drew its ideological boundaries to exclude [the] definition of black women from 'woman'" (*Reconstructing* 38-39), defining the narrative of Southern womanhood for decades to come (Martinot 91).

Concurrently, the enslaved woman was "excluded from the mothering realm" (Patton xii) that was the prerogative of white women, creating the two simultaneous meanings of motherhood: the Black woman was the "breeder" to emphasize and give meaning to the "glorified" position of the white mother (Carby, *Reconstructing* 30). While the "progeny [of the white woman] were heirs to the economic, social, and political interests in the maintenance of the slave system" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 31), the adoption of *partus sequitur ventrem* made the Black woman's body an essential locus of the social order: "'mother' was the function through which slavery was perpetuated across time, moving from an individual condition to a reproduced state" (Gumbs, *We Can Learn* 222-223). *Partus* stipulated that these children become the slave owner's property, yet, children belonged neither to the mother nor the owner: "Under conditions of captivity, the offspring of the female does not 'belong' to the Mother, nor is s/he 'related' to the 'owner,' though the latter 'possesses' it, and in the African American instance, often fathered it" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 74). This made the enslaved woman "both mother and mother-dispossessed" (80). The term mother itself signified differently: it became paradoxical in the context of slavery (76), and "in slave code, [it] is the writing of the condition of slavery onto the bodies of the unborn" (Gumbs, *We Can Learn* 222-223) so much so that the essence of slave motherhood was captured in "the transmission of slavery" (224).

Partus and the ensuing forced separation of mothers and children rested on an ideological foundation, but they served economic purposes as well. Enslaved women's bodies were "annex[ed]

… to a system of profit" (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 56); their wombs were "conscripted" and made into "factor[ies] of production" (Hartman, "The Belly" 169). They "gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves" (Carby, *Reconstructing* 25-26), which, in the economic logic of plantation slavery, led to breeding. In the words of Angela Davis,

> expediency governed the slaveholder's posture toward female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles (*WRC* 9-10).

Partus, together with breeding and the systematic severance of the mother-child bond contributed to what Black feminist scholars refer to as Black mothers' "ungendering" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 68) or "degendering" (Patton xii). It has thus resulted in "a differently gendered Afrodiasporic cultural text that reflects maternal dispersion in and as negation" (Bradley par. 13). As white, middle-class women were increasingly thrust into the role of home-maker and stay-at-home mother in and around the 19th century, the gendering of white womanhood curtailed their rights and autonomy to a considerable extent. As follows, had Black women been gendered similarly, they would have still been treated as inferior members of society. However, being hyper-sexualized, routinely raped, forced to bear children, and then barred from taking care of said children, Black women were denied social standing and bodily autonomy at the same time.

Black Feminism and Post-Emancipation Motherhood: In the Wake(s) of Slavery

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive. (Lorde)[57]

"We specialize in the wholly impossible." (Hine et al. iv)[58]

[57] From "A Litany for Survival" (1978) by Audre Lorde.

[58] Educator and Black feminist Nannie Helen Burroughs on the challenges faced by Black women; the motto of the women's school she founded in 1909.

In some respects, it is as though *partus sequitur ventrem* never ended: when children did not inherit the mother's condition as a slave, they still inherited the effects caused by systemic racism. It is not surprising that the link between slavery and contemporary issues was asserted during Jim Crow (Carby, *Reconstructing* 144). As the 19th century was ending, Pauline Hopkins's turn-of-the-century novels stressed the continuity of racial issues, then Ann Petry traced contemporary violence and the emotionality of language to the days of the peculiar institution in her mid-century essay ("The Novel" 38), and today slavery is still at the forefront of Black theorizing. The idea that slavery still affects Black people despite having ended quite some time ago has been put forward by multiple scholars within the discipline of Black studies, both in literary criticism and theory, but it has been done most prominently by Afropessimists.

Afropessimism is an interpretive framework or metatheory (Wilderson, *Afropessimism* 14) that allows for considering Blackness and slavery in ontological terms; its practitioners, US-based or not, include representatives of various scholarly fields.[59] Frank Wilderson builds on Orlando Patterson's definition of slavery as "the permanent, violent domination of *natally alienated* and generally dishonored persons" (Patterson 13, emphasis mine), which derives from the three constituent elements of slavery: total powerlessness enforced by continuous and gratuitous violence (2-5); natal alienation, that is, legal, genealogical and cultural isolation from close and remote ancestors and descendants (5-7); and the generalized condition of dishonor, meaning a lack of public worth and a name (10-11). Relying on the work of, among others, Spillers and Hartman, Wilderson expands on the definition of slavery and argues that Black slavery is not simply an event, an experience, or a condition to which people of any walk of life can be subjected, but a permanent condition of banishment from ontology (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 18). While forced labor and the curtailment of mobility were indeed common features of enslavement, they do not explain the power relations that subtend the conceptual make-up of colonialism. The Black person, according to Wilderson, is "an individual who is by definition always already void of relationality" and "socially dead in relation to the rest of the world" (18).

The idea of libidinal economy as elaborated by Afropessimists explains the matrix of values that has structured white civil society. Libidinal economy refers to the arrangement and distribution

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[59] See Frantz Fanon, Lewis Gordon, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Kara Keeling, David Marriott, Orlando Patterson, Jared Sexton, Hortense Spillers, Frank B. Wilderson III., George Yancey, and Calvin L. Warren.

of desire and identification that "is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption" (Wilderson, *Red* 7). In Jared Sexton's formulation, it is "the whole structure of psychic and emotional life … a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation" (Wilderson, *Red* 7, quoting an unpublished academic handout by Sexton). Structured by irrational affect and often unconscious drives, libidinal economy might manifest in or contradict financial—economic—decisions. Whiteness is accorded symbolic value as the modern "human" (or, in Wilderson's terminology, as capital-H Human to further stress it being an ontological position), while it is precisely this value that is denied to non-beings: Black people (*Red* 16). This process rendered them the Other and enabled the creation of the European human by being its opposite (20). Consequently, Black bodies became fungible (Hartman, *Scenes* 21) and accumulable (Wilderson, *Red* 14) commodity, demonstrating how libidinal economy is sutured to political economy. Black individuals, in Wilderson's formulation, are "sentient being[s]" that "do not function as political subjects" (*Afropessimism* 15). As a result, white civil society did not have—could not have—any ethical qualms against the enslavement of African people (17), and the violence against Black people has worked as "a health tonic for everyone who is not Black" ever since (40).

Accordingly, as Hartman explains, it is not merely a voluntary fixation or the weight of memory that have to account for the effect of slavery on present-day Black life; instead, "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). That is, the afterlife of slavery refers to a present-tense environment in which "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" prevail (6) in supposedly post-racial times as well, when one's racial background is said to impertinent vis-à-vis social equality.[60] Christina Sharpe, building on the work done by Hartman and other Afropessimists, uses the conceptual metaphor of the wake as a multi-faceted, post-traumatic state, practice, or process. She enumerates the literal meanings of this word: wake, for example, can refer to mourning and "rituals through which to enact grief and memory" (20), or states of disturbance, as in the air current behind a plane or the change in water behind a ship or a body (20), calling to mind the prevalence of contemporary

[60] The idea of post-racialism, part of an overall progressivist narrative of increasing equality, emerged in the 1970s. For a historical overview, see *Postracial America? An Interdisciplinary Study* (2017), edited by Vincent L. Stephens and Anthony Stewart. See the "Introduction" to Ralina Joseph's *Postracial Resistance* (2018) for the various iterations of the term post-racial (alternatively spelled postracial).

racialized gun violence and the Middle Passage alike. Since the presence of what *was* on what *remains* is integral to the meaning of the wake, Sharpe argues that wakes are states characterized by the interplay of seemingly distinct temporal frames: "in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (8), much like in Hartman's formulation of the afterlife. In lieu of a linear, progressive temporality, in this present that is always tinged with the past, freedom is qualified to become an elusive condition, which no longer involves literal enslavement but in which one is far from being free; survival becomes, in the constant presence of Black death, "un/survival" (14). This, I argue, calls to mind Harriet Jacobs's interstitial un/freedom: the afterlife of slavery, or the wake of it, is an interstitial mode of non/existence, or, to use Sharpe's word, "non/being" (14).

If the specifics of Black subjection have changed but the subjection itself has remained in place, then, wonders Sharpe, "what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation" (14). Wake work, she says, might enable Black people to imagine novel ways to survive and even thrive in the afterlife of slavery (17), that is, to "inhabit[] and ruptur[e] this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives" (17). She uses "the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery's violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance" (14), that is, the wake is as much about survival as it is about the conditions which cause the need to struggle for that survival.

Black motherhood is also conceptualized by Sharpe in this framework: she posits that "living in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem* … in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother" (14). Consequently, the birth canal can be likened to the Middle Passage and the coffle in that all three involve a transformative journey that is steeped in violence: "each has functioned separately and collectively over time to dis/figure Black maternity … and turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers, after the end of legal hypodescent, still ushering their children into their condition" (73). In this racial climate, African American parents are forced to live in constant fear of their children dying of violent, racially motivated crimes (73),[61] with wake work being a way to survive (17) the ubiquity of Black death.

[61] See Claudia Rankine's article, "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" (2015), on similar sentiments expressed by the Black Lives Matter movement. The #SayHerName movement commemorates Black female victims of institutional anti-Black violence as well; see *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women* (2015) by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Andrea J. Ritchie.

Sharpe's emphasis on themes of survival and/as resistance resonate with the work of Kevin Everod Quashie and Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who, while not readily associated with Afropessimism, attend to the ways in which the institution of slavery affects the construction of motherhood today. Quashie argues that due to the structural inequalities inherent in white supremacist societies, Black motherhood is "a hard-to-bear responsibility that begins with inevitable despair and failure: if being a good mother is to secure the best for one's child, the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all" (66). Consequently, both choosing to become a mother and choosing not to be one "in a legal system designed to restrict and control Black women's reproduction is an act of political significance and resistance" (66). Gumbs posits a similar idea of mothering as disruption of the white supremacist order and connects it to the idea of survival. She also meditates on the meaning of mother and argues that "the key role of the pathologized Black mother in the narrative justification of economic, eugenic and state violence, 'queers' the term mother, to the extent that it ruptures the term" (*We Can Learn* 191). If interlocking systems of multi-faceted oppression make Black motherhood and Black life itself pathologized, then this life—the survival of Blackness both in terms of population and aesthetics—becomes a criminal act (209). Gumbs conflates Black survival with Black mothering to argue that the former is predicated on the radical act of the latter (209), or in other words, "we were never meant to survive, but if we do, it will be through a dangerous and disruptive maternal trace" (238):[62] a queered ethic of care involving both literal and figurative mothering (192).

Reading Quashie, Gumbs, and Sharpe together enables the consideration of Black motherhood (a state) and mothering (a behavior or act, or, rather, a series of acts) as having a history full of dehumanization but being a possible locus of regeneration at the same time. Sharpe's vision for wake work aimed at resistance and survival allows for amending Quashie's model and modifying his 'impossible' to 'im/possible,' that is, to a characteristic of Black motherhood that speaks to its healing potential in the face of a system that denies the mother the ability to secure the best for her child. In Gumbs's formulation, mothering could be a practice that queers, that is, upends the status quo by affirming the other (Gumbs, "Introduction" to "Out (of) Line" in *Revolutionary Mothering*). Motherhood thus becomes a way many of the characters in the corpus under analysis can "resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence" of Black death (Sharpe 13).

[62] Gumbs references Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" (see the extended quote in the motto of this subchapter).

Supplemental Theoretical Frameworks: Trauma Theory, Motherhood Studies, and Intersectionality

Not only Afropessimism, but both clinical and non-clinical theories of trauma acknowledge the impact of enslavement on the mental and physical wellbeing of the enslaved and their descendants as well. In general, theorists of cultural trauma have argued that the collective traumatic memory of a people shapes their collective identity: Ron Eyerman, for example, argues that American chattel slavery underscores trauma, which he understands to be a cultural process to be differentiated from individual experiences of trauma (1-2).[63] More saliently for the purposes of this dissertation, various other theories of trauma stress the importance of slavery and its effects on multiple generations but with a marked focus on the *individual's* experience. Psychiatric notions supported by clinical evidence have started to incorporate race-specific manifestations of trauma and its aftermath. The conventionally accepted definition of trauma as the result of experiencing or witnessing a single event (American Psychiatric Association 463) has begun to be troubled by mental health professionals focusing on the Black American experience. They argue that the intergenerational transmission of slavery-related trauma as well as large-scale, long-term inequality (Gump 46) manifest themselves as trauma in the descendants of the enslaved as well. Experiencing single or repeated instances of racial discrimination—be they cases of outright violence or microaggressions— results in "race-based traumatic stress" (Carter and Forsyth 38), that is, being exposed to racism might constitute psychological trauma reactions akin to post-traumatic stress disorder (Polanco-Roman et al 609). Post traumatic slave syndrome also points to chattel slavery and the ensuing social inequity as the reasons behind the high contemporary incidence of PTSD among African Americans (DeGruy, see esp. the eponymous chapter).[64] The transmission of trauma in the case of Black Americans has also been theorized within the framework of epigenetics: transgenerational epigenetic inheritance allows for physiological changes in the individual whose parents were exposed to trauma (Sullivan 202). The dissertation thus relies on the different iterations of trauma and recognizes that, on the one hand, a traumatic event or traumatizing state

[63] See also *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004) co-authored by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. On slavery-related cultural trauma, see Eyerman's *Cultural Trauma* (2001).

[64] Note that DeGruy uses the term 'post traumatic' without a hyphen. For more information and sources related to Black Americans' attitudes toward mental illness and psychotherapy as well as racial disparities in access to treatment, see "Black and African American Communities and Mental Health" (2020) compiled by the organization Mental Health America.

can have specific, short- and long-term, physical and psychic ramifications for the individual, and, on the other hand, trauma can be understood as chronic (i.e. repeated and prolonged) as well, especially in the post-slavery American context.

This dissertation is also informed by an additional theoretical framework, that of motherhood studies.[65] An emerging interdisciplinary academic field, it has endeavored to theorize motherhood in diverse ways, and to bridge the gap between academics and non-academic activists and mothers, thus influencing mainstream discussions of motherhood (Kawash 973). A tentative date that has been offered as the start of this area of scholarship is 1976, the year when *Of Woman Born* was published, but the academic output associated with it has proliferated in the past 20 years, especially since the foundation of the Canada-based Demeter Press, a publisher focused on feminist mothering, headed by the leading figure of motherhood studies, Andrea O'Reilly. Motherhood studies has analyzed a variety of fields from pop culture phenomena to public policy, with a focus on how motherhoods are constructed in, for instance, the entertainment industry, literature, legislation, social media, social and political movements, and even within academia itself, as well as at the intersections of sexuality studies, migration studies, disability studies, anthropology, ethnography, and much more.[66] Though in the past decades it has been championed by white Western feminists, it has offered a welcome intervention into the tendency to equate mother with white, Euro-American middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual, biological mother, and it has pulled together research from feminists across the globe. There is, thus, a definitive intersection between the work of Black feminists and those who identify as motherhood studies scholars.

Recognizing that the interlocking oppressions of gender and race form a unique matrix in which Black women have been situated since colonial times—as it follows from my analyses above—necessitates employing an intersectional framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw states that "Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect

[65] For a detailed overview of the field, see "New Directions in Motherhood Studies" by Samira Kawash. Since its publication in 2011, publications in motherhood studies have proliferated and become even more diverse, but some of the problems, such as a lack of funding, still remain.

[66] A few titles that illustrate the diversity of foci: *"Until Our Hearts Are on the Ground:" Aboriginal Mothering, Oppression, Resistance and Rebirth* (2006, edited by D. Memee Lavel Harvard and Jeannette Corbiere Lavell), *Chasing Rainbows: Exploring Gender Fluid Parenting Practices* (2013, edited by Fiona Joy Green and May Friedman), *South Asian Mothering: Negotiating Culture, Family and Selfhood* (2013, edited by Jasjit K. Sangha and Tahira Gonsalves), *Indigenous Experiences of Pregnancy and Birth* (2017, edited by Hannah Tait Neufeld and Jaime Cidro), *Placenta Wit: Mother Stories, Rituals, and Research* (2017, edited by Nané Jordan), and *The Truth About M(O)therhood: Choosing to be Childfree* (2021, edited by Helene A. Cummins, Julie Anne Rodgers, and Judith Dunkelberger Wouk).

the interaction of race and gender" ("Demarginalizing" 140) and argues for an intersectional lens that can illuminate "the complexities of compoundedness" that structure discrimination and disempowerment (166). Crenshaw asserts the multidimensionality of Black women's experiences ("Demarginalizing" 139) and their "intragroup differences" ("Mapping" 1242). Along these lines, this dissertation would not wish to argue that all Black women experience motherhood the same way, nor that it is depicted in fiction in monolithic terms. However, the saturation of US culture with images of Black women as bad mothers as well as their history—not completely uniform but resting on the same dehumanization—do create an environment which tends to overdetermine their representations. With regards to Afropessimism's stance toward intersectionality, Afropessimists argue that Blackness is the only condition that is ontological, making it different from other, non-ontological types of oppression or subjection—that is, an intersectional framework seems to be at odds with an Afropessimist approach (Wekker 86). However, Afropessimists do acknowledge that Black women have been impacted by white supremacy differently than Black men (see esp. Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word" and Spillers, "Mama's Baby"). In my chosen corpus, factors such as socio-economic status, family background, access to housing, health along with access to healthcare, physical appearance, education, and age all impact maternal embodiment and figure into how Black women see themselves as mothers, which is reflected in my analyses. As such, I also rely on findings from fields such as sociology, bioethics, or health studies where applicable.

On the Political Nature of Black Feminist Criticism

> "Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. . . . I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda." (W.E.B. Du Bois)

In the context of Black feminist theory, whether Afropessimism-adjacent or not, the theme of mothering thus appears as a politicized notion and practice. On the relationship between the many violences done to Black women and the resulting political edge of their thought, Patricia Hill Collins asserts, "This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 3).

As alluded to earlier, apart from theory and criticism, literature by African Americans has always also had political undertones. W.E.B. Du Bois identifies a propagandistic undertone in all

art and argues that this is a necessary and welcome facet of Black cultural production: it is propaganda aimed at "gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (757). He urges for a "right of propaganda to those who believe black blood human, lovable and inspired with new ideals for the world" in the face of white supremacist ideology. As Ann Petry notes, "It seems to me that all truly great art is propaganda, whether it be the Sistine Chapel, or *La Gioconda*, *Madame Bovary*, or *War and Peace*," and insofar as the fiction writer thematizes the effects of society on the individual, the resulting work of art is social criticism ("The Novel" 33). Indeed, the protest tradition, headed by the likes of Petry, Langston Hughes, or Richard Wright, used art partly as a tool to achieve social change. Implicitly or often explicitly, Black female prose has centered a political agenda in the form of artistic protest (Eaton 10-11). In her oft-cited essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Smith draws an explicit connection between the politics of the lives of Black women and their topics and circumstances, and writes that "the politics of feminism have a direct relationship to the state of black women's literature" (411). Comparably, Morrison's declaration of writing *for* Black women (Lester 46) also suggests a distinct identity politics; as does Walker's intention to combat the intellectual erasure of generations of Black women: "I write all the things *I should have been able to read*" ("Saving the Life" 13, emphasis in the original). Appreciating Black women's writing on its aesthetic merits alone will result in fruitful discussions and thus might be a valid strategy; however, it implies a disregard for the complex social and historical rootedness of this literature. At the other extreme, ignoring the textual and aesthetic dimensions would not only be absurd but would question the legitimacy of Black women's writing as art; it would mean a regression to those views that praised African American literature only for its sociological merit. A synthesis, as Deborah E. McDowell suggests, could be productive, with an emphasis on a contextual approach that acknowledges the extra-textual factors that shape any particular piece of literature, without circumventing textual analysis ("New Directions" 432-437).

In summary, building on the body of work of Black studies necessitates a partially politicized mode of reading the corpus that itself has been driven by resistance, always already politicized and resting on ideological grounds.

The Outline of the Dissertation

The chapters follow each other on the basis of a blend between the mothertexts' thematic foci, (sub)genres, and the chronologies of their respective diegetic universes. The first chapter discusses

the novel that relies the most on the direct evocation of slavery: the neo-slave narrative the protagonist of which is an enslaved woman, *Dessa Rose* (1986). While the events of the novel analyzed in the subsequent chapter, *Push* (1996), take place in a significantly different spatio-temporal environment (in the 1980s in the North), it is a neo-slave narrative as well, with a protagonist who is constrained by similar factors as Dessa. Then, two short stories whose plots hinge on terminating the protagonists' respective pregnancies are grouped together: "The Abortion" (1982) set in the 1960s and 1970s, and "Harvest" (2010), set somewhere around 2000. The next chapter focuses on *Conception* (2008), set in the 1990s—between the times of the plots of the two short stories—but thematically, it also focuses on abortion and continues the discussion around the access to new forms of reproductive technologies (that is, while "Harvest" thematizes egg donation, *Conception* brings into relief racialized access to contraceptive vaccines, among others). The analysis of *Salvage the Bones* (2011), set in 2005, follows not only because of chronology, but because it also brings up issues of access to reproductive healthcare that are also characteristic of *Conception*. The order of the chapters also demonstrates that the texts exhibit a continuum between the direct and metaphorical evocations of slavery. *Dessa Rose* is set during that time, *Push* is formally-generically evocative of slave narratives, the short stories and *Conception* overtly thematize race to a degree, and *Salvage the Bones* demonstrates the indelible marks of the institution without explicitly discussing the legacy of centuries of racism. Finally, the conclusion reinforces the thematic links between the works, discuss how they pertain to the im/possibility of Black motherhood, and defnines the generic characteristics of mothertexts.

III. Surviving (through) Motherhood in Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*

"We, the black women of today, must accept the full weight of a legacy wrought in blood by our mothers in chains."
(Davis, "Reflections" 100)[67]

Deborah McDowell suggests that as the survivor of a traumatic event is compelled to continuously repeat the event or recreate its circumstances, so are neo-slave narratives the result of such a compulsion to repeat the story of enslavement, albeit with an intent to gain narrative control ("Negotiating" 144). Often in alignment with the generic conventions and thematic preoccupations of slave narratives, neo-slave narratives, emerging from the 1960s, have sought to inscribe the Black experience into historiography and the cultural fabric while also commenting on the politics of appropriation of Black voices in literary and cultural history (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 5-6).[68] A prominent example of such narratives is *Dessa Rose*, published in 1986.

The diverse oeuvre of Sherley Anne Williams (1944-1999), spanning three decades, includes poems, short stories, and a book for children. Yet, she is best known for this popular neo-slave narrative, which has been praised by the likes of Walker and Morrison, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and made into a successful musical in 2005 (Gable). *Dessa Rose* interrogates the consequences of the extreme humiliation and torture of the enslaved maternal body, and charts the process whereby the protagonist becomes the author of her own narrative. Its analyses, often centering the metaphors of reading, writing, and speaking, have focused on the process by which Dessa claims narrative control (Byerman; Goldman; M. Henderson, *Speaking*; McKible; Rushdy, "Reading"). Based on the similarities between the respective protagonists' journeys and the portrayals of the white characters, it has also been compared in detail to Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*, Jones's *Corregidora*, and Butler's *Kindred*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, and Frederick Douglass's works (Goldman, McKible, Griffin, M. Henderson, *Speaking*; Basu, Burns). Other lines of inquiry into *Dessa* include the significance of her violence (as a woman) in attacking her owners (Burns), the significance of music and Dessa's position as an infamous folk heroine (Seliger), the representations of 'reality' and stereotypes (King; A. Robinson), the role of literacy and writing

[67] Angela Davis on the need to understand and appreciate Black women's historical role. The quote brings together several key images and motifs of *Dessa Rose*: the physical suffering—"blood"—that enslavement entails; the imperative to honor Black women's ancestral legacy; and the acts of writing and reading of that legacy.
[68] On Rushdy's periodization and categorization of neo-slave narratives, see his entry in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, "Neo-Slave Narratives." For an in-depth analysis of the genre, see his book-length study *Neo-Slave Narratives*.

(M. Henderson, "(W)riting"), Dessa and Ruf's relationship (Bensedik; Basu; King; Meese; Porter; Ferreira), and Williams's relationship to the Civil Rights developments and Black Power in the 1960s (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives*, esp. the chapter "Meditations on Story"), among others. A focal point of a number of these studies is the struggle between Dessa and two white characters regarding the right to tell and interpret her story. This chapter demonstrates that the subversive potential of Williams's novel lies in its claim that Black women can heal through (re-)appropriating what is meant to dehumanize them: not only their stories, but their bodies, their children, and their communities as well. My contention is that Dessa's journey toward healing—her wake work—is framed by the same factors as her traumatization; therefore, I analyze the factors that traumatize and dehumanize the protagonist such as the denial of narrative authority that the studies mentioned above focus on, along with other factors contributing to the incommunicability of her self and experiences, and the factors specifically related to motherhood. Subsequently, I chart the way she finds and constructs those maternal meanings and practices that facilitate healing in the face of the gendered and racialized nature of both bodily and discursive trauma.

Not unlike Morrison's *Beloved*,[69] *Dessa Rose* is based on the amalgamation of two real-life stories of women engaging in resistance during slavery in the South (Williams, "Author's Note" 5).[70] Williams found the first story in Angela Davis's "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), an essay that brought to light the significant role of Black women in resistance efforts, both violent acts of insurgency and quiet, domestic labor that ensured the survival of the community. Davis recounts an incident, citing Herbert Aptheker's *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1943), of an enslaved pregnant woman sentenced to death after being one of the six leaders of an uprising on a coffle.[71] Her execution was postponed until after the birth of her child, or as Aptheker puts it, she was "*permitted* to remain in jail for several months" before her public hanging (*American* 287, emphasis mine). At around the same time, a white Southern woman, a mother herself, gave sanctuary to four or five fugitives on her isolated farm for years, provided them with food, and allowed them to store arms near her house (289). Williams remarks how "sad"

[69] *Beloved* was inspired by the story of Margaret Garner, who, in 1856 in Kentucky, killed her two-year-old daughter lest the child be returned to slavery after their escape.
[70] Williams wrote her "Author's Note"—which she calls a "disclaimer 'separating fact from fiction'"—reluctantly and at the urging of her editors, who had required her to clarify how historically (in)accurate the plot is (Williams, "The Lion's History" 257-258). Williams suspects that her authority was questioned on account of her race and gender, and the implied criticism toward the novel's white characters: a white male author would not have been asked to demarcate where history ends and fiction begins (258).
[71] A coffle is a group of slaves chained and worked or transported together. In this case, 90 men, women, and children were led for sale through Kentucky in 1829.

it is that these two women never met (Williams, "Author's Note" 5), and this realization, along with William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), inspired her to write the novella "Meditations on History" (1976), an early version of *Dessa Rose*. Styron admits in his author's notes that *Confessions* is "less an 'historical novel' in conventional terms than a meditation on history" (ix); indeed, it has been criticized for appropriating and distorting a significant figure of Black history.[72] He argues that Turner's revolt was an exception since slaves rarely rose up against the institution ("This Quiet Dust" 125-127), a fact disputed by Aptheker ("A Note" 191-195). The title of Williams's novella "unmask[s] Styron's work as more nearly a personal and authorial 'meditation' than the 'confessions' of his subject, [and] constitutes an ironic affirmation of Styron's stated intentions" (M. Henderson "(W)riting" 632). Styron based his novel on *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia* (1831), a pamphlet published by Thomas Ruffin Gray, a lawyer who acted as Turner's amanuensis; therefore, Turner's account is multiply mediated, yet, it is Styron's award-winning version that is canonized. In response to the novel that "travestied the as-told-to memoir" of Turner (Williams, "Author's Note" 5), Williams attempted to construct a history that, instead of tokenizing a Black character, sheds light on the tradition of resistance by Black women as elucidated in Davis's essay, and gives voice to a Black mother. What is more, as this chapter argues, Dessa's healing through the (re)appropriation of her own story and bodily autonomy establishes a marked contrast with Styron's appropriation of Turner's rebellion.

The plot of *Dessa Rose* traces the eponymous protagonist's journey from enslavement to freedom with the help of a white woman. After her master murders Kaine—Dessa's lover and the father of her yet-unborn child—she attacks the master and the mistress. As a consequence, the pregnant Dessa is whipped and "branded … along the insides of her thighs" (134)—that is, in areas associated with motherhood and womanhood—[73] and confined in a sweat box. She is subsequently sold and has to march in a slave trader's coffle. She is captured after a brutal riot and escape attempt. However, since she is pregnant, her life is spared, but only temporarily: mirroring the story uncovered by Aptheker, her execution is postponed until after the birth of her child. She is kept in subhuman conditions in a sheriff's cellar and interrogated by Adam Nehemiah, referred to as

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[72] See *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), edited by John H. Clarke.

[73] For the sake of brevity, whenever I cite *Dessa Rose*, the parenthetical reference only contain the page number and, if necessary, the author's name. All references to other works by Williams are made unambiguous. The irregularities in grammar, lexis, and punctuation in the narration are quoted as they appear in the source text in all cases. I maintain this practice throughout the dissertation.

Nemi[74] by Dessa, a schoolteacher aspiring to enter the ranks of elite Southern society by writing a bestseller—and thus indirectly profiting off of slavery—about how to quell slave uprisings, "thinking himself qualified by virtue of his race and gender to record and interpret Dessa's story" (A. Mitchell 75). Dessa is, however, soon rescued by a group of fugitive men and taken to a small plantation owned by a white woman, Ruth Elizabeth, called Rufel or Ruf by Dessa, who harbors runaway slaves in exchange for labor. During the agonies of being on the run, Dessa gives birth to her son, Mony. She recuperates after spending weeks in a delirium-like state in the white woman's house under the care of Ada and Annabelle, two fugitives. Dessa and Ruf slowly develop an unlikely friendship, and Dessa meets her lifelong partner, Harker, on the farm as well. The group of runaways devises a plan to free themselves: they convince Ruf to sell them during the day, then surreptitiously pick them back up at night. The income from this perilous scam ultimately enables Dessa and the other ex-slaves to flee west. The conclusion of the plot sees an older Dessa surrounded by her new family, living in freedom.

The Factors of Violence and Traumatization

The plot, being firmly anchored in the historical reality of slavery, demonstrates the various types of bodily trauma an enslaved Black woman is subjected to. Several events threaten Dessa's bodily integrity. As a retaliation for attacking her master and mistress, "They'd just about whipped that dress off her and what hadn't been cut off her—dress, drawers, shift—was hanging round her in tatters or else stuck in them wounds" (134). In the sweat box in the heat of the summer, she can neither sit upright nor sit down (136). Just as she is let out, she is dragged by a horse (135) and has to start marching on the coffle, where the manacle rubs her ankle raw (87). Before the almost fatal escape and giving birth under life-threatening circumstances, she is starved and given salt water in the sheriff's custody, and even Nemi strikes her for "insolence" (30). Apart from the bodily injuries, the novel also demonstrates that slave existence is inherently traumatizing due to its multifaceted dehumanization that does not primarily take effect through the body. The structure of the novel

[74] Naming is of central concern in the novel; Dessa is often misnamed as Odessa, while another Black female character—Ruf's mammy—is re-named altogether by white people who allegedly care for her. As Dessa says, "you was always darky or nigger or gal to them, never your name" (211). In referring to the principal white characters by the (nick)names given to them by Dessa, I intend to subvert these dehumanizing (mis)naming practices.
For detailed analyses on using names and naming in the novel, see Byerman; M. Henderson ("Speaking"); McKible; Rushdy ("Reading"), and Seliger.

illuminates one such discursively traumatizing aspect of being enslaved: the denial of narrative authority and of personhood. The following brief overview of the novel's structure, including the foci, focalizers, and proems of individual chapters, is necessary to demonstrate the narrative arc.

The three chapters, each introduced with a proem, and bookended by a prologue and epilogue, offer a multitude of points of entry into who Dessa is. The short prologue, with Dessa as the focalizer, contains a dream sequence with one of the few positive erotic scenes in (neo-)slave literature. It starts and ends with a song by Kaine, in which he professes his love for her. Her memories of him are interrupted by the realization that she is in chains, already in the cellar. The first chapter, "The Darky," centers Nemi as he interrogates Dessa for his book. His voice is mediated by the omniscient extra-diegetic narrator, but through free indirect speech and his journal entries, his perspective is still eminent. Dessa's answers are also included, but as Nemi often trails off or interrupts her, his voice subsumes that of Dessa. Even though he encourages her to talk, he "refuses to recognize survivor testimony, mirroring the original violation threatening to annihilate the survivor's voice" (Griffiths 16). He says he "must speak *with* her again" (23, emphasis mine), without realizing that this one-sided interrogation is far from an actual, balanced conversation. Additionally, he often forgets to write down key details and loses track of what Dessa is saying. His ineptitude is not merely a parody of an individual white man who paternalistically assumes the position of the storyteller and -shaper but fails to understand and convey the experiences of a Black person while also failing to finish his magnum opus; his ignorance and hubris are also an indictment of the literary establishment that privileges certain kinds of literary production that serve the interests of the (white, affluent, and racist) readership (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave Narratives* 143).[75] The proem of this chapter—"You have seen how a man was made a slave…"—foreshadows Dessa's resistance. In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, the sentence concludes with "you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 65-66) and introduces Douglass's retaliation against the abuse of a slave breaker. However, being a *written* account of a *man*, it comes from a place of relative privilege. The proem Signifies on the fact that slave narratives tended to deny their protagonists the chance to retaliate physically against their owners: just as Douglass reciprocates some of the violence enacted against him, Dessa attacks her master and mistress as well.

The next chapter, "The Wench," supplements Nemi's narrow point of view. Here, Dessa's and Ruf's points of view are mediated by the narrator. It includes Dessa's recovery, the stories of

[75] Nemi is also the parody of Styron and Gray, both white men attempting to capture and distort a Black person's voice.

some of the fugitives, and the cautious beginnings of Ruf and Dessa's friendship; however, the main focalizer is Ruf. The proem of "The Wench"—"… I have plowed and planted and no man could head me…"— is taken from an 1851 speech by Sojourner Truth, who, not unlike Dessa, escaped slavery with her baby. Just as the context of the quote—"Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a'n't I a woman?" (Stanton 116)[76]—centers gender, the chapter also juxtaposes and problematizes different gender issues. Not only does it explain Ruf's circumstances, as a helpless, middle-class white woman abandoned by her husband, but also sheds light on the abuses committed against both Black women and men. As opposed to Douglass's written, carefully edited and authenticated, published account, Truth's line is taken from an impromptu, oral performance in which she laments her lack of privilege.

The structure of these first two chapters accomplishes the simultaneous presentation of both Dessa's and Nemi's, as well as Dessa's and Ruf's accounts of the same events, which challenges the typical lenticular logic of racial visibility in the South: defined as "a monocular logic, a schema by which histories or images that are actually copresent get presented (structurally, ideologically) so that only one of the images can be seen at a time" (McPherson 7). Unlike in Southern novels such as Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) where the only 'side' the reader is exposed to is the world of Southern aristocracy, in *Dessa Rose*, we get a glimpse into how enslaved communities *and* white Southerners experience and then narrate the same events, including riots, escapes, or encounters with each other. Despite the copresentation of the two interpretations, Dessa's and Nemi and Ruf's worlds fail to meet in these chapters since the white characters refuse to believe the enslaved woman and discredit what she says, illuminating the unwillingness of white discourse to "recognize the Slave's world as an alternative or competing world because the violence that produces the slave makes it impossible to think 'Slave' and 'world' together" (Wilderson, *Red* 52).

In contrast, "The Negress," as the title implies, offers a more intersectional and integrated approach to understanding the main character. While the word 'wench' is already racialized as well as well gender-specific, "The Negress" attempts to think "the darky"—race—and "the wench"—gender—together, and gives the comprehensive story of Dessa as told to her family in the first person. Her language is quite close to standard English, as if it has been edited for the purposes of a published narrative, which suggests that her voice is still mediated. It tells the story of the

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[76] The speech was transcribed in different ways; this version appeared in the collection *History of Woman Suffrage* (1887), edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage.

fugitives' scheme and various adventures, Dessa's discovery of the affair between Ruf and Nathan, a fugitive, as well Dessa's relationship to Harker, who becomes her lifelong partner. Harker asks her to dance using the French he learned "down in N'Orleans" (185), which is referenced by the proem, "my negress, would you like to dance with me," taken from the lyrics to "Cajun Waltz" (1974) by Black male blues musician Taj Mahal. In this chapter, after frantically searching for Dessa for years, Nemi finally finds her but with the help of Ruf and another Black woman, she discredits his claim. The short epilogue sees an older Dessa telling her story to her loved ones, without any narratorial mediation, finally privileging her point of view and her vernacular.

The fragmented structure also reflects on Dessa's invisibility as a person and the incommunicability of her plight, highlighted by the variety of fragments, stereotypes, and controlling images through the prism of which others see her. Nemi's interest in Dessa is piqued by her reputation of mythic proportions among slaveholders: she is rumored to be a threatening "'fiend,' the 'devil woman' who had attacked white men and roused other niggers to rebellion" (21); she is "'the virago,' the 'she-devil'" (22). Wilson, the slave trader, holds her in "unnatural, superstitious awe" (22). Even though she is not raped, other white men tend to sexualize her: "not all mens acted animals towards us, understand, but enough of them did till this is what we always feared with them … I had seen the way some white mens looked at me, big belly and all, when I was on that coffle" (178). Ruf claims that she sees no color, which confuses and even infuriates Dessa. Ruf in fact can barely distinguish Black people from each other (140ff), she re-names and appropriates a Black woman as her mammy[77] to whom she compares Dessa (119), and imprints her mental images of minstrel characters on Ada (93). While Ruf is moved to help Dessa, the empathy she extends toward her is not based on actually seeing her as a person for a long time.

A further yet related traumatizing aspect of enslavement is universal mistrust and delegitimization: whether she speaks or not, Dessa is denied credence. Her mistress is adamant in her belief that Dessa is pregnant with the master's child and slaps her in the face when Dessa claims otherwise (41). Nemi is unable and unwilling to believe her. He distorts her experience while recording it, thus marginalizing her voice; in fact, "as the master anticipates using the child to be born from Dessa's womb, so the scholar expects to appropriate the words issuing from her mouth for his own profit" (Goldman 323). Ruf's first reaction is also disbelief even before ever talking to Dessa. Although she thinks "the girl would wake and tell *her story*" (96, emphasis mine), Ruf already doubts her and denies her narrative authority because she perceives Dessa as an

[77] I do not capitalize the word mammy when it refers to a character and not the stereotype.

untrustworthy slave girl, that is, as the embodiment of a controlling image. Ruf grapples with the ready-made narratives she learned from childhood. The fact that dragging Dessa after a horse is not meant to kill her but to torture her “made it all the more horrible. To violate a body so. That’s if it happened, she told herself” (135). This quote showcases the duality of Ruf having empathy toward Dessa specifically and suspicion toward Black people in general. She is conditioned to not trust Black people to such an extent that when she hears about Dessa’s scars, her reaction expresses values aligned with white supremacist epistemology: “that’s if it happened” (96). Not recognizing Dessa’s experiences and perspective effaces Dessa’s personhood and exemplifies the extent to which Black women are discredited. It also denies the enslaved woman a possible outlet to narrativize her experiences.

Several aspects of being a Black mother are portrayed as traumatizing as well. Mony is conceived in a loophole of retreat: in a voluntary, equal, and loving relationship that is, nonetheless, followed by months of grief. Kaine encourages Dessa to abort the fetus to spare her the heartbreak caused by the eventual severing of the mother-child bond (46). However, after his death, she is unwilling to give up the child: “This all I got of Kain. Right here, in my belly” (41). At the other end of the spectrum, Dessa is seen as a mere container, only worthy so long as she is able to contribute to economic production and give birth to potentially valuable property, becoming, in Quashie’s words, “(de)valued commodity” (66). The beneficiaries of slavery, while similarly disregarding the subjectivity of Dessa’s child, are oblivious to her(s) as well. Wilson, the slave trader from whom Dessa escaped earlier, “was obsessed with seeing, and selling, the kid she carried,” so “the court, fearing for Wilson’s sanity, had delayed the darky’s execution until after she whelped” (22). Therefore, she is kept alive not only for economic expediency, but because of the value of this pregnancy in the libidinal economy of a white man. Nemi also remarks that her pregnancy is lucky for *him* since it enables him to interrogate her and write the bestseller he hopes would fuel his career (29). Her early motherhood, then, is always negotiated through the white gaze and choreographed according to white needs.

The seminal event of childbirth is made even more complicated as it happens on the run. While in transport, “she was bumped up and down and something, in her womb, she guessed, somewhere deep inside her, the baby pinched its lining in its fist” (88). When her water breaks in front of Harker, she mistakes the amniotic fluid for urine, making her embarrassed. She experiences childbirth as “the core of her body being uprooted” and remembers but can barely articulate “the

pain, the blood" (88). It is described in only half a page, implying the fundamental unnarratability of such a momentous event, but its immediacy, urgency, and visceral pain are emphasized.

Subsequently, when Dessa is in a coma-like state and thus physically unable to provide her newborn with early postnatal care, it is Ruf who takes over and starts nursing the baby, inverting the traditional Southern script of Black slaves becoming wet nurses for wealthy white women. At first, "Rufel had taken the baby to her bosom almost without thought, to quiet his wailing" (101); yet, the narrator comes back to this moment repeatedly, meaning that Ruf keeps rationalizing her decision and re-phrasing her reasons for herself: "The baby was hungry and she fed him" (95); "she could do something about this, about the baby who continued to cry … she—Rufel—could do something … the baby was hungry and she fed him" (95). Ruf continues to tussle with this unusual arrangement that goes against social norms: "still, she had felt some mortification at becoming wet nurse for a darky. She was the only nursing woman on the place, however, and so continued of necessity to suckle the baby" (102). Social expectations compel her to animalize and alienate Mony: "she shrank from the thought of nursing him, a *pickaninny*, seeing this for the first time as neighbors might—*would*—see it. His dark skin might as well be fur" (127, emphasis in the original).

Apart from instinctual behavior and rationality, the realm of Southern social life troubles Dessa and Ruf's relationship. Being a lady—even if not high society—influences how Ruf inhabits her body and how she sees Black people; still, she cannot deny the (inter)corporeal joy of breastfeeding: "willfully, she closed her eyes and, sighing, gave herself over to the sensual rhythm of his feeding" (127). The need to rationalize her decision might stem from guilt or shame for breaking the racial taboo. As an abandoned wife living on an isolated farm, her loneliness is making her uneasy, and the time spent nursing—when she is neither with someone nor alone—allows her to think about and interpret her life (113). Hence, breastfeeding is not merely an instinctual or rational aspect of (other)maternal care but a displacement activity Ruf relies on to mitigate her loneliness. More importantly, she might sense that she compounds Dessa's trauma by interfering in her and Mony's bodily autonomy:

While Ruf is undoubtedly making a sacrifice both by breaking a taboo and by volunteering maternal labor, her care for Mony indeed only traumatizes Dessa further. The sight of her nursing Mony invokes a variety of strong affects in Dessa: she even screams at the sight of Ruf's white body in intimate contact with the baby (88). Dessa is aware that this is an unusual arrangement: "it went against everything she had been taught to think about white women but to inspect that fact

too closely was almost to deny her own existence" (117). Not only does it upset her worldview and extend the boundaries of what is acceptable in Southern slaveholding society, it also makes her question her worth as a mother: Dessa feels she ceases to exist insofar as Mony's needs for nurturance and intimacy are being met by another person while his own mother is unable to care for him. Dessa's milk supply eventually dwindles and she is horrified upon the realization that she could not feed her baby even if she were to recuperate (116). Her initial shock turns into shame for not being a good enough mother and woman (170), that is, her impaired maternal autonomy fundamentally challenges her self-worth.

Dessa's aversion to white women further complicates this situation. Her neurotic former mistress is complacent in the dehumanization of enslaved women. She prevents Dessa from being a house slave and thus being closer to Kaine because she is jealous of the young woman being near the master: "Mist's ascared Masa gon be likin the high-colored gals" such as Dessa (18). Experiences like this lead Dessa to conclude that "white woman was everything I feared and hated" (169). The numerous references she makes to Ruf's whiteness indicates that Dessa is overtaken by the novelty and ubiquity of white skin as she has never seen white women in such intimate settings, in their own homes, with their hair down, in close proximity to her. When they first meet, Ruf is merely a body for her, with her whiteness as a marker of alterity. The act of breastfeeding, since it involves Black and white skin in close contact, is positioned as something sinfully carnal through its implications of miscegenation: "sometimes it seemed to Dessa that she [Ruf] was drowning in milky sin" (117). Dessa is disturbed by the corporeal aspect of the intimate connection of Ruf and Mony, and is suspicious of her, evident in her "surreptitious examination of the child when Rufel returned him after nursing" (140).

Furthermore, seeing Ruf breastfeed Mony is a haunting reminder of the break in the untenable union of Black mother and infant, of which Dessa is acutely aware. She encounters several mementos about the impossibility of Black mothering, which is presented as an experience always deferred and sabotaged by slavery. Earlier on the plantation, Dessa sees that children, including herself, "were bred for market, like the cows mammy milked, the chickens that she fed" (58). Those few nursing mothers who are not yet separated from their children are given more rest (58), but only so as they continue to be able to contribute to economic production. Usually, these un-/degendered mothers are not allowed to raise their children, merely to care for their infants only to the extent that it does not inconvenience the system. Dessa compares herself to one of the other fugitive's mother who "wasn't no more to [her son] than a breast in the night" (169), then adds,

"Somebody had carried him [Cully] like I carried Mony" (169), emphasizing their shared maternal experience. Kaine says, echoing Spillers, that slaves "just only belongs to white folks and that be's all. They don't be belonging to they mammas and daddies; not they sister, not they brother" (37-38). In fact, Kaine is separated from his own mother shortly after he is born, "and some time he think maybe his first masa or the driver or maybe just some white man passing through be his daddy" (38), indicating that even enslaved children are very much aware of the routine rape that subtends the institution. The juxtaposition between the family structures of whites and the lack thereof in the case of the enslaved evokes traditional slave narratives on the one hand, and potentially illustrates Dessa's understanding of the world.

Williams's evocation of the Mammy stereotype encapsulates the rift between white and Black concepts of family and motherhood. Ruf remembers her mammy, Dorcas, lovingly. Dorcas nicknamed the young Ruf "Fel" (124), while the family named Dorcas 'mammy' to make it sound like she has been with them for a long time, thus signaling their status as an established slaveholding family (123). Ruf uses Dorcas's proper name so rarely that she (Ruf) forgets it by the time she grows up (119). Thus, they name each other, but with a marked difference in power relations. Ruf also chooses mammy's birth date, while Dorcas does not even know how old she is (90). Ruf romanticizes and appropriates her, and Dorcas's emotional and physical labor is taken for granted by her owners. Dorcas, in a fashion typical of the artistic representations of the Mammy figure, always gives young Ruf advice (96), earns the girl's praise by dressing her well (118), and is the only one to recognize and remember every slave at Ruf's place (97). After her death, Ruf's loneliness is only eased by the presence of the fugitives; she uses Nathan "much as she had Mammy, as the means through which she participated in the life beyond the yard" (147). Ruf's memories of Dorcas shape her early interactions with Dessa. Ruf cannot fathom why a Black person would not be deferential and warm toward her: "to see eyes so like Mammy's, staring such hatred at her" (98) astonishes her.

The conflict between Dessa's and Ruf's differing concepts of 'mammy' comes to an apex during a heated argument. When Ruf childishly tells the recovering Dessa stories about parties and dresses, Dessa is utterly uninterested and even disgusted by the trivial details and Ruf's self-aggrandizing tendencies. Ruf's constant references to 'mammy' remind Dessa of her own mother and finally cause her to erupt: "Wasn't no 'mammy' to it … Mammy ain't made you nothing! … You ain't got no 'mammy'" (118). Ruf shakes, yells, and hisses as Dessa taunts her:

> Dessa's voice [seemed] to pin the white woman in the chair. 'See! See! You don't even not know 'mammy's' name. Mammy have a name, have children.'
>
> 'She didn't.' The white woman, finger stabbing toward her own heart, finally rose. 'She just had me! I was like her child.'
>
> 'What was her name then?' …
>
> 'Mammy,' the white woman yelled. 'That was her name.' (119)

Dessa starts telling her about her own mother, which the offended Ruf disregards and storms off. Ruf denies narrative authority to both her 'mammy' and Dessa. Then, she remembers Dorcas's name "with painful clarity" (123), thinks that it was absurd to think of herself "as Mammy's child, a darky's child" (125), but insists that Dorcas loved her (125). Their argument thrusts Ruf into a sudden identity crisis that compels her to consider that her mammy was indeed a person, who might have had children she was separated from (128). After years of upholding the fiction that house slaves are unconditionally selfless and loving quasi-relatives, Ruf is forced to "consider how the fictive ties on which she has based her most intimate bonding relationship are 'fictive' in the worst possible sense—they are delusions" (Rushdy, "Reading Mammy" 377). Her confusion is, however, mere discomfort compared to the painful memories it triggers in Dessa.

A common thread running through the lived experience of Dessa's life is her inability to communicate her painful memories. Slavery systematically denies her access to education, literacy, and community, thus limiting her range of vocabulary and expressive language skills. The resulting linguistic—and thus conceptual—limitations compound the already unspeakable nature of slavery's horrors and the impact of fresh trauma. Dessa is incapable of narrativizing her experiences for a long time and acknowledges that she needs effort to conceptualize as well as communicate the world around her (174) even before Kaine's murder. When the trauma of Kaine's death intervenes and stops language completely, she shuts herself off from the emotional impact of the moment as she is first informed of his death: "Dessa came back to that moment again and again, recognizing it as dead, knowing there was no way to change it, arriving at it from various directions, refusing to move beyond it" (58). It was then when "memory stopped" (58) and "lost its fluidity, its ability to change with Dessa as she continues to move through time" (Griffiths 15). She is unable to process this traumatic event through language since its temporal proximity precludes the possibility of narrativizing her suffering (Williams 59-60). Then, just as she is recuperating physically after being beaten and tortured, her escape and childbirth amount to an almost fatal experience, yet again precluding the verbalization of trauma. Her above described

exchange with Ruf is one of the first steps she takes toward overtly communicating her experiences in the face of the white mainstream's mistrust of her, hinting at her gradual recovery.

The Factors of Resistance and Healing

The process of recovery from trauma, bodily or otherwise, hinges on the same factors as the causes of trauma. During and after being denied narrative authority, being fragmented with the help of controlling images, and being mistrusted and subjected to pain regarding motherhood, Dessa gradually signifies on these aspects of dehumanization and ultimately takes control of her own narrative.

As explicated above, the structure of the novel is in conversation with Dessa's journey from being dismissed and decentered to assuming the role of the primary storyteller. The origins of this process can be found in her learning how to struggle for narrative authority with Nemi. The fact that Dessa acquires an authoritative, self-defining voice only by the end of the novel as well as her references to not being able to find the proper words to communicate invite the interpretation that she completely lacks the tools to express herself. However, apart from the open defiance evident in her escapes, she displays several forms of subtle resistance through language as well. She signifies with Nemi by communicating with him in a roundabout way that often diverts his attention or makes it impossible for him to understand her. When Nemi asks her about the other fugitives' motive for escaping, she says, "Onliest mind I be knowing is mines. Why for you don't ask them first?" (41), which takes his focus away from the original question. In the middle of an answer, "she continued to herself, in a deeper dialect … really almost a mumble" (41). When asked where they got the tools to file the shackles, she evades the question by continuing to talk about Kaine (46). There are instances when she gives an incomplete answer simply because she is exhausted, but, as the narrator explains, "talking with the white man was a game; it marked time … playing on words, lightly capping" (60), that is, many of her diversions and non sequiturs are deliberate.

Giving Nemi just enough information to satisfy his curiosity constitutes what Zora Neale Hurston calls featherbed resistance, a survival stratagem predicated upon evasion and misdirection (*Mules* 4-5). Deborah McDowell reads these acts as active subversion and claims that Dessa's "refusal to 'confess' anything to Nehemiah that would facilitate yet another misrepresentation is an act of resistance against the adverse power of literacy and codification" ("Negotiating" 26). Thus, Dessa uses as a cover the stereotype of the simple-minded slave by displaying her apparent

stupidity and docility so that Nemi will constitute her as a non-subject, while asserting herself at the same time. Indeed, even though Nemi registers her "loquacious, roundabout" strategies of communication, he fails to arrive at the conclusion that she is in fact intelligently evasive (23). This resistance signals that despite being physically confined, Dessa still exhibits some control of the situation since the deliberately misleading reproduction of the norms expected of a slave is in itself indicative of her agency: her capacity to make decisions and act on them. These minor hints in the narrative fabric Signify on the substantial tradition of slave narratives in which agency is achieved only by the end of the narrative, and they also undermine those frequent readings of *Dessa Rose* which claim that Dessa is but a mere victim with a complete lack of agential potential until the end of the plot. Ceron L. Bryant asserts that "Dessa Rose *arrives* at a place where she's able to destabilize the hierarchical white structure by cleverly usurping the written form" (2, emphasis mine)—however, I argue that instead of "arriving," Dessa is depicted as already being there: even when her account of events is dismissed by, among others, Nemi, she is able to assert her selfhood and exercise a degree of discursive control with the limited means available to her.

Even though Dessa continues to be the Other for Ruf for months, the gradual changes in how Ruf perceives her and their eventual friendship contribute to Dessa's recovery. It is only after listening to Harker describing Dessa's ordeal in brutal detail that Ruf begins to consider the validity of Dessa's experiences. Harker's metaphorical, even sentimental language calls to mind those descriptions of extreme violence that slave narratives and abolitionists employed in an attempt to incite the sympathy of their readers and listeners. White witnesses derived pleasure from such accounts, as Saidiya Hartman notes (*Scenes* 20-22); indeed, Ruf recoils but listens with fascination. She almost feels Dessa's pain on her own thighs (Williams 135), that is, she acknowledges Dessa's suffering only insofar as she (Ruf) can identify with it by becoming a proxy for Dessa, with pain being "the conduit of identification" (Hartman, *Scenes* 20). However, it is this substitution that further effaces the personhood of the other while re-inscribing the captive's "hyperembodiness" (sic)—the tendency of the enslaved to exist as merely bodies in the white imaginary (*Scenes* 19).[78] Williams dramatizes the limits and "precariousness of empathy" (Hartman, *Scenes* 19) alongside the effects of the white woman's socialization into white supremacy. Finally, however, seeing Dessa's scars *and* hearing Harker's testimony, along with getting to know and ultimately listening

[78] The racial dynamics of perceiving the Other in pain have also been theorized by Debra Walker King, who argues that by placing undue focus on (depictions of) somatic suffering, "the subject of pain disappears beneath the weight of an abstract body" (7). Comparably, Houston A. Baker, Jr. asserts that the fascination with the visible signs of pain in the case of people of color results in them becoming "silent display[s]" (40), that is, voiceless bodies without agency.

to Dessa, convinces Ruf. The horrors of enslavement are first mediated through the flesh, and the combination of visuals and narrative is not sufficient for the white witness to understand the suffering of the enslaved: perceiving Dessa as a person is.

Despite traumatizing Dessa in the short run, her argument with Ruf about what mammy means ultimately helps Dessa heal. Ruf's self-absorbed appropriation of Dorcas and entitlement to a Black woman's labor trigger Dessa's pain of having been separated from her own mother. This prompts the still physically weak Dessa to sit up and deliver a monologue about her own mother, Rose. She names all of her siblings, recounting how many of them lost their lives. She makes several references to how slavery disfigures mother-child relationships and childhood by separating the families and forcing the children to work: Minta dies before the owners (and not her parents) can name her; Seth is the first child to survive long enough so that he can start working on the fields, but he soon dies just like Jeeter, another sibling; and Caesar is trampled to death by a horse that he holds for the owners' white guest (119-120). First unwittingly, then consciously, Dessa continues the labor of remembering and recounting "the names now the way mammy used to tell them, lest they forget, she would say; lest her poor, lost children die to living memory as they had in her world … telling the names until speech became too painful" (119). Anne E. Goldman identifies this conversation—or, rather, monologue—as a crucial moment that allows Dessa to assume her mother's place by voicing the mother's memory (321). This is the first instance of Dessa deliberately sharing her family history with anyone at length. Her initial intention is to hurt and shame Ruf, however, she continues after the white woman leaves the room, which suggests that she is startled by the strength of the memories: "Even buried under years of silence, Dessa could not forget" (Williams 120). The confrontation with Ruf stems from a moment of epistemological violence, and it ultimately motivates Dessa to assume a maternal position after she realizes that, with her own mother gone, she is responsible for keeping the memory of her lost family members for the sake of the next generations. This realization and identification with a maternal position gives her a sense of pride, thus contributing to her healing.

After her pivotal outburst, Dessa warms up to Ruf while still withholding her memories about Kaine partly because "these was still a wound to me and remembrance of that coffle only hurt a little bit less" (216), and partly because she keeps reminding herself that a white woman can never be a real, sympathetic ally (216). Ruf grapples with realizing her own privilege and uses what she can as a white woman of modest means to assist and protect the fugitives, often risking her own life. The narrator suggests that Ruf has childish impulses and is blind to her own white power

for a long time, but overall, she is portrayed in sympathetic light, not for being a white savior for Dessa, but for complementing Dessa's ingenuity and courage with her privilege, i.e. her skin color and upbringing. They forge an alliance through participating in the scheme together, their friendship gradually develops, and an older Dessa remembers her fondly (236).

As part of the process of healing, Dessa starts contextualizing her experiences and putting them into words in the temporary community of fugitives at Ruf's place. At a pivotal moment, she puts together a coherent narrative that links the experiences of Black women together. One of the fugitives at Ruf's plantation, Ned, implies that the Black women in the fugitive community disapprove of Ruf and Nathan's affair only out of jealousy. He says, "Don't nobody want no old mule like you" (183), in response to Janet but by implication addressing all the women there. This infuriates Dessa. She understands that rather than referring to the color or roughness of their skin, his insult qualifies their womanhood. She remembers all the stories of abuse shared with her:

> Mules. Milly who had birthed seventeen children in eighteen years and seen them all taken from her as she weaned them, been put outdoors herself when she went two years without starting another child. They had taken Flora's baby from her, put her out to nurse with someone else cause Flora could do much as any man in the fields. This is what broke Flora from slavery; this why she runned, so she could keep her babies for herself. Janet was mistreated cause she was barren; Ada's master had belly-rubbed with her, then wanted to use her daughter. (183)

Then, she adds her own to the list by saying that she was kept alive only to give birth to a child who was to be enslaved (183). Evoking Nanny's statement that "de nigger woman is de mule of de world so fur as Ah can see" (17) from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she declares, "Oh, we was mules all right" (Williams 183). Nanny tries to pressure Janie into entering and staying in an arranged marriage and in doing so, advocates for making a series of concessions that end up making Janie miserable. Nanny uses the metaphor of the mule to refer to the appropriation of Black women's labor. Dessa amends this by referring to the specificity of the appropriation of their reproductive labor. While acknowledging the ubiquity of racialized and gendered violence as well as the accumulability and fungibility of Black flesh, she does so in a gesture of defiance, solidarity, and a willingness to reckon with and name the multifaceted abuse they endure. She is "shaking from remembrance, from feeling," sees a "flash," and uses words such as "monster" and "bloodhound" to describe her helpless fury (184). She likens this intense affective response to the impulse that led her to attack her owners and flee from the coffle. It should also be noted that slave

narratives by men tended to refer to physical violence enacted by them as a tool to regain their dignity (Threadcraft 41-42; also see the introduction of the dissertation); this female-centered neo-slave narrative introduces bouts of violent reciprocation that might provide a fleeting sense of relief (while also having the tangible and lifesaving benefit of enabling her to escape of course), but what leads to and signifies healing here is Dessa's ability to regain her composure, not to attack Ned. A later scene depicting physical force (Dessa and Ruf warding off the sexual advances of a white man) attests to her ability to use violence in a strategic and calculated manner, not as a result of losing control. The novel does not suggest that Dessa is to blame for attacking the master and mistress or for fleeing (rather, these are depicted as logical and necessary responses to brutality), but the fact that she is later able to find a more peaceful solution to a (much less serious and 'only' verbal) conflict signifies the progress she has made in terms of trauma management. The support she gets from male members of the community, who make Ned apologize, helps her calm down. Even though the sudden surge of emotions does not make it possible for her to coherently communicate with others what she thinks, she does verbalize it in an inner monologue and is able to reappropriate an insult meant to dehumanize her.

Thus, even though the bond between Dessa and Ruf undoubtedly contributes to the former's recovery process, the novel suggests that Dessa needs a permanent, intimate community to be able to heal from trauma. Keith Byerman asserts that Williams dismisses the possibility of a cross-racial community (63), which does not explain the degree of difference between how Dessa relates to Black men and Black women. On the coffle, she is unwilling to share her experiences even in the temporary company of trusted—albeit all male—companions. She remarks that some members of the coffle could not hold a conversation (59), that is, they cannot help her despite (or because of) their communal trauma. At Ruf's place, she identifies with the women around her after witnessing their various accounts of abuse due to the commonalities in their plight. However, it is her new family that enables her to give a full account of her suffering as an adult. The terms of endearment she uses to address her audience in the third chapter and the prologue—"honey" (206), "children" (225)—signal that it consists of her loved ones, whether friends or relatives, while the intimacy suggests that they are (at least predominantly) women and girls. Unlike Nemi, they "can be trusted not to appropriate her discourse for [their] own objectifying and annihilating purposes" (Lanser 199). Not only are they willing to listen to her, but they also fully understand the racialized and gendered nature of her trauma, unlike Ruf or the men on the coffle.

As she acquires some distance from her trauma in this community of trustworthy listeners, Dessa gradually reaches the stage when "memory emerges and reunites a body and a voice severed in trauma" (Griffiths 2). In "The Negress," it is to them that she recollects her childhood memories (171) and describes, in visceral detail, her time in the sweat box (191). Not only does she exhibit self-understanding but can sustain a coherent narrative as well, suggesting that she is indeed in the process of healing. She is also able to recognize implicit meaning as well, for example, she can retrospectively decode that Nemi, in cohort with other white men, thought she was not human: "This not exactly what he say, you understand; what none of them said. I can't put my words together like they did. But I understood right on, now; wasn't nothing wrong with my understanding. And this what Nemi meant" (227), that is, she can understand implied meanings. Even if she cannot rely on rhetorics to the same extent as these educated, white men—"I can't put my words together like they did"—she, in a role reversal, becomes the one to interpret Nemi.

Indeed, the epilogue shows that her spoken word has triumphed over the white man's version of her life: Dessa tells her own story, and encourages her children to remember it and keep it alive. She does so without the stylistic interventions from a narrator that abound in earlier chapters: since the epilogue takes the form of a monologue in the vernacular, the reader gets the impression that this account is less mediated, if at all, by a third party. Both the prologue and epilogue take place outside of the bounds of the plot: one is the memory of an early dream, the other is set long after the main events and emphasizes that the story will live on even after Dessa's death. Thus, the arc of the novel goes from hazy, semi-conscious dreaming in the prologue to constructing and keeping alive a 'master' narrative—an overall, organizing narrative that encapsulates all the episodes in Dessa's life as well as what she has learned about the world. Her overt goal is to transmit knowledge—"I tell you, honey, slavery was ugly" (206)—and to counter the image Nemi was trying to convey about and instead of her. The memories are "so sharp sometimes I can't believe it's all in my mind. And my mind wanders. This why I have it wrote down, why I has the child say it back" (236). Having her story "wrote down" implies that she has dictated it at some point to an amanuensis and it might even have been published, but the fact that she still insists on *telling* it in person to her family suggests her wish to maintain narrative control and to privilege orality. Asking the children to memorize the story also suggests that she is wary of written accounts and/or those who are in control of such accounts, for example, (white)

publishers or editors. By keeping the narrative in the family, Dessa strives to ensure its stability, longevity, and immutability.[79]

The body contributes to survival and the healing process in various ways as well, among them the resemioticization of Dessa's wounded, scarred flesh as body. For Hortense Spillers, having a 'body' is the prerogative of the liberated subject, while all the captive can have is scarred, wounded, and fragmented 'flesh' ("Mama's Baby" 67). Dessa's torture indeed disfigures her and results in "altered human tissue" ("Mama's Baby" 67). Once she is whipped, the semiotics of her skin bear testament to her suffering and subordination, reminiscent of how former slaves, in their abolitionist efforts, displayed their bodies as evidence of their suffering, and it also reflects on the emphasis that written slave narratives place on bodily epistemology—the idea that the traumatic slave past can be referenced in the body after the event itself (Woolfork 45). Indeed, through its scar tissue, Dessa's skin itself becomes a legible testament to her past, prone also to being misread since "these undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 67). The skin, thus, offers a story that replaces or complements narrative and verbal memory, with scars functioning as "inscriptions [that] produce the meaning of Black female subjectivity in the discursive domain of slavery" (M. Henderson, *Speaking* 67).

An indirect way healing takes place in the text is the very act of subsequent 'readings' of the scar tissue by Ruf, Harker, and Aunt Chole, an old Black woman tasked with authenticating Dessa's scars and thus confirming her status as a fugitive at the behest of Nemi and the sheriff. Ruf, in an effort to confirm her bias about cunning slaves, looks for proof that Dessa is lying; however, when she sees the "mutilated cat face" on her loins (154), she slowly starts to empathize with her.[80] Harker, Dessa's partner, resemioticizes her suffering in kissing the altered tissue on her thigh and saying that her scars, far from impairing her "value," actually increase it (191). In doing so, he contributes to the reconstitution of Dessa's flesh as body while Signifyin(g) on the language used by slave owners and traders to profess his love: he uses "value" not to refer to her reproductive capacities or potential price at a slave auction, but to her as a valued, valuable, loved person, or,

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[79] Cf. Williams's contention that "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often these have betrayed us" ("Author's Note 5). On the one hand, Williams hints at the conspicuous absence or distortion of the Black experience in mainstream American literature; on the other hand, she might allude to the 'betrayal' by the publishing industry insofar as it intervened into the integrity of the published slave narratives (see Sayre 189-190; Sekora 496-497).

[80] Ruf's empathy has its limits and pitfalls, as I discuss in other parts of the chapter; still, the fact that Dessa's scars 'speak to' Ruf even when Dessa is unable to do so is a comment on the unspeakability of Black experience.

more specifically, a woman and mother, since Dessa is wounded on her hips and thighs. Similarly, the blind Aunt Chole touches Dessa's scars yet lies about their existence so that Nemi will not be able to convince the sheriff that it is indeed Dessa. In so doing, Aunt Chole "disrupts the primacy of the visual field" (Griffiths 32) and subverts the expectation of the white gaze. Even though Dessa gives her a small amount of money to convince her to lie to the men, Chole's actions still constitute an expression of solidarity: she takes a considerable risk by deceiving law enforcement. She corroborates Dessa's story at her own peril, thus saving Dessa's life instead of pandering to white male interests. Harker accepts the distorted skin and Chole denies its existence, but both readings do so to protect Dessa: they 'use' the scars ultimately to affirm her humanity and bodily integrity. Insofar as the marks left after bodily injuries can be read as metaphors for the psychic wounds suffered as a consequence of enslavement in neo-slave narratives, reading them is part of de-traumatization (Morgenstern).[81]

Dessa heals through recuperative bodily experiences as well. Several types of maternal attachment and care are posited as sources of (often bodily) comfort as well. As Steinberg argues, the novel "explor[es] the absolute necessity for a female slave to form female communities in order to transcend her subjugation" (252), which is, however, clearly supplemented and even superseded by the need to establish familial connections. In the cellar, shut off from any other stimuli, Dessa enjoys the vigorous movement of the fetus; she even begins crooning to it (60). The baby continues to be a major source of pleasure for her: after the first sharp pains of breastfeeding, she smiles and closes her eyes (89-90). Breastfeeding takes on communal significance as well since Ada explains how to nurse and even helps Dessa position herself and the baby. Moreover, she acknowledges and encourages Dessa as a mother: "See? See? He know his mama. See, he just want to eat" (89), strengthening the bond between herself and Dessa as well as between Dessa and the baby, thereby suturing the maternal, the bodily, and the communal.

A more direct way of healing the flesh is present in the novel: healing through—often maternal—touch. The intercorporeal connection with other women and family members is a key component of the protagonist's healing process through its facilitation of remembering and story-telling. For Dessa, the body is a privileged site of remembering: she keeps score of people, events, and even places, traumatizing or pleasant, through memories anchored in the body. It plays a part both in disruptive intrusions of memories and later, in conscious remembering. In the cellar, she

[81] Naomi Morgenstern compares the reading of scars in *Corregidora* and *Beloved* as parts of the process of "making trauma mean," and briefly mentions *Dessa Rose* as another slave narrative that features a scene of scar reading.

remembers specific moments of Kaine touching her (14). She recalls her family by remembering how they touched her: she touching her father's cheek (83) and her sister braiding her (Dessa's) hair (83-84). During the escape, "her feet were remembering" walking on the coffle (87). When she reconstructs the escape and childbirth at Ruf's place, she remembers the intense pain that feels like the fetus pinching the lining of her womb (88), as well as the man helping her escape through the interaction of their bodies: "the sinewy arms around her, the beard-stubbled cheek against her face, 'Got you' on a smoky breath" (87), "the warmth of someone's flesh" (88). As she is talking to her family, she mentions that she will never forget how gentle Aunt Chole's hands were (231), but this memory, instead of being an isolated intrusion, is enveloped in a coherent story she is now able to tell. Thus, involuntary and fragmented memories first torment her, then grieving and memorializing heal her. As the embodied memory fragments are integrated in a coherent narrative, and as she is seen as a loved and respected member of her new family instead of being the Other, so does flesh lose its "ripped-apartness" (Spillers, "Mama's Baby" 67) and comes to be a body.

Another practice included in this healing process is braiding hair, which, due to its maternal undertones, is a coping mechanism for Dessa whether she is the recipient or the one who engages in it. In her old age, she cannot braid hair because of the stiffness of her fingers, but she remembers Ada doing it, "her hands, her legs, the feel of the chair rung at my back, the woman scent rising faint behind my head" (235). It evokes pleasant childhood memories (234), and its monotonous, ritualized nature makes it especially suitable as a soothing, meditative activity that accompanies female and familial bonding and story-telling (235). Already at Ruf's place, it creates a safe space by establishing and enhancing intimate, exclusively female connections that at the same time strengthen cultural and communal ties, to the extent that Ruf feels like an intruder when she inadvertently sees it (148). The ritual of braiding has community-making powers, and, through its element of care, it unites the communal and maternal aspects of healing especially in the epilogue.[82] The importance of bonding through touch, then, is manifold and reveals Williams's ethos of "privileg[ing] touch and other senses" which destabilizes Ruf's and "the dominant discourse's obsession with the visual Black body" (Griffin 39). Dessa first finds the whiteness and proximity of Ruf's body repugnant, while the corporeal connection with other Black women and her family

[82] On a wider cultural scale, hair care and stylization have been understood as rituals that foster intimacy (hooks, "Straightening" 111) and express creative energy (Mercer 34). To counter Black hair's devalorization and politicization (hooks, "Straightening" 113-115 and Mercer 37), specific hair styles can also be considered a site from which pride can emerge.

alleviate her pain and help narrativize—and subsequently fade—memories of somatic suffering through gentle touch.

Maternal care enables Dessa to unite all the heretofore mentioned different aspects of remembering, story-telling, and healing. Having children provides her with an outlet to tell her story again and again, helping her to get a better grasp on her own narrative of the self. Following in the footsteps of her own mother, Dessa insists on keeping her memories alive as well and functioning, in Paula Sanmartín's words, as a "custodian of history."[83] The profound corporeal connection enables remembering and putting into words her most traumatic experiences. While the tradition of matrilineal fiction tends to center the daughter-listener as the focalizer, in *Dessa*, it is the mother who—after hearing her own mother's stories, of course—remains at the center. Narrative memory—that is, not just the telling but the remembering in itself— and the emphasis on remembrance of and by children constitute forms of resistance as well (Seliger 320). As Helen Crump argues, recalling the past in itself lends agency to the traumatized storyteller, which then becomes a catharsis for the listeners as well, resulting in communal empowerment in many pieces of fiction written by Black women (Crump 33).[84] Dessa, Kaine, and Harker all cite the next generation as a driving force for wanting to keep fighting for freedom. The master's threat to sell Dessa and her son south to "worser slavery than they ever thought of" (43) motivates Kaine to escape to a "place without no whites" (50) where they can finally have children. When Ruf asks Dessa why she ran away, Dessa replies: "cause, cause I didn't want my baby to be slaved" (139). Harker is ready to take responsibility for Dessa and Mony and have more children once free, adding that this is impossible for slaves (192). Dessa remarks that "we have paid for our children's place in the world again, and again" (236), summarizing the abuse endured by generations of Black women but also implying that they fought not only for their own benefit but for the survival and freedom of their descendants.

In the afterlife of slavery, writers like Williams have been performing wake work by offering a counter-narrative of Black women. Dessa, albeit with limited means, keeps narrativizing her self, however, this (re-)articulation of the self leads to healing only when two conditions align: it has to be enabled by an empathetic community (exhibiting an ethics of care that exists despite and separate from the lack of institutional care) the members of which also provide her with somatic experiences that render the telling of physical and emotional trauma possible. Within this

[83] Note the irony in having no custodial power (Patterson 6) under white discourse yet at least being a custodian of this record of events, made possible by Black discourse.
[84] In others, it is shown to traumatize the listener deeply, see Jones's *Corregidora*.

matrifocal community, she can use her story as a “countertext” and “site of resistance” (C. Henderson, 68), thus, motherhood is a site from which selfhood emerges and solidifies. Dessa reclaims motherhood in re-writing the restrictive categories imposed on her by the slaveholding power, but this reclamation underlines that motherhood is traumatizing—indeed: impossible—when it is implicated in white supremacist terms and can only take on a restorative character when Black women are allowed a loophole of retreat in their communities, in “the social life of social death” (Sexton, “The Social Life” par. 15). Nevertheless, impossibility is still imbricated in it: while motherhood is capable of engendering new possibilities of healing, it is still lived in (the wake of) chronic, individual, transgenerational, and communal trauma, which Dessa is very much aware of: her compulsion to keep telling her story and her wish that the children remember it attest to the precarity of Black existence and to the need to hold a wake to all that has been lost. While Styron’s version of Nat Turner’s revolt was the accepted one for decades, in *Dessa Rose*, it is Dessa’s narrative that is now canonical, at least in the diegesis. She comes to consider her story worthy of being told, retold, recorded, remembered, but she is fully aware that it might be questioned, dismissed, or misunderstood by those outside of her social circle. Dessa looks for possibility in the face of all this impossibility, that is, something does survive the ontological negation of Black Americans imposed by white supremacy: this being something of a un/survival, non/being, and im/possibility.

III. Reclaiming the 'Abnormal' Maternal Body in Sapphire's *Push*

Look at what they did to my sisters
Last century last week
They put her body in a jar and forget her
They love how it repeats
Look at what they did to my sisters
Last century last week
They make her hate her own skin
Treat her like a sin. (Woods)[85]

Push by Sapphire (1950-), despite being set more than a century after *Dessa Rose*, shows remarkable similarities to it: while *Dessa* is a neo-slave narrative set in antebellum times, *Push* is one set in the 1980s. Not only does it follow the bondage-to-freedom narrative arc reminiscent of traditional slave narratives—as its protagonist is slowly empowered and emancipated from her oppressive family—but it also dramatizes the trauma of sexual and other types of physical and mental abuse, the disruption of the mother-child bond, the struggle for literacy, and the process of gaining narrative self-understanding.[86] Similarly to *Dessa*, *Push* underlines that motherhood is connected to both the protagonist's traumatization and her healing process. This chapter traces Precious's journey—essentially, her quest for 'normalcy' and being—with a focus on how motherhood and the body are implicated in the processes. She grapples with being multiply othered and enfreaked, and the process through which she unfreaks herself involves reconceptualizing several restrictive categories which finally enables her to come to terms with her motherhood and to transform from being a 'freak' to becoming 'precious.'

The 1996 publication of the novel and the 2009 release of its film adaptation, *Precious*, sparked ample scholarly attention, focusing on the role of literacy, pedagogy, the media in Black communities, and the Harlem cityscape, among others.[87] *Push* has been firmly contextualized in Black literature: critics have noted that it references a multitude of literary predecessors in its

[85] Lyrics from African American poet and singer Jamila Woods's song "Blk Girl Soldier" (2016). Besides reverberating with themes of self-hate (a significant element in *Push*) and referring to the historical continuity of anti-Black sentiments, the quote memorializes Sarah Baartman, a South African woman exhibited as a freak show attraction in 19th-century Europe under the name Hottentot Venus. Her remains were displayed in a French museum until as late as the 1970s, with her genitals placed in a jar. Woods connects the white supremacist and sexist fascination with Baartman's body to the enduring suffering of Black women. For details of Baartman's fetishization and its links to contemporary phenomena, see Janell Hobson's *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (2018).

[86] For an in-depth reading of both *Push* and its film adaptation as (neo-)slave narratives, see Riché Richardson's "*Push*, *Precious*, and New Narratives of Slavery in Harlem" (2012).

[87] See especially the collection *Sapphire's Literary Breakthrough: Erotic Literacies, Feminist Pedagogies, Environmental Justice Perspectives* (2012) edited by McNeil et al.

evocation of incest, invisibility, the use of the oral tradition, writing/journaling, and its structure reminiscent of slave narratives (Fulton 164-165; Michlin 171; Dagbovie-Mullins 446; Myles 21-24; McNeil, "Un-'Freak'ing" 13). While parallels with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1953) or some of Morrison's novels can certainly be established, the predecessor *Push* draws on the most is undoubtedly Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. The latter two have been compared on the basis of their narrative structure and style, and the significance of education and literacy with regard to Black girls' quality of life. Just as *The Color Purple* has had to be defended against charges of misandry and impropriety (Bobo 332-333), *Push* and *Precious* were criticized for the blaxploitative nature of the images they operate with: describing and showing the abused Black body in brutal detail has been called disgusting, scandalizing, and, above all, counterproductive (O'Neill; McNeil 14). Sapphire defended the overt visuality of her novel by asserting that the events described in graphic detail are necessary to convey accurately the reality of many girls similar to the protagonist (Wilson and Sapphire 34-35). Her explicit goal was, in her words, "to reconnect to the mainstream of human life a segment of humanity that has been cast off and made invisible" and to center "women who have been marginalized by sexual abuse, poverty, and their blackness" (McNeil et al., "'Going'" 356).

The novel's first-person narrator protagonist is Claireece Precious Jones, an African American teenager living in Harlem in the 1980s. Her father starts abusing her sexually when she is a toddler, then rapes her repeatedly. As a result, Precious becomes pregnant at the ages of 12 and 16, and has two traumatic birth experiences. Her first child has Down syndrome and is taken away from her by her mother and grandmother with the aim of getting welfare benefits. Furthermore, Precious falls into the medical category of 'obese,'[88] she suffers from physical abuse and severe emotional neglect, lives in poverty and is illiterate until she gets into the fictional program called Each One Teach One, the goal of which is to assist youth deemed too 'troublesome' by the education system. One of her teachers eventually becomes her mentor, and she slowly learns how to read and write. After giving birth to her second child and escaping from home, she finds a new home at a halfway house. Precious continues to study and slowly, her mastery of the language as well as her critical thinking skills improve; the appendix of the novel contains her and other students' journals and poetry. Finally, Precious asserts herself even though her mother tries to persuade her to move back home. The mother also reveals that Precious's father has died from

[88] I will use the word 'fat' in line with the conventions of critical weight studies/fat studies and the body positivity movement. See the monograph *Fat* (2012) by Deborah Lupton for the history of the term and the discussion of fat politics.

AIDS, which leads to the revelation of Precious's HIV positive status. Attending various support groups and finding friends empower her, and finally, she gains enough self-understanding to carve out some space for herself. The novel offers an optimistic ending: after forging a new identity by, among others, confronting her mother, Precious reconnects with her children.

Enfreaking Motherhood through Enfreaking the Body

Though never explicitly identifying herself as a freak, Precious is aware of the enfreaking quality of her non-normativity. Enfreakment, as defined by David Hevey, refers to the process by which a non-normative body is represented or, as in the case of 19th-century freak shows, exhibited in a way that accentuates its difference from what is defined as normal in that society (53).[89] Freak shows often showcased women, people of color, and people with physical and mental disabilities, that is, people who were constructed as having bodies, or rather, being bodies that looked very dissimilar from white, able-bodied men (Stewart 110). This discursive construction of the freak as an exotic, colonized other had several functions apart from generating revenue and garnering support for imperialism: capitalizing on the relational nature of meaning and identity, the different or extraordinary body was used "to define more sharply the 'normal' white spectator citizen" (Stewart 109–10) through "sooth[ing] the onlookers' self-doubt by appearing as their antithesis" (Thomson 64). The people whose corporeal otherness was made their only defining characteristic were juxtaposed to the appropriate, well-managed bodies of the majority, that is, most often white, able-bodied, cisgender males (Richardson and Locks 58), while, as Stewart points out, freaks were sequestered from spectators as the latter looked at the former with pornographic gaze, with no opportunities or intent to communicate (109–10).

Since Black people have been Othered to a great extent in order to validate whiteness in the Western cultural imagination,[90] one could argue that they are always already enfreaked; however, the enfreakment of Black women is even more prominent in the figurative and literal sense as well. Freaks showcased on stages were often the ultimate Others: hypersexualized Black women with non-normative, often fat, bodies, who had already been posited as the Other through which

[89] Another, unrelated meaning of 'freak' is a stereotype-like sexual script that describes the Black woman as having no sexual inhibitions and seeking out unconventional, often high-risk erotic experiences (D. Stephens and Phillips 20-22).
[90] See the ideas of Martinot, Wilderson, and others in the introduction to this dissertation regarding the construction of Black people used to accentuate and define what 'proper' whiteness meant.

whiteness, and especially white womanhood, defined itself against. As Sabrina Strings convincingly demonstrates in *Fearing the Black Body* (2019), contemporary fatphobia is linked to centuries-old expectations of race and gender. By the 19th-century, white women's "slenderness served as a marker of moral, racial, and national superiority" in the US, while being overweight was "linked to 'Africanity' or blackness" and was a "sign of immorality" ("Introduction"). As Strings explains, "The fear of the imagined 'fat black woman' was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women *and* discipline white women" ("Introduction," emphasis in the original). The Black female body has been positioned in the white imaginary as grotesque, excessive, and hyperembodied,[91] with conversations around reading obesity as a form of racialized disability.[92] Contemporary forms of presenting 'anomalous' bodies in a sensationalized manner include circuses and television programs such as talk shows, reality shows, and documentaries (Backstrom 683).

Precious's body is the repository of all that Western mainstream culture has an aversion to. The way society and her family perceive her Black, female, and fat body affirms her freak status, and her self-hatred comes from the fact that she internalizes this degrading, othering, and enfreaking gaze. Growing up in the US under Reagan,[93] she is inculcated with ideas of Black inferiority: "I know who they say I am—vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for" (34). Blackness, obesity, and motherhood then become intertwined in Precious's libidinal economy. She hates being dark-skinned and fat, both of which she associates with her mother, Mary, as well: "I like light-skin people, they nice. I likes slim people too. Mama fat black, if I weigh two hundred she weigh three" (33). Whenever she compares the two of them, she emphasizes both their skin tones and body size (35). If she cannot be white, she fantasizes about being lighter at least, evincing her colorism, that is, her belief that light-skinned women are more attractive: "Why I not born a light-skin dream? Why? Why?" (98). Seeing that light and "yellow" girls are found attractive, she writes that in an ideal life, "I

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[91] See Marimba Ani's *Yurugu* (1994), Jennifer L. Morgan's "'Some Could Suckle'" (1997), Janell Hobson's "The 'Batty' Politic" (2003), and Julia S. Jordan-Zachery's *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy* (2009), among many others.

[92] See for example April Herndon's "Disparate but Disabled: Fat Embodiment and Disability Studies" (2002), which advocates for incorporating fat embodiment in a feminist disability studies, and Anna Mollow's "Unvictimizable: Toward a Fat Black Disability Studies" (2017), which demonstrates the dangers of seeing Black bodies as inherently disabled as well as of seeing fatness as a disability, and argues that the resulting concatenation of fatphobic sentiments, racism, and ableism exacerbates anti-Black violence.

[93] There is ample literature on the impact of Ronald Reagan's social and fiscal policy on Black mothers as well as on his racist rhetoric regarding the welfare reform; among others, see *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy* (2009) by Julia S. Jordan-Zachery.

would be light skinned, thereby treated right and loved by boyz" (123). Then-contemporary pop culture affirms the value of light skin: it is not only white bodies that are celebrated in the images available to Precious; rather, light-skinned women of color such as Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson are increasingly visible. Precious tussles with what 'attractive' and 'desirable' mean: she sees that the svelte bodies of celebrities are sexualized and coveted commodities while they are still out of reach and somewhat protected, or at least, they are (presumably, to Precious's knowledge) not raped repeatedly. Precious's body, in contrast, is not conventionally attractive, yet, she is regularly is raped, which she sees as a contradiction. Instead, she yearns to be "a sexy girl don't no one get to fuck. A girl for value. A girl wif little titties whose self is luvlee just Luv-Vell-LEE!" (121-122).

Obesity and motherhood are intertwined in the novel on two levels: first, according to Precious, motherhood causes or at least aggravates obesity; second, Precious's mother is fat and this is a characteristic of hers that Precious identifies with the most. Her mother, Mary actively violates her not only through sexual abuse, but by insisting on overfeeding her as if to make sure Precious was as fat and helpless as she is. She forces Precious to cook for her (63) and eat with her even when Precious is disgusted by the type and amount of the food (23). Precious becomes conscious of the fact that she eats the same way as her mother: "Try not to see grease running down Mama's chin, try not to see her grab whole ham hock wif her hand, try not to see myself doing the same thing" (23). Dagbovie-Mullins draws a parallel between two kinds of consumption in the novel: "she cannot regulate what her body takes in, both in terms of food and sexual contact" (437). I would add that since Precious often deliberately eats until everything is a "blur" and watches TV in order to distract herself from the similarities between her and Mary (Sapphire 23), a more salient parallel is between the consumption of food and that of media: she does both with an intent to numb herself. Dagbovie-Mullins suggests that Precious has an abuse-induced eating disorder (437). Indeed, stealing fried chicken not out of hunger but because of needing food to cope with stress (Sapphire 42) and eating past the point of comfort point to a psychological state in which eating has taken on undue significance and become a maladaptive coping mechanism that can barely ease her suffering even in the short term.

The fat and the maternal body is pathological and enfreaked in *Push* in the sense that it is undesirable to the point of being disgusting. Precious describes the ideal body as one that is a virgin and yet looks like the hyper-sexualized body of superstar Whitney Houston (124), which signals her escape fantasies (Dagbovie-Mullins 441). She uses a composite image of various celebrities to

elaborate on the physical characteristics she considers attractive or unattractive: "I would be a virgin like Michael Jackson, like Madonna. would be a different Precious Jones. My bress not be big, my bra be little 'n pink like fashion girl. My body be like Whitney. I would be thighs not big etc etc. I would be tight pussy girl no stretch marks and torn pussy from babies's head bust me open" (124). The daydreams in which she fantasizes about being similar to celebrities whose bodies are very far from being maternal serve a double function. According to Dagbovie-Mullins, "unsurprisingly, sexual activity often triggers" these fantasies (441), that is, they help her to dissociate while being raped. Also, I would argue that they reflect her conviction that becoming a mother is inevitable, and it is only in her fantasies that she can have control over body. In the next few lines, she offers a summary of what she constitutes as acceptable: "One time boy come to Advancement House to see girlfriend, he think I'm somebody's mother. That bother me" (124). Her discomfort is rooted in being mistaken for someone much older than she is, but also, for her, being a mother and being attractive are mutually exclusive.

Hatred of herself as a mother is also interwoven with the hatred that she feels toward Mary. At first, Precious associates motherhood with Mary even after she herself gives birth, which on the one hand is due to her young age and the fact that her son is taken away from her, and signals Mary's looming presence on the other. After constructing Mary as a freak—"she ain' circus size yet but she getting there" (63)—Precious cannot help but identify with her to the point that she seems to think her mother is a doppelgänger to her, the embodiment of the characteristics that she cannot accept about herself. She explains that "sometimes I pass by store window and somebody fat dark skin, old looking, someone look like my muver look back at me. But I know it can't be my muver 'cause my muver is at home" (35). This unwitting, unwanted identification with a dreaded mother is suggestive of Precious's matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's own mother (Rich 235). In the words of Adrienne Rich, "where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely" (235). Thus, when Precious is mistaken for a woman of her mother's age, she needs cognitive effort to remind herself that they are not the same person, showing Mary's undue influence on her. Unlike in *Dessa Rose*, the protagonist's mother is portrayed here as an unequivocally negative force that hinders, rather than helps, her journey toward empowerment.

Obesity is not only a state that Precious connects to her mother but she also feels that to an extent her looks have been influenced by the physical manifestation of motherhood—going through pregnancy and breastfeeding. She observes her own body and views it as something that can shed

light on who she is, as if she was watching a 'freak' on a stage: "Who I see? I stand in tub sometime, look my body, it stretch marks, ripples. I try to hide myself, then I try to show myself" (36). Stretch marks can be the result of the sudden changes brought about puberty, and together with ripples, they can also be markers of obesity. More specifically, however, stretch marks also allude to pregnancy, thus, to motherhood. Her skin therefore becomes an instrument of enfreakment. Her unease underlines that she is still alienated from her corporeal experiences due to trauma. In the early days of mothering, she would benefit from being part of a community of mothers who could provide her with models not only regarding child-rearing, but in terms of positive, constructive models as to what a maternal body looks like.

Trying to come to terms with physical changes is not the only difficulty Precious has with feeling at home in her own body: she is slow to embrace her maternal self, signaled by and mirrored in her inability to accept her second pregnancy. Being pregnant and giving birth are difficult states for Precious for several reasons: she has survived and is still subjected to traumatizing experiences, she dissociates habitually even when she is not pregnant, and the pregnancy came about as a result of incestuous rape. The medicalization and pathologization of pregnancy and childbirth, which Precious encounters in the 1980s United States, also contributes to this issue. As anthropologist Brigitte Jordan points out, "medical knowledge supersedes and delegitimizes other potentially relevant sources of knowledge such as women's prior experience and the knowledge she has of the state of her body" (73). Precious lacks many "potentially relevant sources" on account of her illiteracy and being cut off from any meaningful (female) relationships. Healthcare workers tend to compound her trauma—with the exception of the "Spanish" paramedic who attends to her when her first child is born. He is empathetic, encouraging, and able to establish rapport with her through acknowledging and respecting her:

> He touch my forehead put his other hand on the side of my belly. "What's your name?" he say. "Huh?" I say. "Your name?" "Precious," I say. He say, "Precious, it's almost here. I want you to push, you hear me momi, when that shit hit you again, go with it and push, Preshecita. Push." And I did. And always after that I look for someone with his face and eyes in Spanish peoples. He coffeecream color, good hair. I remember that. God. I think he was god. (11)

When she gives birth for the second time, the difference between him and the hospital nurses—both white and Black—is striking. Instead of respecting her bodily autonomy, they try to hug her and hold her hand despite her efforts to resist (19-20), unwittingly echoing and replicating the

sexual abuse she is regularly subjected to. Their insistence on using medicalized language when talking to the 16-year-old Precious is another example of the healthcare system's shortcomings (19). All these factors contribute to Precious's greatly diminished bodily awareness.

Precious's dissociation from her pregnant body and from the fetus also underscores her tendency to perceive her body as abnormal. Lacking a supportive family or community and the resources that could help her understand her pregnant body better, Precious is an *expectant* mother only in a biological sense: in part owing to the traumatic nature of her first childbirth and the circumstances of conception, she is not looking forward to childbirth and she does not have a connection with the fetus. She even tries to forget its existence (65). Psychology understands this reluctance as an affect borne out of trauma and potentially damaging to future mother-child relationships. Myra Leifer differentiates between three patterns of bonding pregnant women can have with their embryos/fetuses. The first one is characterized by early attachment, the second by one that forms in the second trimester due to ever-increasing fetal movement, while the third involves the weakest emotional bonds: women in this category might experience severe alienation from the fetus, even to the extent that they recognize it as an intrusion (Leifer 447). Women who belong to the third category often fail to engage with the fetus because it was conceived in rape (Leifer 447; Lundquist 141), which might even make the pregnant woman associate the fetus with the rapist (Parker 203). Precious's belated maternal attachment can undoubtedly be due to the circumstances of conception as the detachment from her pregnant body is reminiscent of the alienation she feels while being raped: "This baby feel like a watermelon between my bones getting bigger and my ankles feelin' tight cause they swoled" (64–65); it is "something stuck in me, growing in me, making me bigger" (70). The loss of control she feels regarding her own pregnancy reminds her of being beaten and raped as well as of the unwanted orgasms she experiences (65). The malevolent image of the ever-expanding watermelon about to burst suggests that Precious conceptualizes her pregnant body as a host of something threatening and alien to her. Since the various kinds of abuse she is burdened by take a considerable toll on her mental health, it is understandably unlikely that she would recognize the fetus as her would-be child during such an emotionally-corporeally complex situation. Accordingly, she oscillates between indifference and a sense of horror, and constitutes the fetus as something menacing that has a life of its own, thereby enfreaking the fetus and herself too.

Another facet of enfreakment is her awareness of her HIV-positive status. When she is first informed of her father's status, she understands the severity of the disease, but due to lack of

education or any other reliable and available resources, she barely understands what it entails. As she wonders of the chances of transmission, she is captivated by the sound of the letters as she sings to her son: "IV HIV HIV U an Mi coold hav HIV" (103).[94] Using the sound of the initialism to craft a short rhyming sequence constitutes an attempt to come to terms with her new reality through the repetition of the sounds, and it is a coping mechanism since it signals her attempt to make light of her fear. Her emotional response is further driven by her environment's reaction to the news: her classmates' and Rain's shock—"all the tongues dead, can't talk no more"—turns into an attempt to encourage Precious to cry (106). Far from judging or criticizing her, the girls and Rain assure her of their support; however, their initial silence informs Precious that being HIV positive is indeed an 'abnormal' state, a serious illness the presence of which drives a wedge between the infected and the healthy. At this point, she still has not fully accepted her positive status, rather, she cries at their encouragement because it allows her an outlet to vocalize her pain with regard to the various hardships in her life, evinced by the mental images of her mother and son that are aggregates of years of suffering and fear (107). Thus, her positive status compounds the already existing, traumatizing and othering states—being a young mother as a result of incestuous rape and being the daughter of someone whom she sees as a freak—in her life.

As she tries to adjust to this newly discovered enfreaking condition, she attempts to position herself in relation to people who suffer from the same disease. When her friend suggests she join an "HIV Community," Precious exclaims, "Jezus! It's a community of them? Us, I mean" (107). In line with the contemporary media portrayals of AIDS patients, she identifies anyone living with HIV or AIDS "as a white faggit or crack addict" and cannot imagine belonging to these categories (117). Interestingly enough, according to data provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, gay men and African American men were burdened with HIV and AIDS in disproportionate numbers at the time of the novel's publication, Black women are 23 times more likely to be affected than white women (Davidson 84-86), and Precious's father is Black as well, but Precious only comments on white gay men being the epitome of the HIV victim. This might be explained by her—rather unsurprising—lack of knowledge of the various subgroups' rates of infection, but might also stem from a compulsion to distance herself from gay men, underprivileged white men, and drug addicts. Despite being multiply Othered herself, she is judgmental of those

[94] This line is included in her correspondence with Rain. Precious is asked to keep a steam-of-consciousness-like journal. After reading her entries, Rain transcribes them, then responds to them. Here, Rain's transcription reads, "IV HIV HIV You and me could have HIV" (103).

whom she deems even less 'normal,' and tries to cement her position as someone who is non-normative in several ways but at least not enfreaked vis-à-vis her sexual orientation or drug use. She clings to her heterosexuality and drug-free status wishing these could set her apart from those members (or, rather, outcasts) of society she considers to be below herself, while being aware that she is considered to be a part of "them." The tension resulting from this contradiction further contributes to her enfreaked status; after being fed up with contemplating her HIV positive status, she starts screaming, feels like she is drowning, and is temporarily discouraged from continuing her therapeutic writing practice (107-108).

The Black Woman as Less-Than-Human

Specific and severe instances of abuse and non-normativity contribute to Precious's self-hatred: as a fat, Black, teenage mother, she is enfreaked by the multi-faceted dehumanization and animalization that she experiences or witnesses. Several behaviors are constructed in the novel as animalistic. The taboo-like nature of breastfeeding is emphasized when a white, middle-class social worker assigned to Precious's case struggles to talk to Mary about breastfeeding and cannot even finish her sentence: "you mentioned something about hygiene in connection with ... with ..." (147, sic). Breastfeeding is thus posited as an abnormal, improper practice that is transgressive due to its animalistic undertones. In Monica Campo's words, it "involves women using their bodies in a mammalian and inescapably biological manner" (51). The association of breastfeeding with uncleanliness is strengthened when Precious's mother justifies not breastfeeding by claiming that it is not sanitary (Sapphire 147). She argues that giving formula to children is a better option, echoing the rhetoric of the then-contemporary formula advertisements. The novel reflects on the facets of breastfeeding not from a mainstream point of view: instead of positioning the breast-or-formula debate along the axis of choice, it demonstrates that Mary's revulsion toward breastfeeding *and* her favoring bottle feeding is rooted in the contemporary discourse that strove to bias low-income mothers of color against nursing.[95]

Breastfeeding, apart from being framed as an animalistic and unclean practice, is eroticized through its indirect association with sexual activity in the novel. In Western culture, apart from a

[95] For details on the implication of race in formula advertising, see Andrea Freeman's *Skimmed: Breastfeeding, Race, and Injustice* (2019).

few isolated depictions that bring breastfeeding into the realm of the erotic, "lactating breasts are sequestered from [mainstream] cultural discourses of sexuality" (Bartlett 1). Yet, instead of breastfeeding infant Precious, Mary breastfeeds her husband, which she justifies by referring to sexual desire (147–148). Precious's sexual abuse starts at this point as well, adding a further layer of the enmeshment of sexuality and breastfeeding in the novel's imagery. The social worker is stunned and confused by Mary's graphic and unapologetic rendering of this chain of events due to the juxtaposition of the erotic and maternal. Her reaction confirms what Precious suspects: that her family's behavior is abhorred by mainstream society. The social worker's hesitation also affirms Western culture's anxiety about breastfeeding that reminds the West of humans' links to the animal world on the one hand, and involves a heavily sexualized part of the female anatomy on the other (Gaard, "Literary Milk" 2). As a result, the multiply taboo-breaking practice of eroticized breastfeeding sutures the affects of disgust and shame to the way Precious thinks about feeding a child.

The boundary between human and animal is symbolically undone in the novel in other, more direct ways as well. Precious has limited contact with other people, but even they animalize her directly. Her academic performance as a child and teenager suffers as a result of the abuse she suffers at home: she cannot concentrate, she is often in a pathological dissociative state, and cannot even establish contact with her teachers or her peers. Her classmates bully her by making "fart sounds" and "hog grunt sounds" (41) whenever she moves. These insults leave her paralyzed and sitting in her urine at school: "So I jus' stop getting up. What for? Thas when I start to pee on myself" (41). Her father calls her a heifer while raping her and "he slap my thigh like cowboys do horses on TV" (27). She has an extremely limited way of expressing herself, but one of her attempts to emote in any way occurs after her father rapes her and she is deeply ashamed of the positive physical sensations she experiences. Feeling alienated from her body but trying to connect with it somehow, she feels compelled to smear her face with fecal matter: "Afterward I go bafroom. I smear shit on my face. Feel good. Don't know why but it do" (121). The severe effects of her trauma limit her emotional outlets, prompting her to resort to these primal responses, which then earn her further scorn or make her feel even more ashamed, keeping her in a vicious circle.

Apart from animalizing Precious, her environment dehumanizes her in various other ways. Bullies at school insult her by calling her "shoe shine shinola" (43), which evokes the act of shining shoes—a task traditionally performed by African Americans—thus insulting her on a racial level, similarly to other race-based taunts such as "Pick up your lips Claireece 'fore you trip over them"

(43). More saliently, alluding to the brownish-blackish color of the shoe polish calls attention to its similarity to feces. She internalizes this by calling herself "ugly black grease to be wipe away" (34). The bullies deepen Precious's self-hatred to the extent that she starts using physical pain to relieve the emotional one: "I bite my fingernails till they look like disease, pull strips of my skin away. Get Daddy's razor out cabinet. Cut cut cut arm wrist, not trying to die, trying to plug myself back in" (121). This practice, common in trauma survivors, is an attempt to counter her profound alienation through self-harm on the one hand. On the other, the dehumanizing undertones of the description—fierce biting, diseased skin, pulling off layers of skin, and, to a smaller extent, "plugging" herself back in—linguistically reaffirm her putative un-humanness, further enfreaking her.

Another character who is relegated to a less-than-human status is Precious's first child, born with Down syndrome. She is failed by the healthcare system: instead of getting appropriate care, she is allowed to live with Precious's grandmother, who exploits her for welfare benefits. The institution of othermothering is thus corrupted and fails to provide Precious with much-needed communal support. Mary also says that it is not worth putting any effort into parenting or caring for this child since she is disabled. As Precious explains, "I hardly have not seen my daughter since she was a little baby. I never stick my bresses in her mouth. My muver say what for? It's outta style. She say I never do you. What that child of yours need tittie for? She retarded. Mongoloid. Down Sinder" (36).[96] Precious identifies her daughter with the disability to the extent that she only calls her Mongo. In doing so, she discursively enfreaks her just as she enfreaks herself when she is ashamed of her HIV positive status (107–108). Undoubtedly, the fact that she has given birth to a disabled child makes her feel insecure about her own qualities as a mother, with which in turn she enfreaks herself as well.

Unfreakment as/in Recovery

Despite her disadvantaged position, Precious "puts up a magnificent fight" (McNeil, "Un-'Freak'ing" 14) to forge a new selfhood. Being isolated and multiply abused results in her being fundamentally alone until she gets into the Each One Teach One program and establishes a relationship with Ms. Rain, the maternal figure who becomes her mentor. She teaches Precious to

[96] Mary anxiously trying to discourage Precious from breastfeeding Mongo hints at her being well aware of the taboo-breaking nature of their fetishization of breastmilk—despite her nonchalant account given to the social worker.

read and write, introduces her to literature and history (most notably, to *The Color Purple*), and assists her with finding accommodation. It is Rain's insistence on self-love that has the most effect on Precious. Gradually, her support helps transform how Precious looks at herself: instead of feeling responsible for her parents' actions, she starts entertaining the notion that the abuse is not her fault, then emphatically asserts that she is innocent (137). Through the literary and cultural examples Rain provides her access to, Precious comes to terms with being Black: "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am" (106). Taking pride in the achievements of Black women such as Harriet Tubman (111), she affirms, "I ain' no white bitch. I understand that now. I am not white bitch. I am not Janet Jackson or Madonna on the inside" (136). Rain also imbues her with a sense of work ethic when she encourages her to keep writing and doing the emotional work required to heal; in fact, the word "push" is most often voiced in the novel by Rain.[97]

The healing work Precious is doing with Rain is later supplemented by attending various support groups and finding friends. In the late 20th-century Harlem, the diffuse family structure that empowers various fictional characters like Dessa or *The Color Purple*'s Celie is unattainable; instead, new forms of communities emerge. Rain and the "house mother" at the Advancement House become Precious's othermothers. The members of her new classroom, the support groups, and the women in the halfway house assist her, be it consciously or unwittingly. After initially assuming that her dark skin is the only reason she is a victim of incest, her concept of white privilege and attractiveness changes upon learning that white and conventionally attractive women can be victims of incest as well. Under the influence of Rain, she starts behaving more normatively (i.e. in accordance with mainstream expectations) and engages in pastimes typically associated with being educated, such as reading and journaling. With her new-found friends, stealing fried chicken is also substituted by a very different activity, which makes her feel giddy: "we go out for coffee. I have never been 'out for coffee' before. … I'm alive inside" (143). Being included and being in a public place without having to feel ashamed has a healing effect on her. Furthermore, she is overjoyed when one of her friends—a blond woman—comments on how beautiful the name Precious is. The narrative's suggestion of a Black girl needing approval from a white girl might be problematic, but in the libidinal context of the novel it makes perfect sense since Precious has always wanted to be validated by the mainstream—or by anyone for that matter. After being

[97] The paramedic present at the birth of her first child also uses this word to encourage Precious.

isolated from her peers for the majority of her childhood and teenage years, her quest for ‘normalcy’ and normativity seems successful now.

A cathartic scene demonstrates the effect of both this new-found community and her developing literacy. She sneaks into a social worker’s office to steal her file, then reads it with the help of a friend. This is the first time for both Precious and the reader to get a glimpse into the official, institutionally sanctioned assessment of her personality, abilities, and aptitude. Being able to read and understand the contents of the file enhances Precious’s self-confidence. When she falters, her friend helps her out by helping her deduce the meaning of several high-level vocabulary items from context (128). More importantly, Precious understands implied meanings: she takes issue with the impersonal wording of the report as well as with its suggestions of her dire future prospects. The report invalidates Rain’s innovative and affective approach to education and traumawork by lamenting her lack of emphasis on computer literacy and G.E.D. workbooks (130), thus exhibiting the system’s profound lack of understanding of the needs of multiply disadvantaged children. Precious, however, chooses Rain’s interpretation of her and renounces the reductive aims and implications of the report. Explicitly rejecting what institutions think of her as a Black teenage mother is a significant step in her journey for feeling worthy, one that could not have happened without either Rain or the friend who also offers much-needed emotional support.[98]

In the process of recovery, Precious takes steps to distance herself from her earlier dehumanization through multiple channels. She transcends being animalized through embracing images of sophisticated animals such as the tiger and birds. After quoting William Blake’s “The Tyger,” Precious identifies herself with the powerful animal: “that’s what in Precious Jones heart—a tiger” (140). Then, she emphatically states that “Precious is bird” (141) and “a bird is my heart” (143). Increasingly, she views the body as a site to be modified when she describes the clothes she is wearing and how she wants to style her hair. Feedback from her environment and the rhetorics of consumerism encourage her to an extent: “Woman at Lane Bryant on one-two-five say no reason big girls can’t wear the latest, so I wear it” (41). The problematic nature of wanting to conform to unrealistic and predominantly white, anti-Black, and fatphobic beauty standards is mitigated to an extent by her genuine, budding self-confidence. She admits that “boyz still laff me, what could I wear that boyz don’t laff?” (41), that is, she realizes that even self-modification is no guarantee of

[98] The report suggests that Precious become a home attendant. For more context on the institutional background and inherent racism and sexism of the work-versus-welfare policies that were prevalent in the late 20th century and targeted, among others, single Black mothers, see “’Bombs Cost More Than Welfare’: Rethinking ‘Responsibility’ in Sapphire’s *Push*” (2012) by Toni Fellela.

escaping the gaze that scrutinizes her, but she seemingly finds a way to cope with consumerism in a healthier way than before.

After defining herself through the dehumanizing, enfreaking gaze of not only society but her own family, Precious finally feels that she does not have to be enthralled to the latter's perception of her either. The novel lends itself to a reading in which the Black family is 'dysfunctional' indeed: as critics have pointed out, *Push* confirms the worst stereotypes in its portrayal of Black fathers and mothers.[99] This interpretation would suggest that Precious suffers due to the inherent character flaws of and individual choices by her family members—after all, they are complicit in exploiting Precious for welfare benefits, robbing her of all meaningful human interaction, an education, and even of her childhood, making it difficult for her to enjoy her pregnancies and motherhood as well. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the way Precious's family relates to welfare benefits has systemic causes; they are not solely responsible for robbing her of her childhood since Black girlhood is always already disfigured and disrupted; and her lack of education is not a private matter that hinges on individual responsibility in a vacuum but an issue with systemic roots evident in, among others, the underfunding of public schools or the tendency to view Black students' use of African American Vernacular English as a lack of language proficiency.[100] Mary is indeed posited as a 'bad' mother, which, irrespective of the causes, is necessary for the narrative arc of the novel: it highlights how much more caring and loving Precious is and how many burdens she has to overcome. As she gradually breaks away from the thrall of her mother, Precious differentiates herself from Mary through practices connected to the body. She rejects the food cooked by Mary, thereby not only directly going against her mother's explicit commands, but symbolically rejecting the position of a child and assuming that of an independent adult as well. Similarly, she wants to distance herself from Mary through her new personal hygiene habits: "I wash serious between my legs and underarm. I don't smell like my muver. I don't" (40), she states emphatically. One of the ways her mother molests her is by forcing her to perform oral sex on her, so cleansing herself takes on a double layer of significance here: it serves as a way of not only differentiating herself from the mother but also detaching herself from the memories of the abuse.

The notions Precious has about being fat or being a mother are subverted in the novel. In the course of the narrative, how she relates to pregnancy evolves significantly, while she also starts

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[99] See esp. McNeil and O'Neill as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter.
[100] On the so-called 'ebonics controversy' that was playing out in the US at time of the writing of *Push*, see *The Real Ebonics Debate* (1998) by Theresa Perry and Lisa Delpit.

occupying her body and listening to its signals. This change is most apparent in her declaration that she has stopped pretending to not be pregnant: “I let it above my neck, in my head. Not that I didn’t know it before but now it’s like part of me; more than something stuck in me, growing in me, making me bigger” (70). She starts to feel that the fetus is not an external object like the watermelon between her bones or not just one part of her, making her bigger, but it is another, separate being. The performative discursive acts signaling her affirmation of the baby also appear, going hand in hand with her self-affirmation: “Listen baby, I puts my hand on my stomach, breathe deep . . . Listen baby, Muver love you. Muver not dumb” (73). The birth of Precious’s second child, Abdul, is just as traumatic for her as the birth of Mongo, but the fact that she gives birth to a healthy—or, as she says, “normal” (78)—child has an empowering effect on her. She even starts coming to terms with her HIV positive status and integrate it into a coherent narrative. After months of merely describing the others’ reaction to her status or articulating her disbelief, she admits she is afraid of the future but is no longer in denial about being HIV positive (152). Despite the overall message she gets from her mother about breastfeeding, she is able to enjoy bonding with Abdul: “I like baby I born. It gets to suckes from my bress. First I don’t like that. It hurt feel sore, then I like it” (77). She puts more and more emphasis on caring for him. Upon realizing that Mary could have prevented her sexual abuse (72), she concludes that she (Precious) is a superior mother and vows to protect and care for Abdul by reading to him, teaching him, and even by decorating his space: “Important to have colors hanging from the wall” (73). Feeling competent enough to care for a healthy baby has a positive effect on her self-esteem, and she starts to consider the possibility of getting custody of Mongo.

The process of reclaiming motherhood through the body reaches full circle when Precious connects with her son in a scene at the end of the narrative. The last image of the novel is one of her sitting with her son on her lap and reading him a story, which happens after she understands the potency of language and story-telling through, among others, reading about Celie. A symbolic shift occurs when Precious transforms from daughter to mother, and assumes responsibility not only for her own progress, but for educating her child. In this scene, reading is multivalent. The simple fact that Precious is literate and has reading comprehension skills empowers her. Furthermore, she uses language to transmit knowledge, which is a new and powerful ability for her. However, reading to a child on one’s lap is as much bodily a practice as it is an emotional or cognitive one; the connection that is established through touch can be just as potent as teaching a

child. Precious alludes to this connection and care when she says, “I love to hold him on my lap, open up the world to him” (153).

As hinted at earlier in this chapter, *The Color Purple* is a major point of reference within the diegetic universe of the novel, and their structure and plot points are also in conversation. A significant parallel between the two novels is their focus on young Black girls’ experiences with the embodied aspects of early motherhood. *Push*, like Walker’s novel, interrogates the importance of mentorship, friendship, and community as they pertain to the maternal. The emotional and often material support offered by other women in both *The Color Purple* and *Push* aid the protagonists in acquiring self-worth and obtaining a degree of independence. Mentors become the focal points of new communities and work tirelessly to empower the protagonists. Mentors and communities give Celie and Precious validation and allow them to carve out a space for themselves and to circumvent systems of interlocking oppressions. More importantly, mentors and communities help them to reclaim the ownership of their bodies after traumatic experiences and thus to come to terms with their motherhood. The titles also underscore the parallels between the novels regarding the importance of mentors: just as it is Rain who urges Precious to ‘push’ and overcome her traumas, it is Shug who talks to Celie about her vision of the color purple (223).

One might attempt to contextualize the hardships that Celie is burdened by—lack of education, isolation, undetected child abuse, rampant misogyny and the like—and explain them with her spatio-temporal situatedness. However, *Push* is set well after the Civil Rights movements, in an era in which feminism, including Black feminism, has already made considerable achievements. Moreover, there is an institutional network in place—including education, healthcare, and child protective services—that is supposed to safeguard the disenfranchised and protect the most marginalized individuals. These are all accomplishments which were unthinkable for Black women in the (Southern) US during slavery, when *Dessa Rose* is set, or even in the first few decades of the 20th century, in the times of *The Color Purple*. Yet, instead of aiding Precious, these institutions tend to fail her, traumatizing her further. At the beginning of the novel, Precious internalizes “the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority” (Sexton, “The Social Life” par. 23) and situates herself as an undesirable non-entity, worthless of her name.

McNeil sees the root of Precious’s unfreakment in getting access to literacy and her willingness to embrace and articulate her “grotesque-erotic experience” through her newfound voice, that is, Precious can develop a healthier self-image because she acknowledges her trauma instead of denying it (“Un-‘Freak’ing” 12–13; 15–17). I argue that the processes of

reconceptualization are accentuated and in some cases even brought about not (only) by pantextualization (i.e. putting one's experiences in one coherent story and seeking to make sense of them this way), enhanced verbal expressivity, and acknowledging trauma, but also by how Precious uses and experiences her fat, maternal, and HIV positive body, influenced by Rain's help and her own traumawork, in the face of society's beliefs about the inferiority of not only poor Back women, but teenage, fat Black mothers living with HIV. Reappropriating her maternal body enables her to unfreak herself and accept her motherhood, which then further enhances her well-being—that is, she seems to enter into a new, self-reinforcing circle instead of the old, destructive one.

Sapphire's novel, however, is careful *not* to suggest that individual responsibility can eclipse the shortcomings of a dehumanizing system. A significant aim *Push* accomplishes, not unlike many of its literary predecessors, is social critique. *The Color Purple*'s revolutionary nature lies in its oblique references to slavery, and I argue that the subversive power of Sapphire's text lies in its overt and covert references to *The Color Purple*: their structural and thematic similarities highlight how the conditions of African American mothers have changed and remained the same even though the mainstream society's views on race and gender appear to have evolved in the process. By alluding to *The Color Purple* on a multitude of textual levels, *Push* argues that even though Black mothers like Precious have some access to institutional help, essentially, they are just as marginalized as Walker's protagonist. These cultural and intertextual allusions make up a cascading structure in which *The Color Purple* shows that nothing has changed since slavery, and *Push* shows that nothing has changed since *The Color Purple*. The system that rests on the traumatic legacy of slavery can only be circumvented but not demolished. *Push* thus implies that Black women have a lot to unlearn if they are to address their trauma and find some (at least temporary) solace, a loophole of retreat; however, no matter how intense their efforts are, the system—which, as Martinot and similar scholars argue, is predicated upon Black suffering—remains in place. *Push*'s sequel, *The Kid*, reinforces this duality: it shows that while Precious is indeed the best mother possible, she dies young due to her illness, and her son ends up a victim who then slowly transforms into a victimizer. Thus, *Push* illuminates the notion of the im/possibility of being a good mother: her effort, while being extraordinary and leading up to a (short-lived) catharsis, cannot negate the multifaceted effects of deep-rooted structural issues.

IV. Abortion and Egg Donation in the Context of Reproductive Racism in Alice Walker's "The Abortion" and Danielle Evans's "Harvest"

"When we have asked for love, we have been given children." (A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* 236)[101]

Another issue worth considering regarding Black motherhood is both the individual woman's and the community's views regarding abortion, along with the procedure's legality and affective dimensions. Both short stories under analysis in the current chapter, one by an established voice and one by a relative literary newcomer, are set well after the 19th century. Neither protagonist is enslaved, they are not subject to direct racially motivated violence or abject poverty, and they are well-educated, which differentiates them from both Williams's Dessa and Sapphire's Precious. "Harvest" exposes the systemic racism inherent in the media and science by making more explicit comments on the white supremacist climate than "The Abortion," which relies on its intricate narrative fabric to link seemingly disparate issues. However, both Walker's and Evans's text suggest that in the afterlife of slavery, the increased availability of abortion does little to negate the systemic effects of racism. Both short stories render the Black maternal body visible in order to interrogate the various manifestations of systemic inequality and the ways the protagonists cope with them in their unique, highly diverging processes of wake work.

Alice Walker's (1944-) oeuvre encompasses several decades and contains not only novels and short stories, but many volumes of poetry and non-fiction works, whether of theory, literary or social criticism, as well as writings of a personal nature. Her fiction is well-known for its delicate portrayal of various issues of Black womanhood and motherhood; most prominently in *The Color Purple* (1982), for which she received the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize (Dunning). Her short story, "The Abortion" was published in 1981 in the collection *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*. The title of the collection alludes to the line "[you] just can't keep a real good woman down" in a 1928 blues song by Black singer-composer Lillian Miller that celebrates the refusal of Black women to subject themselves to the mistreatment of men, an ethos echoed by the stories in the volume (M. Johnson 222-223). "The Abortion" has been the subject of surprisingly little scholarly attention despite its complex narrative fabric and subtle treatment of the issues of

[101] Alice Walker lamenting the history of forced reproduction and the general lack of respect toward Black women.

motherhood in the post-Civil Rights era.[102] The protagonist, Imani, is a married, middle-class African American woman living in the South. Her social status as well as her stable financial and family background differentiate her not only from Dessa or Precious, but even from Angel in "Harvest" and the protagonists of the other mothertexts under discussion. She has two abortions: one during her college years and one when her daughter is two years old. The two interventions are separated by a miscarriage. The plot revolves around the affective aftermath of the second abortion, but a close reading of the text reveals that the way Imani relates to the termination of her first pregnancy opens up the possibility to interpret the story as a trauma narrative.

"Harvest" is set even later, in an ostensibly post-racial society: an environment in which one's (perceived) racial background is thought to be immaterial in terms of social equality. Danielle Evans's (1983-) short story collection, *Before You Suffocate Your Own Fool Self* (2010) received great acclaim upon its publication.[103] Reviewers praised its fresh female voice and perspective (Dreilinger) and its unflinching thematic focus on the liminality of early adulthood (Peelle). They have also commented on Evans's subtle treatment of racism: "the blackness of her characters is always there and fraught, both ancillary and totally central to understanding the main conflict [since] her characters are always in danger, and it is Evans's considerable achievement that though this danger cannot be reduced to skin color, it is nonetheless inextricable from it" (Orsi 172). Evans is the co-winner of the 2011 PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Short Story Collection ("Pen America"); yet, neither the volume nor the individual stories have elicited much scholarly attention. "Harvest" has received almost none so far despite the timely issues it touches upon: it interrogates the fraught relationship of African American motherhood and medical advancements, exploring the extent to which history makes its mark on the experiences of a young Black woman in the 21st century. "Harvest" delineates the process whereby contemporary scientific discourses (more specifically, reproductive technologies) interact with racism and insert themselves into the identity formation of the protagonist. The first-person narrator, Angel, a witty, ambitious, African American college student, lives in a dorm with students of various socio-economic backgrounds sometime after the new millennium. A number of her white dorm-mates make money by selling their eggs to an agency representing supposedly wealthy, white clients. However, the students

[102] To my knowledge, Jane A. Rinehart's "Roaming in the Margins, Speaking with Broken Tongues" (1994) is the only study that deals predominantly with this short story.

[103] The title foreshadows the volume's thematic preoccupation with race. It is a line from Black feminist poet Kate Rushin's "The Bridge Poem" (1981), the prefatory piece to *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. The poem laments the mental burden of the various roles of being a Black woman, among them the mammy-like caretaking figure that has to remind white people to breathe.

believe that the agency would not even consider soliciting eggs from non-white women such as Angel. Even though they are healthy, highly intelligent, and studying to be doctors and lawyers, they—especially Black students—are faced with the reality that their genetic material is considered undesirable while their white peers enjoy the financial perks of being a donor. Unexpectedly, Angel becomes pregnant and decides to forgo abortion in the last minute.

This chapter reads Imani's and Angel's choices regarding becoming a mother with a view to how race and racism structure their experiences, while also situating the availability of abortion for Black women within a historical perspective and discussing Angel's anxieties around egg donation in the context of the historical imbrications of Black women's bodies and economics. I argue that while Imani rejects her pregnancy and Angel embraces hers, both protagonists' decisions constitute being in the wake and exemplify the im/possibility of Black motherhood: they signal the women's wish to undo a personal and generational history that links issues of a racist and sexist society to the maternal body and has positioned Black women as unfit mothers.

Reproductive Racism and/as Abortion

Before discussing the individual circumstances of the protagonists, it is necessary to consider the history of abortion vis-à-vis Black American women. While the birth of Black babies was encouraged—or rather enforced—under the purview of slavery and many resorted to self-induced miscarriage and infanticide (Davis, *WRC* 178), the pendulum swung in the other direction in the 20th century, when a number of Black women were discouraged or prevented from having children. The federally funded sterilization of women and girls of color without (informed) consent became rampant in the first half of the 20th century (188) so much so that medically unfounded postpartum hysterectomies on Southern Black women became known in the vernacular as Mississippi appendectomies (Roberts, *Killing* 90). The administration of experimental contraceptives remained popular throughout the century, as did unwarranted obstetrical-gynecological procedures, often done for the sake of young (and white and male) doctors' medical training (92), calling into mind the experiments of J. Marion Sims and his contemporaries. As late as the 1990s, Black women

were incentivized or pressured into using long-acting contraceptive implants as well as so-called contraceptive vaccines the effects of which are permanent (105-111).[104]

Meanwhile, the stance Black communities took toward the legalization of abortion remained ambivalent. White women, the first to argue for abortion in an organized manner in the late 19th century, framed it as one of the lynchpins of freedom that would become a tool for self-development or allow them to exercise their political rights (Davis, *WRC* 179-181). This justification stood in stark contrast with Black women's contemporary experiences: "most [enslaved] women, no doubt, would have expressed their deepest resentment had someone hailed their abortions as a stepping stone toward freedom;" rather, as historical records testify, they resorted to these acts out of desperation (179). At the beginning of the 20th century, Margaret Sanger, the birth control activist who opened the first contraceptive services clinic that evolved into Planned Parenthood Federation of America, went on a crusade for the availability of birth control and safe, affordable abortions out of concern for population growth among those she deemed unworthy (186), especially Black women in the South (Roberts, *Killing* 78-79). Early 20th-century white activists saw birth control in general and abortion in particular as a tool that could prevent the extinction of the native-born, white stratum of society: "[white] race suicide could be prevented by the introduction of birth control among Black people, immigrants and the poor in general," they asserted (Davis, *WRC* 183).

These eugenic undercurrents of early mainstream birth control discourse played a part in some Black communities' mid-century mistrust of abortion. Among others, the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party warned that abortion (and even contraceptive use) would lead to genocide, while an increase in the Black population, achieved by banning abortions, would ultimately result in racial progress (Nelson 77-85). In 1970, the fundamental essay "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" by Frances Beal argued for comprehensive reproductive rights for Black women, laying "the groundwork for a black women's reproductive rights discourse that departed from both Black Nationalist and mainstream feminist reproductive politics up to that point" (Nelson 80). Beal chastised the masculinism of the Black nationalist currents, and argued for access to contraceptives and abortion as well as against reproductive abuses such as the forced sterilization of Black women (172). In fact, she insisted that it is not voluntary abortion that leads to the potential (self-)destruction of the Black community; rather, federally encouraged

[104] On how race is connected to state-level legislative inducements that promote low-income women's use of such contraceptives, and how it is Black women who are in fact implicitly targeted by such incentives, see "Chapter 3: From Norplant to the Contraceptive Vaccine" in *Killing the Black Body* by Roberts.

sterilizations constitute “surgical genocide” (172). By the mid-1970s, this Black feminist influence inserted itself into the ideology of Black Panthers as well (Nelson 89-109). At the same time, Black women sought abortion in increasing numbers, in part due to its federal legalization in 1973 (77-78). Since then, Black masculinist, pro-life positions under the guise of patriotism, religion (Blackman; Childress) or the Black Lives Matter movement (Eligon) continue to be articulated even by conservative Black women (Zadrozny). Women of color have increasing access to abortions, which, however, is complicated by, among other factors, discriminatory healthcare practices and the confluence of poverty and racism, resulting in the lack of access to legal and safe abortion providers (Donovan 7).[105]

Imani’s Abortions and Their Affective Aftermath

Walker’s short story focuses on a woman who gets her first abortion amid these debates in a post-Civil Right Movement context. Imani’s first abortion occurs seven years prior to the time of the majority of the plot, sometime in the 1960s, when she is still a college student. The racial climate of the South is shown to be detrimental to Imani’s health: the references to her vomiting, toothache, and feeling unwell (67-68) point to those chronic, partly stress-related problems that have been theorized using the interpretive frameworks of Sojourner syndrome (Mullings 79) and weathering, the undue, gradual emotional and even physical harm in Black female and especially maternal bodies (Geronimus, “The Weathering Hypothesis” 207). Imani’s first abortion takes place at a doctor’s—presumably a gynecologist’s—office on a Saturday. The doctor’s manners are overly casual, even friendly, but the procedure itself is illegal and botched, for which Imani pays a thousand dollars knowing that she will be in debt for years. Another clue that alerts the reader to the procedure’s illegality is that there is no nurse in attendance; a woman who Imani assumes is the doctor’s wife encourages her to get up and start physical activity only a few hours after the procedure. Imani complies, but after passing out on the subway, “she hemorrhaged steadily for six weeks, and was not well again for a year” (68). Thus, Imani suffers from the consequences of an expensive and dangerously performed procedure, which is exacerbated not only by the fact that the

[105] For an overview of the contemporary link between racism and reproductive healthcare, see “Racism, African American Women, and Their Sexual and Reproductive Health” (2018) by Cynthia Prather et al. On the racial dimension of the unequal distribution of wealth, see *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (2009) by Dalton Conley.

abortion providers rush her recovery to mask the procedure's illegality, but by the cumulative socioeconomic disadvantage that impacts Black women's health.

How Imani remembers the abortion, however, stands in stark contrast to the bleak description of it as an embodied experience. She considers it a triumphant incident and thinks of it in mythical terms. When it happens, she considers it a rite of passage and says that it allowed her to make sure that the world is not a façade (67). Later, she maintains that it is a life-changing event and a thrilling ritual that thrust her into adulthood: "her first abortion, when she was still in college, she frequently remembered as wonderful, bearing as it had all the marks of a supreme coming of age and a seizing of the direction of her own life" (67). Unlike many women, she does not view the birth of her first child as a momentous event, a rite of passage that can perhaps be the catalyst of the coming-of-age process. For her, becoming a mother is an item on a to-do list or a compulsory exercise in gender: "having a child is a good experience to *have had*, like graduate school. But if you've had one, you've had the experience and that's enough" (65, emphasis in the original). Thus, the importance traditionally given to childbirth is assigned by Imani to her abortion.

Years after the abortion, she lives in a suffocatingly racist and sexist environment with her husband and daughter. She is a reluctant mother and has an emotionally unsatisfying marriage with Clarence, whose priority lies with advancing the career of the town's first Black mayor. She is infantilized and brushed aside by the two men. The mayor's sexist attitude is apparent in his disregard for Imani: he praises her cooking but barely establishes eye contact with her and assumes that she would not understand politics on account of her gender (66). Clarence idolizes the mayor and understands that his own contribution as a legal advocate is needed for the mayor to be taken seriously as a competent Black politician. The public matters of governance and, by extension, racial uplift, take precedence over the private matters of family.[106] Clarence prioritizes discussing an official document with the mayor over supporting his wife emotionally right before the second abortion (67), that is, his public persona eclipses his role as a husband. Another instance of the public overtaking the private is the matter of Imani's mother's death, which triggers Imani's miscarriage. Her mother dies of lung cancer caused by the asbestos in the walls of the school where she teaches for decades, which is juxtaposed with the two men's discussion about the political issues of integrated classrooms. While the cause of school de-segregation is a universal racial issue, the specific plight of the woman working there is gendered as well. The voice of pink-collar

[106] For an analysis on the public-private conflict summed up in the metaphor of the center and the margin in the short story, see Rinehart's "Roaming in the Margins."

workers involved in education is marginalized and thus dismissed in the narrative that Clarence and the mayor draft of education as a purely political issue, making the specific, first-hand experiences of women like Imani's mother moot. The fact that Imani's miscarriage is brought about by grief (65-66) also attests to the first-hand *and* delayed effects of this disregard.

The emotional impact of the first abortion and of the above-mentioned climate are amplified and thrust to the forefront by the second abortion seven years after the first one. Imani realizes that abortion might not have become part of the mainstream in the small, religious communities in the South, but it has become a quick, commercialized, and normalized procedure in New York. The narrator uses the language of an advertisement to criticize this ease of access to abortion as a part of consumerism: "for seventy-five dollars a safe, quick, painless abortion was yours" (69). In contrast with the first one, this clinical environment is clean and mechanized, with the procedure being financially accessible, legal, and seemingly much safer, making it seem more professional and trustworthy. While Imani acknowledges these differences, she senses the inherent danger of the assembly line-like nature of the procedure. The doctor disregards her pain and proceeds without proper anesthesia, leading Imani to conclude that she is but a faulty part in the chain of production. The juxtaposition of the two abortion providers gives a commentary on the deceiving nature of progress. The availability of abortion might seem like a significant step toward women's rights, but the short story suggests that making it legal and affordable does not make it safe; abortion is presented as at once convenient and dangerous, mundane and tragic.

References to pain and discomfort become even more pronounced around and after the second abortion, bringing to the surface the unresolved and ignored pain of the first one. The physical effects of being pregnant (nausea, vomiting, hormonal changes that cause emotional instability) and having been pregnant (anemia, dental issues) are referred to multiple times (64-67) as the narration is candid and explicit about the toll motherhood might take on the female body, but indirect discomfort is emphasized around and after the second abortion especially. There are several instances when Imani gets irritated because of heavy things pressing on her. As she and Clarence discuss the possibility of getting a second abortion, "he placed the tea before her and rested a heavy hand on her hair. She felt the heat and pressure of his hand as she touched the cup and felt the odor and steam rise up from it. Her throat contracted" (65). Similarly, after she gets back from the procedure, she cannot bear the physical and metaphorical weight of her husband and daughter: "Imani was in her rocker, Clarice dozing on her lap. Clarence sank to the floor and rested his head against her knees. … She felt the two of them, Clarence and Clarice, clinging to her, using

her. . . . She suffered the pressure of his head as long as she could" (71). She is even obsessed and irritated by the sight of a man's hand when she is on the plane to have her second abortion: the "fat hairy wrist" of the "cigarette-smoking white man" is all she "could bear to see out of the corner of her eye" (67). Being repelled by the touch of her husband might stem from the general unease of the marriage and might refer to Imani's free spirit: "Her aim had never been to marry, but to take in lovers who could be sent home at dawn, freeing her to work and ramble" (73). Also, being distraught by the heavy hand of the man on the plane might be natural due to the stress prior to the abortion, or it might remind her of the touch of the male doctor who performed the first one. However, the recurrence and intensity of the irritation suggests that it is an outlet allowing Imani to feel justified in getting upset while refusing to focus on her emotional burden.

Furthermore, various other hints are embedded in the narrative fabric as well that gesture toward Imani's overt and repressed pain alike. In contrast with the rushed recovery process after the first abortion, the nurse warns Imani that she should rest for a week in order to let her body heal. Still, Imani ignores this advice: she does not give herself time to recuperate from the procedure, even though she is fully aware of the danger of resuming her normal daily routine too abruptly. She insists on bathing and dressing her two-year-old daughter, which involves kneeling by the tub and even lifting her up and placing her on a table, ignoring her own aching abdomen (72). Earlier in the short story, the narrator explains that Imani wanted air conditioning installed in their home because she was very emphatic about not being able to tolerate physical discomfort (72), which stands in stark opposition with how she disregards the signals of her body in this scene. Being out of touch with her body and being immune to its sensations testify to a traumatic experience.

Besides performing physically draining tasks in spite of bleeding, feeling physical pain and dizziness, Imani is adamant on going to a memorial service, which is where descriptions of her battered body reach an intersection with the racist and sexist climate. The service honors the memory of Holly Monroe, a Black girl who was shot on the street five years earlier, right after her high-school graduation ceremony. Detail as to who or why killed her are not given, but there are some indications showing that Imani knows or thinks that the murder might have been racially motivated or might have had gender-related causes. The phrase "shot down" suggests that it was a violent crime. Imani "*always* went to these memorials" (71, emphasis in the original) because she deems it important to pay respects to "*her* people … those people who fell in struggle or innocence" (71, emphasis mine), hinting at Imani's race-based identification with the victim. She also refers

to the indifference of “white lawgivers” (71), who tend to trivialize murder “by saying the victim provoked it” while also standing against abortions (71), again hinting at the racialized *and* gendered implications of the killing of a young Black woman and conflating abortion and murder. As they are getting ready for the memorial, Imani gives a speech to Clarice in her feverish state about the oppression perpetrated by white people, which reinforces her view of Holly’s killing not as an isolated incident but a part of a web of white supremacist violences. She says, “you’re going to remember as long as you live what kind of people they are” because they have appropriated Black music and “they think they can kill a continent—people, trees, buffalo—and then fly off to the moon and just forget about it” (72). Her efforts to point out white hypocrisy for the two-year-old suggest that the goal of the feverish speech is not to teach the child, but to remind herself of large-scale, colonial and contemporary racial injustice. Still, the specific timing of the speech implies that it is both Holly’s memory and the memories of her own abortions that contribute to her agitation.

Just as she feels the need to honor Holly’s memory every year, she wants her body to remember and to keep the memory of the aborted fetus(es) alive. She does not particularly remember the first aborted fetus, but she sentimentalizes the other one. She cannot bear calling it anything else but a child (70), signaling her strong attachment to it. She laments what happens to the body of her aborted future child and thinks about the life experiences it will now miss out on: its body “was being flushed down a sewer. Gone all her or his chances to see sunlight, savor a fig” (70). Yet, while she does admit that abortion is a difficult choice for her and wishes that her husband would care enough to try and stop her, she also maintains that it is a clear-cut choice because she wants a life without another child more than she wants the birth of that child (66). Yet, the preparation for the memorial triggers her bleeding, bringing about a situation strikingly similar to how her body reacted after the first abortion. Moreover, the performative discursive act of imagining a fetus as a fully grown human being or even considering the tissue as body (Valerius 29) is completely absent in the case of the first abortion but emphatic after the second one. The intensity of her affective reaction to the second termination, coupled with the complete lack of this reaction to the first one, hints at her underlying, unspoken guilt she feels in relation to both events.

The fact that her fury and physical pain reach their peak in her post-abortion state implies that she deflects her guilt and goes to the memorial service as if to atone for her abortions through mourning Holly. The momentous nature of the memorial is reinforced by Holly being a stand-in for multiple people. Imani’s lack of fulfillment with married life and motherhood leads her to

identify with her: "Holly Monroe was herself. Herself shot down, aborted on the eve of becoming herself" (73). While the narrator reinforces the parallel between them with this overly direct explanation (A. H. Petry 22), the deployment of Holly as a symbol is multi-layered. She also represents all Black girls who are defenseless against violence: "to her, every black girl of a certain vulnerable age *was* Holly Monroe" (73, emphasis in the original). Most importantly, Holly is a stand-in for a fetus or a newborn. During the service, Holly's friend gives a speech about her and includes specific details of her weight and height (74), which is evocative not only of police records, but also of how a newborn's measurements are announced and recorded. These data can even allude to a fetus: a doctor might note down its size in order to estimate its weight, and, more importantly, age. The association between a baby and Holly is reinforced when Imani thinks that Holly was aborted on the eve of growing up (73), and also by the fact that a memorial is a ritual intended to help survivors cope with loss and it is a part of the mourning process—in fact, Imani "was prepared to cry and to do so with abandon" during the service (73).

The memorial is thus the site of the culmination of the quotidian traumas surrounding Imani, including the pain of her failing marriage, life in the environment in which a Black girl is murdered and racist and sexist microaggressions happen. She knows she cannot escape the effects of the literal climate there: she suffers from the 110-degree heat at the church. It is there that Imani's physical symptoms betray her unspoken frustration and guilt. Mourning the fetuses and attempting to mourn Holly position Imani in a multi-layered wake insofar as she suffers in the aftermath of some of these deaths for years. The second abortion serves as a tipping point prior to the seminal event of the memorial, with its short-term effect severely impacting her wellbeing as well as triggering the physical and emotional memories of the first abortion. The multitude of references to her physical pain both prior to and during the service—such as pain she felt in her stomach now moving to her uterus (73)—can be read as indications of her trauma: her body remembers the first abortion and compels her to reenact it.

Instead of being able to focus on mourning Holly, the need to remember her aborted fetuses—coupled with her unspoken guilt and frustration—culminates in a confrontation with her husband and the mayor. Before the memorial starts, a group gathers around the mayor and listens to him with awe (73-74), with the mayor barely registering Imani's and Clarice's presence. Then, while Holly's best friend gives a speech, Clarence and the mayor talk in the corner about city business, with their voices audible throughout the service. The friend, in an attempt to humanize Holly, gives specific details of her life, mentioning not only her likes and dislikes, but talking in

detail about her hair texture and skin color, thus memorializing the specific physical markers of gender and race in a gesture of celebration of Black womanhood. The speech, apart from referring to the particularities of Holly's personality and looks, aims to universalize Black female experience, making Imani think of the precarity and vulnerability of all young Black women. The masculine, public domain evident in the men's conversation thus enters into and disrupts the time and space dedicated to the memory of a Black woman and honoring all such women. Imani, despite the burning pain she feels in her uterus, stands up and goes over to them to hiss, "Your voices are carrying" (75). Her implicit aim is to get them to join the memorial; instead, they continue the conversation in the yard, leaving Imani dejected. Her subsequent anger stems from Clarence's preoccupation with social change at the expense of the individual's and the smaller community's interest (Rinehart 26). The fact that Imani deems her husband walking out of the memorial the ultimate act of disrespect that initiates their uncoupling is a comment on the interlocking problems of her marriage, ideas of male-focused racial uplift, and Black womanhood.

The importance Imani confers upon Clarence walking out of the memorial subtly signals her inability to reckon with her own choices. Before she gets on the plane on her way to New York to get an abortion, she is frustrated with Clarence's lack of emotional support but does not attempt to express it. In contrast, she is furious when she perceives his lack of respect for Holly, that is, the negative emotions she feels toward her husband are seemingly stronger when it comes to not honoring a deceased community member than when it comes to a decision that deeply affects her own life and health. This reversal mirrors an earlier one: her negligible emotional response to the first abortion and to its dire corporeal consequences shows a marked contrast with her heightened reaction in the aftermath of the second one. Insofar as she represses her emotions after the first termination but addresses the second with a striking intensity, she again displaces her anger from one occasion to another, and from one person to another: in the heightened emotional state she experiences at the memorial, she transfers her guilt for the abortion onto her husband. Notably, Clarence advises the mayor on legislative issues, which might also be a source of frustration for Imani. Earlier, she remarks that the legal status of abortion has changed since her first procedure (69), thus, she might be angry at her husband not (only) because he behaves in a disrespectful manner during the service, but because he represents male authority and legislation, that is, he might stand for the machinery that has made abortion legal and accessible. Read together with Imani's earlier remark about white lawgivers, Imani's transference of her frustration with herself onto Clarence underscores her inability to process the events of seven years prior.

More subtle narratological devices also allude to Imani's tendency not to confront the trauma of her first abortion directly, among them the ubiquity of non-essential descriptions focusing on color. Before she starts bleeding as an aftermath of her first abortion, only the color brown is referenced: the New York City clinic is surrounded with brownstones (69), and she lies down on a brown sofa after the procedure (68). Shortly after, she begins bleeding, which is the first instance of intense colors in the short story. Later, suddenly there are numerous conspicuous mentions of vibrant colors. The room where her second abortion takes place is decorated by cheerful primary colors (69), the speech at the memorial refers to multiple colors (74), the members of the choir wear "vivid green" (74) and their movement creates a "brilliant, swaying color" (75). More importantly, there are numerous references to the solid, vivid colors with which Imani decorates her house: the hall is adorned with "bright prints" (65), the tea pot is bright yellow (65), her clothes are "pert green" and "sea green" (73); even the bile she vomits is "yellowish" (67). The lively quality of these colors stands in contrast with how Imani perceives herself as she feels weakened and anemic (66) before the second abortion, and how alarmed she is by her grey complexion (69). The inclusion of these strong colors recalls the instant when Imani first started hemorrhaging [i.e. after the first termination] and thus can be considered as a reminder of it.

The abundance of references to newborns and children also speaks to the long-lasting effect and ubiquitous nature of the abortion-induced trauma. Apart from Holly's conflation with a baby, the clinic room being reminiscent of a nursery, and the men's discussion of a school, another instance when somebody else is a stand-in for a child is tied to Clarence and the mayor. After Imani is hurt when Clarence discusses politics with the mayor instead of offering her emotional support, Clarence says in self-defense: "it was so important that I help the mayor!" because "he was our first" (76), making it sound as if the mayor was their child. Fittingly, Clarence does not pick up on this allusion, but Imani's smile shows that she understands the irony in the expression. Even though he agrees to a vasectomy (71), he remains emotionally unavailable and later cites it as a huge sacrifice, suggesting that it is one grand gesture that, without meaningful emotional investment, fails to change the marriage. Imani leaves him two years after the abortion (76), thus leaving behind her burden. By this time, she also regains her health, which, within the economy of the text, indicates that some reckoning might have taken place and the healing process might have begun.

The Affective Dimensions of (Perceived) Exclusion

While Imani navigates her complicated emotional landscape as well as the similarly complex social context of the 1960s and 70s, the protagonist of "Harvest" has to reckon with newly emerged facets of reproductive racism before she considers abortion. The following short overview of the racial dimensions of reproductive technologies is necessary to appreciate the severity of Angel's response to not becoming an egg donor.

Reproductive technologies[107] have occupied a unique place within reproductive rights discourse. While "technologies to facilitate conception, ranging from simple artificial insemination to expensive, advanced procedures such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and egg donation" have become increasingly available, non-white women, specifically Black women, seem to be excluded from access (Roberts, *Killing* 246). Even in the 20th century and the new millennium, the imbrication of reproductive rights and race is evident in what anthropologist Rayna Rapp calls "stratified reproduction:" the hierarchical access of white and non-white women to reproduction-assisting technologies (qtd. in Roberts, *Killing* 310). Reasons from the 'demand' side include economic barriers: since fertility treatments are expensive with limited public funding, those who suffer from systemic socio-economic inequality are unlikely to afford eggs, sperm, or surrogate mothers (253). "Racial steering" might be another reason as the medical establishment's unconscious bias against Black women may manifest in their exclusion: Black women might be advised against certain procedures due to views about their ineptitude as mothers. The perceived lack of belief in Black women's fitness as mothers may lead physicians, for instance, to think that they do not deserve to be treated for infertility (254-255). Furthermore, "many Blacks harbor a well-founded distrust of technological interference with their bodies and genetic material at the hands of white physicians" and they tend to be suspicious of "genetic marketing" (260-261), a subset of a general medical mistrust exhibited by Black women.[108]

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[107] For discussions on other forms of racialized reproductive labor as gestational surrogacy that are beyond the scope of this dissertation, see *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism's Philosophy of History* (2019) by Alys Eve Weinbaum, as well as "Surrogates and Outcast Mothers: Racism and Reproductive Politics in the Nineties" (1998) by Angela Davis, which argues that enslaved women can be considered as surrogates for their owners.

[108] On the long-standing, quantifiable medical mistrust by Black women (as compared to white men, white women, and Black men), see "Shadow of the Past?: Assessing Racial and Gender Differences in Confidence in the Institutions of Science and Medicine" (2008) by Mamadi Corra and J. Scott Carter. The study identifies as the roots of this mistrust the legacy of slavery and institutional racism and sexism in general, and the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and medical (i.e. obstetrical-gynecological) misconduct in particular (78).

Not unlike other forms of assisted reproduction, "sperm and egg donation practices in the American reproductive industry mirror positive eugenic beliefs in new and more subtle forms" (Daniels and Heidt-Forsythe 720), whereas the exclusion of Black donors in both the diegetic universe of "Harvest" and outside of it (729) is a prime example of negative eugenic undertones, underpinned by theories of race and gender (Leonard 207-208).[109] Hence, it is not surprising that white couples—those who are the most likely to use these services—rarely consider soliciting genetic material from Black women (Kluchin 3). Many defend couples' rights to eggs from genetically reliable sources: "of good stock" and not from some "unknown third party," as a legal scholar puts it (qtd. in Roberts, *Killing* 279). Roberts argues that "although this process devalues all women, it devalues Black women in a particular way" (279), referring to Black women's inferiority in white supremacy's cultural imaginary.

It is in this context that Angel navigates the complex racialized landscape of reproductive rights. While she is not exposed to shockingly violent atrocities or direct medical malpractice like Dessa, Precious, and Imani, she is confronted by the racism that pervades the context of the everyday. The events and states leading to such consequences (among them health-related ones, cf. Sojourner syndrome and weathering) have been characterized as quotidian during slavery (Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* 4) and its afterlife (Sharpe 4): they may not always be explicitly cruel, but they are nevertheless grim testaments to the dehumanization of Black women. This environment triggers Angel's various affects such as anxiety, anger, shame, and desire.

Her quotidian trauma is exacerbated upon the realization that the reproductive potential of the African American female body is still implicated in economics. She comes from a family of modest means and makes frequent references to class.[110] Their dorm community is diverse: it includes the white Laura, African Americans Angel, Nicole, and Courtney, as well as Candy, who

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[109] Since the publication of "Harvest," egg donors of color have begun to be solicited, giving the illusion of equality. Indeed, this might signal the end of stratified reproduction, that is, the increase of those upper-middle class people of color who can afford in vitro fertilization, but it also might simply signal the fetishization of racial otherness. Furthermore, "fertility clinics' use of race in genetic selection procedures may help to reinforce the erroneous belief that race is a biological classification that can be determined genetically or that genetic traits occur in human beings according to their race" (Roberts, "Race, Gender, and Genetic Technologies" 789). According to Roberts, "the expansion of race-based biotechnology, including genetic selection, fits within the neoliberal trend toward privatization and punitive governance" (789), highlighting the potential rise of ethical problems inherent in egg donation.
Men, i.e. African American sperm donors, are similarly underrepresented; see Daniels and Heidt-Forsythe (723-724) for an analysis of the data.

[110] For the purposes of this chapter, I use class to refer to the financial background and purchasing power of the characters, that is, in accordance with how the protagonist uses it. It is to be noted, though, that Black feminists such as Angela Davis refers to class in Marxist terms (see *Women, Race and Class*), while Cedric Robinson cautions against conflating the struggle of Black people with that of the non-Black lower classes (see *Black Marxism*).

is presumably Chicana ("*Mira*, my people did not get half exterminated and have half their country stolen from them for you to be calling me white girl," 67, italics in the original). The girls' financial background seems to be a stronger link of affiliation than their race or ethnicity: Angel says that Laura used to be "a homegirl, a *hermanita*" (66, italics in the original) until she started wearing expensive boots (66). Angel aspires to what she sees as white middle-class status: earning a salary that enables one to have non-tenuous financial security, such as being able to afford a home, provide for a family, have continued access to quality education, and, above all, having enough discretionary income that allows for conspicuous consumption. Her biting commentary on egg donors exposes the way she conceptualizes class differences. When she enumerates the commodities that the donors spend their money on, she judges those who flaunt purchasing power by buying "stuff" of an ephemeral character, such as stilettos, expensive dinners, or "endless overpriced trinkets" (65), while making it clear that they come from middle-class (or higher) backgrounds as their "parents pa[y] their full tuition anyway" (65). She speaks less harshly of those who prioritize more sensible purchases, such as computers or "a savings account for grad school" (65). She points out the racialized nature of middle-class identity by commenting on Courtney's background. Being "barely middle-class," Courtney's family makes financially irrational decisions out of desperation to cling to their status, that is, their choices make sense in their libidinal, but not financial, economy: "the family forgoes vacations and savings and stock for a nice house in a nice neighborhood in the hopes that the neighbors will forget they are black" (68). She contrasts Laura with their well-off white peers, remarking that "Laura's mother was a cashier at Penney's," making her one of their community (66). When referring to Laura's style, Angel mentions that her "wardrobe screamed Kmart" not only to emphasize that she did not dress "like city girls" (71), but the fact that she can only afford clothes from a department store. These references to property, consumer items, and brands encapsulate Angel's concept of class.

Given Angel's working-class anxieties, notions of money and value permeate her consciousness. References to specific brands are strikingly abundant in her narration. Laura does not simply start wearing more expensive items, rather, she goes from buying her clothes from Kmart to wearing Jimmy Choos (71, 66). Similarly, egg donors dine at Le Cirque and Nobu (65), her friends drink Corona (66), Nicole wears a Triple Five Soul sweatshirt and Angel, in an attempt to avoid heavier topics, mentions this specific brand to her own mother (71-72). Even human relationships are spoken of in terms of commodities: boyfriends "were like accessories; we kept them stored at [various] colleges … Mine I kept at NYU" (69-70), and Angel thinks her parents'

"marriage was just a phase during which they had collected each other until something more interesting came along" (73). Ads surround them: not only does a newspaper open on a page full of ads when it falls on the floor (67), but Nicole pins "ads for designer shoes and clothing, electronic equipment" and a picture of a house to her wall (67). Angel's father works as a voice actor in radio commercials, advertising, among other items, "season tickets for the Knicks" and "the *Daily News*" (74).

A specific ad that students are exposed to foregrounds the use of Black female bodies enmeshed in economic terms, underlining the precarious position of Angel and her friends. The girls listen to some white donors:

> "they compared paychecks and pain levels and wondered what had become of the little pieces of them released into the universe. We sat in Candy's room and faked gagging. Nicole let the back pages of *The Village Voice* fall open, 900 numbers and round brown asses staring up at us from the floor. She said, 'They're *mother* material, but who wants to fuck them? If we were hookers, we'd be making twice what they were.'" (67, emphasis in the original).

Nicole's bitter, sarcastic comment, made while looking at fetishized and literally commodified Black bodies, signals her understanding that being desired and having potentially profitable flesh does not necessary entail being valued by white supremacy's libidinal economy. Another description of commodified bodies being traded evokes not only slavery but outright sex work: "Eggs. They wanted eggs, and their requests came trickling in daily in ten-point type, through the want ads of the campus paper. Five, ten, fifteen thousand you could get for *doing it just once*. More than that if you were *experienced*" (65, emphasis mine), hinting at Angel's disapproval of those whom she calls serial donors (66).

In this environment permeated by consumerism and heavy with bitterness as a result of inequality, Angel puts more and more emphasis on the difference between those who earn money through egg donation and those who are excluded from this opportunity. The psychological toll that feeling unwanted takes on her is discernible in the tripartite division of her micro-society that she then collapses into two groups: *we* and *they*. *They* first stands for the agency—"They wanted eggs" (65)—but quickly goes on to incorporate those white students from middle-class backgrounds who waste money on luxury items (65). In contrast, *we* refers to those non-white, working-class students whose eggs are not wanted and who therefore cannot afford the conspicuous consumption white students can. Angel and her friends—the "broke college students" (66)—grow

resentful of *them*: when a valuable item bought with this newly acquired wealth is stolen, she says: "shame on us, because we weren't particularly sorry" (65).

Angel singles out Laura as the epitome of this group: "It wasn't our eggs they wanted … Laura Kelso, who lived in our suite—that was whose eggs they wanted" (66). Angel maintains that Laura has become a barely visible ghost and is gliding and fading away from them (68) since becoming a donor. Angel emphasizes the distance between herself and Laura in order to get reassurance that egg donors are in fact miserable: even though the system validates them, they become fragile and frail. Laura's success—her ability to afford clothes and accessories that enable her to pass as middle-class and to pay off her loans—instantiates white privilege at work, and thus reaffirms non–white students' racial and class–based identity. The contrast between them results in Angel agonizing over not being chosen as an egg donor. She seems to keep reminding herself of the bifurcation between the haves and the have-nots, further deepening her resentment and resulting in a shift in her concept of self. When Nicole, expressing her indignation over another pair of high-end jeans Laura has bought, exclaims: "You know what Laura has now?," Angel's reaction is telling: "*Value*, I thought, but said nothing" (78, emphasis in the original). Her disdain underlines that she conceptualizes value in terms of having genetic material that can be monetized due to it being acceptable to white society, that is, she has at least partially internalized the dogma that equates her worth as a person with her economic value.

The intersections of age, gender, race, and class are evident in current egg solicitation practices depicted in the short story. The ubiquity of egg donation ads on US campuses implies that agencies choose their target donor demographics based on age and educational achievement. What is more, socioeconomic status factors in as well through the "compensation rates for egg donation and the financial vulnerability of many students" (Daniels and Heidt-Forsythe 732). Still, "Harvest" argues that race, not education or class, is the most significant factor at play. According to Angel, "blonde, blue-eyed" Laura is the ideal candidate due primarily to her looks and to her outstanding academic achievement (66). Nonetheless, as Angel wryly comments, "Columbia credentials be damned, no one was interested in paying us for our genetic material" (66). The fact that the agency forgoes expanding their clientele, and thus chooses symbolic value over potential financial value, is the mark of libidinal economy. More importantly, it is a clear indication that individual effort and education cannot trump race-based prejudice.

Looking at Laura, the non-white students understand that it is their bodily involvement—i.e. genetic material—that white society refuses, or, as a reviewer puts it, "This is a world where

young black and Latina Ivy Leaguers see ads in their campus newspaper offering up to $15,000 for human eggs and instinctively understand that only their white, blonde 5'7" roommate is likely to cash in on such a transaction" (Escárcega). They acknowledge the complicated racial dynamics of the 21st century, which is evident in Angel's remark: "If *they* had wanted brown babies who so obviously didn't belong to *them*, *they* would have just adopted" (66, emphasis mine). Angel's bitter comment refers back to the idea of division between the two worlds, and suggests that white upper-middle class families might adopt non-white babies for a variety of reasons, among them in order to be or seem charitable by adopting a child from poverty-stricken regions, as many wealthy couples do. A white couple might also opt for a non-white child for financial reasons: often, transracial adoption "stems from the shortage of adoptable white babies, whose soaring price tag reflects their market value" (Roberts, *Killing* 273). At the same time, if a white couple has an obviously non-white child, it might not be obvious that the child was adopted: it might seem as at least one parent has undisclosed non-white heritage or it might suggest an extramarital affair with a non-white person. Both cases would hint at the direct involvement of non-white bodies, which, if the white couple's environment deems 'miscegenation' (i.e. 'contamination') taboo, would lead to a decrease in social status. If this direct involvement is undesirable, the indirect involvement of genetic material (i.e. eggs) from non-white bodies is likewise undesirable in this discourse.[111]

Although women's struggles in general are not the focal point of this dissertation, it is worth noting that while "Harvest" foregrounds Angel's situation, it does touch upon the struggles of a variety of other women too, whether directly or obliquely. Egg donors might enjoy the consumer items they can now afford, but their abdominal pain, bloating and the disruption of their menstrual cycle (Evans 67) signal the long-term health risks of egg donation. In fact, the procedure can be regarded as inherently violent not only because it entails altering the donor's endocrine system but also because it ruptures the integrity of the body through repeated drug injections and the extraction itself, which involves puncturing the vaginal wall while the donor is sedated (Martineau). The success of the agencies hinges on young women's willingness to undergo a series of painful, intrusive procedures for a financial reward usually referred to as "compensation" for the donor's time (Martineau). This euphemism is used in an attempt to divert attention from the commodification of female bodies and serves to mask the fact that there is an entire, multimillion-dollar, international[112] industry predicated on the use of said bodies.

[111] For more details on the politics of transracial adoptions, including statistics, see Roberts, *Killing* 272-277.
[112] Although "Harvest" does not mention the international aspect of assisted reproduction, American (typically but not exclusively white) egg donors are in high demand on international—legal or illegal—markets. Another facet of

Even though Angel's remark quoted above identifies skin color as the primary factor of difference and thus suggests that whiteness is the precondition of becoming a donor, it should be noted that African American students are in a peculiar position relative to other students, non-white, non-Black alike. As the Chicana Candy remarks, their eggs are unwanted simply because of some racialized markers: "Let me go in there and sign Dulce Maria Gutierrez Hernandez on the dotted line and see how fast they throw me out the office. Who knows what could be hiding in DNA with a name like that" (78-79), that is, there *is* a degree to which their experiences are comparable. However, as Jared Sexton explains, while there are similarities between the way various racial and ethnic minorities have suffered under white supremacy, "the singularity of racial slavery and its afterlife" is undeniable ("People-of-Color-Blindness" 44). The domination of Black people, claims Sexton, is evident in the "specific genealogy" (54) of the gratuitous violence and total commodification (38) that spans from slavery to the present. On the one hand, the white egg donors' bodies *are* commodified and hurt, and brown students *are* hurt by the rejection they anticipate; however, Angel is aware—without explicitly stating as much—of the ironies of being refused as an egg donor whereas her ancestors were used in the economic chain of re/production. Black women in "Harvest" recognize that they are in a double bind. Becoming an egg donor is desirable; yet, it would also instantiate economic and biological exploitation since it entails a privileged, wealthy family purchasing something unequivocally biological from someone in economic need. For the Black women in the story, being used would still be favorable compared to being rejected, considering that it is this use that would make the semblance of upward mobility or of a higher degree of social inclusion possible for them.

Moreover, the seemingly innocent term 'harvest' reflects on the plight of Black women in particular as well. The original meaning of harvest, the terminology for egg retrieval, refers to the agricultural process entailing coming into possession of what is (presumably) rightfully owned by one, gathering something from nature that one is (or feels) entitled to; women's eggs thus figure as property waiting to be harvested and capitalized on. Just as aggressive—often colonial—farming practices have disfigured the land in order to extract as much from it as possible, the delicate hormonal balance driving the natural menstrual cycle is intervened into for the sake of harvesting the eggs. As it has been pointed out by ecofeminists, women of color *and* white women alike have

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the international surrogacy market is its reliance on surrogates—also called gestational carriers, a euphemism that underlines their instrumentalization—who often undergo several pregnancies for financial reasons. See Darlena Cunha's "The Hidden Costs of International Surrogacy" (2014) and Zippi Brand Frank's documentary *Google Baby* (2009).

been impacted by the interlocking domination of both nature and female bodies since misogyny and the irreversible environmental damage stemming in part from colonization are both products of white Western patriarchy (Longenecker 1-2). The unequal distribution of resources that has privileged white people in general has nonetheless resulted in exploitative agricultural practices such as sharecropping, driven by un(der)paid work done by people of color and underprivileged white people as well. In addition to often being economically exploited as sharecroppers, Chicanas have been victims of environmental racism apparent, among others, in the heavy pesticide use on certain US farmlands that has resulted in adverse health effects in pregnant Chicanas and their newborns (Davies 31; A. Larsen et al.). Agricultural and misogynistic violation have thus gone hand in hand in places and times other than (or adjacent to) racialized chattel slavery in America. However, several factors bespeak Black women's unique historical position vis-à-vis the land: the enslaved worked during harvest for the economic benefit of their owners, not for themselves; enslaved women were literally owned just as plots of land were owned; their children were 'harvested' from them; and newly free Black people were inevitably ensnared in the sharecropping system, which exploited their labor to a considerable extent, thus constituting a new form of quasi-enslavement.[113]

I read the title of the short story as an ironic comment that illuminates the afore-mentioned complex racial economy Angel has to navigate, exposing the uneasy atmosphere surrounding her. Along with 'harvest,' several other semiotic ambiguities also work to make emphatic the instabilities and incongruities restricting Angel. The word donor is an ironic misnomer as well since these women "are clearly selling reproductive products, like any other marketplace item, and some donors are clearly able to get more lucrative financial compensation than others based on hierarchies of human value … in a privatized industry" (Daniels and Heidt-Forsythe 735). Even the protagonist's name contributes to the tension in the text due to the contrast between the innocence her name connotes and the 'dirtiness' her being rejected implies. As follows, attentiveness to the indeterminacy inherent in these particular words enhances the reader's perception of Angel's delicate position.

[113] It is also to be noted that the presumed 'innocence' of the term harvesting is further complicated when it goes hand in hand with land theft (as in the case of the dispossession of indigenous populations). Also note that enslaved (i.e. 'stolen') Black people were forced to work on stolen land in the US, just as Latinx people have often been exposed to agricultural inequalities on land that used to belong to their ancestors, as in the California example mentioned by Davies and A. Larsen. See Daniel W. Crofts's "From Slavery to Sharecropping" (1995) for an overview of the transition from slavery to sharecropping and its historical interpretations.

The Mathematics of Being a Black Mother

It is against this background that the protagonist becomes pregnant unexpectedly. Out of touch with her motherhood and tentative about her pregnant self at first, she mistakes early pregnancy for symptoms of an illness and compares it to the melodramatic descriptions of conception in the "bad romance novels" she read in tenth grade: "Perhaps because I subconsciously expected pregnancy to announce itself with some such motherly feeling of omniscience, I completely overlooked mine" (69). She is even ashamed of having an unplanned pregnancy because it clashes with her self-definition as a smart woman who plans ahead (71), echoing the expectations of Black respectability politics.[114] She is hesitant about starting a family with her boyfriend, Rafael, who she feels is not committed enough, and, more significantly, she is aware of serious financial problems. As she remarks, "Any way you looked at it, where there should have been a child, there was a math problem" (84).

Angel's decision to ask Laura to accompany her to the clinic sheds light on the complicated affective dimension of her situation: Laura proves to be the best target on whom to project her anger and shame. First, Angel calls her mother, but does not tell her about the pregnancy. Their conversation is unproductive because of the mother's preoccupation with gossip, catalogues, and horoscopes (71-72). Feeling frustrated and angry with herself, she visits her father and tells him about both the pregnancy and her plan to get an abortion. He immediately offers some practical advice and emotional support (74-75); however, Angel is not ready for compassion: "I had screwed up, I wanted to punish somebody" (75). She abruptly leaves to visit Rafael, being conscious of her immature anguish and her need to lash out at somebody (75). He is eager to become a father and immediately starts budgeting, but she senses a tone of desperation behind his enthusiasm and notices that he is "making grossly obvious mathematical errors" (76). Again, she leaves abruptly, which illustrates her agitation (77-78). Back at the dorm, she does not interrupt the girls' conversation about their frustration over not being chosen as donors. Instead, she imagines how they would react to the news of her pregnancy and, realizing she is not ready to cope with Nicole's realism, Candy's feminist sensibilities, and Courtney's empathy, she visits Laura, tells her the "whole story," and asks her to go with her to the clinic (79-80). "I'm asking you … because I can't really tell them" (80), she explains, which, on the one hand, could simply refer back to her not

[114] For an analysis on how Black women have subscribed to respectability as a way of earning the respect of the white majority and rebuke stereotypes from the beginning of the 20th century, see *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (2001) by Frances E. White.

wanting to hear the specific reactions she imagines earlier. On the other hand, since the girls are talking about their pain of not being good enough to be egg donors, Angel's decision of not sharing her predicament with them might stem from an effort to shield them. She needs Laura "to understand what she [Laura] couldn't possibly: how it felt to not be her" (80), hinting at the gap of privilege and fulfillment she sees between the two of them. She acts as if Laura has personally offended her; her passive-aggressive attitude shows her misguided need to make Laura feel uncomfortable throughout their brief and tense conversation, leaving with a slight insult: "maybe you know what it feels like to almost be a mother" (80). Again, Angel exits the conversation without closure, barely covering up her need to hurt Laura.

Just before Angel's number is called at Planned Parenthood, Laura unexpectedly offers her the check she has received from the egg donation agency. Angel changes her mind about the abortion in a matter of seconds, even though she acknowledges that this is merely a temporary, partial fix to the "math problem" (84). She worries what she would do "when the money ran out" (85) and even thinks that it is "a horrible world to bring a child into" (85). As Laura is writing the check, Angel thinks "of telling her to stop, but like I was afraid of undoing the knot of cells growing into something alive inside of me, I was afraid of undoing what was happening" (85). On the one hand, this fear of intervening into a process might hint at a newly found—or at least newly expressed—respect for life. On the other, a closer reading of this ambiguous paragraph reveals that "what was happening" also refers to Laura writing the check—that is, to the white person Angel has been envious of, subsidizing the birth of a Black child, using the money from the very same egg donation opportunity Angel feels excluded from. Laura's financial gains and the resulting agency, all enabled by her white privilege, fuel Angel's anxiety: she wants to make Laura understand "how it felt to not be her" (83) and thus claim some agency for herself. That is, what Angel might be afraid of "undoing" or stopping is this precious moment of getting something from Laura and all she represents.[115]

The phrase that Angel uses to encapsulate the problem of racialized childbearing—"math problem"—reverberates with similar metaphors and metonyms employed in Black feminist thought. Saidiya Hartman addresses the violence inherent in the numbers of the captain's log,

[115] After accompanying her older sister to get an abortion twice while they were still teenagers, Laura is ashamed of her and is resolute not to get pregnant. She gives no explanation as to why she says yes to Angel's request to go with her to the abortion provider, nor as to why she gives her the money. Angel speculates that the reason might be "guilt, or anger, or privilege" (84). Indeed, the resignation on Laura's face hints at guilt that might also stem from not having been able to help her sister more, or from a possible Christian upbringing. The text does not attempt to reduce this tension.

ledgers, and other archival material, and the inadequacy of these mathematical formulations to convey the horror of the transatlantic slave trade (“Venus in Two Acts” 3-12). Building on Hartman’s work, Katherine McKittrick identifies “the violence of transatlantic slavery as a numerical moment” (20), and refers to the brutality of mathematics in such quotidian parts of slave life as the numbers of whip cracks (23). McKittrick also connects these 19th-century realities to contemporary biotechnology through which “bodies are calculated” (23) and the binaries of race and of gender—that is, scientific racism and sexism—are reaffirmed. Together with the institutionalized violence condoned by the state, these systems add up to “the uncomfortable mathematics of black life” (19). In response, Alexis Pauline Gumbs and Julia Roxanne Wallace call for a revisionary Black feminist calculus that can reckon with the “limits, equalities, and imbalances” that frame Black life and are relevant for its survival (Gumbs and Wallace 306). Furthermore, poet June Jordan remarks: “We had been Black children. And each of us had given birth to a Black child. So we knew the precious, unimaginably deep music and the precious unimaginably complicated mathematics that our forbidden Black bodies enveloped” (sic qtd. in Gumbs, *We Can Learn* 184), thus drawing an explicit connection between motherhood and the metaphor of mathematics.

These theoreticians and artists re/frame mathematics as a system that is seemingly neutral—not unlike medicine, the very science that has been complicit in the marginalization of non–white, economically underprivileged women—and cruel at the same time. In a gesture of reclamation, they suggest using mathematics—something exact—to subvert the harm done to Black bodies in the name of science. Through her invocation of mathematics, Angel enters and furthers this conversation and suggests that indeed, its rigidity cannot account for the experiences of women like her. Its set of rules are represented as furthering consumerism but leading to failure: just as Angel’s boyfriend, despite his good intentions, “mak[es] grossly obvious mathematical errors when … comput[ing] our budget in his head” (76), her parents do not fit into the system set up by consumerism either: her father loses money on the stock market and instead collects “hobbies and habits” while remaining deeply dissatisfied (73), and her mother turns to spirituality only to collect crystals and other meaningless commodities (72).

Collecting, similarly to harvesting, is represented as a seemingly amoral activity that, however, symptomatizes the basic social and economic inequalities that result in the decrease in Black women’s quality of life. It subtly alludes to and contrasts with the status of the slave as accumulable and fungible chattel: Black people were ‘collected’ for centuries and were denied the

right to own property and purchasing power. These were the exclusive privileges of free and high-income individuals, often whites, who, after the abolition, have often used it to pay for Black menial labor, to buy Black collectibles, or to otherwise contribute to inequality. Sociologists pin down the excessive collecting and flaunting of consumer items done by some Black Americans to a wish to "counterbalance negative stereotypes of blacks as a marginal, low-status and criminal element of US society" (Lamont and Molnár 42), and, one might add, to counterbalance a long history of expropriation. Angel disapproves of the egg donors' mindless accumulation of consumer goods, but speaks about her mother's obsession with mail-order catalogs without sarcasm (72), suggesting that she sees a fundamental difference between the two: white people's accumulation of commodities creates surplus, while that of Black people is an attempt to make up for what they lack in social status. Comparably, instead of judging Courtney's family for insisting on owning a house they can barely afford, Angel judges the system that creates housing inequality and leads the white neighbors to be suspicious about the Black residents.

"Harvest" subtly comments not only on Angel's and the individual egg donors' situation, but on the wide-reaching social ramifications of the math problem as well. The fertility industry is embedded in a wider, pronatalist framework, which views childbearing as entirely natural, inherently moral, and even necessary in order for humanity to survive or a nation—or even a race—to thrive (thus often having nationalistic, white supremacist, or eugenic overtones, as argued elsewhere in this dissertation). This framework, often supported by religious views and enacted through public policy, influences those at the other end of the egg donation 'chain:' people who are adamant on becoming parents regardless of the ethical dimensions of the fertility business. Individual motivation might, of course, vary: clients might be driven by Western culture's tendency to idealize parenthood and promote the idea of the 'perfect' family as well as by a variety of other, personal and culture-specific factors, but whatever their reasons might be, their longing for a child is monetized on a large scale. Women's reproductive capacities—regardless of race or ethnicity—as well as the notion of 'motherhood' and 'family' have been politicized (albeit to varying degrees and in diverging ways), leading to a climate in which Angel, Laura, Candy, the agency's clients, and the abortion clinic's patients all tussle with (not) wanting and (not) having a child or with (not) having marketable eggs. Therefore, the seemingly personal decision of having a child is enmeshed in the logic of capitalism not only in the case of Black American women, Evans's oblique treatment of which fact only accentuates the complexity of the short story.

What the short story thus performs is an indictment of capitalism, more specifically, racial capitalism, which assigns value to life "differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders" (Melamed 77). The system that encourages and values white reproduction does not confer the same value upon Black bodies. The only representations the characters see of women like them are the fetishized, objectified, and commodified body parts in ads for phone sex, or in Angel's case, in the similarly fetishizing drawings of herself by Rafael (75). Even these Ivy League educated Black women with hopes of upward mobility cannot extricate themselves from narratives of Black women as hypersexual welfare dependents. The cultural narratives regarding Angel—as a Black woman whose flesh would be profitable as a "hooker" but who is unfit as an egg donor and could only become an incompetent mother—fit in well with the wide array of culturally produced and continuously upheld narratives about Black women that, according to Black feminist scholars such as Wahneema H. Lubiano, Gumbs, or Davis, divert the nation's attention from structural problems. Such stereotypes evoke the Moynihanian criminalization of those "dangerous" Black mothers that need to be vilified because they are "casting a shadow on the narrative of the state" (Gumbs, *We Can Learn* 184). Lubiano claims that these images serve to affirm the "health" of white, patriarchal, and capitalistic America (350), which reverberates with Wilderson's unrelated assertion that violence perpetrated against Black people functions as "a health tonic" (*Afropessimism* 40). The implications of white and non-white, especially Black, bodies in the cultural imaginary in economic (Gumbs, *We Can Learn* 13) and social (Jordan-Zachery 2) policy are well-documented, and the matrix in which bodies (and eggs, and children) become valued, valuable, and marketable manifests on multiple levels, from federal policy to the private sector. The harm done by negative stereotypes weathers Black women, curtails their agency, and "perpetuate[s] racism and sexism [and] guarantee[s] the continued unequal distribution of economic resources" (Lubiano 350), as argued by Black feminist thinkers and illustrated by "Harvest." Just as their long-term financial well-being is contingent on skin color, the girls are aware that their short-term financial situation is impaired by racial capitalism's hierarchy of values in an ostensibly post-racial, colorblind society.

Thwarting the effects of this racialized "math problem," motherhood seems to take on a restorative potential for Angel, exposed in her use of the metaphor of corporeal fullness. She mentions that the students who become egg donors complain about abdominal pain and feeling "full" as a side effect of hormone treatments. Angel re-conceptualizes this artificially induced bloating as the sign of being "swollen with potential for life," which she yearns for: "I didn't want to be any emptier than I already felt. I wanted to be full … I had wanted that forever and had never

felt it yet" (82). Just before the abortion, she realizes that "they were about to vacuum [my baby] out of me" (82), alluding to the emptiness—that is, the socially conditioned inferiority—she is desperate to avoid. However, moments after accepting motherhood, her sense of embodiment changes. The last sentence of the story reads as follows: "I looked up at the sky, feeling grown and full of something sad and aching to be known" (85), signifying a sudden yet ambivalent shift. On the one hand, she acknowledges that in spite of Laura's help there is something potentially sad in having a baby in her precarious position; on the other, she can finally avoid the nagging emptiness caused by having been considered worthless. What is more, her 'fullness' is organic and thus more satisfying than the bloating caused by fertility treatments. Unlike the egg donors, she does not have to wonder about the fate of those "little pieces" of hers. The references to pieces evoke the literal meaning of weathering: when rocks are weathered, they disintegrate by breaking into increasingly smaller pieces. By choosing to keep the baby, not only can Angel counter the effects of weathering, but finally come out as the 'winner' in the us-versus-them binary.

Impossible Choices and the Limits of Healing

In conclusion, Imani and Angel thus make different decisions: terminating her pregnancy brings Imani some peace, while keeping the baby makes Angel feel rejuvenated. The focal point of both "The Abortion" and "Harvest" is the Black female body, on which the complex issues of race/racism, gender/sexism, marriage, motherhood, and questions over the legality and availability of abortion are mapped out. "The Abortion" relies on the body of Imani to interrogate racial and gender inequalities, especially the diverging interests of Black men and women. The abortions are nodal points and catalysts that shed light on these issues. The title of Walker's story, then, refers not to the second, but to the first abortion. Imani seems to be preoccupied only with the second one while brushing aside the first one, but it is indeed the first that has a lasting, inescapable effect on her. It remains an unacknowledged trauma the effects of which keep resurfacing in her life. Her insistence on the positive aspects of the first abortion coupled with her subsequent refusal to assign any significance to becoming a mother speak to a refusal to acknowledge the toll the abortion takes on her. She surrounds herself with color when she feels grey as if to remind herself of the aftermath of the procedure, and has another termination as if to punish herself. Her denial, which starts out as a defense mechanism, turns out to be destructive and becomes a form of self-punishment through her compulsion to exert herself. Narratological devices such as the constant focus on the private

versus the public, stand-ins, and symbolism underline her tendency to refuse to focalize her emotional pain and her inability to come to terms with her first abortion. Her unrelenting attachment to the fetus and especially the fact that it continues after the abortion, suggests that the second abortion can be read as the consequence of the first, a rewriting of it. This way, it becomes its ultimate reenactment and a substitute for the reckoning with the first one.

Another reason behind the second abortion is connected to Imani's struggle for personal autonomy and a wish to counter her feelings of powerlessness. She acknowledges her desire to take control of her body (69), and the narrator's references to health problems, heat, and unwanted touch suggest that Imani is indeed relatively powerless when it comes to her environment as well as her body. Furthermore, she plays the role of the compliant wife by, among others, enduring the dinners with the sexist mayor (66) due to the pressure to advance her husband's political career and thus aid the cause of racial progress. Other manifestations of sexism and racism that she has no control over include her mother's abysmal working conditions that lead to her illness and death (which then causes Imani's miscarriage), Holly Monroe's violent death, Black people's assumed incompetence, the issues around school de-segregation, and "racist cops" (67), all of which contribute to the oppressive, even threatening climate surrounding Imani and thus impinge on her self-efficacy. Thus, the second abortion might stem from her wish to maintain a degree of control over the events of her life and assert her reproductive rights.

Taking into account the wider context of reproductive rights puts Imani's choices into historical perspective: she opts for the terminations in an era when abortion rights were still contested within and outside Black circles. Black American women have a long history of their reproductive rights being either taken away or heavily curtailed. Many of Imani's ancestors struggled to have a child and (re-)unite their families, but Imani divorces her husband and opts for two abortions. She is not forced into either decision, nevertheless, her two abortions stem from desperation, similarly to those enslaved women Davis memorializes (*WRC* 179), albeit for different reasons, under different circumstances: the first one to enable her to continue her education, and the second one at least partially to mitigate the effects of slavery's afterlife, that is, to escape her suffocating Southern environment and regain control of her weathered body. There is thus no overt connection between slavery and her choices; rather, her indirect treatment of her remorse and pain, then her subsequent, ambiguous sense of relief mirror Walker's similarly indirect treatment of the issues delineated above: "The Abortion" shows that the effects of slavery's afterlife are inescapable even in the mundane life of a normative, middle-class family through, among others, the overt

presence of racial violence, the community's lack of political agency, and Imani's limited personal agency and bodily autonomy.

Walker's story remains ambiguous toward the legality or morality of abortion. On the one hand, Imani's underlying guilt as well as the narrator's sarcastic tone used when describing the availability of the procedure imply that the story indicts the ease of access that could lead to hasty decisions. Imani's hemorrhaging and pain after the terminations also emphasize the potential dangers of abortion. On the other hand, the narrator is unequivocal about Imani not wanting another child, and her chronic health problems also suggest that not being able to terminate the pregnancy could be detrimental to her physical wellbeing even more so than the abortions. Imani's reluctance to be a mother, her adamant insistence on having a second abortion, her bodily ailments, and her remorse are all featured against the backdrop of the quotidian (micro)aggressions she experiences as an individual and as a member of a community. The narrator's constant references to this environment imply that it bears heavily upon the process by which Imani attempts to make sense of the world. She looks for healing from the corporeal and affective aftermath of the gendered racialization of non/being and childbearing, and tries to remain sane by remembering Holly, the aborted fetuses, and prioritizing her own emotional wellbeing, all the while tussling with her resurfacing guilt. The end of the story suggests that while the racist and sexist climate is still left in place, Imani's second abortion and the eventual dissolution of the marriage—essentially, her wake work, her refusal to be 'kept down'—eventually indeed bring her some peace.

Comparably, when Angel becomes pregnant, she has to reckon with white society's preconceptions about Black motherhood and Black bodies. Her acceptance of motherhood is influenced by what she has experienced on account of her gender, race, and class, but, in contrast with Imani, she wants to become a mother so as to give herself the validation she could not get from the egg donation agency representing the interests of white society. Although Angel credits her acceptance of motherhood partially to her desire to grow up, the impulsive, rash, fear-driven nature of her change of heart contradicts this self–assessment. Instead, I read it as being motivated by an unconscious desire to prove her worth as a woman whose body, genetic material, and skills are valuable enough to be able to be a mother in the context of racism, against the reverberations of slavery.

In contrast to the decade-long time span of "The "Abortion," this vignette-like short story provides merely a snapshot of a situation in which a life-altering moment occurs, without showing its ramifications. Since the narration stops on a bittersweet note at a crucial moment, both Angel

and the reader are denied the reassurance of a positive ending. Since she plans not to rely on government benefits, she will have to drop out of college and work throughout her pregnancy, and the reader can only speculate as to how Angel will be able to provide a stable financial background for her child. This denial of closure and the ensuing unresolved tension highlight the precarity of both Angel's position as a Black mother and that of her child by suggesting that her defiant, come-what-may attitude cannot guarantee the undoing of the uncomfortable racial mathematics of Black mothering. Indeed, Angel seems to remain locked in the mathematical mindset she was previously plagued by: she does not revisit her earlier ideas about worth. Neither story is one of unquestionable triumph over the impossibility of Black motherhood, but the reason is not Angel's or Imani's inadequacy. With its meditations on math, price, value, and fruitless budgeting that are surrounded and structured by white supremacy's libidinal economy, "Harvest" blames the structural economic and libidinal realities that form the backbone of the "math problem," and the intricate narrative fabric of "The Abortion" reveals the struggles of a woman who wants to become a mother to enact the script of respectable middle-class life but who ultimately rebels against her oppressive environment.

Still, Angel's affirmation of the pregnancy and Imani's abortion do confront the im/possibility of Black motherhood and constitute resistance in the face of racism, representing a healing potential in the wake. Wake work, for Sharpe, involves the rupturing of the episteme (Sharpe 14), and since one of the cornerstones of the episteme is that Black women are dangerous, unfit mothers with undesirable genetic material, the counternarrative for Angel is the very act of becoming a mother against all odds. Since Angel fails at establishing a (heavily compromised) counternarrative when she is not wanted as an egg donor, she holds on to her pregnancy; an unambiguous choice in the face of ambiguity, and a caring choice in the face of the rigid mathematics of racial capitalism—ironically enough, assisted by a white woman's money derived from the marketization of her (i.e. Laura's) body. As she is living in the afterlife of slavery, facing weathering, being constantly reminded of her worthlessness, at the intersection of past and present, in a technologically advanced era but at the same time still influenced by the history of slavery, claiming motherhood is a way Angel can "resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence" of Black death (Sharpe 13)—just as choosing not to be a mother of two is a life-affirming, self-caring choice for Imani in the face of the quotidian trauma of being a Black woman.

V. Con(tra)ception, Continuity, and Circularity in Kalisha Buckhanon's *Conception*

i am somebody's daughter again,
i speak like i belong in her echo,
i watch chaos control a heart,
. . . .
i cannot tell the difference
between her wailing and mine (Monet)[116]

Conception, a contemporary mothertext, centers issues that the novels and short stories analyzed in the previous chapters also focus on. The protagonist is a young, poor, urban teenager like Precious, and she is lucky to find a loving partner like Dessa does. She faces the decision whether to become a mother like Angel, and, similarly to Angel and Imani, tussles with difficult choices in terms of reproductive health and getting an abortion. The novel is unique, however, in utilizing a narrative structure that provides a timeframe from enslavement to near the new millennium while foregrounding a number of Black mothers.

Kalisha Buckhanon (1977-) has been praised for her approach to Black womanhood in the press and not yet within the scholarly community. Her first three novels—*Upstate* (2005), *Conception* (2008), and *Solemn* (2016)—constitute a trilogy (Asim 27) that focuses on the unrelated stories of troubled Black girls. Her emphasis on this group has led critics to recommend her novels especially to Black girls (Gray-Sewell) and even to categorize her as a writer of young adult fiction ("Authorology"), reinforced by her receiving the 2006 Alex Awards that honors books that are originally intended for an adult audience but whose appeal nevertheless extends to teenagers aged 12-18 ("Alex Awards"). Reviews have compared her works to *Push* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Cavanaugh) as well to Morrison's oeuvre in general (Woodside). Despite its coverage by the press, *Conception* is yet to garner sustained scholarly attention. The principal story of the novel is set over a few weeks in 1992 on the South Side of Chicago, where fifteen-year-old Shivana Golding contemplates terminating her pregnancy. Her first-person account is interspersed with a voice that narrates a story spanning from enslavement to 1992. It

[116] The speaker in Black poet (of Cuban-Jamaican origins) Aja Monet's "for the mothers who did the best they could" (2017) is, much like the eponymous character in Buckhanon' novel, a fetus "again" who wants to communicate with her mother.

belongs to someone inside Shivana's womb: an unborn child whose sex and age are unclear. Shivana refers to it as a "she" (7), and says she might have named it Conception (276). Being conceived again and again, Conception is trying to be born, but her mothers-to-be have all died. After a brief overview of the structure and the plot, I argue that that the stories of the four mothers, influenced by (the wake of) enslavement, engender a unique mixture of continuity and circularity, which extends until Shivana's present storyline since the reproductive inequality, the ramifications of raced and gendered embodiment, and the disruption of the Black family (issues a with a long history) all impact her maternal identification process. I also demonstrate that the ubiquity of several symbols, present in the mothers' lives as well as in the unborn's imagination, reveals a uniquely disrupted temporality that undergirds the fundamental im/possibility of a happy mother-child union.

The limits of Conception's consciousness and knowledge are unclear. Much like the eponymous character in Morrison's *Beloved* who gives witness to the horrors of the Middle Passage, Conception knows about and narrates past events. She also has hazy, inexplicable dreams and visions of future events she cannot control. In a vision of a "day that hasn't happened yet" (5),[117] for instance, she knows she is six years old, has Pan-African colored beads and remembers a mysterious storm that caused an older woman to order her to go inside. Since the pregnant Shivana plans to put beads "with Africa's colors" in her child's hair (253), the child in the vision indeed seems to be Conception's future self, pointing to her eventual reincarnation.[118] Even though Conception does not understand the nature of the relationship between herself and the old woman, she senses that the woman is her grandmother and wonders, "Who is she? And why do I mind her?" (4). She remembers a funeral procession that moves through Cottage Grove, a street leading from King Drive—where Shivana lives—to a cemetery, and she mentions that there are portraits of "Martin, Malcolm, and Mandela, a collage of images similar to ones found on a wall in the home of every grandmother who made it through the sixties" (35). Conception does not know who is to be buried and the reader is not yet aware of Shivana's future death at this point, but the spatio-temporal clues point to it being Shivana's funeral. As Conception speaks of a "vision of the life I may one day live trickle into dreams I share with my mothers" (36), Shivana starts having lucid

[117] The sections narrated by her are originally set in italics, but to avoid the unnecessary repetition of the format, I only italicize to indicate my emphases.
[118] I use the word reincarnation for the sake of simplicity, but it should be noted that Conception is never born within the bounds of the plot. Incarnation—as the morphology and etymology of the word would suggest—takes place to a limited degree here: she 'dies' in various stages of prenatal development, so she never possesses a fully developed physical body outside of the womb. I also use this term without its religious connotations.

dreams of her and her family's past after getting pregnant. Conception is wise, eloquent and poetic except for her last section, in which her stream of consciousness is chaotic. She has a will of her own: she acknowledges that she has agency and can make Shivana be aware of her presence.

The sections narrated by the unborn Conception focus on the story of three of her mothers, separated by 50 years each. The fifteen-year-old enslaved Yoshi is the first one: she is whipped severely for stealing and reading a letter stating that she is to be sold away and become a breeder to settle a debt and dies the following morning in Georgia in 1842. The intent of the "boys" who whip her is presumably not to kill her, since they dig a hole to accommodate her "four-month-old pregnant belly" (39). Helene, an old Black maid, the matriarch of the slave community, insists that Yoshi's body be wrapped and released into the ocean in order to save her unborn child: "We gotta set the baby free … That there inside still gots a chance" (38). The voice inside Shivana confirms that Helene's actions indeed saved her. Fifty years later, eighteen-year-old Darlene, who is unaware of her pregnancy, is lynched after being wrongfully accused of theft in 1892 in Mississippi. She is hanged on a magnolia branch over a swamp and hemorrhages after dying; thus, Conception slips into the swamp. Lastly, Tawana dies in Harlem in 1942, which is, as the voice says, "the last time before this time" (201). After her husband is "shot in mistaken identity by NYPD looking for an armed liquor store robber" (202), Tawana is left alone with a five-year old daughter, an infant son, and a baby on the way, and becomes depressed. Finally, she kills her son and commits suicide. Shivana's section is narrated by herself form a vantage point in which she is older and wiser than her teenage self. She is impregnated by Leroy, an older, married man, who then goes to prison. She meets a 19-year-old boy, Rasul, and they fall in love. After a brief stay at a woman's shelter, Shivana commits to fleeing to New York City to start a new life with him. On the way, Rasul's car hits a deer and verves into a river, killing them both as well as the unborn baby.

The Illusion of Progress

In the novel, every mother has a seemingly higher quality of life than the previous one, which suggests an optimistic, progressive narrative. However, despite their economic differences, racism pervades their everyday experiences to a strikingly similar degree. Even if Yoshi could keep the baby, their life would be in constant danger, hinted at by an accident that happened twelve years prior to her death: two mares stomped to death several babies who were left in a trough while their mothers worked on the plantation. Her owner, Parnell, mentions her alongside "articles of

husbandry and farming implements" (40). Her value is underscored by her reproductive capabilities: as Parnell writes in the letter Yoshi steals, "she is currently pregnant and, as far as I know, capable of further breeding" (40). The owner is seeking to trade her in order to settle his own father's debt of $5000, arguing that even though she could be sold for $2000, she could give birth to "six to eight offspring," therefore, keeping and breeding her would exponentially increase her monetary value (40). Ironically enough, Parnell appeals to the debtee's kindness, generosity, and mercy, and implores him to agree to the deal so that he could keep his father's legacy alive and ensure that his property survives (41). In keeping with the logic of slavery, he shows no concern for Yoshi's siblings being sold away and forced to bear or father children; in fact, he argues that one of Yoshi's brothers makes an excellent "buck" and their mother increased the profit of the Parnell family, thus using the slave 'family's' history as proof of Yoshi's potential.

Darlene's life is infinitely easier: she lives in a shack with her mother and sisters, and has a cleaning and stocking job. However, she is at the mercy of the store's owner, a white woman, who is cordial only insofar as the Black population of the town behaves and performs in accordance with the ruling majority's interests and wishes. When Miss Mailley suspects that a small item is missing from the store, several members of the white community suddenly notice that something has been stolen from them, too. The only logical consequence that appeases the libidinal economy of the white townsfolk is a lynching of every boy living on the segregated street symbolically named New Africa. The boys, who keep the town's economy going by providing cheap menial labor, are rounded up and hanged in a dramatic spectacle. Miss Mailley accuses Darlene of complicity as well, and she tearfully confesses to a sin she committed, all the while in the belief that the white woman refers to her sexual encounter with one of the boys who supply the store. Miss Mailley, sure of having a confession, names Darlene as a thief, resulting in Darlene's hanging as well. Darlene seems to be the only one questioned and given a chance to defend herself while the boys' guilt is assumed automatically, illustrating the dangerous myth of Black male criminality. Miss Mailley even thinks that even though all Blacks are savages, "she could forgive any one of them who was smart enough to ask for mercy" (114). Nevertheless, her cold demeanor suggests that she would not believe Darlene no matter how she tried to exculpate herself; she even feels vindicated when Darlene 'confesses.'

The fact that her family can afford a home and such items as a breast pump, perfumes, or decorative pillows sets Tawana's living conditions apart from those of Yoshi and Darlene. Nevertheless, the untenable financial security of the family is clear. Tawana has an unsatisfying

and low-paying cleaning job, while her husband, Billy, a young, traumatized war veteran, has "quit showing up" for work while still wearing his garbageman uniform every day to spare Tawana the pain of knowing about his unemployment (203). Apart from the fleeting sense of comfort her children and Billy's occasional bursts of affection provide her, Tawana feels lonely in her marriage. Her loneliness turns into severe depression when Billy is shot on the same day he impregnates her. Her grief and the frustration stemming from financial insecurity are compounded by the bureaucratic and inhumane process at the veteran's office, which she goes to in the hopes of getting her spousal benefits. The demeaning visits exhaust and demoralize her. Being barely able to feed and clothe her children, she is further aggravated at the baby's constant need to nurse. Finally, she reaches a state of psychosis that leads to her suicide. Poverty, and not race, seems to be the primary factor influencing Tawana's life the most directly, making her story the least racially situated so far. However, a poor Black family struggling in Harlem, instead of being an isolated occurrence, speaks to the presence of racialized poverty[119] and the tragedy that sets off Tawana's breakdown is imbricated in racism as well: the police shoot Billy by mistake because he fits the general description of a Black male suspect. Her friends understand the perils of cross-race identification bias—"You know all niggers look the same to 'em" (206)—while Conception mentions that the police officers informing Tawana of Billy's death come with an excuse instead of an apology (205). Thus, the confluence of anti-Black sentiments, the disproportionate response of the NYPD in an already crime-ridden, overpoliced, and ghettoized neighborhood,[120] and the disregard for the value of Billy's life structures a context in which Tawana's trauma proves to be contingent on her race and gender, similarly to Yoshi's and Darlene's cases.

Shivana's background and plotline is thus an apt continuation of the manifold injustices experienced by the other women. Several references to her suboptimal living conditions and bleak urban environment elucidate the housing inequality besetting numerous Black communities. She lives in a dangerously decrepit, cold building that smells of trash and animal remains on the South Side of Chicago, notorious for its crime rate. She dreams of "a big house, with a dog and a white fence and clothesline in the back" (261), all seemingly out of her reach. *The Cosby Show* is a point of reference that provides the chimera of middle-class, Black normativity (220, 229). A profound experience that shapes her knowledge of the world is employment inequality. The only group of

[119] See *Being Black, Living in the Red: Race, Wealth, and Social Policy in America* (2009) by Dalton Conley on the confluence of poverty and racism.
[120] On racial housing segregation, see *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (2017) by Richard Rothstein.

people that has worse outlooks than Black women in her environment is that of Black men: women often work exhausting night shifts as a nurse's aide while pregnant such as Renelle or drive a bus despite the severe pain it causes like Annette, but Black men compete for even lower-paying and more menial jobs, as remarked by both Leroy (16) and Rasul (242). Institutions fail Shivana, including the substandard school system, or the birth clinic New Horizon, with its organized attempt to methodically push contraception to teenage girls. The only exception is a Christian women's shelter with a Black woman at its helm: despite its aggressive attempts at religious indoctrination, it provides invaluable assistance to the most vulnerable layers of society, among them young Black mothers who are homeless or live with HIV.

Raced and gendered embodiment, along with poverty, has an inescapable impact on Black women in *Conception*. Shivana thinks that having "good hair" might have changed her life: by making her feel more confident and more rewarded for her good looks, it would have made her life "better, easier, calmer" (10). She is, as she says, "too brown" and "too nappy-headed" (29), which makes her feel unwanted and ashamed. She believes she could only compensate for her natural looks by spending money on it; that is, instead of yearning to be white like Precious in *Push*, she wants to maximize her appeal as a Black woman. However, not only does she know that her family cannot afford "a bi-weekly hair appointment" necessary to make her look acceptable (29), but she is also aware of the implications of this situation. On the South Side of Chicago, few families have financial security, but a certain stratification still exists between them, which enables some of her peers to style themselves more fashionably. Shivana understands that asking overwhelmed parents for money is unthinkable for most of these girls (29), which suggests that issues of money pervade the everyday fabric of psychic life in the community. The concatenation of Blackness, womanhood, and poverty thus makes a mark on Shivana's self-worth.

The issue of contraception is a recurring theme in the novel that connects the fates of several women. While Yoshi is forced to breed, 20th-century women like Tawana are steered toward various forms of birth control. When Tawana is in labor with her first child, a white nurse advocates for "Complete, total, and complimentary sterilization, to your own economic gain" (208). The practice of trying to pressure young women into making a decision of this import, using the language of commercialism, is not only unethical, but puts a twist on the logic and language of slavery. It exposes the sudden reversal of values that took place when the birth of Black children was no longer profitable. Referring to the "economic gain" of the Black woman is an ironic reminder of the profitability of breeding as well.

Shivana and her friend Nakesha are almost cajoled into using long-acting or permanent contraception at the clinic. Shivana acknowledges that the clinic does not discriminate and treats everyone equally when it comes to "exams, infant care, and birth control—all for free" (76). Indeed, women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds are present at the meeting where a "'Family Planning' specialist," Rebecca, encourages them to use either permanent or long-acting methods of birth control—eighteen out of the twenty girls are Black, as Shivana notices (83). Rebecca dissuades them from using birth control pills ostensibly because girls this age lack the responsibility required to take it consistently, but the systematic and insistent nature of her efforts hints at the underlying agenda of the government to promote and heavily subsidize these birth control methods predominantly among Black, poor girls and women. Colorful pamphlets touting the benefits of "tubal ligation, Norplant, and Depo-Povera" (83) put alongside a rich display of sweets suggests government funding behind such forms of advertising, prevalent within that time frame in the US. The girls are suspicious of the intent behind this aggressive form of marketing. As Nakesha asks regarding the implant, "'How come it's free to put in but we gotta pay all this money to take it out?" (84). Removal is not only expensive, it is also a highly complicated process that only a certified removal specialist can carry out; however, no such professional is available at that clinic. The girls' concerns about the adverse effects are brushed aside as Rebecca minimalizes the risks, displaying unethical and potentially profit-driven behavior. The question of profit enmeshed in reproduction thus surfaces again: on the one hand, corporations making these forms of birth control available are compensated by the government that subsidizes them, on the other hand, the government seeks to save money by cutting back on welfare paid to mothers of multiple children.[121] The undue influence of economic interest on (predominantly Black) women's reproductive practices is reminiscent of slavery, and while Tawana and Shivana are not directly coerced into anything unlike Yoshi, there is a definitive continuity between the stories of the four mothers.

Another thread that runs through the narrative(s) is the racialized configurations of gender roles evident in the role fathers play in the family. Every Black woman in *Conception* has been socialized into a world where fathers are either inaccessible or incompetent. Hind, the 26-year-old father of Yoshi's baby, has been a "stud" for 10 years, tasked with impregnating every enslaved

[121] Adducing all the relevant historical documents in support of the situatedness of *Conception*'s treatment of contraception is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but see the meticulously researched "Chapter 3: From Norplant to the Contraceptive Vaccine" in *Killing the Black Body* by Roberts for details, among them the exact wording used by legislators involved in outlining the schemes to subsidize and market contraceptive vaccines and implants, as well as other specific examples.

girl over the age of thirteen. The process is described as cold, efficient, and methodical: each girl spends 30 days in his cabin and has to leave when the next one arrives with her satchel (43). Yoshi falls in love with him, but understands the disfigured nature of Black families and is aware that since they have no legal standing, she can never unite with the father of her child: "there would be no announcement, no wedding, no signal or symbol to everyone else, no 'taking up,' no jumping a broom" (43). The lack of symbolic gestures and rituals that would signal the unity and legal standing of a Black family illustrates Orlando Patterson's arguments about the lack of a name Black people can claim (10-11). Theoretically, Darlene could even get the chance to legally marry a man of her choice, but she understands the perils of Black manhood: the whereabouts of her father are unknown (107). Tawana has a family that remains intact until her husband's death, but Billy lies to her about his job, and he is unable to deal with the severe post-traumatic effects of being a veteran. As he struggles to provide for his family, the possibility of getting help for his mental health issues is unthinkable; the result is him being emotionally unavailable as a husband and father.

The characterization of men in Shivana's life also point to the profound lack of positive father figures. From an early age, she is inculcated by the women in her environment to think of men as fundamentally irresponsible:

> I knew the story well. I had seen it, heard about it, been warned about it; my own father left so I was a victim of it. Any gathering of two or more women made me a silent witness to the deep wounds men left behind. … The story was always the same. … Something about being called 'Daddy'—never mind husband—seems to choke men these days. … The woman is [always] left staring into a window rather than out of it. (12-13)

The circumstances of every child and mother in Shivana's life seem to confirm that the Black family is in a crisis, which is, according to Shivana, the result of Black men's actions. Leroy cheats on Renelle, impregnates Shivana, fails to take responsibility for them, and, according to Shivana's mother, ultimately causes Renelle's miscarriage. In addition, Leroy pretends to have a stable job but is a drug dealer, unbeknownst to his wife for a long time. Shivana has her doubts about Rasul: she wonders how committed and loyal he will be once the initial thrill of running away wears off. While he is patient and caring in those few weeks they spend together, his story is not finished: Shivana worries that he might fall into the pattern of mistreating her and her child in the future. A male character depicted in a positive light is Hakim, Shivana's aunt's partner; they are two adults

in a loving, supportive relationship that is also childfree and new, which—in the economy of the text—possibly explains their success as a couple.

Childhood is also disfigured, as understood by the unborn child and Shivana. As Conception takes inventory of all the mothers she has lost, she wonders whether being Black and poor are the decisive factors: “What if the women had been White? What if the women had been privileged?” (6). Several poignant images are employed to contrast a privileged child’s circumstances to those of a poor Black one. When Darlene and the young men are hanged, they are arranged in a pattern that Conception likens to a constellation, a mobile hung above a newborn’s crib (117), and Christmas ornaments (118)—the latter two being decorative items a Black child in the Jim Crow era would not be likely to have access to. The grim contrast between a privileged child and the child of a Black, lynched mother is further heightened when she—that is, the zygote—falls into the swamp beneath the hanged bodies, making her a ‘child’ who is looking up at a mobile-like arrangement. In Shivana’s womb, she dreams of a nursery lavishly decorated with carefully chosen and arranged furniture, toys, books, and various gifts (134). The details given suggest that this would-be nursery belongs to a family with secure financial means; a family who anticipates the birth and cherishes the newborn. After a lengthy, daydream-like description, Conception concludes, “But none of that is usually waiting for *us*” (135, emphasis in the original), meaning the children considered a nuisance. As she describes the environment an unwanted child is born into—as one full of overdue bills, mismatched chairs, and a sleeping pallet on the floor—she suggests that poverty is to be blamed for this lack of foresight, implying that the already strained circumstances of Black life seldom lead to a happy family.

In contrast to the pampered child as imagined by Conception, every young person in the novel experiences a lack of affection and comfort. Girls such as Shivana or Yoshi are sexualized at a young age, and Shivana meets several teenagers at the shelter who are pregnant or have babies while struggling with addiction or illness. Shivana is regularly beaten by her mother (10), who was not appreciated by her parents either (189). Leroy’s children are silenced and brushed aside by adults and even by Shivana. Rasul is rejected by his parents and is passed from one distant relative to the other (136). The unborn child describes this life as “an uncomfortable future of tension, misery, obstacles, and want” (106), and believes that Shivana’s and Rasul’s lives could have been easier had they been born into different circumstances: “because you were poor neglected black boy and girl you had never frolicked in the froth of the ocean or journeyed to the caribbean or the hamptons or marthas’s vineyard or idlewild or even an overcrowded pool someone paid for you to

be in at the ymca so you could not recollect the instinct of womb [and swim]" (273, sic). Conception thus draws a connection between being Black, poor, and unwanted. Compressed in this image are the factors that, according to her, hinder Black youth: not only being Black, but being neglected and poor, which ultimately leads to "skewed life chances"[122] that impact the next generation—including herself—as well.

The traumatization of Black children is apparent in all the plotlines of the novel, demonstrating another point of connection that anchors the mother and children of *Conception* to the original trauma of enslavement. During slavery, children do laugh and enjoy playing games, but one of these games is "rewinding the bandages on their feet that passed for shoes" (42); they seldom have enough to eat, and are regularly exposed to direct and indirect violence as well. Helene, in anticipation of Yoshi being sold away and then in mourning, keeps crying and shaking while holding newborns who squirm and cry as a result (38). Tawana's daughter is heavily traumatized after her mother's suicide: "try being five years old with your mama dead on the other side of the bathroom door and you can't even get in, nobody tellin' you what happened, after you done came to school with piss running down your legs" (238-239), as the adult Gladys explains. Leroy's children watch as their father is chained to a radiator during his arrest, which, as several other characters believe, exemplifies racially motivated police brutality (59-61). These early experiences are depicted as being specific to Blackness.

The concept of child is destabilized on an ontological level as well. As Christina Sharpe notes, there is a signifying surplus added to certain words in a racialized context: "meaning slides, signification slips, when words like *child*, *girl*, *mother*, and *boy* abut blackness" (80, emphasis in the original). While the mainstream, Western concept of childhood is in itself a tenuous one that has a complicated genealogy, Black childhood has been clearly differentiated from it. Instead of being thought of as being innocent and needing nurturance and protection, Black boys tend to be demonized and considered a sexual threat, while Black girls are sexualized earlier than their white peers.[123] Black children have been perceived to be older than their age, which, as Shivana explains, is especially prevalent in her times: "That's what 1992 had come to: boys were men with that first

[122] As used by Hartman to epitomize the afterlife of slavery (*Lose Your Mother* 6).
[123] On how and why the ideas of Black and white childhood diverged at the onset of white supremacy, as well on the contemporary ramifications of this bifurcation, see *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) by Robin Bernstein. On the construction of Black girlhood, the perils of "adultification," and a background on the cultural production of white childhood, see *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood* (2017) by Rebecca Epstein, Jamilia J. Blake, and Thalia González; as well as *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected* (2015) by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Priscilla Ocen, and Jyoti Nanda.

hair on the chest and girls were treated like grown women long before their bodies said so" (20). She mentions that the world tends to "shove a Black boy back into his place" (22), and even she herself immediately sees Rasul and other young men as a threat. Shivana and her friend are often catcalled, and while they learn about reproduction at school with pictures of embryos on a handout, they discuss their own experiences involving unprotected sex and sex with multiple partners (98). Even Conception, the unborn child, has a mature, wise voice; thus, children are never simply children in the novel, in no small part owing to the unique circumstances stemming from the racialized and often gendered reality of the characters.

The way Shivana conceptualizes Black womanhood, fatherhood, and childhood, along with her experiences with poverty and reproductive racism, has a bearing on how she approaches her own pregnancy. According to her, it is primarily due to the behavior of Black men that "planning pregnancy [is] for White women" (12), but money is a contributing factor too. Shivana thinks that the prenatal care offered by New Horizon would not counter the root problems: "what about postnatal care—diapers, clothes, food, money, a roof over our heads?" (87). Conscious of not wanting to burden a "little Black baby" with the suffering she has endured (96), she fantasizes about violent ways of inducing a miscarriage, leading her to beg Nakesha to jump on her stomach (89-91). Her desperation leads her to almost have sex with an elderly taxi driver for money, considering becoming a sex worker, and stealing from her aunt's boyfriend, all in an attempt to gather enough money for abortion and thus to spare herself and the baby a life of constant pain and poverty. She does not want to be a welfare mother in a system that infantilizes and demeans women in exchange for monetary aid: "I got to fill out forms telling my business just to get a gallon of milk, just 'cause I got kids" (197). Despite seeing her pregnancy as a state that lends her maturity and enables her to claim womanhood—"I was carrying a baby now, a real woman officially grown" (166), she is resolute in wanting to get an abortion.

In a matter of minutes, however, she changes her mind. After taking into account all the reasons she must abort the baby and enumerating them to a healthcare worker at New Horizon, she walks out of the building with a new sense of her pregnant self. As she warms her hands by placing them on her belly under the coat, she is suddenly aware of her split subjectivity: "there were now two of me . . . I got a baby. *I'm a mother*" (200, emphasis in the original). Sore breasts, nausea, and fear turn into pride and hope, which contrasts with her earlier feelings of shame regarding her appearance, academic abilities, choices, and living conditions (77-78). Her abrupt affirmation of motherhood is in part due to Conception's machinations, who indeed takes credit for making

Shivana aware of her presence and making her want her (201). Shivana remains somewhat tentative until a 'conversation' with Conception in which Shivana directly addresses her and plans ahead (252-253). Shivana meeting a mysterious old woman who sings a song and seeing a dog die on the street before entering the clinic also suggest an intervention on Conception's part.

Disrupted Temporality Reinforced through Symbols

The symbols of the singing woman and the dog add another layer of signification to the text. Apart from the unborn child reincarnating, there is another figure that keeps cropping up, to Conception's surprise. An old Black woman wearing a white rag on her head assists the previous mothers several times, and has unexplained appearances in Conception's visions and dreams. Helene, the woman who helps to set Yoshi's baby free in the water, is the first one to wear the rag; the second one is an old woman—in Shivana's words, "Big Mama"—who often stands at the entrance of the clinic Shivana wants to get an abortion at. She is trying to dissuade young women from getting birth control as it is the equivalent of the termination of a pregnancy, as she says, "every time you take that pill … you getting an abortion honey" (79). Both Helene and Big Mama have cloudy gray eyes: the former's "eyesight has faded to a distorted and cloudy gray" (39), and the latter has an eye that has turned into an icy blue-gray. A cataract had closed over it" (194). Apart from a grandmotherly figure wearing a white rag in one of the unborn child's visions of a life not yet lived (4, 36), the other significant character in the head rag is Gladys, who founded and runs the women's shelter that takes in Shivana after she moves out of her mother's apartment. Gladys, who reminds Shivana of Big Mama (219), tells her the story of her own mother's suicide, revealing for the reader that she is Tawana's daughter. Her trauma has fueled her mission to help young mothers. Thus, the women in the white rag reinterpret the figure of the mammy on account of the characteristic head gear, and appear to be the guardians of life, mysteriously reincarnating along with Conception and providing another point of connection between the temporal frames of the characters' lives.

Just before Shivana decides to keep the baby, Big Mama sings the song known as "Soon-a Will Be Done," "Soon I Will Be Done," or "Trouble of the World," that is never mentioned by its title, nor are its full lyrics included, but it crops up a conspicuous number of times across a wide timespan and accompanies significant life decisions. It is a spiritual featured in a film that Shivana watches countless times as it is one of her mother's favorites: *Imitation of Life* (1959). In a key scene, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson sings the song at a funeral, which Shivana listens to when

contemplating abortion, and she even hums the song later (214). Tawana listens to it on the radio when she decides to commit suicide (211), and Shivana hears it from Big Mama before entering New Horizon to get an abortion; thus, it seems to be connected to Conception's death. Since Conception reincarnates after Tawana's suicide and Shivana changes her mind about terminating her pregnancy, the song is also connected to the continuation of life. Its lyrics reference death, and they include the line "I want to see my mother," thus, they aptly symbolize Conception's agony due to dying again and again but wanting to be born and see her mother. Neither Shivana nor Conception acknowledges the power of this song or draws a connection between its various appearances, but its conspicuity underlines the intergenerational link between the mothers and Conception.

Music, especially the ubiquity of certain musical motifs, adds to the intricate fabric of the novel in another way as well. Another favorite of Shivana's mother and aunt that they keep playing on repeat is the film *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972), starring Diana Ross in the role of Billie Holiday. Just like the multiple iterations of the same song, this film suggests a palimpsestuousness that reverberates with the stories of the characters as well. Just as a singer plays the part of another singer—Diana Ross singing the songs that made Billie Holiday famous—the lives of the mothers are superimposed over each other, resonating with each other, in some respects repeating each other. Ross, a Black woman and singer herself, 'becomes' Holiday in a film based on the latter's autobiography. Not only is the book already a fictionalized representation of Holiday's life; it was also written with the help of a ghostwriter. These different layers and their play on reincarnation constitute a palimpsestic structure that mirrors the structure of both the novel and Conception's origins. *Lady Sings the Blues* references Black history in its invocation of lynching: by including the scene in which Holiday sees the hanging bodies of lynching victims, the film memorializes the violence of racism. Shivana watches this scene without understanding the famous lyrics to "Strange Fruit," the song Holiday was allegedly compelled to write after seeing the bodies (62). Shivana watching Ross's iteration of Holiday seeing the aftermath of the lynching, taken together with Darlene's lynching, also acquires a palimpsestic quality, further strengthening the link between the histories of the women.

Apart from the various iterations of the same piece of music, the novel establishes continuity between the generations through the changes to music as well. Early and mid-20th-century Black music is juxtaposed with the hip hop of Shivana's generation, characterized by lyrical themes often focusing on sexuality and accompanied by music videos that center—and

sexualize—young bodies.[124] The popularity of icons from different eras, such as Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, or Queen Latifah, is mentioned alongside aspiring hip hop artists such as Rasul. Just as Billie Holiday thematizes Black suffering, Rasul raps about the contemporary struggles of Black youth while emphasizing slavery's afterlife: "We ain't your slaves no more or your Uncle Toms" (259). The use of music, then, both emphasizes the repetition of the same theme and the changes that take place throughout the century regarding lyrical content or the (self-)presentation of the artist.

As music functions as an over-arching symbol commenting on the continuity and circularity inherent in the structure, so does water provide a crucial link between the mothers. Conception's frequent visions of storms (105) are metaphors for the turbulent and volatile lives of Black women in the novel. Shivana and Rasul contemplate their future and make plans while sitting outside in the snow, which is a more comforting setting than Shivana's run-down apartment (244). When Yoshi dies, Conception is saved by the ocean: "A soul smothered by bloodstained dirt has nowhere to go. Rolling through effervescence, tumbling through tides, 360-degree turns over and over and over again, life reincarnated and swallowing itself whole, her impulse had given me a new chance to be born" (44). Then, after Darlene's death, she falls into the swamp and floats "far above the water" (107). Tawana slices her wrists with a razor and gets into the tub with "one child" on her breast, already dead, and "another bled out of her into water filled in a dirty bathtub" (211). Shivana and Rasul end up in a river as well. Water—whether the ocean, a swamp, bathwater, or a river—is present at the time of death of each woman. Nevertheless, it seems to be the prerequisite to the survival of Conception, and, since Shivana narrates the last passage of the novel from beyond the grave, water is essential for her spiritual survival as well. Conception establishes a connection between amniotic fluid, recreational swimming that Black youth do not have access to, and the water in which they die and are revived in the passage also quoted earlier: "because you were poor neglected black boy and girl you had never frolicked in the froth of the ocean or journeyed to the caribbean or the hamptons or marthas's vineyard or idlewild or even an overcrowded pool someone paid for you to be in at the ymca so you could not recollect the instinct of womb [and swim] (sic)" (273). Water is thus the site of death and life, emphasizing the continuity and the circularity inherent in Conception's story.

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[124] Most notably, one of Shivana's classmates, that is, an underage girl, "provided the feminine pants and moans" that popularized a song called "We Likes It Ruff" (30); and Shivana watches the "gyrating" bodies of male performers in the music video to "Freakin' You" (97).

Conception's remark about Shivana and Rasul's lack of access to swimming facilities already sutures their plight to that of the underprivileged community as a whole, but her reference to the Middle Passage extends it even further. In the last section narrated by her, she refers to a "she" in her stream of consciousness, a previously unmentioned woman who would have jumped in the water during Middle Passage to save her child, but since this mythical mother is not there, it is up to Conception to save Shivana. The image of the woman jumping overboard from a moving ship recalls several meanings of the wake adduced by Sharpe: she risks her life to save her child from drowning, which alludes to the wake's connection to death; she jumps into the wake of the ship, i.e. its track; and, since a wake is also "the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water" (Sharpe 20), she creates or contributes to the literal wake and she enters the metaphorical wake of Middle Passage as well. The bodies of those who drown— including this mother and her child, other victims of Middle Passage, Yoshi, and Shivana, among others—are eaten by water organisms and are thus continuously recycled, leading Sharpe to conclude that Black people have become part of the ocean and exist in an extended, ever-present time of the wake (49).[125] Sharpe's contentions fit in with other facets of water-related mythology, including Kongolese religious notions of the Kalunga line, believed to be a watery threshold between the living and the dead (Bolster 62-63) that has been interpreted as the middle of the Atlantic ("Kalunga"); the idea of an underwater city populated by the descendants of those newly enslaved pregnant African women who were thrown overboard during Middle Passage, imagined by the music duo Drexciya in the 1990s (Eshun 300); Morrison's reference to those who lost their lives during Middle Passage as "the whole nation that is under the Sea" (Carabi 38-39); or the myth of the water-walking African, inspired by the group of captives who, as an act of resistance to enslavement, marched into the swamp and died in 1803 on Georgia's St. Simons Island, not far from Cumberland Island (Watts 211).[126] Water is not only posited as a significant site for the individual; through the evocation of the Middle Passage and early colonial times, it is also mobilized to establish the individual's links to the early history of Black Americans.

Another symbol that straddles the line between life and death, thus illustrating the disrupted temporal configuration of *Conception*, is that of animals. When she is telling Yoshi's story, Conception briefly mentions the incident in which two mares, "unexpectedly wild from the scent

[125] While Sharpe is concerned with those who perished during Middle Passage, those who died in other bodies of water can be thought of as ever-present in a similar fashion due to the water cycle.

[126] This latter event is believed to have inspired the myth of the flying African as well (Snyder 39), most prominently memorialized in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. For a discussion of the significance of water in Black expressive culture, see also Anissa Janine Wardi's *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (2011).

of thirty women's moon-synchronized cycles," run over and kill the small children whose mothers are working nearby (39). This scene is not integral to the plot, nor does it advance it; nevertheless, it incorporates several key elements of Conception's story. After nearly dying in the stampede, Yoshi has nightmares without knowing their origin, which emphasizes the importance of dreams, thereby hinting at the continuity between generations. The image of female horses killing children when running wild after smelling menstrual blood reverberates with the large amount of blood Yoshi loses during the whipping; it also foreshadows Darlene's hemorrhaging and Tawana's suicide and infanticide. Various episodes involving the sudden and violent death of animals also appear in the novel serving multiple other functions. Shivana's kitten dies when she is a child, with Shivana finding its stiff body (157). A young Rasul sees a dog as it is giving birth in the middle of the road moments before it is run over by a truck (157). Before walking into New Horizon, Shivana sees a dog run across the street, get hit by a car, and left to howl and die in the middle of the road as Big Mama watches on (194-195). On their way to New York, Shivana and Rasul see a deer hit and mutilated by a semitruck (268), then they hit another one shortly thereafter (270), causing them to plunge into the river. These seemingly random, horrific images of dead or dying animals serve to accentuate the bleak environment and the presence of tragedies in the characters' lives, including the deaths of the enslaved and the lynching victims. Not only do they startle and disorient both the reader and Shivana, these incidents—especially the dog in front of the clinic and the deer—also foreshadow the death and eventual reincarnation of Conception and Shivana.

Comparably, the places where each mother lives take on a symbolic character: the novel Signifies on the notion of progress by relying on the spatiotemporal situatedness of the characters. The authorial choice to position them in historically significant locations sheds light on the historical dispossession of Black women and the contemporary issue of inadequate housing, and establishes an arc between the plight of the enslaved Yoshi and Shivana Yoshi lives near Georgia's Cumberland Island, famous for such facets of white history as cotton production, the grave of Robert E. Lee's father, and, in general, for housing a significant settlement in the colonial era (Bullard). Darlene lives on a street the community, in a celebratory and optimistic gesture, names New Africa Street. Tawana lives on Harlem's Edgecombe Avenue, famous for serving as a nodal point for Black thought in the first half of the 20th century (Burden-Stelly) and being the home of such Black intellectuals and artists as Thurgood Marshall, W. E. B. DuBois, Duke Ellington, or Cecelia Hodges (Gonzalez). The South Side of Chicago is an African American neighborhood famous for its prominent residents, including Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, Gwendolyn Brooks,

or Richard Wright, but notorious for its high crime rate. Shivana's street, King Drive, is named after Martin Luther King, Jr., whose figure is directly invoked when she muses about her funeral and evokes the optimism of a march that could lead to lasting changes: "the procession in my honor would have made King proud, joyous that footsteps had pounded a street bearing his name and turned a funeral into something of a march" (274). However, optimism of this image is undermined as she remarks that the transformative potential of a march held to honor a young Black woman fails to sustain interest. She implies that the tragic end to her "small, insignificant life" could have led to systemic changes (274). Shivana's and Conception's ephemeral lives are contrasted not only with their eventual reincarnation, but with significant sites and figures of Black past and hope, contributing to the memorializing drive apparent in the text's intricate structure. The locations also serve to reinforce a contrast between a presumptive racial progress and the bleak reality of the characters' lived experience: as Shivana remarks, there is some irony in their decrepit building "having the nerve to sit on a street named after Martin Luther King" (20-21). Centuries have passed since Yoshi's times until the main storyline's diegetic present, yet meaningful 'racial progress' does not seem to have occurred

Locations, along with images of water, music, or animals, thus contribute to the reader's understanding that the characters are moving through time yet standing still. Buckhanon's artistic rendition of time in fact reverberates with various strands of Black studies, including Afropessimism, which have questioned the straightforward, linear nature of time and history. As Ian Baucom puts it—basing his arguments on the writings of theorists and artists of the Black Atlantic such as Édouard Glissant, Derek Walcott, Fred D'Aguiar, and Toni Morrison—"in its refusal to progress, time accumulates both variously and unevenly" for communities disrupted by the Atlantic slave trade (325). Consequently, as he argues, the "Atlantic now"—a phrase originally used in Walcott's *Osmeros*—is qualitatively different than the unmarked 'now' (324), that is, the past is not subordinated to the present, and the present is not a logical, comforting continuation of the past. Time "pil[es] up" cyclically, writes Baucom (333, evoking Glissant's formulation of time in *Poetics of Relation*), which results in the individual's perception that "all of it is now, it is always now, even for you who never was there" (333, quoting *Beloved*), Indeed, in Buckhanon's novel, what seems like progress is more like circularity and even contemporaneity, with Conception being trapped in an ever-repeating scenario and desperate to break out of it in order to be finally born as Shivana's child.

In sum, the structure of the novel speaks to the blending of notions of progression and circularity. Shivana's story, narrated by herself, is interwoven and co-present with the unborn child's voice, which suggests a disrupted progression. Still, taken together, these narratives are future-oriented: the main plotline focusing on a series of mothers seems to point to a progressive temporality. Accordingly, the plot is building up to an ending about which both Shivana and the unborn are eventually vocally enthusiastic and optimistic. Shivana, similarly to other mothers in the texts under analysis, ends up claiming motherhood as a transformative, promising experience. However, Conception dies along with Shivana, seemingly rupturing this linearity. Then, the last few pages upend the characters' (and the reader's) expectations once again: not only does the unborn child hint that she will be conceived again, Shivana's consciousness survives as well. While a critic believes that "many readers will wonder what significance they should find in an abrupt ending that seems to rob the novel of its essential meaning" (Cart), I argue that the ending is apt since it allows the circularity inherent in the plot and in symbols such as the white head rag or music to not cease; in fact, both continuity and circularity are reinforced since Shivana is the first mother whose spirit survives and will possibly be reincarnated.[127]

Notably, her survival is facilitated by the need of Conception: in a feat of will, Conception refuses to let go and rescues Shivana. Her section ends with "Come on, Ma. Let's go" (274), and the next section begins with Shivana saying from beyond the grave, "And so I went. And haven't gone back ever since" (275). Shivana describes her funeral and even how other people remember her, noting that she and her child will move on to a better life or lives (275-276). Her voice thus acquires the quasi-omniscience characterizing Conception's earlier sections. In both of their stories, the duality of literal death and metaphorical survival trouble the line between life and death in a fashion similar to the ghost-story aspect of *Beloved*[128] and result in a parallel, non-Christian cosmology. Death and survival are intertwined to produce a curious mixture of rupture and continuity. Being conceived again and again and never being born, the unborn child stresses the pain of longing and being denied. She expresses her desire to be good and loved, but the fact that she is never born within the confines of plot, along with the images of broken and loveless families that populate the novel, suggests the inherent impossibility of the mother-child unity that keeps

[127] There are a number of hints that suggest an intergenerational connection between some of the mothers: Shivana reminds Conception of Yoshi (37-38); Darlene's family migrated to Mississippi from Georgia (107), and Tawana's family moved from Mississippi to New York (205), but there is no mention of Shivana's family living anywhere else but Chicago, that is, it is unlikely that the mothers are related to each other or are the reincarnations of each other, making Shivana the first to survive.

[128] Beloved also emerges from water while Sethe feels an uncontrollable urge to urinate—as if her water has broken.

cropping up in the 150-year span of *Conception*. This blend of the possible and the impossible points toward the im/possibility seen in several other mothertexts: becoming a mother is possible and impossible at the same time, deferred but looked forward to with a blend of unease and exhilaration, traumatizing and healing, denied and affirmed.

Another facet of im/possibility lies in a reversal of the roles of the mother and the child. Unlike in *Dessa Rose*, which features a prominent mother-narrator in charge of upholding a decades-long story, here the daughter is the narrator who tells the more comprehensive, multigenerational story, assuming the traditional role of the mother as story-teller. She is the one to guide her mother, not vice versa. Shivana is presented as the one needed to be guided and, essentially, manipulated into keeping the child. The child guiding and parenting the mother signifies the ultimate im/possibility: the impossibility of the mother to use her agential potential to guide and care for the child, and the possibility of the child to take control of both of their lives when she takes up the role of the mythical mother that would risk her life to save her daughter in Middle Passage. This constitutes a reversal that gestures toward the over-arching metaphor of the ever-present rupture and the fight for continuity that has characterized Black women's experiences and writing. As Alexis Gumbs notes, Black motherhood and Black family structures are always already non-normative and queered (*We Can Learn* 191); Buckhanon's novel presents a unique mother-child bond that underscores this idea. Shivana and Conception can even be regarded as co-protagonists: the former is the narrator and focalizer of what appears to be the main storyline, but Conception's quasi-memoir occupies a comparably significant textual space as well. The novel reconfigures the afterlives of slavery by foregrounding the (after)lives of the unborn child, which generate new possibilities and hope in the face of tragedies, thus shedding light on the duality of im/possibilities prevalent in the other mothertexts as well and demonstrating that the im/possibility of motherhood was not merely a tenet of enslavement but is very much a part of Shivana's life as well in the 1990s.

VI. The Volatility of the Weather and the Wake in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*

> Our eyes were scattered among T.V. images of
> So many poor, who without cars clung to interstate ramps like buoys
> young mothers starving stole diapers and bottles of baby food
> Our families spread as ashes to the wind after cremation
> Our brothers our sisters our aunts our uncles our mothers our fathers lost
> Stranded like slaves in the Middle Passages
> Pressed like sardines, in the Super Dome, cargo like on slave ships. (Salloy qtd. in Barajas)[129]

Jesmyn Ward's (1977-) second novel, *Salvage the Bones* (2011) received the 2011 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2012 Alex Award, and has been hailed as an exceptional fictional account of the 2005 hurricane Katrina (Hartnell 206).[130] Its setting is closest to the rural environment of *Dessa Rose*, while bringing into relief the topic of survival under harsh circumstances, similarly to such urban stories as *Push* or *Conception*. Along with Ward's two other novels, (*Where the Line Bleeds*, 2009, and *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, 2017) as well as with her memoir, *Men We Reaped* (2013) and the edited collection of essays *The Fire This Time* (2016), *Salvage* has helped solidify Ward's position as an eminent author of the South.[131] Studies have read the novel as a re-writing of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (S. Moynihan) or John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (B. Railsback), and have focused on its depictions of human and non-human embodiment (Clark), its utilization of memory (Henry) and the myth of Medea (Stevens), the characters' search for alternatives to the dominant Southern narratives of Black youth (Bülgözdi), and environmental injustice through the theoretical lenses of debility and slow violence (Bares). A special issue of the journal *Xavier Review*, dedicated to the work of Ward, demonstrates the extent of critical interest in *Salvage the Bones*, with studies aligning the novel's plot structure with that of apocalyptic fiction (Doble), investigating the human-animal relationships (K. Mitchell), and the liminality of Black girlhood (S. B. Washington). In interviews, magazine profiles, and the introduction to *The Fire This Time*, Ward herself has been vocal about what she considers the focal points of the novel as

[129] An excerpt from "Remembering that Katrina time & New Orleans" by Black poet Mona Lisa Saloy.
[130] On how *Salvage the Bones* compares to several other fictionalized Katrina-narratives, see Molly Travis's "We Are Here: Jesmyn Ward's Survival Narratives Response (sic) to Anna Hartnell, 'When Cars Become Churches'" (2016).
[131] She was awarded the National Book Award for Fiction in 2017 for *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, making her the only woman to receive this award twice (Canfield).

well as about her own authorial decisions and vision. While admiring the work of Faulkner and identifying Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker as literary figures she is indebted to (Hartnell 217), Ward insists on inscribing her Black characters into the Faulknerian literary master narrative of Southernness (Hoover; Brockes). Focusing on the theme of survival (Hartnell 213), she wishes to emphasize the long-lasting, structural problems owing to Southern white supremacy (Allardice) and to honor Black people both in her fiction and non-fiction (Ward, "Cracking the Code") by centering the otherwise dismissed and misunderstood Black girl (Allardice) and acknowledging the vulnerability of all Black children (Ward, "Introduction"). Ward has also been clear about her formative personal experiences as a survivor of Katrina (Hoover). She modeled both the physical environment and the community she depicts in her novels after her hometown, DeLisle, Mississippi (Briger), and she emphasizes the importance of these surroundings on characters such as Leonie in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* or Esch in *Salvage* (Hartnell 212).[132]

The reason the novel has sparked such diverse responses is a testament to the potency of its subject matter: depictions of a family living in deep poverty during a national tragedy has captured the interest of the general readership and academia alike. *Salvage the Bones* traces the Batiste family's experiences with hurricane Katrina in the fictional coastal town of Bois Sauvage, Mississippi. Four children—Esch and her brothers, Junior, Skeetah, and Randall—live with their alcoholic father in a derelict building on an isolated plot of land called the Pit. As they anticipate Katrina, Esch realizes she is pregnant by Manny, a local boy who only shows sexual interest in her; after the hurricane makes landfall and the family survives, Esch affirms her pregnancy. Since the Batistes already live in poverty and isolation, the novel allows for the potent illustration of how Katrina exposed racism, but the focus is not the oft-criticized state and federal response to the natural disaster and its aftermath; rather, *Salvage* zooms in on the newly pregnant narrator. Following Katrina, the literal meaning of the wake intersects with its metaphorical meaning as understood by Christina Sharpe, that is, the acute, tangible danger of the hurricane is imposed on the chronic, quotidian state of being a Black (pregnant) girl in an already poverty-stricken region. The weather, as used in its metaphoricity by Sharpe, refers to the unceasing, normalized, and pervasive climate of anti-Back racism (90), which Katrina, a literal weather event, both exposes and exacerbates. Weathering is also present in the sense that is used by Geronimus: the gradual harm to the protagonist's body, caused by years of inadequate nutrition, healthcare, and stress. The

[132] For an overview of Ward's attitude toward her authorial choices including the ones to rely on ancient mythology in *Salvage*, see Stevens 159.

novel thus juxtaposes the literal and metaphorical meanings of (the) weather(ing) to an even greater extent than Walker's "The Abortion", and examines the interlocking effects of both short- and long-term, psychic and corporeal, natural and social, catastrophes.

The following chapter demonstrates that while Esch's pregnancy is a significant plotline, it is decentered through the novel's narrative design; instead, several other mother figures are foregrounded and utilized as catalysts that foster Esch's understanding of her motherhood on the one hand, and throw into sharp relief her position as a single, poor, Black teenager in a masculinized environment on the other. Through the examination of the kaleidoscope of maternal figures against the backdrop of constant interpersonal, or abstract, linguistic violence, I argue that Esch copes with the weather—in both its meanings—through fixating on several fragmented maternal figures but cannot escape the degendering and dehumanizing aspects of being in that weather, which, as I demonstrate, ultimately frames her im/possibilities as a young mother.

Literal and Figurative Mothers

Esch's mother dies shortly after giving birth to Junior seven years before the main events of the plot; however, her absence is felt continuously and her memory lingers. Not only do smells, situations, objects, and physical touch trigger Esch to remember her, but since Mama was a centripetal figure in the family, Esch is also reminded of her care by the dilapidation of the house. Mama facilitated changes around the home by either fixing what was broken or initiating small projects that increased the comfort of the house: she insisted on installing a screen on the front door (10), crocheted blankets (11) and decorated the bedroom with candles and photos (134). After her death, Randall—the oldest brother—and Esch care for the newborn and do most of the housework. First, their father reminds them that it is time to do the laundry, then they do it when the sheets are unbearably dirty (179). Instead of fixing the sagging clothesline Mama used to tighten, Randall and Esch let their newly washed clothes touch the dirt outside after hanging them out to dry (179). These descriptions of dirty clothes and linens reinforce Mama's significance as a homemaker: her death not only upends the existing family structure and thrusts two young teenagers into parenting roles, but it results in the yard and house getting less and less comfortable and even habitable, while the fact that the dirty sheets make their skin itch evokes the lack of bodily comfort of the children as well. The sudden trauma of her death leaves a wake that is destructive not only in its immediate effects but accelerates the weathering of the family members and their surroundings.

Even though she is mostly remembered for her acts of care, the circumstances of her death also inform not only Esch's life as a daughter but her sense of self as an expectant mother. Esch witnesses her giving birth to Junior at home, and her agony lives on vividly in Esch's imagination. She thinks the struggle against the baby killed her (4). Experiencing the mother's absence and witnessing her suffering are compounded by the knowledge that Esch's grandmother, Mother Lizbeth, gave birth to eight children, all of whom died before their time, Esch's mother being the last one to pass away in her early thirties. The ambiguous structure, "Mama, the only baby still living out of the eight that Mother Lizbeth had borne, died when having Junior" (14), does not clarify when her aunts or uncles died, but her use of the word "baby" implies that the children died young. Losing her grandmother, then her own mother, and having hazy memories about them thus ties loss and suffering to motherhood in Esch's imagination.

Despite Mama's constant presence through the memories of Esch, there is a slippage of stable meaning associated with her as well. Mama often told the children to "stop being orner" (*sic*, 25), and Esch upholds this practice and thus steps into the role of her mother by often repeating this to Junior without understanding that her mother meant "ornery." There is a discrepancy in how Esch remembers the details of Junior's birth: either Mama "never screamed" (221) or she "screamed toward the end" (1). She watches as her father drags her mother out to the truck to take her to the hospital and sees the trail of blood she leaves behind. Before they drive away, the mother maintains eye contact with her children and shakes her head, which Esch, at the intersection of being a daughter and a mother herself, struggles to interpret: "Maybe that meant *no*. Or *Don't worry—I'm coming back*. Or *I'm sorry*. Or *Don't do it. Don't become the woman in this bed, Esch*, she could have been saying. But I have" (222, emphasis in the original). Skeetah recalls these events differently and believes the mother said goodbye to them (222). On the one hand, the siblings' differing versions attest to them being heavily traumatized by the sight of their dying mother. On the other hand, misunderstandings and misremembering stand in stark contrast with Esch's imperative to salvage her mother's legacy, underlining the impact of her mother's memory—and especially the fragmented nature of that memory—on Esch's motherhood.

While Randall and Esch emerge as Junior's primary caretakers, Skeetah finds another preoccupation and becomes a quasi-parent to his pitbull, China. Esch often perceives Skeetah and China's relationship as almost romantic when China only has eyes for Skeetah (2) and is like his woman (3). They even seem like equals to Esch: he sleeps curled up next to the dog on the shed floor in anticipation of the puppies' birth (3), and the intimacy between them leads Esch to conclude

that when Skeetah and China look into each other's eyes, he looks like a dog (193). Esch maps a loving father-daughter dynamic onto Skeetah and China (98), but since he goes to great lengths to secure China's food, medicine, and a safe living environment, he fulfils a traditional maternal role as well. His gentleness reminds Esch of their mother as well: "He wakes China like Mama used to wake us" (115). He endangers his health and even his life in order to steal medicine for the dog from a white family, and spends all his money to buy her quality dog food while the family starves. Again, these acts of care and sacrifice align him with the gendered selflessness traditionally imputed (or rather, prescribed) to mothers, so much so that he has been identified as a quasi-maternal figure (Keith).

However, Skeetah's affection toward China is rooted in valuing her not as an equal partner or a beloved child—as Esch's descriptions would suggest—but as a tool that serves Skeetah's interests. While claiming to cherish her, he facilitates dogfights that endanger China's health and life, yanks her chain repeatedly, and forces her to walk and exercise when she can barely stand up (87), all supposedly for China's benefit. Skeetah forcing China to exercise can be interpreted as a desperate and loving attempt to help her recover: he accidentally gives her too much medicine, and he insists that China walk because he wants to make sure she recuperates. Nonetheless, dragging her, yanking her chain, and forcing her to jog for miles in the heat seems excessive and less-than-compassionate to the onlookers (118). The pattern typical of his controlling behavior is reminiscent of an abusive partnership, in which affection is deployed strategically: when coaxing her to fight viciously, Skeetah rubs her lovingly and whispers to her gently (171). Their dyad also mirrors an abusive parent-child dynamic in which the parent enjoys vicariously the praise given to the child. The qualities of China that Esch often refers to (her whiteness, cleanliness, and strength) contrast with the decay in and around the house, which suggest that what Skeetah values about her is her being out of the ordinary: he finds it appealing that she stands out from her environment, making him feel special in turn. Her oft-referenced whiteness also alludes to the color of cocaine—an expensive and rare commodity—(K. Mitchell 72), and to white skin color (Clark 356). Esch also likens it to the whiteness of magnolias, a symbol of white Southern culture (94). These allusions attest to China's status as a rare and valuable possession, and reinforce that she is prized because she stands out from her bleak natural and social surroundings. According to Ward, young men in the South often fight dogs for honor, not for money ("Q&A with Jesmyn Ward" 265), but possessing the dog in itself is valuable in this context. Having a well-fed, healthy dog is rare and thus a status symbol in the community; having China fight and win confers an even greater value

upon Skeetah too, giving him a chance at possessing something almost luxurious that makes him feel like he can transcend their condition.

The puppies accrue symbolic and monetary value alike. According to Keith Mitchell, they become "a symbolic extension of [Skeetah's] own sexual prowess" (71). In addition, he hopes to convert this contextual value to having monetary profit when he mates her in hopes of selling the puppies and speculates about their price (18). Partially, his hopes of monetizing the puppies stem from an obligation to serve his family: he promises to use the money to cover the costs of Randall's basketball camp. At the basketball game, however, Skeetah instigates a fight with Manny, costing Randall a potential college scholarship. The fight breaks out because Skeetah is enraged by Manny's insult and knows that Manny is the reluctant father of Esch's baby, therefore, his reaction is again connected to his family. However, part of the reason behind the fight is his need to assert his masculinity, further elucidating his wish for being a proud member of the community. Furthermore, by organizing a fight a week after the puppies are born and still nursing, he risks their chances of survival as well, which underlines that the social capital accrued by having an extraordinary dog is deemed more valuable than the money the family desperately needs. Skeetah's irrational, desire-driven decisions thus underscore that China occupies a primary spot in his libidinal economy, but only insofar as she enables him to stand out among his peers.

While critics tend to sidestep the problematization of Skeetah's relationship to China,[133] Esch sees and narrates the way he relates to the dog, which ultimately informs Esch's understanding of her own impending motherhood. While she is reassured by Skeetah saying that motherhood gives dogs (and thus women) strength to fight (96) instead of making them weaker, she witnesses him cruelly fighting the dog a week after she whelps. Although Esch does not reflect on China being analogous to an enslaved woman, a subtle parallel is certainly hinted at it in the text. Not only is China deemed more valuable as a mother, Skeetah even calls himself a breeder (21). While some of his behaviors (such as sleeping curled up next to China) align him with animality, by decrying that he is a breeder he distances himself from the animal and asserts his dominance over her. The moment China deviates from what is expected from her by refusing to feed one of her puppies, Skeetah lashes out at her by hissing "you bitch!" (40). His sudden burst of anger might stem from seeing a mother reject her child, which evokes the painful absence of their deceased mother, but it certainly reveals that his relationship to China is far from the idealized symbiosis

[133] With the exception of Keith Mitchell: instead of foregrounding Skeetah and China's relationship in terms of a familial parent-daughter one, he argues that they exhibit a typical male-female dynamic of mistreatment (69).

critics suggest. Esch sees China being respected on the surface but being bred, used for profit, and insulted with a female-specific word at the same time, which unwittingly perpetuates her lack of self-worth.

Independently of Skeetah, China also influences Esch's maternal identification process. In a crucial scene, Esch witnesses the birth of the puppies, which is described in mythical terms: Esch watches the seemingly supernatural forces that move China's body during this intense, physical event. Evident in her using the register of natural disasters or a violent confrontation, she conceptualizes the birth as an awe-inspiring yet threatening, primal experience: "Her sides ripple. She snarls, her mouth a black line. Her eyes are red; the mucus runs pink. Everything about China tenses and there are a million marbles under her skin, and then she appears to be turning herself inside out. At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming" (4), mirroring the image of the hydrangea that the newborn Junior resembles (2). The integrity of China's body is undone and her agency taken away when her skin ripples and her body moves as if due to a divine intervention (8) or "like she has caught the ghost, like the holiest voice moves through her (6). Through the death of Esch's mother's and China's suffering, labor thus takes on a destructive quality. China is also likened to Medea owing to her strength and because she kills one of her puppies, further reinforcing the link between wrath and motherhood.

Another maternal figure that has an impact on Esch's nascent maternal identification is the mythical figure of Medea. While she has personal experience with and memories of her mother, and observes the most powerful, embodied event of China as a mother, she only reads about Medea as a school assignment, resulting in a heavily mediated knowledge that nevertheless has a profound impact on her. The assigned reading, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* (1942) makes it clear that there are different versions of the myth, and Medea is more cruel and ruthless in one version (Ward 154), confronting Esch with a multiplicity of meanings and truths. The instability of Medea's and her own mother's stories mirror Esch's insecurity about becoming a mother, thus leaving her in a liminal space, without any stable point of reference. By identifying Medea as Greek and thus effacing her being a barbarian—that is, a member of a minority group—Esch marginalizes Medea's ethnicity (Stevens 163). Medea's outsider status could provide Esch with another point of identification, but the facet that captures her imagination the most is Medea's passion for Jason: as she grapples with her desire for Manny, she understands the mythical figure's anger. However, as Stevens points out, by not turning against her own fetus, she does not emulate Medea's violence when it comes to motherhood (159). The only incident in which she does follow Medea's example

is when she lashes out at Manny, but their short physical confrontation is but a desperate attempt to take charge of her situation: it ends with Manny walking away. The main function of the multiple references to the mythical story is thus to illustrate Esch's repressed intensity and lack of choices: while she marvels at Medea's resourcefulness and fury, she is trapped in an environment that restricts her agency.

As the family prepares for, lives through, and ultimately survives, Katrina, Esch wonders about the hurricane's maternal qualities. As she experienced an earlier hurricane with her mother and heard stories of one that happened decades earlier, she connects hurricanes and motherhood, but Katrina takes on highly metaphorical meanings as well. After Esch sees her mother and China in labor and reads about Medea, notions of force and devastation are enmeshed in her perception of mothers. The hurricane figures not only as a mother—"Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother … comes" (255)—but as birth itself, or as a force that facilitates birth. It is a transformative event not only because it is a life-threatening experience that almost destroys—or, at the very least, reorganizes—the family's and the community's living environment, but because it rearranges the family dynamic as well: as they are fighting for survival in the raging storm, Skeetah tells their father that Esch is pregnant. Katrina is thus a liminal, coming-of-age experience that uproots Esch's circumstances and thrusts her into motherhood, that is, it gives birth to Esch as a mother.

Katrina's power is conceptualized as bordering on the divine, elucidated by the metaphors of hands and grip. The first motto of the novel—"See now that I, even I am he, and there is no god with me; I kill and I make alive, I wound and I heal, neither is there any can deliver out of my hand" (King James, Deuteronomy 32:39)—evokes the Old Testament image of a God capable of vengeance and healing. The image of God's hand is mobilized to provide a contrast with Esch's powerlessness. Human hands, when not used for an instrumental purpose in preparation for the hurricane, are either tender or steady in the novel: Big Henry's big hands and touch epitomize his reassuring presence (255), Skeetah's hands pet China, Mama's touch the children lovingly, and Randall's hold Junior firmly and dribble the basketball masterfully. In contrast, the father's hands are unsteady and vulnerable to injury, as the ironically named chapter "A Steady Hand" evinces. Similarly, Esch's grip is posited as weak: her hands are injured, then unable to hold onto a tree branch and the bucket sheltering the puppies during the hurricane. She refers to Katrina's hand

multiple times,[134] aligning it with that of God, both being mighty and destructive. Using another Biblical reference, she asks in the eye of the hurricane, “Who will deliver me?,” quoting apostle Paul’s rhetorical question (“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”) in Romans 7:24 that references God’s mercy. Paul’s question is answered definitively in the following verse, not quoted in the novel: he believes that Jesus will save him. Esch does not have the luxury of such hope but still emerges from Katrina’s destruction with a renewed sense of hope and vitality, saying that the hurricane leaves the survivors as “newborn babies,” “puppies,” and “baby snakes” (255). She is endangered and salvaged by Katrina and by motherhood as well as by the members of her family. First, Claude pushes her into the water upon finding out about the pregnancy, that is, it is an angry *father* who puts her life at risk, recalling the “I wound” of the motto. Then, instead of a divine intervention, Skeetah lends her a hand, prioritizing his family over his dog (235). The twin images of life and death in both the Bible and the Katrina-related passages of *Salvage* thus conflate a divine power and a natural force in order to highlight Esch’s initial powerlessness and nascent sense of agency.

Juxtaposed to the maternal figures of Mama, Skeetah, China, Medea, and Katrina, Esch is the primary mother character in the novel. Her pregnancy progresses alongside the changes in weather: as the wind gets stronger, her belly grows and she considers her options. The family’s attempts to prepare for a hurricane mirror Esch’s struggle to cope with the changes in her body. Their father, Claude, who is otherwise depicted as a less-than-pragmatic, less-than-capable parent, makes rational decisions in anticipation of Katrina, but their financial situation does not allow for proper preparations. Esch’s plight is even more critical. While the slats are misaligned, the window is at least boarded up, and while their food stack lacks variety and nutritional value, at least they have enough food for a few days. Esch, however, finds that her “options narrow to none” (103) as a Black, teenage mother in a poverty- and disaster-stricken, rural, Southern environment, without a supportive partner or financial means. While the novel depicts various mother figures’ caring or fierce behavior, it does not evade another facet of womanhood in rural Mississippi: the lack of access to reproductive healthcare. After his accident, Claude is taken to the hospital where he is given antibiotics, that is, emergency healthcare is not altogether unavailable to those in Bois Sauvage, but quality reproductive care seems to be elusive.[135]

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[134] For example, “the arriving storm has put a strangling hand over the house” (218), “the hurricane enfolds me in its hand” (232), “my head bobs above the water but the hand of the hurricane pushes it down, down again” (235), and “Katrina is the mother we will remember until the next mother with large, merciless hands, committed to blood, comes” (255).

[135] On the inadequate quality and quantity of prenatal care given to Black women in Mississippi, see Cox et al.

Esch does not clarify the reason why "Mama didn't want to go to the hospital" when Junior was born (2), nor does she elaborate on the price of healthcare and Black women's history of medical mistreatment, but she experiences the lack of resources available to her as a poor, young, Southern Black girl. While she risks her own life to steal medicine for China and knows that Skeetah spends a disproportionate amount of money on the dog's wellbeing, her reproductive health suffers because of the inadequate quantity and quality of food the Batistes have access to even before she gets pregnant: her menses are often irregular because she chooses to starve over eating ramen and potatoes all the time (30). This effect of weathering is the very reason she is slow to realize she is pregnant; when she does, she has to steal a pregnancy test, in an act reminiscent of the siblings' scavenging for food or medicine (30). Considering dangerous ways to induce a miscarriage—similarly to Shivana in *Conception*—and being aware of her lack of options and limited agency, she muses:

> The girls [at school] say that if you're pregnant and you take a month's worth of birth control pills, it will make your period come on. … Only thing I wouldn't be able to find is the birth control pills; I've never had a prescription, wouldn't have money to get them if I did, don't have any girlfriends to ask for some, and have never been to the Health Department. Who would bring me? . . . These are my options, and they narrow to none. (102-103)

This passage also reveals the gaps in Esch's knowledge: like Precious in *Push* or Celie in *The Color Purple*, she is withheld crucial information regarding birth control. Sexual education was not mandated in Mississippi in 2005, and if a school chose to incorporate it, state legislation required that emphasis be put on abstinence as the primary form of birth control (E. Moore 7). The institutionalized reproductive racism directed at Black women is thus represented in an oblique way, its presence seen through its absence: the reader never sees how Esch directly interacts with these systems simply because she receives no relevant education and has no means of even going to a clinic.

Without access to legal and affordable abortion or even healthcare, the process of pregnancy cannot be stopped, that is, there is a parallel between the weather's ruthlessness and her body's changes. As the storm approaches, her body's signals become more unambiguous as well: her frequent need to urinate and vomit reminds her of the pregnancy even when she tries to forget about it (78). In anticipation of Katrina, she says, "*Tomorrow*, I think, *everything will be washed clean*. What I carry in my stomach is relentless; like each unbearable day, it will dawn" (205, emphasis

in the original), likening her pregnancy not only to the cycles of nature, but to the force of the impending storm as well. Water functions "as a multivalent, organizing symbolic principle" (K. Mitchell 75): Esch also draws a parallel between amniotic fluid and rainwater when she listens to "the watery swish of Junior inside" their mother's stomach during a hurricane (217). The association between water and birth is further reinforced when Esch says that Junior is the mother's last flower: a hydrangea (2). Nature, along with the Batistes' human-made environment, is depicted as unforgiving and less-than-habitable even before Katrina makes landfall. Even though being outside is favorable to being in the unbearably hot and dark, boarded-up house, there are frequent references to the unrelenting heat that exacerbates Esch's nausea. References to noises over which Esch has no control function similarly: rhythmic, unceasing hammering, hiccupping, or barking contribute to this atmosphere of imminent danger. They make Esch's discomfort emphatic and highlight the parallel between the immutable nature of both her pregnancy and her environment.

Volatility and Animality in the Pit

Comparably, numerous episodes of marked violence are woven into the narrative fabric, highlighting Esch's precarious condition. Apart from the easily identifiable, major events such as the landfall of the hurricane, the dogfight, the fight between Esch's brothers and their friends at a basketball game, or Esch's confrontation with Manny that are examples of overt force or aggression, there are frequent incidents in which violence takes a more subtle, sometimes indirect form. Several episodes serve characterization purposes or reinforce the lingering presence of the mother through memories. Esch's perception of the whelping in terms of a clash between China and an unseen force elucidates her tendency to think in mythical, poetic terms; Skeetah's indifference to the victims of a roadside accident highlights the singularity of his fixation on China and his disdain for white people; or Randall's care of Esch after she cuts her palm with glass sets him up as a patient caregiver whose touch triggers memories of the mother's gentleness in her, while his tenderness also throws into relief Manny's indifference toward Esch. However, other, seemingly more ordinary and randomly occurring events which are treated as a part of life are described in powerful terms that emphasize the volatility of the Batistes' circumstances. Esch sees the mating of the dogs as a particularly intense event: "When he and China had sex, there was blood on their jaws, on her coat, and instead of loving, it looked like they were fighting" (8). China and Kilo's mating mirrors the intensity of Esch and Manny's brief sexual encounter as well (144-

146). Allusions to violence and pain permeate Esch's consciousness: her blood turns the water into "a thick, brownish red," which Esch immediately associates with a scab (15); the male dog "ha[s] chunks of skin and flesh crusted over to scabby sores from fighting" and thus resembles "a big red [raw] muscle" (8); Manny's teeth are "white knives" (9); the father vomits forcefully (188); the rain looks like blood (82); even Skeetah's wounds are "angry" (84). The siblings shoot, skin, and roast a squirrel, the gore of which Esch narrates in graphic detail (47-48). Esch's cut, the mother's postpartum hemorrhaging, China's and the other dogs' severe injuries, the father's accident that results in him losing three fingers, and depictions of Medea's brother's death and dismemberment add to the underlying note of threat.

In this unforgiving environment, Esch and several other characters are likened to or conflated with animals.[136] The animal world is a constant point of reference due its proximity: they look at frog eggs in an effort to understand reproduction (24) and to hens to understand parenting (22); they hunt for food and often hear the hum of insects in the background. Some of the references to animals are intentional similes or metaphors that exemplify Esch's poetic sensibilities. "Seeing [Manny] broke the cocoon of my rib cage, and my heart unfurled to fly" (5) is an example that illustrates her unrequited desire for him and links the intensity and even violence prevalent in the narration with the promise of transformation that eventually happens at the end. More subtle examples, however, suture the family to the animal world, bespeaking their poverty and disempowerment. Junior spending hours under the house conjures up images of animalistic behavior in Esch's imagination: she wonders whether he digs holes in the dirt like a dog (5). Junior "slither[s]" under the house to find cans and bottles they can fill with water in anticipation of water shortages (5), Skeetah and Esch crawl, slide, and worm their way through the dirt next to insects and snakes before they steal medicine for China (69-70), and the mother gives birth in a "bare-bulb place" (2) just like the dog, that is, the Batistes' circumstances often force them to resort to practices that are outside the bounds of normative behavior. Furthermore, Esch speculates about the white population of the town: "I wonder if they have their own Skeetahs and Esches crawling around the edges of their fields, like ants under the floorboards marching in line toward sugar left open in the cabinet" (71). Identifying herself and her siblings with insects and not with their white peers signals her internalized sense of insignificance and marginal, less-than-human status; her non-being in an Afropessimist sense.

[136] For insights on how these intertwinings of the natural environment and the individual align with the trope of grotesque hybridity prevalent in the Southern literary tradition, see Clark 355.

Another, fleeting image of an animal is evoked through an allusion to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Esch gets an A on a test because she "answered the hardest question right: *Why does the young boy think his mother is a fish*?" (7, emphasis in the original). She does not repeat the answer here, nor does she draw an explicit analogy between the Batiste family's circumstances and the characters or plot of Faulkner's novel, but the image of the floating fish is crucial to her emotional imaginary. The boy, Vardaman, conflates the image of her dead mother's floating coffin with a dead fish he catches earlier, thus linking the dead, motionless bodies of both the animal and his mother. These images resonate in *Salvage* since Esch hears stories about dead bodies left in the wake of an earlier hurricane, and she herself almost dies when the water starts carrying her body away. She knows the answer to "the hardest question" because she is exposed to and understands the presence of death.

As Vardaman copes with mortality by asserting that his mother is a fish, so does Esch cope with the same loss through aligning her mother with a mother hen. When they look for eggs among the trees, Esch's mother blends into the surroundings, forcing Esch to use touch to be able to follow her (22). Mama tells Esch that the mother hen never goes far from her eggs: "*The cock, he always running off being a bully*, she said. *But the mama, the mama always here. See*?" (199, emphasis in the original). Esch is reminded of this in an emotional scene just before the hurricane hits and she and Skeetah reminisce:

> "You look like her. You know that?"
>
> "No."
>
> "You do. You not as big as her, but in the face. Something about your lips and eyes. The older you get the more you do."
>
> I don't know what to say, so I half grimace, and I shake my head. *But Mama, Mama always here. See?* I miss her so badly. (222, emphasis in the original)

This intrusion of memory not only attests to the mother's indelible presence, but reinforces the link between animality and the Batiste family's marginalized status.[137] The recurrence of "cross-species assemblages" thus blurs the line between human and animal (K. Mitchell 69) to underscore the multiple effects of structurally mandated inequality that excludes the family from mainstream white society and thrusts them to the fringe of the local community as well.

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[137] Another conspicuous use of animals is the employment of interspecies relationships to mirror and illuminate the problems in human relationships, as explicated by Keith Mitchell (62); see also the section of this chapter focusing on the Skeetah-China dynamic.

The passage quoted above allows for aligning the mother with tenderness—a rare quality Esch is constantly looking for in and around the Pit. Softly walking among the trees with the mother—and then with Skeetah and Junior—is a quiet, gentle moment amid the descriptions of blood, gore, and pain. Randall shows softness toward Esch when bandaging her hand, but otherwise, gentleness appears to be reserved for others, including Manny's girlfriend, Junior, China, and even inanimate objects: Esch watches Manny holding a basketball "like an egg, with his fingertips … tenderly as he would a pit puppy with pedigree papers" (9) and laments his lack of affection toward her. Entering into various sexual relationships with Manny and others offers her fleeting moments of being valued (16). Despite admiring Medea's and China's fierceness, she looks for manifestations of affection she lost when her mother died. The definite contrast between gore and tenderness reinforces the scarcity of the latter, again underpinning Esch's precarious position in a volatile environment.

Destabilizing and Decentering Esch as a Woman

Through associating Mama with gentleness and remembering her dancing sensually with Claude, Esch posits her as a woman—a status not afforded to herself. While not only the mother, but even the hurricane and the dogs are gendered female, Esch is not. She wears the clothes handed down by her brothers (88), she thinks that her father often forgets that she is a girl (103), and instead of interacting with her peers—Black girls who live a few miles from the Pit—she watches them from afar. It is especially Manny's girlfriend, Shaliyah, who behaves and looks in accordance with feminine gender codes: she wears jewelry, a miniskirt, sits with her legs crossed, while Esch "sit[s] ungracefully in the grass" (118). To Esch, Shaliyah's self-presentation looks sophisticated, just like Medea's grace: she yearns to be "tall as Medea, wearing purple and green robes, bones and gold for jewelry" (170), but all she is left with is trying to rub Vaseline on her lips to make them glossy while being unsatisfied with her looks (137). Shaliyah being a Black teenage girl living quite close to the Batistes implies that it is not only Esch's race, gender, age, or isolation that foreclose the possibility of being feminine for her; rather, it is her poverty, masculinized community, and the lack of female role models in her formative years.

The gender roles within the family are also problematized. The Batistes are presented as being outside of the traditional, heteronormative, nuclear family norm, but they diverge from those female-centered, often rhizomatically organized structures that are prevalent in African American

literature.[138] Instead of relying on the trope of the absentee father and a single mother, *Salvage the Bones* centers a diffuse family. The father is often present but absent at the same time, exhibiting a "hands-off," neglectful approach to parenting (S. Moynihan 558). Randall and Skeetah are somewhat outside of the bounds of normative gender codes owing to their function as caretakers of Junior and China, respectively. Critics usually conclude that an alternative community forms around Esch, but specifically, it is a community made up of boys and men: even Big Henry, the only person outside the family who offers help to Esch and reassures her that "this baby got plenty daddies" (255), is a man. This figuration is already non-normative, and caring for and raising a child without a partner will eventually force Esch to accept and seek alternative, queered[139] forms of relationality. These forms could provide her with much more affection and material help than the frequent failure and dysfunction of the traditional family unit as well as her own disrupted family. Nevertheless, her present and possible future community is predominantly a masculine one.

The way Esch relates to sexuality is illustrative of her feelings of insignificance in this specific social environment. She has multiple sexual partners since age twelve, but she is often a reluctant participant (22-23). Regarding the advances made toward her by various local boys, she says that it is less complicated to "take it" than having to explain why she does not want it (23). Her wish to avoid potential nagging questions anticipates the verbal or even physical violence the rejected male partner would resort to. The comparison she draws between sex and swimming—an activity she otherwise finds effortless and calming—might suggest that she finds enjoyment in the brief encounters, but her pleasure is certainly fleeting. Claude teaches the children to swim by throwing them into the water—another episode in their childhood that elucidates his parenting philosophy partly borne out of the need to force the children to adapt to their harsh circumstances—and Esch thrives in the water: "I'd taken to it fast, hadn't coughed up the muddy pit water, hadn't cried or flailed … I'd pulled the water with my hands, kicked it with my feet, let it push me forward. That was sex" (23-24). Thus, the primary factor that sexuality and swimming have in common is not unqualified joy but a sense of effortlessness that results in feelings of temporary competence. Esch looks for the same ease but, without a partner who respects her desires and boundaries, fails to find it. She seeks out these experiences to feel like a girl at least temporarily (Green 133)—that is, to feel gendered at least to some extent. Her sexual behavior, then, is a cry for help and attests

[138] See *Push*, *Conception*, *The Color Purple*, *Corregidora*, *Beloved*, and many others.
[139] I use the term queered to refer to Alexis Gumbs's formulation of non-heteronormative, non-patriarchal family structures (*We Can Learn* 191).

to her lack of self-confidence, self-respect, and agency, which in turn stem from her young age and, above all, the male-centered sexual culture prevalent in the community.

Not only is Esch de- or misgendered, but she is decentered as well: the above delineated images of animals as well as her sexual behavior speak to her view of herself as an insignificant, marginal character in her own life. The narration confirms this as well: even though she is observant and sensitive, she barely speaks a few lines. The second motto of the novel ("For though I'm small, I know many things/ And my body is an endless eye/ Through which, unfortunately, I see everything"), taken from the English translation of a Gloria Fuertes poem, is an apt and compact illustration of this theme. The lyrical I informs the reader that she has observed how worms transform into butterflies "because insects possess a bit of magic" (Fuertes), then she reveals that "Eloisa Muro/fourth mistress of Cervantes,/was the author of Don Quixote." The motto sutures the images of insects, gender, and the hurricane ("an endless eye") to allude to Esch's internalized insignificance and her being in a position of an almost detached observer of her surroundings ("I'm small," "I see everything") who, like Eloisa Muro, both is and is not the author of a narrative. She narrates everyone else's story except her own: different animals, nature, the weather, their own and their grandparents' house, and the Pit are described in detail and even humanized. Her perspective might be central (Doble 58), but she herself is not. The tension between Esch being the eloquent, poetic narrator and her invisibility highlights that she marginalizes herself even further because her own insignificance is ingrained in her. Comparably to Precious in *Push*, she is not only invisible to mainstream society, but is on the periphery of her own family and community; as she says, "where my brothers go, I follow" (53). As "she resides between her mother's death and her own life" (Green 132) and thus occupies an interstitial position between being a daughter and a mother, she hopes motherhood would bestow her with agency, and indeed, this happens to an extent: she undergoes a minor transformation. In demanding Manny to look her in the eye during sex, Esch finally expresses her need to be seen as a partner; tellingly, however, Manny panics and leaves her alone after realizing she is pregnant (146). Slowly, her voice begins to sound more confident; as she asserts, bringing back the image of a hand: "I'm surprised at how clear my voice is, how solid, how sure, like a hand that can be held in the dark" (229). This comparison, in accordance with all the previous mentions of touch, suggests that both the impending catastrophe and motherhood allow her to have a grip suitable for both gentle and steady touch. The last four words of the novel—"I am a mother" (197)—suggest that she is beginning to transcend her marginalized condition by attempting to *hold on* to the heavily limited agency afforded to her.

The third motto and its extended context, however, thematize the limits of Esch's 'grip.' Following the Biblical quote emphasizing God's authority and the Fuertes quote centering someone "small" in awe of the unavoidable, the third one connects these perspectives by specifically alluding to Esch's predicament as a Black teenage mother. The lines "We on our backs staring at the stars above,/Talking about what we going to be when we grow up,/I said what you wanna be? She said, 'Alive'" are taken from the song "Da Art of Storytellin' (Part I)" by the Black Southern—Georgian—hip hop duo OutKast, thus, this motto puts forward the contemporary and somewhat regional, culturally specific literary realm. The full lyrics relate the stories of two young women, one of them being an abused, pregnant drug addict who dies of overdose. Years after she speaks the quoted line, "she got found in the back of a school/With a needle in her arm, baby two months due" (OutKast, Lyrics to "Da Art (Part I"). The extended lyrics thus reference not only the vulnerability of Black youth in general, but the defenselessness of Black girls and young mothers in particular. The next song on the album, "Da Art of Storytellin' (Part II)," though not referenced in the mottos, chronicles an apocalyptic storm the victims of which scramble to salvage what they can while likening the abused Earth to the female body selfishly used for sex, which echoes Esch's sexual practices, and, of course, Katrina. The focal images of the mottos thus illuminate the intertwining of the mythological, the intimately personal, and the cultural layers, as well as the interplay of the micro and macro lenses the novel employs, thus allowing not only for heightening the aesthetic effect achieved in *Salvage*, but illustrating the ambiguity of the seemingly triumphant and positive ending: even though the Batistes survive—which is a feat at a time when hundreds of people of color died because of Katrina—they still remain in a precarious position.

In conclusion, Esch affirming the pregnancy offers some comfort to the reader and to Esch, but, as Bares argues, Ward's ethos of narrative ruthlessness precludes the possibility of a truly satisfying narrative resolution (36). Esch finds some reassurance at the end of the novel when she claims that China, who has been carried away by the water, will come back and know that Esch has indeed become a mother, a fighter (258), but her fantasy of impressing China again misplaces *her* and centers a figure of reference outside of herself. Without a maternal figure with whom Esch can fully identify and who can guide her through the process, she is desperate to align herself with a mythical character, a dog, and a weather event. The mythical and the down-to-earth intersect: she scavenges for food and witnesses China give birth, which is set against the constant presence of memories and Medea's story. Tangible and intangible maternal models meet and are superimposed on each other, relegating Esch's own experiences to the margins. Her pregnancy is juxtaposed with

various episodes of marked intensity or violence, leading her to think of childbirth as a traumatic and violent event that is as unstoppable as a force of nature. The ambivalence regarding the mother's last words, the tension between the various extant versions of Medea's story, and China's muteness throw into relief the unknowability of the past and the 'truth,' while the unfoundedly optimistic belief in China's return highlights the similar instability of the future. These are rendered unavailable, impossible to reconstruct or access, further stressing the epistemological uncertainty that compounds the existential precarity Esch as a young mother is forced to navigate.

The impossibility inherent in her options narrowing to none is not dissolved by her optimism, which, due to the severe impact Katrina had on Black mothers in the extradiegetic world, appears to be unfounded.[140] Moreover, if we read the family's experience with the hurricane as the Middle Passage as suggested by Tara T. Green (139),[141] then a parallel emerges between the wake of the Middle Passage—enslavement and non/being—and the wake of Katrina, which entails a similar degree of non/being. By simultaneously centering and decentering a character and imbuing her with a sense of fragile optimism while making her face "skewed life chances," *Salvage the Bones* mobilizes the im/possibility of Black life and motherhood to portray the impact of the systemic denial of dignity to Black mothers that frames Esch's self-perception. The volatility of the weather is also foregrounded: the literal sense of weather, through the impending hurricane, intersects with its metaphorical meanings through the debilitating, weathering effects of the racist social climate that consigns the Batistes to the Pit. The wake of the hurricane and the wake of slavery thus coalesce to produce a uniquely vulnerable position for Esch and her baby, in which the restorative potential of her decision remains in question.

[140] The specific, post-Katrina plight of Black mothers has been the subject of multidisciplinary scholarly analyses; studies (for example, Manove et al. or Reid) conclude that the majority of survivors were indeed traumatized and displaced to such a degree that it caused considerable psychological distress and existential difficulties that affected their mothering even if they later experienced post-traumatic growth.

[141] Apparent in, for example, the similarities between the slave ship and the attic where the family tries to survive, with both being enclosed, tight spaces in which Black bodies are confined and set to drown (Green 139).

VII. Conclusion

"'History' is often no more than who holds the pen at a given point in time. I hold the pen now, and that is what authenticates me and my children." (S. A. Williams, "Lion's History" 258)[142]

The following conclusion demonstrates the connection between the mothertexts, elaborates on their shared features, and, relying on the trope of im/possibility, examines how the subcorpus enters into dialogue with some of Afropessimism's tenets.

This dissertations is based on my contention that not only the approaches to portraying early motherhood is to be attributed to the afterlife of slavery but also the conspicuity itself with which this topic is present in fiction written by *and* about Black women since the 1980s. On the one hand, the original trauma of forced pregnancies, mother-child separations, desperate infanticide, etc. has reverberated in the African American imagination for centuries but outlets for its expression were framed and limited by socio-cultural and literary conventions. On the other hand, contemporary circumstances mirror those of the Antebellum period to a degree, as put forward by, among others, Hartman or Sharpe, resulting in texts, such as "The Abortion" or *Salvage the Bones*, that illustrate the enduring, systemic effects of anti-Black racism. These conditions align to produce a subcorpus of post-1980 Black female-centered fiction that zooms in on the figure of the new mother and addresses her joys and struggles in no uncertain terms. While many prose works around the turn of the previous century by Black women such as Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper are said to interrogate notions of racial inequality at the expense of characterization, and mid-century novels turn to portraying the everyday struggles of complex protagonists, the maternal subcorpus that began emerging in the 1980s merges the micro-level of its characters with social commentary. The reader is introduced to how the characters perceive the embodied feelings of such fleeting moments as quickening or the first nursing, or how they struggle with personal decisions regarding their bodies or relationships. At the same time, the texts investigate the (often corporeal) ramifications of existing in the protagonists' respective anti-Black environments and how the individual relates to her community or society as a whole, thereby reflecting on large-scale social issues as well.

The writers of the mothertexts under analysis and their characters face unique struggles that differ even from those of other minorities. The dissertation relies on the Black-and-white binary not because it wishes to suggest that blackness or whiteness are absolute or immutable categories;

[142] Sherley Anne Williams on attempting to disrupt mainstream historiography with *Dessa Rose.*

nor does it attempt to erase or trivialize the adversity faced by other (racial, ethnic, gender) minorities. Rather, this approach intends to acknowledge that it is predominantly white mainstream feminism that has delineated what issues and perspectives are worth studying when it comes to mothers and has framed our understanding of such issues. Another fact that undergirds the need for this binary is that the protagonists of the selected texts identify or are identified as Black, while the people around them (whether they are merely mentioned or have a significant role in the story) are usually white, and there is a definitive power imbalance between the Black and the white characters. The texts approach topics such as re/production, contraception, the disruption of the family unit, or breastfeeding from a different vantage point than other feminisms, thus reflecting on the singularity of the Black female experience. Were she not Black, Angel would think differently about her own body; Precious would have greater chances of getting adequate help and might even have the relative luxury of musing about and rebelling against her medicalized childbirth; or Dessa would not have to spend weeks in a cellar waiting for her execution. Their circumstances frame how they perceive their motherhood; thus, Blackness, through (the afterlife of) slavery, impacts the ways these young mothers make decisions regarding becoming or staying pregnant as well as navigating the bodily and psychic ramifications of early motherhood.

Even though the temporal frames of the works span centuries and the nature and degree of racism's manifestations may have changed from the times of Dessa to those of Esch, Black studies scholars usually agree that the factors influencing the Black (female) experience are subtended by the same ideological constructs. Black feminist scholars caution against imagining Black women and mothers in monolithic terms, however, they maintain that the racism and sexism embedded in American society are pervasive to the point that they *tend* to make a mark on Black women's lives even if said women live under diverging circumstances, as seen in the mothertexts as well. A way to contest this always already post-traumatic condition is wake work (Sharpe 17), which, as I argue in the chapters, is performed by the characters in various ways: most often by keeping and caring for an unplanned and initially even unwanted baby (as in *Push*, "Harvest," *Conception*, and *Salvage the Bones*), choosing to terminate their pregnancy (as in "The Abortion"), keeping together or reuniting their families (as in *Dessa Rose* or *Push*), or joining or actively shaping a family or community that can become a site of their rejuvenation, safety, or identity construction (as in *Dessa Rose*, *Push,* or *Salvage the Bones*). In the process, they are viewed or view themselves through the lens of those destructive stereotypes that have shaped the general public's perception of Black

mothers (see the evocation of the angry and dangerous Black woman, the Mammy, and the Matriarch in *Dessa Rose*, or the Welfare Queen and Urban Teen Mother in *Push*, among others).

The dissertation establishes a clear line from works with more direct approaches of portraying slavery to ones relying on its subtle evocations, but within this continuum from Dessa to protagonists such as Angel or Esch, there is a striking similarity between the mothers: Imani is the only adult, with Angel in the liminal position of being a college student, but Dessa, Precious, Shivana, and Esch are young teenagers.[143] A reason behind this remarkable similarity is manifold: it allows for a more potent illustration of the plight of Black women through focusing on the most vulnerable group; it sheds light on the disruption of Black childhood and especially girlhood; it highlights the difficult dual position of those mothers who are children themselves and grapple with the feeling of not being wanted or valued by their parents, communities, or society (such as Precious, Shivana, or Esch); it comments on poor sexual education practices in schools (see esp. *Conception* and *Salvage the Bones*); it sets the stage for subverting the stereotypes that target young girls and women; and, of course, it reflects the extradiegetic reality of the age difference between first-time mothers belonging to different socio-economic groups and races.[144] What I term early motherhood in the introduction—as spanning from conception until breastfeeding—thus seems to gain another meaning by referring to the mothers' ages. Further directions of study might follow up on other narrative ramifications of this age differential.

Beside their age, there are few common features these characters share. As far as their socio-economic background is concerned, most—but not all—are destitute: Dessa is enslaved, Precious and Shivana live in impoverished urban ghettoes, and Esch lives in a poverty-stricken rural area on the verge of starvation. Angel is in a liminal position not only because of her age but due to her status as a college student as well: she comes from a working-class background and hopes her education will provide her with job security. Imani is an exception here too: her comfortable middle-class status ensures that she does not lack basic necessities. However, as argued in the respective chapters, financial means are no guarantee when it comes to either corporeal suffering or the effects of a wider white supremacist environment. Even though the protagonists' experiences

[143] In *Conception*, Yoshi and Darlene are teenagers as well.

[144] For data on the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic disparities in the timing of childbearing, see Sweeney and Raley's "Race, Ethnicity, and the Changing Context of Childbearing in the United States" (2014). Based on the meta-analysis of studies spanning several decades, they conclude that "racial and ethnic gaps in teen childbearing, nonmarital births, and the extent to which a birth was intended by its mother clearly persist throughout the social background distribution … This suggests that the racial and [ethnic] differences in these key aspects of childbearing behavior are not fully explained by social background" (544).

with motherhood stem from the intersections of their circumstances, Blackness is the determinant with the most profound impact on it.

Regarding plot development in the mothertexts, as elucidated in the thematic chapters, becoming—or not becoming—a mother is a primary decision or process that drives narrative development and adds further dimensions to all the stories. While later stages and various forms of motherhood are discussed in many mothertexts, significantly, it is early motherhood that is present in all of them. Dessa's decision to rebel and escape is largely motivated by her pregnancy, as is her confinement in the cell and interrogation by Nemi. The birth of her son occurs at a pivotal moment—during an escape that impacts the entire course of the plot. Seeing a white woman nurse Dessa's son influences Dessa's understanding of her racially stratified environment; similarly, talking about motherhood and remembering her own mother, in conjunction with the feeling that she should assume a maternal position to keep the memory of her deceased family members alive, contributes to her growing sense of self. Therefore, Dessa's journey toward becoming a narrator would not take place without her being a mother. Comparably, the pregnancies and childbirths of Precious are the primary drivers of the plot in *Push*; without them, her trajectory of enfreakment and unfreakment would take on a different shape. Observing and rejecting her pregnant body or nursing her son, for example, are moments that fundamentally affect her self-image and thus her willingness to accept Rain's imperative to *push* later on. While the failure of a marriage, the inability to communicate, and the memory of a deceased member of the community are central issues in "The Abortion," the plot hinges on Imani's (lack of) maternal identification and her desire to get an abortion. "Harvest" would be a fascinating piece of social commentary on the economic and corporeal aspects of egg donation even without the protagonist's pregnancy, however, the latter event and Angel's indecision increase the emotional stakes and allow for a wider-scale commentary on issues of Black motherhood. *Conception* is structured entirely around the unborn Black child and the factors that connect her mothers-to-be. Lastly, what makes *Salvage the Bones* a compelling and intricate story is not merely its focus on Katrina, but its allusions to Katrina being a mother, heightened by the protagonist's pregnancy and her eventual decision to keep the baby while also drawing a connection between the perils of the hurricane and those of motherhood. Therefore, the pregnancies, childbirths, abortions, nursing, and even the decisions to become or not to become a mother drive and structure the plots to the extent that without these events, states, or attitudes, the narrative arcs would dramatically differ from their current state, or these stories as such would be unrecognizably different without them.

As the mothertexts are embedded in the larger history of Black women's writing, they have ties to several traditions. Notably, some mothertexts invoke the tradition of slave narratives, albeit to a limited extent. Most protagonists experience (a sense of) being trapped, examples of which include the literal captivity of Dessa, Imani feeling stuck in her marriage, Precious feeling confined in her apartment and neighborhood, or Shivana and Esch feeling restricted to their environments. The narratives often involve a literal and/or figurative journey in the hopes of greater 'freedom,' which is most prominent in *Dessa Rose*, *Push*, and *Conception*, with Imani, Angel, and Esch having more of an inner trajectory. Family separation, episodes of (sexual) violence and danger, and descriptions of living circumstances also abound in many mothertexts. This is not to say, however, that all of them should be considered neo-slave narratives; instead, they borrow some tropes potentially in order to undergird the legacy of slavery and Black women's writing. Similarly, some mothertexts can be categorized as belonging to speculative fiction: apart from *Conception*, the very premise of which is based on reincarnation and a sentient fetus, *Dessa Rose* is also often labeled as an alternate history novel—a genre under the umbrella of speculative fiction. The popularity of speculative elements in Black women's slavery-focused and mother-centric writing is further evidenced by Octavia Butler's oeuvre, especially *Kindred* (1979), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1998), and Yvonne Battle-Felton's *Remembered* (2020). It also reflects the popularity of the Afrofuturist aesthetic, which allows for the imagination and exploration of the possibilities of a different future. Investigating the mothertexts' relationship to these and other bodies of fiction would undoubtedly prove to be a worthwhile scholarly endeavor.

As argued at the beginning of my literature review, for centuries, Black women's writing was influenced by the strictures of decency that have been increasingly transformed as literary conventions changed; accordingly, the mothertexts are overt regarding the *embodied* aspects of pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, and nursing. These strictures might be a reason for the often graphic nature of representation that foregrounds topics and lexis formerly considered taboo. Every mothertext refers to a plethora of intense, bodily sensations or states, sometimes using explicit language: Dessa's baby's kicks are a source of pleasure (60) but then the baby appears to be pinching the lining of her uterus during childbirth (88), and breastfeeding hurts but then soothes her (89-90); Precious describes her "pussy" as "torn" from giving birth (124); Imani feels as if her tendons are being cut during the abortion (71) and her throat contracts when she is reminded of it (65); Angel feels queasy and muses about her period being late at the onset of her pregnancy (69-70); Shivana describes in detail the sexual encounter during which her baby is conceived (15-16),

while Conception narrates the deaths of her mothers vividly, including references to Darlene's bleeding womb (118); and finally, Esch dwells on her frequent need to urinate and vomit because of her pregnancy (78). The gaps in Elizabeth Keckley's "I—I—became a mother"—quoted in the literature review—are thus substituted with overt details pertaining to the pain and the pleasure of early motherhood. Both the proliferation of such details and their often raw, explicit wording are thus new developments made possible by the changing social, theoretical, and literary landscape typical of the end of the 20th century.

As attested by the literature review, a definitive line can be drawn from all the pre-1980s works to today's mothertexts when it comes to their scope of representation as well. The difference between these two groups of texts is of course not necessarily qualitative: the earlier works are not to be dismissed for conforming to the social and literary conventions of their day; in fact, many were revolutionary for their subject matter or style. However, I argue that the developments related to explicitness and rawness are in tandem with the widened scope of representation, both being welcome changes. Many Black authors and feminists argue that one of the possible functions of fiction is to make sure that even individuals or groups on the margins of visibility are represented and can *be* and *feel* seen: Sherley Anne Williams asserts that "there was no place in the American past I could go and be free . . . I now own a summer in the 19th century" because *Dessa Rose* exists ("Author's Note" 5); Sapphire notes that several readers have expressed their astonishment to read about a girl—Precious—who resembles people they know or teach but seldom see represented (Wilson and Sapphire 35); or Kalisha Buckhanon argues that Shivana and her friend "look like those girls people never bother to look at" (Bets and Buckhanon). Thus, fueled by an often explicit desire or drive on the part of the authors to be more representative of the real-world experiences of a wide range of Black mothers, the mothertexts are able to give voice to a previously relatively silenced section of the United States and thus do provide a bigger range of women textual space in which they can feel 'at home.'

Another trait connecting the mothertexts is their emphasis on the maternal body in pain, which throws into relief the question of the ethics of representation. While many characters feel at least a fleeting sense of contentment with an embodied aspect of motherhood, references to bodily suffering abound, be the pain sharp or dull, acute or chronic, brought about by or 'only' accentuated because of pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, or nursing. Trauma, loss, death, and violence are also often referenced even when the story ends on a somewhat optimistic or ambiguous note. As Jennifer C. Nash claims in her upcoming book, *Birthing Black Mothers* (2021), the Black maternal

body has tended to be only represented as a site of trauma and a reminder of Black suffering, loss, and death, but focusing on the Black mother as someone perpetually in crisis ultimately reproduces the harm done by white supremacist power structures since it prevents these mothers from being seen as multi-dimensional individuals and precludes the possibility of characterizing Black motherhood as a site from which triumph and joy can also emerge. Portrayals of Black pain, whether artistic or documentary, cater to the voyeuristic gaze of (predominantly) white audiences, retraumatize those Black individuals who read or watch them, and efface the personhood of those portrayed (E. Alexander; Tillet; also see the arguments by Hartman, Debra Walker King, and Houston A. Baker, Jr. referenced in the chapter on *Dessa Rose*). Therefore, Nash's assertions reverberate with calls for expanding Black representations both on the page and the screen: it has been argued that if the Black American experience is diverse, it should be rendered artistically in a similarly diverse way, with ample space for images of Black people who are not victimized and tortured (Blake; Gay). Nevertheless, the tendency to portray traumatized characters remains relevant due to a political, social, and ethical impetus to highlight the social inequality behind Black people's, including mothers', experiences—an impetus this dissertation is also driven by. Accordingly, the aim of the dissertation is not only to reinforce the artistic merits of the works under consideration and analyze them through a Black studies framework, but to elucidate the mothertexts' relation to other avenues of systemic anti-Black racism spanning from medicine to the publishing industry as well as to contemporary forms of resistance, thereby joining the ever-growing body of anti-racist work.

The mothertexts bring into relief the im/possibility of Black motherhood that stems from the Black experience as described by Afropessimists: if slavery involves natal alienation (Patterson 5-7) and is a condition entailing social death and banishment from ontology (Wilderson, *Red, White and Black* 18), then the Black woman is left with impossible choices in an ever-hostile environment that stresses and traumatizes her before she even considers becoming a mother. The main novelty of this dissertation lies in identifying and tracing this trope of im/possibility in the subcorpus. While all the stories have endings that are carefully crafted to instill a sense of optimism in the reader, I demonstrate that they also reflect on the im/possibility of Black motherhood: even though the mothers do forge a unique path for themselves that may leave them with a sense of contentment or even euphoria at the conclusion of the plot, a consideration of the gaps in the texts reveals the disruption and impossibility of Black motherhood. Kevin Quashie's claim that "the Black mother cannot be a good mother and can hardly be a mother at all" (66) thus means that in spite of the

regenerative possibilities that becoming a mother may open up, impossibility is still very much a part of the reality of the characters, as corroborated by either the respective narrators' overt reflections on a racist and misogynistic environment or subtle clues in the descriptions of the diegetic world. The characters fight for their 'being' in a society or community that fails to acknowledge their humanity, thereby facing not only im/possibility but those interstitial modes of un/freedom and non/being that I touch upon in the chapter "Theoretical Underpinnings and Method." Through a process in which motherhood plays a crucial part, they all eventually claim their right to being, which is not to say that their respective environments will also unanimously recognize their humanity.

The fact that some characters stake a claim to 'being,' acquire narrative authority, carve out agency, or shape a community around them seems to be at odds with some of the axioms of Afropessimism, which holds that the Black individual is excluded from civic life, is always a ghost-like figure on the periphery, or, at the very best, the Black body is interesting so far as it is in pain or sexualized. Indeed, Wilderson argues that it is impossible for our current Western white supremacist society to fully recognize the Black person's personhood. Hartman considers it "obscene" to celebrate the political "agency" and "autonomy" of subordinate groups in a "terrorizing state apparatus," against the backdrop of "the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries" ("The Position of the Unthought" 185-186), that is, she cautions against taking comfort in the existence of an optimistic narrative and a redemptive historical paradigm that emphasize developments in the area of, for example, civil rights. She does permit, however, that a degree of personal (if not political) agency might exist even in bondage (*Scenes* 6), and acknowledges the individual or communal efforts of those who were excluded, dismissed, or relegated to the margins yet rebelled openly and lived unconventional, "wayward" lives ("A Note on Method" in *Wayward Lives*)—that is, in lieu of structural change, smaller-scale initiatives do exist and survival does take place. In a similar vein, Jared Sexton maintains that there *is* Black social life and inner life that is lived outside of or against Black social death ("The Social Life" par. 15); in fact, he urges a move away from the "oft-noted dialectic of slavery and freedom" and toward conceptualizing Black social death and Black social life "less as opposites and more as conditions of an impossible possibility" ("Ante-Anti-Blackness"). Other Afropessimists also concede that there has been *some* change, for example, Sharpe asserts that "the means and modes of Black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain" (14). Sharpe also asks what is it that survives social death, exclusion, and non-being (14); her *In the Wake* project hinges on the note of

survival that exists at the same time as social death and ontological negation, the resistance that exists in the face of immanent and imminent Black death, and the possibility that exists at the same time as impossibility, which is exactly the ambiguity I aim to capture in my dissertation. To return to my earlier examples, Dessa acquires narrative authority—she comes to consider her story worthy of being told, retold, recorded, and remembered—but she is fully aware that it will be questioned, dismissed, or misunderstood by those outside of her loved ones. Yet, she looks for possibility in the face of this impossibility. As explained in the thematic chapters, the narrators express or at least hint at the possibility that the characters' newly found or forged agency, self-image, or sense of triumph might be questioned by their white supremacist environment at any minute. Thus, while there exists a certain degree and kind of personal agency that the characters can acquire or a community they can build or join, according to Afropesissimism, these will always be limited, incomplete, transitory, fleeting, or in potential danger—different from what those in civic life can have. The conclusions of the thematic chapters point toward this in-betweenness that comes about when something survives an ontological negation, and what the mothertexts' characters are left with is un/survival, non/being, and im/possibility. In the process, lexical instability abounds: for Hartman, the word 'agency' (whether political or personal) is corrupted, compromised, and limited at best, becoming just as fraught a term as 'will' or 'freedom' (*Scenes* 6); comparably, Sharpe contends that there is a slippage in the meaning of 'mother' or 'girl' when they encounter "blackness's signifying surplus" (80), Sexton suggests that relationality and sociality take on new meanings ("The Social Life" par. 15), and Spillers argues that words such as 'gender,' 'body,' and 'pleasure' "are thrown into unrelieved crisis" ("Mama's Baby" 76). Racial slavery has permanently disfigured such seemingly transparent terms; it follows that terms such as 'hope' and 'possibility' also become qualified.

Im/possibility also pertains to how the mothertexts relate to the literary canon on the whole. Afropessimism questions the existence and the very possibility of linear progress for the Black person and the Black community; in fact, Black studies in general has troubled the Western notion of time and suggests that it does not offer the same linearity and historicity to Black people as it does to the majority. The narrative I seem to chart appears to take Black women's writing from almost complete silence and silencing to a more stable place in the literary canon, which implies that progress has taken place in a neat, linear fashion over time. Black women's writing did attain a place in the literary canon, and the literary establishment and mainstream culture do recognize Black women more and more, a phenomenon that has even been dubbed a literary renaissance

(Greenidge). Therefore, there is a degree and kind of literary and academic recognition and interest that Black authors can get. Indeed, Afropessimism itself has been described as popular with a large following and established professors who are now in-demand speakers (Olaloku-Teriba). This is not pure 'possibility,' however. Rather, a facet of im/possibility also applies here: while Black authors are published, taught, and even celebrated today, in the main, they are not recognized and validated to the same extent as their white counterparts.[145] While some authors or genres are popular, many feel that they are rewarded only if they conform to the expectations to write yet another "ghetto story" or to represent yet another oversexualized, suffering character speaking in in the vernacular.[146] Moreover, Black literary renaissances are ephemeral, and critics already ask when the current one will end (Greendige). Undoubtedly, it would be naïve to assume that racism has vanished from the establishment and the readership, that is, while the "means and modes" have changed, the "fact" remains.

Still, there is an on-going cultural shift in the representation of the Black maternal body not only in literature but in contemporary media and popular culture as well. Indubitably, the visibility of Black women and mothers has increased in the past decade both in visual art and in the media but with a marked difference to the mothertexts: a striking number of these visual representations celebrate positive images of Black motherhood. The pregnant and postpartum bodies of Black superstars such as Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, Kerry Washington, and Serena Williams have been proudly shown and celebrated both in public and on social media. Through a uniquely 21st-century phenomenon, these subversive performances of motherhood put the Black body on a pedestal instead of the scaffold; and more and more Black celebrities are making their public appearances

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[145] See So and Wezerek for recent examples on anti-Black racism in publishing, including the racial pay disparity that affected Jesmyn Ward even after she won National Book Award, or the small number of people of color working in publishing, which is believed to be correlated with the number of works published by people of color: Random House published a higher number of Black authors during Toni Morrison's tenure as editor and significantly fewer before and after. Moreover, some publishers allegedly tokenize works by people of color and only publish a few such titles a year in order to appease critics who would label them racist otherwise (see the comment "We already have our Black girl book for the year" in So and Wezerek). See also "Where is the Diversity in Publishing?" for the data of a 2019 survey of diversity in publishing, McLaughlin for racial bias in scholarly publishing, and "'A Conflicted Cultural Force'" for examples of overt or covert racism targeted at Black authors, editors, or literary agents. A few promising developments, however, include the popularity of books on race and racism; a more diverse cohort of junior staff in publishing; the high ratio of literary prizes awarded to people of color, including Black American authors; the existence of publishers or imprints that focus on Black literature, for example, HarperCollins's Amistad, or Hachette Book Group's Legacy Lit (So and Wezerek); and various anti-racism initiatives, fellowships and mentorship programs for people of color (McLaughlin).

[146] See Percival Everett novel, *Erasure* (2001), which satirizes *Push*, criticizes the publishing industry's interest in Black 'pathology,' and indicts American culture for its inability to imagine Black life outside of stereotypes. A similar point was made as early as 1950 in Zora Neale Hurston's "What White Publishers Won't Print."

and social media posts an integral part of their own, hypermediated narrative.[147] Further analyses focusing on transmedia narratives such as visual albums with accompanying music and lyrics might shed light on the cultural neuroses and stereotypes surrounding gender and race through the lens of motherhood; an analysis of how these 21st-century works problematize the legacy of slave auctions, freaks shows, and the minstrelsy would undoubtedly prove to be fruitful, as would representations on screen. The clear line from *The Cosby Show*'s (1984-92) well-known and 'perfect' TV mom, Clair Huxtable,[148] to the contemporary, much more varied images of Black women and mothers in major networks' primetime TV shows created by and starring people of color also testifies to the nascent resemioticization of the Black maternal body and early motherhood.[149] While the protagonist of *Push* is tormented by images of svelte and light-skinned Black bodies who look nothing like her in the media, Gabourey Sidibe, the actress starring as Precious in the film version, has played a glamorous music industry professional on TV, which is but one example that testifies to the changing landscape of bodies deemed 'screen-worthy' without being over-sexualized and exploited. In sum, apart from the maternal subcorpus analyzed here, several other works by Black women have been essential in resisting the reigning political ideology by inscribing counter-narratives into the master-discourse of Black womanhood and white America. They all shift the gaze of white mainstream culture by attempting to normalize and re-appropriate control over how the Black female/maternal body and experience are visualized and

[147] On how Serena Williams's 2017 *Vanity Fair* cover photo Signifies on Demi Moore's earlier (1991) one, and how Beyoncé's shows and social media photos fuse Catholic iconography with subverted notions of the Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes, see my paper "Sztereotípiák metszéspontjában" (2018).

[148] Huxtable was the first Black mother on screen with whom even white women found it easy to identify (Douglas and Michaels 104-106). See also Imani M. Cheers's *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses* (2017).

[149] Examples from primetime TV shows intended for mainstream audiences from the past few years include characters undergoing abortions on *Scandal* ("Baby, It's Cold Outside") or *Empire* ("Sweet Sorrow," with Gabourey Sidibe as the pregnant woman); an imprisoned woman being in labor and forced to give her child up for abortion on *Empire* ("Of Hardiness is Mother"); a character nursing her child and accidentally leaking breastmilk on *Grey's Anatomy* ("Blink"); a character suffering from postpartum depression on *Black-ish* ("Mother Nature"); and several characters on *New Amsterdam* facing difficulties with breastfeeding and VBAC (vaginal birth after C-section), and a teenager who is fat-shamed, disconnected from her pregnant body, and talked to using medical jargon, resembling Precious's case—in fact, an entire episode of this primetime drama on a major network was dedicated to the the issue of medical racism affecting Black women ("Catch"). (*New Amsterdam* is somewhat of an exception here: while this episode was written by a Black woman, it was directed by a white woman and the show's creator is a white man, differentiating it from the other shows used as examples here, which prioritize the work of Black Americans.) *Scandal* and *Grey's Anatomy* were created by Black television mogul Shonda Rhimes, who is single-handedly responsible for the post-millennial ubiquity of these varied images. See Maryann Erigha's "Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal*, and the Politics of Crossing Over" (2015) for more on Rhimes's impact. The preponderance of Black mothers in products primarily made for Black audiences is even clearer, especially when it comes to daytime programming and characters who are not in the early stages of their motherhood; see for example Tyler Perry's oeuvre and the programming of BET (Black Entertainment Television) or of the Oprah Winfrey Network.

narrated, and enable the representation of Black mothers who are joyful and competent—parallel to the still-existing images of Black mothers that focus on their ridicule and shaming.

As Black female- and mother-centered fiction and other types of art are entering the mainstream, attempts by Black women to "hold the pen" and thus inscribe their version of history into official accounts are becoming more and more successful. Sherley Anne Williams's act of holding then pen entails holding a claim to selfhood—the selfhood that, according to Alice Walker, was denied to Phillis Wheatly—and even to a room, that is, to the circumstances in which one can write, as demanded by Virginia Woolf. Many Black feminist thinkers and Afropessimists, however, caution against being overly optimistic and argue that instead of being involved in a linear progress narrative, African American people are still enclosed in a space of non/being and un/survival very much reminiscent of enslavement. Williams might hold the pen and authenticate herself and her children, but the extent to which her efforts indeed make history and truly disrupt historiography can be debated. In other words, Black women's literature, including the works of the subcorpus delineated in this dissertation, still occupies an in-betweenness—an im/possibility.

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