THE OPEN WOUND: WRITING BLACK FEMALE BODIES

by

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Abstract

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This study explores the various methods that black women writers use to depict the black female body in pain. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* theorizes that pain has a language-destroying power and that it often defies expression. Thus, I will argue that in endeavoring to express pain, the writers examined in this study utilize the creative process to work around the barriers presented in the effort to express pain. I discuss various creative approaches that the writers under discussion take up and what results from those approaches. Works examined in this study include: Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*, Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora,* Edwige Dandicat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*. The collection of writers that I have assembled for this analysis write the black female body into visibility, narrativize the history of black women's bodies in the West, and illustrate the difficulty in expressing black women's pain.

This project will take on a multi-genre approach which includes drama, novels, and non-fiction prose by black women writers. I not only intend to analyze the function of the written word in these works, but with respect to drama, I will analyze how the black female body is presented on stage. Also, I will explore how non-fiction deepens our

understanding of fictive works. A multi-genre approach allows for an understanding of how black women's bodies are depicted from several vantage points. In addition to analyzing various approaches to expressing pain, I will consider how these works prompt deeper thought on various theoretical notions such as: the difficulty inherent in rendering experiences of pain into language and the implications of doing so, and whether or not there is potential for healing the historical wounds by grappling with these experiences of pain.

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Introduction

In the final chapter of Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*, Florens' mother explains her powerlessness in protecting her from slavery. She relates her own rape, of which Florens is a product, and says that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (163). I am intrigued by the conflation of black female identity, the body and the wound in this passage largely because many works by contemporary black women writers employ similar metaphors, in many cases portraying the black female body as a wounded body. When I began this project, I primarily desired to gain insight into how black women writers treated the black female body in their fiction, specifically in terms of how they were responding to and transforming various representations of black women's bodies and black womanhood. In my exploration of this subject, I noted that physical pain featured prominently in representations of the black female body. The centrality of physical pain in these portrayals call up several questions: What role does the depiction of physical pain play in the depiction of the black female body? Is this portrayal necessary for depicting the black female body? Is the depiction of pain productive and if so, what is being produced? What is there to be learned or gained in witnessing the painful experiences of black women, particularly as they relate to historical narratives rendered in present contexts?

The works that I have selected for this project provide fertile ground upon which to grapple with these questions. I intend to analyze how black women writers use various methods of expressing physical pain in order to bring about new representations of black women's bodies and new understandings of black womanhood. The collection of writers that I have assembled for this analysis write the black female body into visibility,

narrativize the history of black women's bodies in the West, and illustrate the difficulty in expressing black women's pain. Also, while some writers offer the potential for reconciling black women's historical pain and healing the subsequent wounds, others represent this pain as inexpressible and leave little possibility for reconciliation.

One important work that contributes to the theoretical framework of this project is Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Scarry's insights on language and pain are very informative when thinking about just how one goes about expressing physical pain. She notes that a key characteristic of pain is its unsharability, that "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human makes before language is learned" (4). She also argues that there are political consequences in not expressing pain[1] (14) and that achieving an expression of

[1] With respect to the political consequences of not expressing pain, Scarry says, "The failure to express pain – whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body – will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation" (14). Thus, expressing pain works to challenge the power of those invested in denying that pain. This is especially true for black women whose pain has been historically disavowed.

physical pain "eventually opens to the wider frame of *invention*"(22). Scarry frames invention in the context of belief, ideology and the way we experience the world; however, writers such as Robbie McCauley, Toni Morrison, Jamaica Kincaid and others examined in this project offer important new vantage points when considering what is invented from expressing physical pain. In this context, language serves as the primary tool of invention in terms of representing pain both formally and aesthetically. The black female body becomes visible through language; correspondingly, black women's pain becomes voiced and legitimized. Creative expression thus overcomes the language destroying nature of pain.

While Scarry's work presents useful ideas for my analysis, it does not thoroughly consider how race and gender play a role in the expression of pain and certainly the nature of that pain. She offers examples of physical pain that include pain from torture during war, disease, etc. but when we consider the black female body as perpetually unprotected – historically subject to rape and violence at any moment – we must consider the psychological components of that pain in a different way. Analyzing the black female body in pain presents an important perspective which enhances our understanding of the creative process emerging out of the act of expressing physical pain. Doing so expands Scarry's work to consider a particular kind of invention, motivated by those previously subjugated; additionally, it demonstrates how selfhood is constructed from this specific kind of pain. What emerges from the texts that will be analyzed in this study is a humanized representation of the black female body, a depiction that also highlights not only the physical effects of the systemic pain black women have endured but also the psychological aspects of this pain.

With respect to race, pain, and the body, bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* cites James Baldwin's claim that "'there has been almost no language' to describe the 'horrors' of black life" (2). hooks later states that "the young black male body is represented most graphically as the body in pain" and that "black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives" (34). Interestingly hooks does not make a similar claim regarding black women. Her discussions of black women and representation in the work are largely grounded in the sexual exploitation of black women and the lack of revolutionary black female figures and thought in our discourse. I agree with hooks that the black male body too has unaddressed pain, that this pain is systemic and has a deep impact on the black male psyche. It is a project equally worthy of analysis as the one in which I am thus engaged. However, there is great silence on black women's physical pain, particularly the violence visited upon their bodies on multiple levels.[2] Throughout their history in the West, black women were central to maintaining the slave system – functioning as laborers, child-bearers, and bodies that could be freely abused through whippings and sexual exploitation. Rarely is this history of abuse or its implications acknowledged, even within black communities.

Rather, notions persist of black women as sexual bodies (and in many cases asexual), superhuman, and insensitive to pain. One particularly salient example of the

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[2] Although hooks' *'Ain't I a Woman'?: Black Women and Feminism* touches upon the history of physical pain inflicted upon black women, there is no sustained discussion of this and the implications involved in the silence around it.

diminishment of black women's pain is a news story cited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson in their introduction to *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*. They cite a May 1998 story in the *Indianapolis Recorder* in which two black women and two white women engage in a physical confrontation where both parties become injured. The police charge only the black women with battery because they find "no evidence of injury on the bodies of the black women" whereas the white women's flesh showed visible bruises and bite marks (Bennett and Dickerson 1). In this case, we see in a very literal way the invisibility and the delegitimizing of black women's pain. However, this is but a present example of the long history of disavowal of black women's pain.

Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* sheds light on the historical lack of acknowledgement of black women's pain established in white Western discourse by early modern English writers and slave owners as justification for the "theft of bodies" during slavery (Morgan 15). A remarkable example of this characterization is the narrative of explorer William Smith, noted in Morgan's text. In his description of the African women he encounters during his voyage to the Gold Coast, he mentions being told that "A Negroe Woman, [. . .], has been deliver'd of a Child i[n] less than a Quarter of an Hour, and in their Labour, they use no Shrieks or Cries; nay the very same Day it is customery for the Lying-in women to go to the Sea-Side and bathe herself, without ever thinking of returning to her Bed" [sic] (45). Significantly, Smith's furtherance of the notion that black women experience no pain in child birth and immediately resume work thereafter, renders black women's bodies as unnatural and superhuman. The denial of pain establishes a foundation for future

representations of black women in slavery, particularly the popular myth that they could deliver children and take to the fields the next day, suckling their children by throwing their breasts over their shoulders. These kinds of mythology also justify black female abuse and sexual exploitation.

Saidiya Hartman is also clarifying regarding this systematic disavowal of pain in her work *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. She explains the investment slave owners had in making the slaves appear pain-free and happy, particularly on the auction block. Slave owners used the tactic of "jollification," greasing slaves' bodies to make them appear more youthful and forcing them to display excess enjoyment in being a slave (38). Hartman argues that the disavowal of a slave's pain functions as a use of the slave's own body against him or herself (39). Hartman also relays the rhetoric by which slave pain was disavowed: "No the slave is not in pain. Pain isn't really pain for the enslaved because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly, the slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds 'our' own" (36). The depiction of slaves as happy, unfeeling, and immune to the experience of pain continues the troubling discourse of dehumanization.

Not only does Hartman offer the general rhetoric of denial of slaves' pain, she presents the story of Sukie, a slave who refuses to mask the pain of the auction block. As her teeth are being examined, she "pult up her dress an' tole de nigger traders to look an' see if dey could find any teef down dere" (40). Hartman explains that "Sukie's gesture to teeth down there, delineates the debasing exhibition of the black body as object of property, as it was common for bidders to feel between women's legs, examine their hips,

and fondle their breasts" (41). This scene highlights the level to which the dehumanization of black slaves occurs and it illustrates the particular case of black women slaves whose historical pain and exploitation receives limited critical attention.[3]

With respect to the image of pain as represented in photography and illustration, there are few visual depictions of black bodies, particularly black female bodies, in pain and this works to maintain the silence around this subject as well. This is true for the perpetuation of images of black women in general from the Western perspective. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams call attention to this lack of representation in their work *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*. They explain,

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[3]Although a focused study on black women's bodies in pain has not been produced, studies of black women's bodies have received increased scholarly interest and attention. Works such as: Michael Bennet and Vanessa Dickerson's *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, Kimberly Wallace Sanders' *Skin Deep, Spirit Strong: The Black Female Body in American Culture*, Robert Reid-Pharr's *Conjugal Union: The Body, the House, and the Black American* and Deborah Willis and Carla Williams' *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* have all made important contributions to the analysis of black women's bodies and their historical, literary and political implications. It is my hope to build upon the work of texts like these and to place myself in conversation with these writers as the study of black women's bodies continues to build.

> Nineteenth-century photographic images of black women are scarce. Western visual art offers precious few portrait studies of black women, no black heroines celebrated on canvas or in stone for an act of bravery, few gentle glimpses of a spiritual or intellectual being within the black female body. [. . .] Exotic but rarely exalted, the black female image frequently functioned as an iconographic device to illustrate some subject believed to be worthier of depiction, often a white female. When she appeared at all, she was a servant in the seraglio, a savage in the landscape, "Sarah" on the display stage, but always merely an adjunct. (1)

Thus, in large part, black women were represented from a minimally humanizing perspective at best. The paucity of these images highlight the relative invisibility of black women in visual representation. Furthermore, when they were visually represented, the depiction was often deliberately reductive. Willis and Williams make this point when discussing images of black women produced in the United States of America, stating, "In the United States a quite different image of the black woman developed [than ones in London and Paris in the late 19th century]. Antebellum America elevated the image of the nurturing, asexual mammy as the standard even as white males continued to systematically rape black women and breed new generations of slaves" (3-4). This is a powerful example of the erasure of black women's pain from societal view, a suppression that is foundational to the historic denial that such brutal acts like rape, beatings, etc. ever occurred in slave life. Elevating black women as asexual mammies or debasing them as jezebels, not only misrepresents their multifaceted identities, but also promotes caricatures of them that obscures their humanity and by extension their sentience.

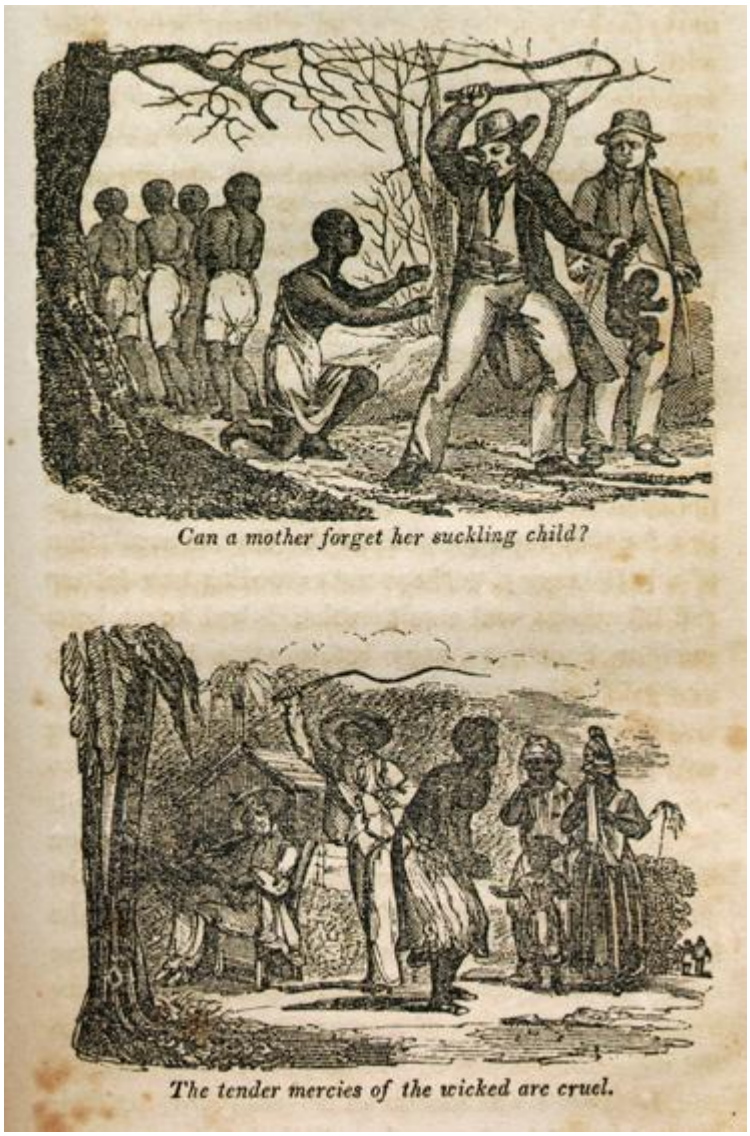
Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* provides a supporting perspective as to why the West, particularly the United States, perpetuates certain notions about black women and men that don't address the brutality they have experienced during slavery and beyond. She writes,

> Indeed, there is no Museum of the History of Slavery – the whole story, starting with the slave trade in Africa itself, not just selected parts, such as the Underground Railroad – anywhere in the United States. This, it seems, is a memory judged too dangerous to social stability to activate and to create. The Holocaust Memorial Museum and the future Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial are about what didn't happen in America, so the memory-work doesn't risk arousing an embittered domestic population against authority. To have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that evil was *here*. Americans prefer to picture the evil that was *there*, and from which the United States – a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history – is exempt. That this country, like every other country, has its tragic past does not sit well with the founding, and still all-powerful, belief in American exceptionalism. (88)

The image's power to provoke, shock, challenge, etc. offers opportunity to confront pain in a tangible way. It is important to present these images because they have been long suppressed and denied. If, as Scarry asserts, pain destroys language, the image depicting

the pain functions as an expression of it. The depiction of pain also serves as an undeniable representation of the brutality visited upon black slave bodies.

Considering the importance of visual representation in addition to the literary, the work, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* is significant in this context. Bibb presents the image of a female slave being beaten while attempting to nurture her child:



(Taken from Bibb)

In tandem with this image, Bibb contemplates the sad realities of his own wife and daughter who are slaves and laments over his powerlessness to protect them from physical and sexual violence. The use of this image functions as a compelling display of the horrors of slave life and it reveals the violence that endures beyond the person being abused. In this image, the child is also in the scene being torn away from his or her mother and is witnessing the mother being whipped. The child is a first-hand witness to this tragedy and likely suffers the trauma of witnessing as well. Not only does the image draw attention to the multiple levels of abuse in this instance, but it calls for a consideration of how pain can be passed down from one generation to the next, again illustrating the notion of the open wound.

Thus, this project will analyze the use of the visual most specifically in terms of the theatrical stage as well as other ways visual imaging is employed in fiction in order to represent what is often considered unrepresentable. Analyzing the use of the visual in representing black female pain allows for an exploration of how the writers under discussion re-present the black female body in a more humanizing perspective, thus making prominent her sentience. Also, these visual depictions of the black female body overturn the historical misrepresentations as referenced in Deborah Willis and Carla Williams' *The Black Female Body*. The dramatic stage in particular is an important site for re-presenting the black female body primarily because the image functions on multiple levels: 1) it calls attention to the black female as objectified; 2) it allows for new understandings about the implications of black women on display given its historically debasing nature; 3) lastly, it implicitly highlights the act of witnessing and allows for the possibility of reflection on the part of the audience. Because visual representation carries

such significance in the framework of drama, this project will examine how black women playwrights are using this medium in order to include their perspectives on how the black female body has been and is presented.

Another important aspect of visual representation that I will explore is the scar and its presence in black women's writing on the black female body. The scar is an important symbol because it stands as evidence of the body's pain. It speaks what is in large part unspeakable. Saidiya Hartman discussess the significance of the scarred slave body, particularly in the context of branding:

> WICS25 or T99 [branding marks] – no one wants to identify her kin by the cipher of slave-trading companies, or by the brand, which supplanted identity and left only a scar in its place. I'm reminded of the scene in *Beloved* in which Sethe's mother points to her mark, the circle and cross burned on her rib and says to her daughter, "This is your ma'am . . . If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you know me by this mark." The mark of property provides the emblem of kinship in the wake of defacement. It acquires the character of a personal trait, as though it were a birthmark. (*Lose* 80)

The connection between identity and scarring is notable here. The scar figures centrally as an identifier, a symbolic expression not only of a painful experience, but also a representation of the lack of protection slaves had over their own bodies and their status as property. Similar conclusions can be drawn from examining scars from the slave whip, which symbolize just as many things about identity as the slave-trading brand that marked many bodies of black female slaves. In the same way that the brand is used to

recognize a potentially unrecognizable body, the scars signify an inexpressible pain. The scar is the remnant of that experience.

In relation to this idea, Carol Henderson analyzes the scar and its role in the reinvention of African American subjectivity in her work *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature*. Her goal is to examine the "discursive ways in which African American writers recoup the African American body through a literary evocation of its physical trauma, thus reclaiming the essence of a selfhood fragmented under the weight of the dominant culture's gaze" (7).[4] Henderson

[4] Carol Henderson's work offers a very significant launching point for this discussion. In sum, her argument offers a holistic view of the scar and the black body in literature by using what she terms a "call and response" framework for her analysis. Her section entitled "The Call" sets forth the historical and literary overview of the conditions under which African American bodies were scarred. (9) She also examines how early works such as slave narratives sought for equal rights for African descendants and equal protection under the law (11). She then analyzes in "The Response" section various texts by African American writers, particularly Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Shirley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Ann Petry's *The Street* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Henderson's discussions, particularly on *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* provide important insight into the subject of pain and black women's bodies. She describes *Dessa Rose* as a novel that "posits the slave's narrative as a contested site as various 'interests' compete for the right to articulate *the* story of the bonded individual by claiming ownership of

asserts that the scar is alternatively a representation of wounding and a representation for healing (7). While this is an important argument, it is equally important to consider other uses of the scar as a narrative device. The scar gives individual pain its specificity, reinforcing the notion of pain's unsharability. Therefore the depiction of the scar in literature is the result of the process of invention. Where language fails, the scar speaks. While I will consider the scar's healing potential, especially its role in making the black female body visible, I also intend to contemplate the scar as representative of the limitations in representing the pain of others and potential impossibility of healing.

As we consider more deeply the presence of an open wound in the black female body politic, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's theories in *The Shell and the Kernel* on the phantom and transgenerational haunting are significant. The use of the open wound as

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the slave body" (67). She then goes on to argue that the struggle for ownership of Dessa's body is claimed by Dessa in her ability to conceal the scars around her private area and determine how she is represented to others in the text. The act of claiming ownership over her body and its scars then constitutes an act of ownership of one's body, an idea relatively foreign in slavery (79). Henderson then makes the linkage between *Dessa Rose* and *Beloved* in arguing that "Morrison takes Williams' literary exploration a step further: she makes her protagonists' story the center of a communal healing that must acknowledge its shared historical legacy" (82). Sethe's private pain then becomes a central expression of the pain of slaves in general.

a trope in the works examined here corresponds with Abraham and Torok's notion that "some people unwittingly inherit the psychic substance of their ancestors' lives" (Rand 166). Many of the works under analysis explore the idea of inheriting pain or of pain being passed down like an heirloom. These works theorize the implications of an unresolved past through their representation of wounding across generations.[5] Nicolas Abraham goes further to suggest that "the phantom is therefore also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (171). He also argues that "*The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other*" (175). These theories correspond to the works discussed in this project in two important ways.

First, Abraham's notion that the true haunting of the past is in large part due to gaps left within an individual as a result of secrets or omissions from the ancestor's life is explored in this study. In some way, each fictive work considers the notion of suppressed history and unaddressed pain for an ancestor. Undeniably, African American history itself is characterized by absences, deliberate omissions, etc. Jamaica Kincaid rightly states that in her view history is an open wound that "began in 1492 and has come to no end yet" (qtd. in Hartman - *Lose* 166). Kincaid's connection between the wound and unresolved history correlates with Abraham's idea of the gaps of history haunting the present. The works in the project suggest that the open wound persists due to the unresolved nature of this history. It is not until these gaps are acknowledged and expressed that healing can begin to be considered. Second, Abraham makes an intriguing

[5] See Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*.

correlation between the ancestral body and the individual body. The idea of the dead being buried within the other is a provocative expression of just how our lives are intertwined with those of our past. Works such as Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* specifically call for a consideration of the ways in which an ancestor's body and pain can be connected to the descendant's both physically and psychically. As a result, this project will examine how historical pain and psychological trauma is passed on to future generations, how the descendants negotiate these influences and what emerges from the works as a result.

Because representations of the black female body center around the visual, I will begin my work by examining how dramatic performance is a significant initial act in responding to the historically dehumanizing display of black women in the West. Additionally, because the dramatic works this project includes directly engage this history, they provide a foundation whereby we can enter this discussion. I will then consider other iterations of representations of the black female body in fictive works, specifically novels. In those works I will examine both the imagery and the implications of the scar and transgenerational wounding. It is my goal to move progressively, analyzing how the writers deal with this subject historically, literally and aesthetically, and how, in doing so, they give this pain a voice and acknowledgement that opens up the possibility for healing.[6]

[6] In *Black Looks*, hooks laments that "Sadly, in much of the fiction by contemporary black women writers, the struggle by black female characters for subjectivity, though forged in radical resistance to the status quo (opposition to

Chapter 1 of this project will focus on works that use history as a primary subject in order to address the foundational aspects of black female bodily exploitation in the West, particularly embodied in Saartjie Baartman ("The Hottentot Venus") and black women slaves. I will analyze Suzan Lori Parks' *Venus* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* because they take up key elements of this history and re-present them in contemporary contexts. Their works locate what I term the original wound because they deal with historical events that laid the groundwork in shaping how the black female body is viewed. My analysis of these plays will provide a framework for this project and introduce themes that recur in works by black women writers as they attempt to represent the black female body in the context of pain. A central idea that resonates in both works is the notion of resurrection, in which they both literally and metaphorically exhume the bodies of black women in order to fully engage with the subject matter. These works present the complex question of whether or not the pain visited upon the black female body can be redressed and if not, what are the implications of that for future generations?

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racist oppression, less frequently to class and gender) usually takes the form of black women breaking free from boundaries imposed by others only to practice their newfound 'freedom' by setting limits and boundaries for themselves. Hence, though black women may make themselves 'subject' they do not be come radical subjects. Often they simply conform to existing norms, even ones they once resisted" (47). My analysis uncovers a different perspective than hooks'. The collection of works that I examine presents multi-layered forms of black female subjectivity, which in many cases could be considered 'radical'.

Significantly, because these are works of drama, they provide a visual context that it is important to begin with since representations of the black female body are grounded in the image. The setting of the stage allows for contemplation of many overarching ideas of this project, particularly, the role of the audience as witness and the impact of witnessing, the jeopardy of reproducing scenes of pain and objectification, and the effects of confronting this long repressed history and giving voice to these unacknowledged experiences.

Chapter 2 continues an exploration of the ideas raised in the previous chapter, especially as they relate to presenting a visual image of the black female body in pain and the role this representation plays in legitimizing these experiences. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* are two works that make significant strides toward recognition. They do this by employing the scar as a visual representation of what has been lost to history. Building on Suzan Lori Parks' and Robbie McCauley's work, Morrison and Butler utilize their fiction to make the transformation of the black female body in pain from a dehumanized body to a sentient one. Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" will provide theoretical context for just how this transition can take place. Spillers makes an important distinction between the "flesh" and the "body," concepts which Morrison and Butler explore in their work. For Spillers, black women's bodies have been rendered as flesh in the Western imagination and this hinges on the idea that their flesh lacks sentience. Thus, moving away from that categorization to identifying black women in the context of a feeling body is an important step toward providing legitimacy to this long-denied history. In addition to analyzing Morrison and Butler's participation in this refashioning, I will also examine

how their works take Parks and McCauley's a step further by offering deeper consideration of the generational impact of this historical pain on future generations of black women. In both *Beloved* and *Kindred,* the descendants of this pain bear the scars as well. These works begin an important thread of inquiry concerning the notion of transgenerational haunting as discussed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok.

As Morrison and Butler explore the notion of how pain can be passed down, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* take up this subject matter primarily from the vantage point of the present-day descendants. Thus, Chapter 3 will examine the particular dynamics of the black female body as a metaphorical open wound. The female descendants in each novel bear suffering in direct relationship to painful experiences that occurred long before their existence. In this way, pain takes on the idea of inheritance. Cathy Caruth's work on trauma and memory is significant in helping to frame the issues raised in both narratives. I will employ Caruth's notion of "double-telling" as a way to discuss how traumatic memory can encumber not only the individual suffering from the original trauma but those who are made to bear witness to the memory in repeated fashion. Importantly, Jones and Danticat offer an alternative to traumatic fixation on painful events by taking the notion of double-telling and transforming it to testimony. In the sense that testimony is a tradition, particularly for African Americans, that can provide healing and positive relation to the individual telling the story, both works frame the telling of the story via testimony as a precursor to possible healing of the festering wound. The protagonists in both works present alternative methods for acknowledging historical pain while not being continually injured by the memory of it.

Chapter 4 is somewhat of a departure from the ideas that previous chapters raise because it deals with the issue of being cut off from one's history. In the previous chapters, the protagonists are deeply connected to the black female ancestors but in the case of the central figures in the texts examined in this chapter, there is a disconnect that causes us to consider how one copes with being made to feel the effects of a history they are disconnected from. This chapter will look closely at how Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* deal with this issue. Hartman expresses the overarching sentiment of this chapter when she writes, "I knew that no matter how far from home I traveled, I would never be able to leave my past behind. I would never be able to imagine being the kind of person who had not been made and marked by slavery. [. . .] There was no going back to a time or place before slavery, and going beyond it no doubt would entail nothing less momentous than yet another revolution" (40). Indeed, moving beyond the ambiguity of being at once connected and disconnected from one's history requires some form of revolutionary act in the case of the central figures of both works. Both writers employ autobiography as a way to capture the revolutionary potential of self-creation in the face of being disconnected from one's history. I will discuss how both works use autobiography as a way to tell the story of the self and others. In doing so, they liberate themselves from the negative implications of their respective histories. In Kincaid's case, she creates an "alterbiography," described by Jana Evans Braziel as a radical form of telling that transgresses boundaries of self and other, place, and time. In the work, the central character, Xuela, challenges the boundaries of autobiography and arrives at a radical creation of the self. Kincaid's work causes us to consider the potential

for healing that can come from self-possession and self-creation. Alternately, however, she highlights the difficult nature of such a task in the face of the long-term effects of the open wound of the black female body in pain. Ultimately, both Kincaid and Hartman point toward more radical strategies of negotiating the effects of the history of pain on the black female body. These strategies involve acknowledging the pain of one's history but attempting to move forward without being encumbered by that history. For better or for worse, the central figures in each work make efforts to employ such strategies.

By examining different approaches to expressing the black female body in pain and different responses to dealing with the open wound, this project points to the need for recognition of black female pain because it is an integral part of the healing process. Through various forms of expression, the works in this study utilize creative expression in order to present new perspectives on the black female body. These writers overcome the language limiting effects of physical pain which creates the possibility of healing both physical and psychological wounds.

Resurrecting the Black Female Body: Witnessing the Wound in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*

"The Court grants the writ of Habeas Corpus. Bring up the body of this female."

Venus – Suzan-Lori Parks

Perhaps no two images reflect the onset of the public display of black women in the West more than that of Saartjie Baartman "The Hottentot Venus" and black female slaves on the auction block. Happening concurrently, both displays presented the black female body as grotesque, subhuman – jarring in its vulnerability, debased in spectacle. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* bring the plight of these experiences to the contemporary stage, creating possibilities for a re-witnessing of these women's bodies in ways that cause their respective audiences to see them from multi-dimensional and humanizing perspectives. The stage becomes a space of transformation where black female pain is legitimized and given a voice. This is important, particularly in light of Elaine Scarry's assertion that doubt of another's pain serves to amplify the suffering (7).[7] Therefore, placing the focus on figures so central to the onslaught of the

[7]Jennifer Griffith's sheds light on this by citing Antonius C. G. M. Robben who says,

> "People cannot mourn their losses when others deny that those losses took place. [. . .] The contest of memory denies conflicting parties sufficient room to work through their traumas, hinders them from gradually standing back from the past and proceeding from testimony to historical interpretation and from re-experience to commemoration" (2).

objectification of black women in the West (women who reflect the open wound that resonates for many black women across generations), is a significant attempt at recognition, leaving little doubt as to the pain of this history.[8]

In order to represent this pain on the stage, Parks and McCauley utilize various theatrical devices which result in defamiliarizing perceptions about the black female

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[8]We can think of the experiences of Baartman and black female slaves as a kind of "founding trauma." Dominick LaCapra, defines this as "the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective and/or personal identity. The Holocaust, slavery, or apartheid – even suffering the effects of the atom bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki – can become a founding trauma" (724). LaCapra argues that "one may recognize the need for, and question the function of, the founding trauma that typically plays a tendentious ideological role, for example, in terms of the concept of a chosen people or a belief in one's privileged status as victim" (724). LaCapra has provided an aptly descriptive term for historical trauma's that have a specific foundation which reverberates across generations. However, I am using this term in a different way – not intending to bestow upon black women a kind of privileged victim status. The initial traumas of exploitation, rape, and other forms of violence experienced on the part of black women have both literal and figurative influence across generations and it is in this way that I acknowledge these experiences as the foundation upon which many contemporary painful experiences of black women harken back to.

body; additionally, they destabilize the audience's position as passive spectators through using forms of participatory theater in which the audience is asked to speak or move about while the play is happening around them. Daphne Brooks theorizes about these kinds of performative strategies in *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Her work highlights the ways that nineteenth and early twentieth-century performers used their bodies as a method of alienating their audiences in order to "defamiliarize the spectacle of 'blackness' in transatlantic culture" and "yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies" (5). Drawing her inspiration from Bertolt Brecht, who calls for actors to generate "'alienation effects' [in order to] 'awaken' audiences to history," Brooks terms these kinds of performances "Afro-alienation" transforming traumas of self-fragmentation into "dissonantly enlightened performance" (5). Parks and McCauley are driven by similar impulses and help us to see Brooks' ideas from the playwright's perspective.

One particular way that Parks and McCauley present a form of Afro-alienation, as it were, is through their use of the trope of resurrection. The notion of resurrection immediately disorients the audience and their perceptions on what is being witnessed. It also mediates the difficult line that the playwrights must walk in order to be careful not to re-objectify these already exploited bodies, something I will take up later in this chapter. To think of the body on the stage as "resurrected" prompts a sense of alienation on the part of the audience. It re-frames the body as exhumed, brought back to life, one that must be witnessed differently.

In addition to resurrection, the pained body on the stage is at once a mechanism for alienation of the audience and is itself alienated. Elaine Scarry describes pain as

having an annihilating power. She argues that intense pain has the power to destroy "a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. [It is also] language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content of one's language disintegrates" (35). The pain of sexual and physical assault, which largely characterizes the experiences of black female slaves and Saartjie Baartman, constitutes a form of destruction of the self. Not only are their bodies subject to abuse at any moment, there is no way to voice this pain and no one who deems them victims of the crimes inflicted upon them. Thus, the condition of these women is one of alienation. Their bodies are rendered abject and lacking sentience. Because of this, Parks and McCauley must contend with the challenge of representing these alienated and pained bodies in order to relate this experience on the stage.

Furthermore, Parks and McCauley take on different approaches to arrive at a similar end. For Parks, providing an alternative narrative to the various historical records on Saartjie Baartman's life is the primary objective. However, McCauley seeks to not only offer a counter-narrative, she suggests that the history of misinformation about the abuse occurring to black women on plantations has implications, not only for those who experienced this violence first hand, but for those who are descendants of those victims. Thus, while it is Parks' goal to focus singularly on Baartman and McCauley's goal to express a collective and enduring pain, both works address history and present in a visual and explicit way the pained bodies of women whose images have been lost to obscurity.

Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* tells the story of Saartjie Baartman "The Hottentot Venus" and her experience being exhibited in London, Paris, and posthumously in Museé

de l'Homme. Although much scholarship has centered on Baartman, little is truly known about the specifics of her exhibition and background in general.[9] Most accounts agree that she was born in Kaffraria, the interior of the Cape Colony of South Africa in 1788 and that around the age of 21 or 22 she agreed to work in England and Ireland for Alexander Dunlop and Hendrik Cezar, performing domestic duties and being exhibited publicly. She was exhibited at 225 Piccadilly in London from 1810 to approximately 1814 where she parted company with Cezar in Paris as a result of his selling her to a showman of wild animals named Réaux (Sharpley-Whiting 18). That Reaux's profession involves showing animals is illustrative of just how Baartman was exhibited and likely treated at this time. She continued to be shown as an object of curiosity in France until her death in 1815. Many accounts describe her exhibition as forced and that she was fed candies to entice her to leap about and sing (Sharpley-Whiting 19).[10] After her death, her body was dissected by Georges Cuvier, noted French naturalist who had, prior to her death, submitted Baartman to a three day examination in March 1815 (Sharpley-Whiting 22). Cuvier, in his attempt to contribute to the Enlightenment's efforts to establish the

[9] See Sharpley-Whiting pp. 16-31.

[10] A letter printed in an October 1810 edition of London's *Morning Post* states: "This poor female is made to walk, to *dance*, to shew herself, not for her own advantage, but for the profit of her master, who when she appeared tired, *held up a stick to her, like the wild beast keepers*, to intimidate her into obedience. . . " (qtd. in Hobson 40).

Great Chain of Being, presented his observations of Baartman's body before his colleagues, and through analysis of her steatopygia (or protruding buttocks) and her genitalia over which lay the "Hottentot apron," he likened her to the oranguatan in order to establish the black woman's position as the lowest human species (Gilman 85).[11] She became the archetype for the black female in the nineteenth-century. Additionally, Sander Gilman asserts that "the model of de Blainville's [another pathologist who examined Baartman] and Cuvier's descriptions, which center on the detailed presentation of the sexual parts of the black [sic], dominates medical description of the black [sic] during the nineteenth century" (88). As a result of her inhumane treatment during life and after death, Baartman became representative of the way blacks are viewed in Western countries like France, England and the US. Additionally, the fact that Museé de l'Homme had custodial rights to her remains reflected the ways in which the slave trade and colonization made black bodies objects of possession by whites in the West. The outcry to return Baartman's remains to South Africa grew and in 2002, she was repatriated to South Africa and received a proper burial.

[11]The Great Chain of Being sought to establish a hierarchy linking all living beings and organisms in the world. In this chain, scientists struggled to find a missing link between Caucasians and other organisms. They determined that savages, particularly African savages constituted this link. Baartman's body was used in order to substantiate this as Sander Gilman explains.

Parks' *Venus* is inspired in large part by the 1814 vaudeville play *La Vénus hottentote, ou haine aux Francaises.* [*The Hottentot Venus, or the Hatred of French Women*] written by Messieurs Théaulon, Dartois, and Brasier. The play was designed to present a sharp contrast between Saartjie Baartman and French women who were threatened by French men's intense curiosity in Baartman. The play, in depicting Baartman as a savage, correspondingly elevates French women as objects of erotic desire. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting notes, "Baartman's symbolic presence acts as a mirror, legitimizing existing notions of the superiority of France and the inferiority of the Other. A savage and primitive image of Baartman governs the piece. And as an image, she does not speak. She is, therefore, spoken for" (37).[12] In both the reality of Baartman's existence and the fictional representation of her in this play, she is voiceless and presented as a beast, less than human. The play is sure to emphasize the grotesque nature of her buttocks and seeks to make shameful the enjoyment in gazing upon her.

With respect to the gaze, Sharpley-Whiting notes that one other goal of the play was to re-direct the French male gaze (bound up in power, domination as well as mystery and desire) from "black women (embodied in the objectified Saartjie Baartman) [. . .] to white female bodies" (34-5). Although the play focuses primarily on the French male gaze, it is also important to consider the French (and English) female gaze that is also at play in Baartman's display. While Baartman is primarily an object of desire and sexual curiosity on the part of men, this play also figures her as a threat whose encroaching body

[12] See Sharpley-Whiting pp. 32-41 for more details on the plot.

threatens national purity and familial stability.[13] This is why Suzan-Lori Parks' position as a black female playwright whose vision (or gaze) determines what is seen in *Venus* is important in considering the historical gaze to which Baartman's image has been subjected.

In fact, we can look to Parks' gaze to analyze the way the audience's own gaze is manipulated in *Venus*. She employs a version of what bell hooks terms "the oppositional gaze." hooks arrives at this idea after analyzing how in the history of film, white women are depicted as objects of sexual desire and representations of sexual difference, while black women were often background figures who were barely noticed on the screen or asexual (as in Mammy-type representations). Thus, "the oppositional gaze" is a way of looking beyond this disparity and critically accessing "the cinema's construction of white womanhood as object of phallocentric gaze and [choosing] not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator" (hooks 122). This approach, according to hooks, empowers black women as spectators (long abused by the gaze, 125) because it is a form of agency in which black women determine what they will see and the critical lens they apply to the images being witnessed. (Of course, we must be careful not to suggest that this is the case of all black women. Indeed issues surrounding colorism and ideals of beauty that

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[13] Sharpley-Whiting explains that "*The Hottentot Venus, or Hatred of Frenchwomen*, like Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, opens with a show of reverence for exotic difference and ends literally in incestuous sameness: Adolph and Amelia are united in marital bliss – members of the same race, culture, nationality, and family" (41).

permeate the psyche of many black women and men are influenced by films and images of white beauty and desire.) bell hooks offers an important perspective in the context of the larger body of feminist criticism which doesn't truly address black female spectatorship.[14]

Inspired by hooks' founding work, we can consider the role of the black female playwright (in this case Parks and McCauley) and the role her oppositional gaze plays in how the audience experiences the play. Because the playwright determines how the play will unfold, how the action is directed, etc., the audience takes on the playwright's lens to some degree.[15] Interestingly, Parks and McCauley offer another perspective in terms of the gaze. In addition to considering the underlying elements of their gaze as an oppositional one, we can also consider them as offering a more "humanizing gaze," one that offers a more holistic picture of black women and the black female body beyond the

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[14]bell hooks rightly asserts that "Mainstream feminist film criticism in no way acknowledges black female spectatorship. It does not even consider the possibility that women can construct an oppositional gaze via an understanding and awareness of the politics of race and racism" (*Black Looks* 123).

[15]I realize that the audience's gaze cannot truly be controlled. As hooks makes us aware, individuals can determine what they will gaze upon and how they see what is presented to them; however, inasmuch as a playwright can influence the audience in terms of what they see and how they experience that viewing, Parks and McCauley make significant efforts in doing so.

reductive, one dimensional representations that permeate Western culture. In fact, notions of the playwright's gaze in both works, is multifaceted.

As we consider *Venus*, Parks presents various images on the stage that direct the audience to places other than the Venus' body, decentralizing her body as object of spectacle. (For clarity, when referring to the play, I will refer to Baartman as "the Venus" as she is named in the work and when referencing her biography I will use Baartman's name.) Therefore, evaluating Parks' gaze and how she seeks to manipulate the audience's gaze is foundational to understanding how she attempts to achieve a kind of healing and expression of a voice on the part of Saartjie Baartman.

Parks presents the audience with situations that foster alienation in key ways at the play's onset. First, she does so through indicating that the body of the Venus that appears on stage is a dead body. In the play's Overture, The Negro Resurrectionist appears and tells the audience, "I regret to inform you that thuh Venus Hottentot iz dead" (3). This is especially jarring because the first action the audience witnesses in the play is the Venus revolving counterclockwise, to be witnessed from multiple angles. The audience then has to refashion its interpretation of the opening image to account for the fact that she "iz dead." The figure the "Negro Resurrectionist" calls attention to the notion of bringing up the dead. In the context of resurrection, the Venus' body is exhumed, thus the audience has to consider her body as an historical figure – they must begin to contemplate this body in the context of history.

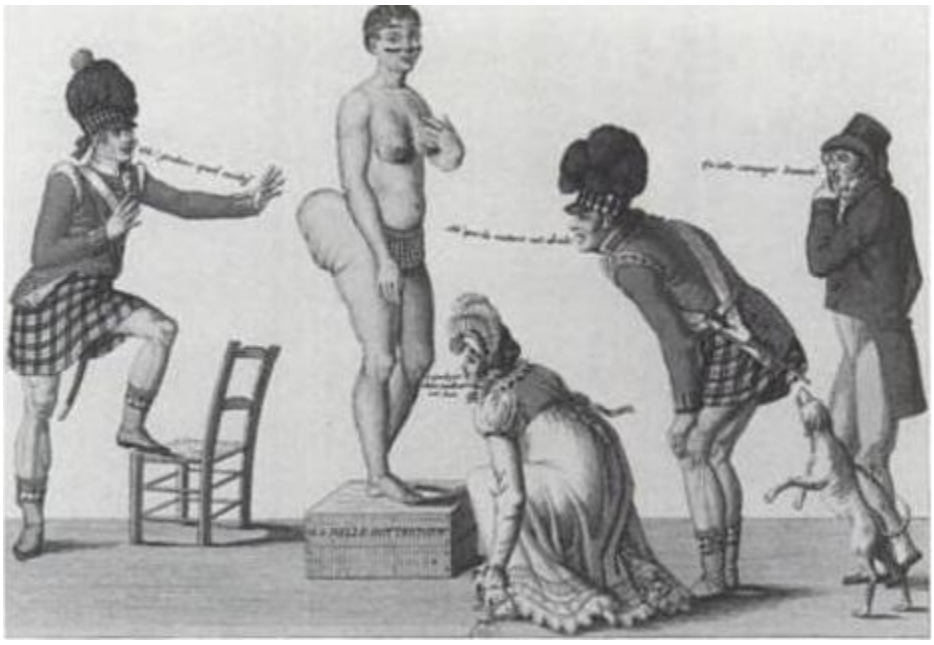
Presenting the Venus in this way is consistent with the underlying theme in Parks work which is largely inspired by history. Antonia Rodriguez-Gago notes Parks' emphasis on the idea of bringing up the dead – literally resurrecting historical figures and

re-imagining their lives (270). It is in this way that the Venus represents an historical body in this play; thus, rather than reduce her to her most notable body part – her buttocks, there is an historical context that must be considered while engaging with the play. The exhumed body of the Venus also represents an open historical wound – a kind of unfinished narrative that needs to be taken up in a contemporary context. Shawn-Marie Garret makes the point that "Her [Parks'] theatre of history, then, unlike August Wilson's is a space of simultaneity. History for Parks is not necessarily a progressive experience, or even a set of unfinished events that can be divided and dramatized by decade. The pain of the past that has never passed is precisely what sharpens the bite of her wicked satire" (qtd. in Young "Touching History" 145). Thinking of Baartman's body as one that has not truly "passed on" due to its relationship to unfinished events, crystallizes the use of resurrection as a way to address a wound that has not healed.

The play's organization is also another mechanism of forcing the audience out of a kind of passive/ineffectual spectatorship. It begins at the end moving in descending order from Scene 31 to Scene 1. The non-linear organization serves to disrupt a predictable and ordered telling of Baartman's story. Even those who are aware of the historical context of her life and its events cannot rely on their own knowledge to follow the play. As the play moves from one time frame to the next and one setting to the next, the audience is thrust into different scenarios that are at times unexpected and disjointed.

Finally, there is the act of initiating self-reflection on the part of the audience because Parks writes an audience into the play.[16] Named "The Chorus," (which becomes other choruses such as The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, The Chorus of the Spectators, The Chorus of the Court, etc.) this audience re-enacts the spectacle that surrounds the viewing of Baartman's body. Parks calls the audience's attention to the spectators, shifting the gaze away from the Venus and onto those who are looking, reminiscent of *Les Curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers* (1814) – ("The Curious in Ecstasy or Shoelaces").

[16]Parks is certainly aware of the implications of this. Antonia Rodriguez-Gago notes that "Parks emphasizes the theatrical metaphor when she says that the play is 'about show business, showing yourself, being in a show' [Sellar 38], and making a show of women's bodies has always been an important feature of show business. Venus's body on stage signifies, in various ways, as an 'object of perception' held before the spectators' gaze as 'a site of perception' – in the subject position – embodying words, movements, and sounds [Garner 6]" (264).



(Taken from Sharpley-Whiting 20)

This image takes a critical look at the spectators and the underlying spectacle of the act of looking related to Baartman's display. She is featured in the center of the image innocently while the onlookers are depicted in varying degrees of shame. For example, on the right hand side of the image, a dog is sniffing under an onlooker's kilt. The female onlooker in the scene is strategically placed below Baartman as a suggestion of the onlooker's own debasement in the act of looking. Also, in the left of the image, there appears to be a tail between the male onlooker's kilt, suggesting that he is behaving in an animal-like fashion. It is a clever turnabout as it shifts the debasement from Baartman and onto those who look upon her in lustful curiosity.

Parks re-creates the influence of this image in her work through the depiction of the various choruses. Upon the news that the Venus is dead and "There wont b inny show tonite" (3), The Chorus speaks several recitations that reveal the duality of the shame and debasing nature of witnessing the Venus. They say together "Turn uhway. Dont look.

Cover her face. Cover yr eyes" (4). The admonishing of the audience here to turn away calls into question whether this play can be enjoyed and if it is something that the audience should be witnessing. The audience functions as a figurative mirror. They mediate the internal impulse to view the Venus as presented on stage in an objectifying way.

Additionally, the primary audience of the play witnesses the audience in the play who behave deplorably in their lustful desires to "look uh little longer" and to possibly, as one Chorus member intimates, "stick my hand insider her cage and have a feel (if no ones looking)" (6). The multiple layers of witnessing is skillful on Parks' part because we are drawn to the act of looking and what it means to witness a spectacle and how the spectator can be complicit in (or part of) the spectacle. These initial acts serve to alienate the audience and cause them to revise their assumptions that the play would present a living body, in a linear fashion and upon terms that would not unsettle their positions as viewers.[17]

The Chorus's behavior at the opening of the play (one chorus member crudely refers to the Venus as "An ass to write home about./ Well worth the admission price./ A spectacle a debacle a priceless prize/ thuh filthy slut" (7)) illustrates the precarious

[17]The words "dont look" are often repeated in the play. In this way Parks is problematizing notions of audience and looking, making her primary audience aware that they are looking at the body of an objectified and likely exploited person.

position of Baartman's body in this public space.[18] Indeed, Parks calls attention to the multiple levels of abuse that Baartman likely endured throughout the time that she was on display in London and Paris.

Throughout the play, we see her body in varying degrees of pain resulting from her display. The first sound that the Venus utters during the play is a guttural "Uhhhh!" (4). This sound is voiced in the context of The Man, later The Baron Docteur and The Negro Resurrectionist contemplating the circumstances of her death – whether she died of "too much drink" or the cold (3-4). That the first sound the Venus makes is a voiced expression of physical angst establishes her physical presence as bound up in perhaps unspeakable pain.

She is subjected to other more literal forms of physical brutality committed against her body through both nonsexual and sexual violence. Scene 24 offers the most vivid action in the play of physical violence likely visited upon Baartman. The Venus is kicked repeatedly by The Mother-Showman followed by a series of "Aaaah"s and "Oh"s!

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[18]At points in the play, The Baron Docteur and The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists masturbate upon looking at The Venus (106, 119). Also, there were reports that Baartman's plaster cast was removed from Musee de L'Homme because "the image of Baartman awakened the sexual desires of the tourists and occasionally erupted in the form of visitors groping the cast, masturbating in the (public) presence of the cast, or attempting to sexually assault tour guides after having seen Baartman" (Young 135).

on both the part of The Mother-Showman and The Venus. (45) The sounds intensify the beating and the pain related to it. When The Mother-Showman tires, she instructs the spectators to "Paw her folks. Hands on. Go on Have yr pleasure. Her heathen shame is real" (46). They proceed to "paw" her. The Mother-Showman also rationalizes the kicking explaining to the spectators that "Thuh kicks is native for them Hottentots./ [. . .] They do one kick for our 'move uhbout.' 2 kicks means uh well 'pass thuh meat.'/ They mix it with thuh toes n heel: Uh whole language of kicks/ very sophisticated/ for them of course" (46). By offering such an explanation, The Mother-Showman justifies the violence against The Venus' and devalues her pain by describing her culture as immune to violence evidenced by their "whole language of kicks."

The final moment of the scene, however, belies The Mother-Showman's rationale when The Negro Resurrectionist states, "The things they noticed were quite various/ but no one ever noticed that her face was streamed with tears" (47). The Venus' physical pain from The Mother-Showman's cumulative kicks and the spectators pawing and laughing at her, is represented by her emotional pain. In the case of this "showing," her display is not altogether different from the humiliation of the auction block of the African slave trade.[19]

Physical abuse is also coupled with sexual abuse in the play. The Venus inhabits what the spectators view as an abject body and as a result of this abjection, her body is

[19]See Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

also vulnerable because the debasing display opens a space for not only the abuse of the gaze, but also of the touch – physical contact. There are a few instances in the play where The Venus references the transgressions against her sexually. When The Venus attempts to get a share of her profits from The Mother-Showman after completing two years of work that she originally agreed to, The Mother-Showman does not comply and proceeds to threaten:

> Dont push me, Sweetie.
> Next doors a smoky pub
> full of drunken men.
> I just may invite them in
> one at a time
> and let them fuck yr brains out. (56)

The Venus responds simply, "They do it anyway" (56). Not only are others sexually assaulting her with impunity, when she asserts herself in an attempt to discontinue the display, she is threatened with this kind of assault. This exchange illustrates the extent to which Saartjie Baartman's body was objectified as spectacle as well as abused physically. The physical debasement is extended to Scene 7 during her stay with The Baron Docteur when The Venus confesses that The Chorus of the 8 Anatomists touch her when he is not looking (137). The Baron Docteur responds to her "How could they not? Touching you is – well, its their job" (137). Again, the violation of her body is sanctioned although it is

clearly a subversive and lascivious act because it occurs when The Baron Docteur is not looking.[20]

Although Parks does not go as deeply into the reports of abuse that Saartjie Baartman experienced[21], she weaves throughout the narrative the notion of The Venus's powerlessness most significantly represented by the trope of the chain. Early in the play when The Man and The Brother persuade The Venus (at this time in the play The Girl) to come to England with them to be displayed as "The African Dancing Princess," she asks "Do I have a choice?" (17). Seemingly, she is given the right to choose and chooses to go on the journey to England. However, this same question carries greater resonance when asked later in the play in Scene 17 after The Baron Docteur purchases her from The Mother-Showman. He requires that she say yes to leaving with him and she responds again "Do I have a choice?" (87). She knows that she has been transferred as property from one hand to another and that the perceived choice is not a choice at all. She is a captive body, bought and sold and displayed for profit.

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[20]Parks offers an ambivalent depiction of The Venus's sexual violation. The Venus and The Baron Docteur are engaged in what is seemingly a consensual sexual relationship. Although this appears to be the case, the use of her body for pleasure and the power relationship that undergirds their intimacy is undeniable.

[21]See Jean Young's "The Re-Objectification and Re-Commodification of Saartjie Baartman in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus*."

The image of the chain then adds to The Venus' knowledge that she does not belong to herself. The first reference to a chain in the text is with The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, who, like The Venus are a part of a veritable freak show. They are referred to as The Mother-Showman's "Great Chain of Being" (30) again referencing the Enlightenment and the efforts to establish a Great Chain of Being. The Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders repeats the word "Chain" throughout the first show they enact on stage (30-1). The Chain of Being then sets up an overarching context for The Venus's relationship to chains.

The notion of the Venus being a captive body is demonstrated in greater detail when the cage in which The Mother-Showman keeps her in Scene 17 transforms into chains in Scene 7 after The Baron Docteur purchases her. The setting notes describe, "Suddenly The Venus is again imprisoned. Not caged but chained like a dog in the yard" (146). The Negro Resurrectionist is her guard. He stands to gain from the use of her body after death because he is offered gold in exchange for giving her body over for analysis "[a]fter she 'goes on'" (151). The chains here reinforce her being transferred to one prison to another – although one setting is the street of Picadilly Circus and the other setting is a scientific hall, the nature of her captivity is largely the same.

The audience is also captive in many respects but there is an important point where Parks seeks to give the members of the audience a kind of reprieve. Traditionally, these kinds of breaks occur during intermission. However, Parks transforms even the intermission into a dramatic act. The Intermission is titled "Scene 16: Several Years from Now: In the Anatomical Theatre of Tubingen: The Dis(-re-)memberment of the Venus Hottentot, Part I." In the stage direction, the House lights come up signaling to the

audience that they can take leave of their seats and walk about as in a traditional intermission. However, throughout this section, The Baron Docteur, representative of Georges Cuvier, is reading from his notes on the dissection of Saartjie Baarman's body. The section is quite lengthy, but there are key moments that signal the pain and dehumanization of Baartman which Parks attempts to capture. The Baron Docteur notes, "On the scalp were several spots completely bald: The subject when alive wore wigs which could have produced the bare patches" (94). He goes on to describe her body in such graphic detail that he asks a member of his on stage audience, a group of anatomists, if he needs to take a break. He says, "You look, Distinguished Collegue [sic], as if you need relief or sleep. Please, Sir, indulge yourself. Go take uh break" (95). This signals to the audience that what they are witnessing – the public dissection and examination of a woman to establish a racial hierarchy – is an act that dehumanizes Baartman in horrific fashion so much so that some members need a break from witnessing it. Again, Parks is balancing multiple notions of audience and discomforting the primary audience to such an extent that even the intermission does not imply a rest from witnessing and the realities of that witnessing. Baartman, as a captive body, could not gain reprieve, her corpse constantly subject to the gaze. In this respect, her display is an unending spectacle.

By extension, even the legal space in the courtroom where the nature of her exhibition is challenged by abolitionists who feel she is being displayed against her will, is not a secure place where her body is not a matter of curiosity. During the courtroom scene, she is subjected to a similar gaze that she has endured in other contexts. When preparing to hear her testimony, The Chorus of the Court desires to "Bring up the body of this female" (73). In bringing up her body, they are placing her on display in the court of

law. Parks' use of multiple settings to illustrate the many ways in which Baartman was debased reinforces the politics of her body and the various implications of her display. Mirroring that historical reality of Baartman's exhibition and the debasing nature of the display, Parks extends her depiction to Baartman's posthumous violations in the name of science. The Intermission, which takes place after The Venus has been taken into possession by The Baron Docteur, details specifics about The Venus' anatomy from The Baron Docteur's notebook. This continues throughout the remainder of the play. In these notes, she is compared to an animal: "Her ears were much like those found in monkeys" (109) and "Above all, she had a way of pushing out her lips just like the monkeys do" (110). These descriptions and efforts to render her a savage to be placed among the lower links on The Great Chain of Being is another kind of violence done to her body. [22] In sum, her exploitation and its brutality even beyond her death, constitute an enduring wound.

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[22]One place in which Parks depicts the violence done to Baartman's body after death is through her representation of maceration. The resurrected Venus overhears The Baron Docteur and The Grade School Chum discussing the dissecting procedure and is startled at hearing the term maceration. The Negro Resurrectionist defines it for her: "A process performed on the subject after the subjects death. The subjects body parts are soaked in a chemical solution to separate the flesh from the bones so that the bones may be measured with greater accuracy" (120).

To be sure, Parks takes numerous liberties in presenting The Venus's persona on the stage. Although there is a clear emphasis at points in the play on Baartman's victimization, Parks does not want to present her only in this framework. She says, "I could have written a two-hour saga with Venus being the victim . . . . But she's multi-faceted . . . . as black people we are encouraged to be narrow and simply address the race issue. We deserve much more" (qtd. in Elam and Rayner 279). Parks depiction of Baartman is certainly unlike other artists who have taken up her story.[23] She avoids presenting her as historical documents portray her – as a voiceless and exploited savage. In the play, The Venus speaks. The audience learns that she is determined to make a mint and resists a return to South Africa because, although she misses it, it was a "shitty shitty life" (105, 158). Another notable feature in the play is her excessive consumption of chocolate.[24] In many respects, Parks attempts to offer a presentation of Saartjie Baartman that treats her as a whole person, someone subject to moral failings and not entirely powerless, as are most human beings.

It has to be noted, however, that in spite of Parks radical re-presentation of Baartman, there are great risks in offering such an interpretation. One risks re-objectifying Baartman in a contemporary context, again profiting from her compromised

[23]See Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus: A Novel* and Elizabeth Alexander's poem "The Venus Hottentot (1825)".

[24]See Laura Wright's "'Macerations' French for 'Lunch': Reading the Vampire in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus*.

display. In the play, there are no moments of nudity, although in Scene 12 she is slightly clothed in a sheet fabric (112) as she is presented to the anatomists who begin to sketch her. Parks also borders on re-objectification with the costuming of the actress playing The Venus (Adina Porter) in the 1996 production at The New York Public Theater.

FIG. 17. Adina Porter as the Venus with the Chorus of the Spectators in Richard Foreman's 1996 production at the New York Public Theatre. *(Photo by T. Charles Erikson.)*

(Taken from Elam and Rayner 266)

Here, Baartman is presented to a new audience in a similarly grotesque manner as she was for London audiences in 1810. Parks has to be very careful not to present Baartman as a sexualized object as opposed to a woman who was exploited, regardless of whether or not we know the nature of the role she played in that exploitation.

Jean Young offers a critical interpretation of the play and indicts Parks in re-objectifying Baartman. She asserts that Parks misrepresents the actual history of Saartjie Baartman and distorts her experience by framing her as a person "complicit in her own

horrific exploitation" (699). Young suggests that we will never truly know Baartman's own desires for her life because "neither Parks's *Venus* nor the London court recognizes the unequal power relationship, as Saartjie, a kidnapped, colonized captive, is forced to speak on her own behalf against her 'keepers,' who have assumed absolute control over her body and person, subjecting her to coercion, trading her along with stacks of animal skins, displaying her in a cage, and forcefully subduing her at will" (704). Young makes valid points that are also substantiated in witness accounts of Baartman's treatment.[25]

At best, the play can be described as ambivalent with Parks fluctuating between presenting Baartman as someone with agency and some degree of power versus someone who experiences a great deal of pain as a result of her display.[26] Near the end of the

[25]Again, see London's *Morning Post* referenced in Hobson p. 40.

[26]Sara L. Warner notes, Parks's drama of disinternment actively thwarts catharsis and rejects reconciliation in favor of a theatre of resurrection and dis(re)memberment. Whereas post-apartheid acts of internment privilege the ends – political unity, reconciliation, and the restoration of human dignity – over the means, Parks drama does just the opposite: it dislocates, alienates, and disorders history and "truth" as we know it. *Venus* dramatizes the life of Baartman as a means without an end, and as such holds out the opportunity of reimagining recovery without dignity and reconciliation without truth. (189).

work, The Venus requests that The Negro Resurrectionist keep the crowds away and laments the way in which her life has proceeded. She says "*Dont look at me* dont look . . ." (159). We return again to the audience being made aware of their participation in the spectacle. In the final images of her in play, she appears sullen, used and exploited. We are made to sympathize with her seeing her great dream transform into great pain. In Scene 1, she gets the last words, which echo The Negro Resurrectionist's words in the Overture. She says,

> Tail end of the tale for there must be uh end
> is that Venus, Black Goddess, was shameless, she sinned or else
> completely unknowing thuh Godfearin ways, she stood
> showing her ass off in her iron cage.
> When death met Love Death deathd Love
> and left Love tuh rot
> *au naturel* end for thuh Miss Hottentot.
> Loves soul, which was tidy, hides in heaven, yes, that's it
> Loves corpse stands on show in museum. Please
> visit. (161)

Also, Parks explains her motivation in depicting Baartman. She says that she was: "trying to make it all all right somehow . . . Sometimes telling the story is the only thing that makes it all right" (qtd in Elam and Rayner 269).

The play ends with The Venus repeatedly saying "Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss" (162). The lines are tortured and enigmatic for anyone wanting a simple representation of Saartjie Baartman. But they reflect a sincere ambivalence about her life and life's choices. Images of her body being left to "rot" but also being "loves corpse" evokes imagery of love existing alongside decay. The lines also don't truly hold her accountable for her own display. We are presented with two options at the end. That she "sinned" willingly by showing her body or that she was "unknowing [of] thuh Godfearin ways" and had she known, she may have made a different life's choice – although this notion of choice is problematized throughout the work. There is great ambiguity in these last lines which reflects both of Parks's sensibilities in ending this play, in which she negotiates just how to portray a much more complex life of Saartjie Baartman while resisting, yet acknowledging, a more straightforward narrative of exploitation. Regardless, The Venus's words and voice are what end this play, allowing her to speak for herself in some fashion. Sara Warner notes this sensibility in her final assessment of the play. She argues, "A hagiography this play is not. Parks is interested in freeing Baartman not from the imperialist gaze but from the burden of representation itself. Baartman does not belong to all of us, she seems to say – she belongs to none of us" (197). [27] Parks's liberation of Saartjie Baartman from all who desire to lay claim to her

[27]See also Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story*. The following passage in particular illustrates the extent to which Baartman is a figure that others attempt to claim. The narrator asks David, "Besides, what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?" David replies "Baartman belongs to all of us" (135). In this way,

body offers a symbolic freeing of the black female body in general and a potential freedom from the many ways that Baartman's experience has become the foreground for how we think and write about black female bodies.[28]

Robbie McCauley takes up the notion of freeing the black female body in the context of the open wound of slavery and the socially sanctioned rape of black women during this time and arguably years beyond. In the same way that Parks seeks to offer a more complex representation of Saartjie Baartman, McCauley presents the plight of black female slaves in a manner that is not sanitized. Also, McCauley provides an extension of the themes we see raised in Parks' *Venus*, particularly using the black female body in the present to overturn past representations, drawing attention to the pain associated with the history of black female bodies in the West, and the present-day implications of this.

Wicomb, like Parks is questioning the ways in which Bartman's identity has been appropriated not only by Westerners, but by South Africans who seek to lay claim to her. I do not want to suggest, however, that these are equal acts of claiming with equal implications.

[28]This impulse is present throughout scholarship on the black female body and, to an extent, this is understandable. According to Deborah Willis and Carla Williams, "The name 'Sarah' is repeatedly used throughout history as a representation of the black female, from Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman, the so-called Hottentot Venus to the 'Aunt Sarah' of Nina Simone's 1964 song 'Four Women'" (199).

Sally's Rape is a dramatization of several layers of pain that black women have endured from slavery to the present. The play is a fluid dialogue with the audience and is largely driven by the audience's energy and participation in the performance.[29] It features her great-great grandmother Sally, a slave who was raped, Sally Hemmings, the slave well-known for her sexual and personal relationship with her owner, President Thomas Jefferson (which McCauley clearly identifies as rape as well)[30], and McCauley herself, who exists as a contemporary representation of the act of rape visited upon her great-great grandmother and women like her. While Parks particularizes the open wound to Saartjie Baartman's experience, McCauley's *Sally's Rape* explores how the historical exploitation and abuse of black women's bodies has contemporary implications for their descendants. In this way, McCauley offers a counter to Parks' singular approach in order to illustrate how this wound often circumscribes black female identity.

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[29]The version of *Sally's Rape* that I am using is the "dialogue scenario" found in *Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans: The Recent Period 1934-Today*. Another version appears in *Moon Marked and Touched by the Sun: Plays by African-American Women* and there are transcriptions from other performances notably The Kitchen in New York City. Because the play is an organic piece, the versions vary a small extent, but the central dialogue scenario is consistent throughout each version.

[30]See Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Sally Hemmings* and *The President's Daughter*. Also see Fawn Brodie's *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History*.

If we consider McCauley's play in the context of Daphne Brooks' notion of Afro-alienation, McCauley reflects this concept more because she is a performance artist in the sense that Brooks describes, particularly as it relates to how performing artists alienate their audiences through their "dissonantly enlightened performance" (5). The use of her body on the stage as embodying the resurrected bodies of her great-great-grandmother and female slaves causes the audience to revise their perhaps preconceived notions about how the play will proceed. They have to consider McCauley in relation to the bodies of female slaves and negotiate connections between the past and present.

Although McCauley unsettles her audience by using her body in order to re-enact aspects of female slave rape, she desires that the audience be not only jarred from their comfort as spectators but also connected to her. In an interview with Vicki Patraka entitled "Obsessing in Public," McCauley states that she wants to foster dialogue with her audience because she considers the audience as with her: "I'm not against the audience, so 'they' are always those who are not in the room. Even if they are in the room, I want them for the moment to identify with me" (27). In this way, she desires to reach out to her audience in order to foster a relationship. As to alienation, she says, "What some performers are doing when they attack the audience is keeping the audience alienated, which isn't my major strategy. And some people don't want to be brought in. It's like going to church, when you come for one thing and get another" (49). Here McCauley acknowledges the potential for resistance on the part of her audience, many of whom come expecting to see a show and to not be a part of that show. So, while McCauley attempts to form a connective relationship with her audience, there is an underlying tension inherent in the act of challenging the notion of passive viewership or attempting

to render an identification on the part of the audience with the performer/character/story.[31] McCauley balances these considerations by creating a dynamic of talking and listening.

Early in the performance in Section 1: Confessing About Family and Religion and Work in Progress, she and her white co-performer Jeannie entreat the audience to engage in dialogue with them because for them without a dialogue, "there is no progress" (370). (For clarity, when referring to McCauley as a performer, I will use "Robbie" as she is named in the play and when referencing McCauley as a playwright, I will use her full or last name.) They proceed to tell the audience that they are in the play and give instruction on how they will participate. They divide the room into three groups – The agreeable ones, who say "That's right" or "Yes indeed" at points in the play, The Bass line, who offer low toned "uh huh"s and "umm hmmm"s and The Dialogue group who adds to the discussion and/or disagrees. Robbie and Jeannie also pass out food such as cookies and apples in order to commune with the audience as a way of making them receptive.[32]

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[31]To wit, Ann Nymann notes that "Spectator responses [to the play] have run the gamut: angry disputations of Hutchins's words, confessions of white guilt (or charges of being manipulated into such a stance), questions about McCauley's use of nudity, sharing of personal experiences of racism and/or sexual assault, all of which McCauley attempts to elucidate without suggesting resolution" (580).

[32]The act of eating in this sense is striking when compared to *Venus*. In *Sally's Rape*, eating is a communal act, while in *Venus*, consumption is rendered

In addition to talking and listening, they participate in the act of giving and receiving. Fostering this relationship opens up a space for the hearing of the brutality endured by black women in slavery. By creating within the audience the impulse to be receptive listeners, witnesses who acknowledge the pain of this history, McCauley is using the stage as a space to validate often silenced and unacknowledged black female pain. Jennifer Griffiths discusses witnessing and its relation to trauma in "Between Women: Trauma, Witnessing, and the Legacy of Interracial Rape in Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*." She cites Thomas Keenan who discusses the ways that public denial can exacerbate trauma and pain for its victim.[33] He says, "There is a double trauma here [in the denial of the pain]. On the one hand, there's a cataclysmic event, which produces symptoms and calls for testimony. And then it happens again, when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied" (Griffiths 2). Because the pain of this history is often elided in favor of more palatable narratives of the slave experience, the trauma of the initial act continues to fester and resonate across generations.

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perversely (The Venus's excessive devouring of "chockluts" one kind specifically named "Capezzoli di Venere" or "The nipples of Venus" (105) – in fact the distance between maceration and mastication is not very far.

[33] This again echoes Elaine Scarry's argument.

McCauley focuses on creating an audience who will truly witness and acknowledge this pain in real ways.[34] She relates the multiple layers of witnessing that occur in the play: "I'm being a witness by choosing to remember. What's important about witnessing is that the audience is doing it with me. One of the problems of modern industrial society is the disconnection from that constant witnessing of the past" (35). As she establishes a relationship with the audience, she creates a space of multi-layered witnessing, what Dori Laub refers to as the "third level of witnessing" (6). This is explained in greater detail by Griffiths: "[T]he process of bearing witness to traumatic experience is analyzed and understood. The performance itself bears witness not only to the facts of interracial rape, but also to the dynamic of denial that reproduces the traumatizing effect of the initial violence by silencing and isolating the survivor" (7).[35]While McCauley is not an immediate survivor, she is the product of the socially sanctioned rape of her ancestors in slavery. Thus, the denial of this offense continues to delegitimize the violence done to black women's bodies, in which her own is implicated.

[34]Jennifer Griffiths argues that "McCauley uses the theater to create a new public space for the construction of an address to articulate the traumatic history and complex cultural processes that keep this history muted" (6).

[35]While Griffiths' argument is quite strong, I do want to caution against simply using trauma theory to describe McCauley's project. McCauley complicates this theory by virtue of the fact that she is not the original victim of this trauma, yet intimately related to it.

Like Parks, McCauley takes up the metaphor of chains. In Section 3: Trying to Transform, she declares that "It is a journey of chains" (372). Not only is this a clear reference to the Middle Passage, but it is also a reference to links and connection. For McCauley, "History of the past is simply folklore. History has to be connected to the realities of the present" (Patraka 28). I would contend that if we consider the open wound of this particular history as a result of unacknowledged pain, then history is inevitably connected to the present because the pain endures.

McCauley attempts to legitimize the unacknowledged pain of black female rape and exploitation by depicting the trauma that constitutes the wound and the denial of that trauma. She figuratively rips the veil off this history when she says in Section 1, "Almost everybody in my mother's family was half white. But that wasn't nothing but some rape" (370). She pointedly highlights what most historical narratives, including slave narratives, attempt to gloss over because of its unspeakable nature.[36] It is important to McCauley to place the term rape at the center of the narrative because for her, "That kind of rape [occurring on plantations] changed who we were as a people and that was not our choice. We didn't choose to make ourselves as a result of that rape, we had to improvise ourselves" (Patraka 30). In this way, rape is a kind of birthmark because it produced generations of African Americans (in this case) who grapple with the unspoken circumstances of their identities.

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[36]In her interview with Vicki Patraka, McCauley says that she likes "the concept of speaking the unspeakable" (26).

The central confrontation, however, that directly addresses the sanitizing of this history is the exchange with a Smith College graduate who majored in U.S. history. The college graduate says, "I never knew white men did anything with colored women on plantations" (372) to which Robbie responds, "'It was rape.' Her eyes turned red. She choked on her sandwich and quit the job" (372). The fact that the woman holds a degree in U.S. history from a prestigious women's college is an indictment on the failure of even academic institutions to speak/teach the truth of history. The choking metaphor calls up notions of choking on repressed history – being unable to speak what is primarily unspoken.

McCauley then proceeds to depict the historical pain of black female rape by re-enacting the rape and the experience of being displayed on the auction block. Rather than depict these as separate experiences, McCauley merges their bodies, primarily represented by her great-great grandmother, with her own stating, "It's about my great-great grandmother Sally who was a young woman with children when official slavery ended. And she's in me" (371). Declaring that "she's in me," she makes clear that her grandmother's past pain, history and experiences are intimately connected to her own. Also, it demonstrates how she carries her great-great-grandmother within to such a degree that she feels a sense of cohabitation with her. Harvey Young refers to Robbie's body in the play as her "ancestral body" (146). He explains, "It represents, and indeed re-presents, the bodies and the embodied experience of her ancestors whose previous actions invoked her current experience" (146). Robbie's expression of her existence in this way, reveals how much of those experiences are a part of her understanding herself.

The intertwining of the self and one's ancestors also removes the line that exists between the living and the dead, a concept poignantly expressed in Sharon Patricia Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Holland cites Orlando Patterson's notion that slaves experience a social death because they exist as "genealogical isolates because they are denied access to the social heritage of their ancestors" (14). This social death is what Patterson and by extension Holland would argue as a liminal state in which the dead and the living somehow co-exist and in that context, we can note the same idea operating in McCauley's play. Holland provides greater clarity into her overall theory on the lack of a line between the living and the dead, particularly for black Americans. She says,

> The unaccomplished shift from enslaved to freed subjectivity and the marked gap between genealogical isolation and the ancestral past form the meeting place where the bulk of my ruminations on death and black subjectivity reside. It is possible to make at least two broad contentions here: a) that the (white) culture's dependence on the nonhuman status of its black subjects was never measured by the ability of whites to produce a "social heritage"; instead it rested on the status of the black as a nonentity; and b) that the transmutation from enslaved to freed subject never quite occurred at the level of the imagination." (15)

In one sense McCauley's use of her own body as a vehicle for resurrecting the bodies of the black women who are the focus of the play could be read as a representation of the perpetual state of blacks being caught between being enslaved and freed subjects. However, McCauley also creates a space where the transition between enslaved and freed

can truly occur by taking these stories and giving voice to these women's unacknowledged pain. Her work's success in making this transition is also elucidated by Holland who argues that black literature, for example Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which takes up various voices of the living and the dead creates a "discourse of margins" that come together "to create a space where there was none before; where multilayered discourse can exist; where physical bodies and the disembodied speak" (64). McCauley constructs a discourse of margins in the performance that provides a voice not only for her persona on stage but the resurrected ones as well.

McCauley makes clear her attempts to merge her voice with that of her ancestors in Section 3 "Trying to Transform". She says, "I I I become others inside me standing at the bus stop with my socks rolled down screaming things I shoulda said, 'Just because people are crazy don't mean they can't think straight!' Hollering periodically at white men 'YOU RAPED ME! GODDAMN MOTHERFUKA! YOU RAPED ME!'" (371). Here, Robbie uses her voice to express the long-held anger at the socially sanctioned act of raping black slave women.[37] She is also forcing acknowledgement on the part of the victimizers in a metaphorical sense. Jennifer Griffifths reinforces the significance of speaking these words in the play, explaining that:

> [R]ecovery [from a traumatic event] requires a reintegration of fractured memory forms. This reintegration occurs when the original trauma

[37]This moment is one that presents a challenge to the audience. In this instance, there is a kind of alienating confrontation which makes the stability of the audience identifying with her tenuous.

> survivor processes the story with a willing witness, who assists the survivor in understanding the connections between the event and its impact on her life. However, failing to recognize the survivor's experience, on a cultural as well as individual level, reproduces traumatic experience. (2)

The need for recognition for the survivor of the trauma, to have her pain heard and recognized is central to the act of recovery. Thus, McCauley's screaming at the bus stop to white men "YOU RAPED ME!" becomes an act of expression whereby the women are able to scream at these representative white men things they could not have said as slaves. Serving as that medium, Robbie illustrates the impact of the systemic denial of black women's pain for many years. Robbie relates this pain as though she feels it as deeply – signaling a personal element in the telling of these stories and the anger at the socially sanctioned rape of black women. Saidiya Hartman addresses this very issue in her essay "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" as she details how the law was constructed to view black women as always already willing participants in their own sexual abuse and exploitation. Hartman explains that the impression of the willing black slave woman was key in establishing legal differences between slaves and whites. She says,

> The (re)production of enslavement and the legal codification of racial subordination and sexual subjection depended upon various methods of sexual control and domination: anti-miscegenation statutes, rape laws which made the rape of white women by black men a capital offense, the sanctioning of sexual violence against slave women by virtue of the law's

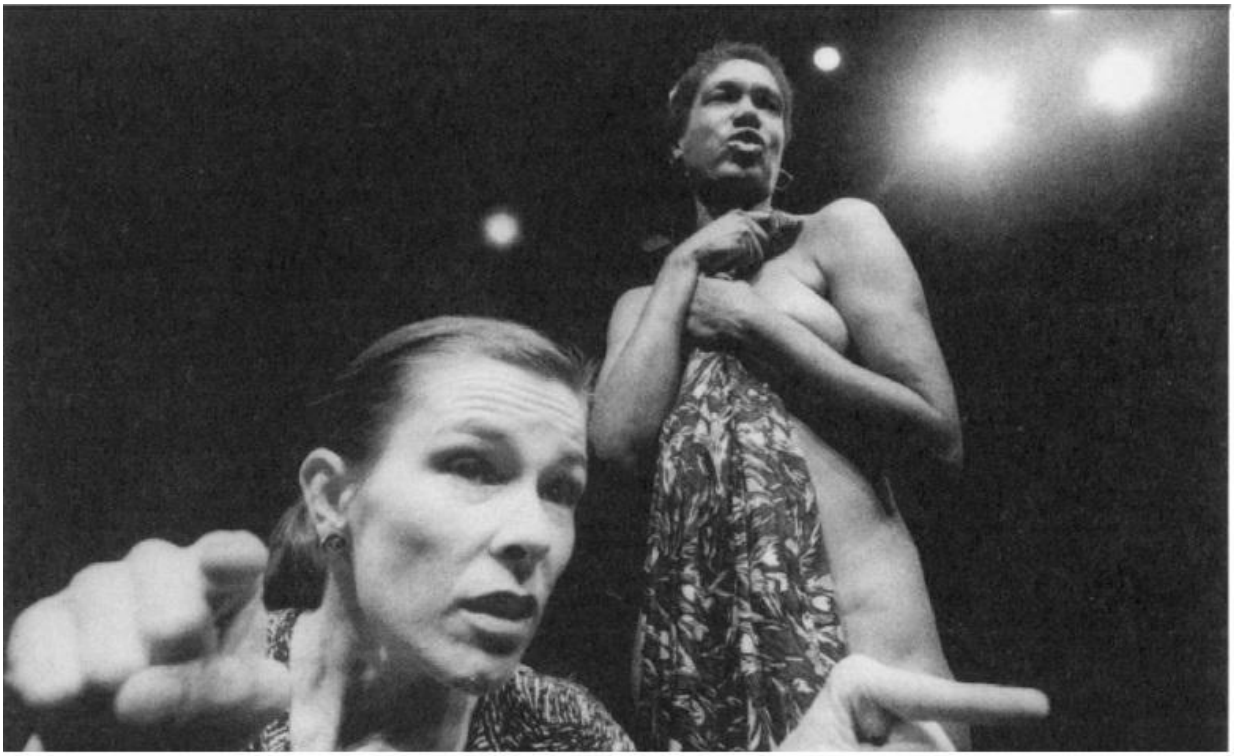
> calculation of negligible injury, the negation of kinship, conveyance of property and black subordination. (541-2)

With the law being established to make sexual violence against slave women "of negligible injury," we can see the onslaught of how even in the law black women had no recourse and no medium whereby their pain could be addressed. McCauley makes that fact central when she expresses to Jeannie, "You . . . let the cabs roll by . . . let shit roll off your back . . . stay . . . ain't no rape crisis center on the plantation" (375). To this, Jeannie asks, "Then what do you do about it?"(375). Robbie's statement and Jeannie's response to it are central to understanding what is at stake in this play. Robbie makes clear in her statement "ain't no rape crisis center on the plantation" that for all the contemporary treatment we have to address rape in our time, those kinds of outlets were not available to black women in any form; thus, they cannot fully be addressed in a present-day framework. Robbie's words go to the heart of the trauma of black women having to suffer in silence and face a residual lack of recognition of the impact of these crimes not only on their bodies but also on their psyches. Jeannie's rhetorical question "Then what do you do about it?" ends Section 6 "In a Rape Crisis Center." By leaving this question open, McCauley is acknowledging even the limitations of her own writing and body to do anything "about it". Other than tell the stories of her ancestors and of women like Sally Hemmings, McCauley can only go so far in providing healing for those wounds existing long ago.

This is why the stage as a space for imagining a voice for these women, where their pain can be expressed, where their descendants can potentially be freed of the residual pain, is so significant. McCauley also uses the black female body on stage as an

outlet for healing through the auction block imagery. Section 5 “Sally’s Rape” is the central place where McCauley’s project comes together. Early on in the scene, Jeannie and Robbie think on and act out various imagery from the experiences of black female slaves. They begin by imagining Sally Hemmings in European tea rooms with Thomas Jefferson, Robbie’s great-great-grandmother Sally and the children she bore as a result of being raped by her master, and Harriet Tubman’s escaping to freedom (374). During this travel through time, Jeannie makes the statement that “These are dreams but the wounds remain and there are no meetings of ourselves at these crossroads” (374). This moment can be read in a few ways. Since Jeannie is white, perhaps she literally feels that the past in which they are navigating doesn’t allow a space for her to access these memories with Robbie, who is much more intimately connected than she. It also points to the possibility that neither of them can exist along the crossroads where the wounds of history remain. Even Robbie, who has imagined herself an embodiment of her ancestors cannot truly access their historical pain. This moment leads into the scene where Robbie strips naked and stands on the auction block. Disregarding the limitations presented to her in her attempts to connect with her ancestors’ wounds, she becomes a slave to be sold while

Jeannie takes on the role of auctioneer.



(Taken from Patraka 29)

Robbie says, "On the auction block. They put their hands all down our bodies to sell you, for folks to measure you smeltcha . . ." (374). Placed in the context of Parks' depiction of The Venus on display in her text, we see again the same kind of dehumanization and physical violation of black women's bodies on display. Robbie puts her body on display in order to truly capture the violence of this experience.[38]She also makes the audience

[38]McCauley explains to Vicki Patraka, "I did that [stood nude before the audience] because I had to. I got an impulse, I dreamed the taking off the clothes and the feeling, 'Do you see this now? Now can you see me, who I really am, and that this

aware that the auction block represented a kind of performance as well. Slaves were often made to dance, sing, and appear happy while they were frisked and groped – the women often examined for their suitability as lovers for their masters.

As the scene goes on, Robbie intimates that according to her Aunt Jessie, men got their manhood by coming down to the quarters and "do[ing] it to us and the chickens" (374). By repeating her aunt's stories, she is raising them up to be witnessed, giving voice to the systemic sexual abuse of black female slaves on plantations. She also states that she stands naked before the audience on the auction block in the hopes of freeing us from "this" – "this" referring to her naked body. She sees her freedom as intertwined with the freeing of female slaves from their pain and subjugation. According to Robbie, "Any old socialist knows one can't be free till we all are free" (375). The use of the pronouns "us" and "we" demonstrate how McCauley, in writing the play, envisions the struggles of the female slave ancestors as a continuing struggle for black women in the present, a past pain and characterization of "always already willing," something they need to be "freed" of.

She does not only address the humiliation of the auction block, Robbie then goes further to re-live the rape of her great-great grandmother and says ". . . in the dream I am Sally being done it to I am down on the groundbeing done it to bound down didn't wanna be bound down on the ground" (375). Again, McCauley is re-visiting the pain of rape

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is essential to who I am?'" (30). She notes that in performance vulnerability is strength (30).

and the black female slave's position of being "*bound* down on the ground" (my emphasis). The impact of performing this event for the audience shifts the prior dehumanization of the auction block and subsequent rape to the pain of the event and offers the female slave's perspective and voice.

McCauley's presentation of her own body – a body in search of freedom and healing for black women highlights the use of drama as a mode of recapturing a degrading performance such as the one on the auction block in order to give voice to the pained experience. By using her own body as a representation of the exploited black female body, McCauley goes to the very heart of the wounds that come as a result of that exploitation. This is so much so that when Robbie commands Jeannie to step up on the auction block and reveal herself in Section 7, (376) Jeannie chooses not to.[39] Jeannie had been attempting throughout the section to identify with the experience that Robbie was relating about her family history, including home education and negotiating the realities of race in America, but Robbie reveals that their experiences aren't truly comparable. She uses the symbol of the auction block to make Jeannie aware of this. In this moment, Robbie makes clear that she is tapping into an experience specific to black women and as a descendant of that history, she desires to rescue the unheard voices from the overwhelming silence about the systemic sexual abuse of black women.

[39]McCauley clarifies that as a white woman Jeannie has the choice not to perform the drama of the auction block. McCauley along with other women artists decided that it would be stronger to "show that she [Jeannie] didn't have to do it" (33).

Unlike Parks, McCauley's primary objective is dramatizing victimization.[40] Her approach has a certain kind of utility that is important if we consider how to grapple with the trauma that resonates out of this history. Ann Nymann in "*Sally's Rape*: Robbie McCauley's Survival Art," makes the point that "Trauma creates a cessation of identity, culture, and tradition; continuance is living through and responding to that trauma. Survival art aestheticizes this constant 're-traumatizing,' not to offer transcendence or simple resolution, but to stimulate an immediacy of emotional and intellectual response" (579). To this end, although McCauley focuses on victimhood and how to work through its implications, she is not offering a simplistic presentation. Nor is she suggesting that her work necessarily "frees" black women from the historical and present implications of their bodies. The play does not offer a sense of resolution in the same way that *Venus* does not. Primarily, it stimulates an emotional and intellectual response to this victimization by shedding light on it through the platform granted to her by the stage. In their own ways, both works re-present these historical bodies and their pained experiences as acts of freedom by highlighting the continued captivity beyond death which takes the form of the social and political implications of being abused and having that abuse delegitimized. Parks and McCauley force their audiences into active spectatorship whereby they can offer a sympathetic witnessing that helps to alleviate the

[40]Ann Nymann explains that McCauley "performs the black female subject out of victimization" (577). Thus, in order to do this, victimhood must figure as a central subject.

enduring pain of this history. Thus, both works give voice to silenced experiences and offer a different lens through which to view these bodies on display – revealing the truth and pain of the exploitation rather than the previous sanitized versions. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* continue in the theme of providing a visual image to combat historical misinformation about black women's bodies and pain. They utilize the imagery of the scar as an indelible mark that disallows any refutation of this painful history. Like Parks and McCauley, Morrison and Butler are concerned with speaking directly to the historical silence of the brutality visited upon black women's bodies. However, they also explore in greater detail the effects of that silence on future generations, particularly the descendants of that history.

Haunting Flesh: Scars and Transgenerational Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*

"The undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?"

"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" – Hortense Spillers

In her path-making essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers inspires a rethinking of discourses on women in the West so that they account for the unique situation of black women during and after slavery. Spillers focuses primarily on black women because their bodies were central to maintaining the slave system and matters of primogeniture. She makes the point that history does not acknowledge or has "failed to realize" the particular case of the African female subject in slavery (68). She explains:

> A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the "overseer," standing the length of a whip, has popped her flesh open, adds a lexical and living dimension to the narratives of women in culture and society [Davis 9]. This materialized scene of unprotected female flesh – of female flesh "ungendered" – offers

> a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations. (68)

In making the case for consideration of the "lexical and living dimension" that this history of black women slaves brings to bear, Spillers employs images of wounded black women's bodies, which is a significant distinction, to be sure, because such acts of brutality were often thought of as only experienced and carried out by men. In calling for this aspect of black female life to be acknowledged, Spillers offers a framework whereby we can examine Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler's depiction of the black female body in pain in their respective works: *Beloved* and *Kindred*. These novels extend the project of recognition (in making black female bodily pain visible) that occurs in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape*. Morrison and Butler attempt to transform the visual scar into language. In doing so, they are acknowledging the history of black female pain, facilitating a recognition of the black female body from being viewed as flesh to sentient body. In rendering the scar into language, they create the possibility for the story of the scar(s) to be told.

Morrison and Butler deal specifically with scarred black female bodies in their narratives as a way to express that which is encumbered by "proceedings too terrible to relate."[41] To the extent that the characters struggle to articulate their pain, the symbol of

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[41] Morrison says in her essay "Site of Memory" that "Over and over, the writers [of slave narratives] pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'but let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.' In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent

the scar stands in for what has not been documented and works against expression.[42] Where spoken or written language fails, the scar speaks. It is in this way that the scar takes on the form of the hieroglyph. It not only expresses the pain of these experiences but it also verifies and gives them an undeniable visibility. To go further, recognition of the scar allows for black women depicted as sentient bodies rather than flesh. Spillers explains her distinction between the body and flesh. She says, "[B]efore the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. [. . .] If we think of the 'flesh' as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the slave ship's hole, fallen, or 'escaped' overboard" (67). Through

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about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things [. . .]" (qtd in Henderson 81).

[42] According to Scarry, "pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Carol Henderson alludes to Scarry's idea about this in her discussion of *Beloved*. She makes the point that "Morrison's creation of Beloved offers another way to read the language of the scar itself as Beloved's inability to speak can be viewed as a manifestation not only of her young age at the time of her death but also of the inadequacy of language to fully articulate pain" (94).

their works, Morrison and Butler depict this "seared, divided, ripped-apartness," figured as scarred flesh, as a way to make the transition from flesh to sentient body.[43]

The transition from flesh to body is important particularly in terms of responding to the historical silence around black female pain and the consequences of this silence. It is in this respect that we can consider the role that silence plays in sustaining an open wound in the black female body politic. In his analysis of Nicolas Abraham's work on the idea of the phantom and transgenerational haunting, Nicholas T. Rand explains that "The phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence" (168). Nicolas Abraham's theories on the phantom suggest that some cases of psychological trauma extend beyond or are not simply caused by the Oedipal complex as Freud suggests. Rather, an individual's trauma can in many cases be linked to a continual haunting of an ancestor who has unfinished business, whether it be an unaddressed wrong or a painful experience that is never fully resolved. (167). Rand elaborates:

> One could say metaphorically that Abraham calls for a psychoanalytic cult of ancestors and a psychoanalytic form of honoring the dead with rightful burial. But in the psychoanalytic realm, laying the dead to rest and

[43] Saidiya Hartman sheds light on how slaves were characterized as unfeeling. She notes the rhetoric by which slave pain was disavowed: "No the slave is not in pain. Pain isn't really pain for the enslaved because of their limited sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly, the slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds 'our' own" (36).

> cultivating our ancestors implies uncovering their shameful secrets, understanding their nameless and undisclosed suffering. We should engage in this unveiling and understanding of the former existence of the dead not because we may want to appease them or prevent them from perpetrating their nocturnal pranks, but because, unsuspected, the dead continue to lead a devastating psychic half-life in us. (167)

What is most intriguing about Abraham's theory is that he doesn't call for a simple burial of the dead who unwittingly pass on their unresolved pain to their descendants. Rather, he feels that engaging with and understanding the former existence of the dead helps those living descendants to release themselves of the historical traumas that cause present day turmoil within the individual. Morrison and Butler illustrate Abraham's ideas in significant ways. Because they are concerned with "uncovering [the dead's] shameful secrets" and "understanding their nameless and undisclosed suffering," they suggest that doing so gives those directly impacted by the history of black female pain an overdue visibility. In this way, healing is both about the living and the dead.

Also, Abraham's theories are quite radical in the sense that they rely upon an individual recalling a history that he or she was not privy to and in some cases cannot substantiate. However, if we consider what occurs in *Beloved* and *Kindred*, Abraham's words have great resonance. The central theme in both novels centers on the unfinished business of the dead and the ways in which the past haunts the present. The novels highlight how understanding the dead connects to understanding the self. Silence about the past is so overpowering in both texts that they bring about a radical and supernatural confrontation. In this case, the scar plays a role in bringing about the confrontation in that

it is an undeniable remnant of the past. It thwarts silence. Therefore, the narratives in both *Beloved* and *Kindred* are two-pronged: 1) The primary work in the novels focuses on breaking silence (both the silencing nature of the protagonists' pain and the silence of their ancestors' pasts) in order to acknowledge historical wrongs; 2) the novels also seek to transform this silence through the movement from flesh to body so that this painful history does not continue to haunt future generations.

For the protagonists in both works, simply overcoming silence is a difficult task in and of itself. This is primarily because slaves (in this case black women slaves) experienced the kind of pain that has an annihilating power and defies language, as Scarry asserts.[44] Mae Henderson offers insight into the issues that underlie the limitations on black women's expression:

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[44] See also Cynthia Dobbs' "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited." She engages Elaine Scarry and contextualizes *Beloved* in Scarry's theory. She argues, "While Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* emphasizes the silencing effects of political violence, the nonverbal communication in the midst of extreme pain that Morrison invokes here [in the case of Hi Man and the chain gang's nonverbal communication] offers a different sort of model for political resistance. (In our current critical vocabulary, we could read this 'code' as a subversive semiotics in the face of a seemingly hegemonic symbolic order)" (567). The scar is an analogous case where we see nonverbal communication coming from the scars of the body as a form of undeniable expression in the face of oppression intended to silence.

> The presumption is [because of their positions as objects], of course, that black women have no voice, no text, and consequently no history. They can be written and written upon precisely because they exist as the ultimate Other whose absence or (non)being only serves to define the being or presence of the white male subject. The black woman, symbolizing a kind of double negativity, becomes a *tabula rasa* upon which the racial/sexual identity of the other(s) can be positively inscribed. (69)

Thus, before even undergoing painful language-destroying experiences, there is already an inability to be heard that disallows any possibility for black women to assert their personhood. Working under this assumption, the problem of voice and silence is an even greater obstacle. It is this reality that foregrounds the various reasons that silence occurs in the texts.

Beloved weaves together the relationship between silence, haunting and physical scarring intricately. The novel's preeminence among neo-slave narratives can largely be attributed to Morrison's compelling depiction of the complexity of telling a story about slave life and whether or not it is a story that can be (or should be told). This is precisely why this text is so integral to this project.

Early in the work, we see the consequences of speaking one's pain for Sethe in particular. Sethe is beaten by Schoolteacher because she had gone to Mrs. Garner to tell her of the abuse she endured at the hand of Schoolteacher and his pupils, who had held her down and sucked her breast milk. Sethe explains that the reason she told Mrs. Garner is that "Somebody had to know it. Hear it" (202). In attempting to work through the

wrongs done to her body, she needs to express them – needs for someone to acknowledge and legitimize her pain. Once Schoolteacher learns that she has told Mrs. Garner about the act, she is beaten to the point where she bites off a piece of her tongue (202). Symbolically, the loss of her tongue inhibits her ability to tell of the violence done to her and is a reminder of the consequences of speaking against those in power. Sethe cannot in confidence express her pain to anyone on Sweet Home plantation. There is no audience for her pain and when she attempts to express it to someone it only results in a greater pain that subsequently renders her unable to speak because her tongue is wounded as well.

In addition to Sethe's silenced tongue, other Sweet Home slaves were struck with silence when remembering their experiences. Baby Suggs is silenced when she witnesses Sethe's back, still bleeding from the beating she endured at Schoolteacher's hand. She makes a tacit agreement with Sethe not to speak of their past lives because "everything [in them] was painful or lost – unspeakable" (58). Also, Sethe and Paul D when recounting their respective pasts, stop short of truly detailing them. Without speaking, they agree that "Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from" (72). Instead they beat back the past (73) in order to maintain a kind of psychological stability in the face of the maddening effects of slavery. In all, the pain of memory carries as much threat as the original experience.

Morrison offers, however, one central and key example of how the body can be silenced (even when one wills it to speak) with the story of Sethe's mother, whose body is marked by a brand. When Sethe is a girl, her mother takes her behind a smokehouse and shows her a mark on her rib, which we can assume is a slave brand. Sethe describes it

as “a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin” (61). Her mother then tells her “This is your ma’am. [. . .] I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face you can know me by this mark” (61). The script on Sethe’s mother’s body is her only means of identifying herself in the event that she is rendered voiceless. It serves as a text which Sethe can read to establish kinship. It is also a speaking representation of abuse and bodily pain, and although it “speaks” on Sethe’s mother’s body, it is a silencing and silenced entity for Sethe. Her mother does not tell Sethe the story of how she got the mark. And when Sethe asks to be marked as well, her mother slaps her face, leaving her confused and without the story. Her mother allows the mark to tell one kind of story of identification, but refuses to allow it to tell the painful story of its origination, which would be an empowering act. In *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the African Slave Route,* Saidiya Hartman notes that in this case, “The mark of property provides the emblem of kinship in the wake of defacement. It aquires the character of a personal trait, as though it were a birthmark” (80). Sethe’s mother’s attempts to redefine her scar, originally meant to signify that she is now property. She remakes the brand as an identifying marker whereby her family can recognize her should her body one day be unrecognizable.

Unfortunately, Sethe’s mother’s body is disfigured at her death. Her mother is hanged and killed, the reason ambiguous to the reader. Sethe remembers that when her body was taken down “nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look” (61). She is unable to “read” her mother’s body in order to establish her identity and even as she attempts to study her mother’s body, she is snatched away by Nan, another slave woman who had crossed the Middle Passage with her

mother. Nan finally tells Sethe her mother's story of abuse, of how both she and Sethe's mother "were taken up many times by the crew" (62). And while Sethe's mother bore many children from these acts, according to Nan, she "threw" all of them away except Sethe (62). Significantly, even Nan's attempt to tell the story is lost to history because she does so in a language Sethe "understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now" (62). This illustrates the disconnect slaves experienced when attempting to pass down their stories. Stripped of their language and made to learn a new one that they were forbidden to read or write, there is no true avenue for empowering acts of articulation. Sethe notes that it was not until she had a mark of her own that she understood why her mother slapped her when she asked for a mark like hers (61). Her mother knew that Sethe's only inheritance was the same pain that she endured in slavery, which she has no power to control or protect Sethe from. When Sethe is faced with the same choice, she kills her own child so that no one could "measure [her] behind before they tore it up," that she would not be sexually violated or hung up like a tree with a bit in her mouth like her mother, whose bit "made her smile when she didn't want to" (203). In this way she seeks to "out hurt the hurter" (234). By killing her daughter Beloved, Sethe is attempting to thwart the passing down of pain that has characterized her experiences as a slave. However, this act illustrates that she is still disempowered because she has to resort to extreme measures in order to do so. The subtext of the novel suggests that until Sethe can speak about her own pain and the reasons behind the choices she makes to liberate her children in the only way she knows how, the pain of that experience will continue to haunt her and future generations within her family.

Sethe's ability to find words to express her body's pain is a complex process. Exploring the relationship between the body and the word is fundamental in establishing the concept of scars functioning as instruments to relate stories of pain. For Sethe in particular, the interplay of word and body has painful physical and psychological associations. She carries the painful memory of being pulled away from her mother's body before she is able to "read" it in order to establish her mother's identity. Also, it is through her physical labor that the ink is produced which Schoolteacher uses to debase her. He uses the ink in his instruction to his students where, in one memorable example, he has them delineate between what he refers to as Sethe's animal and human characteristics (193). This was Sethe's first sign that the relative goodwill shown to her and the other slaves on Sweet Home by Mr. and Mrs. Garner was not permanent.

Words even betray Sethe's body when Stamp Paid shows Paul D the newspaper which prints Sethe's picture alongside the story of her act of violence against her child. Paul D ruminates that "there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear" (156). Paul D maintains that events in black life – stories of having a healthy baby or of surviving some kind of danger – don't qualify as newsworthy to whites. This calls attention also to the fact that Sethe's story appearing in this paper was not for other former slaves to read because many of them could not. Stories like Sethe's were for the information of whites, thus causing Paul D to conclude that "This ain't her mouth" (157). Sethe's story, printed in a newspaper, alongside a picture of her face makes her a spectacle for whites and unrecognizable to Paul D.

The violence of words in connection to Sethe's body is perhaps illustrated as its most brutal when she has to purchase a tombstone for Beloved, the daughter she kills so that she won't be taken into slavery. Sethe sells her body to a white engraver in order to have the word "Beloved" engraved on her daughter's tombstone: "Ten minutes for seven letters. [. . .] She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new" – her legs "wide open as the grave" (5). To add to the pain and grief that Sethe is experiencing at the moment because of the violent act she commits in order to save her child, she also endures sexual degradation marking yet another act of violence. Sharon Patricia Holland importantly notes Morrison's multi-layered discourse in terms of the body and the word:

> The word and the flesh become intimately connected in this scene [with the engraver] in which Sethe's body becomes the exchange for letters of a language whose words and logic have separated her from the category of human being and posited her body as a commodity, as an other. Here, the word *Beloved* is both spoken and written word, both sign and articulation. In essence, this language can be described as physical and temporal. (53)

Clearly, slavery has established Sethe's body as a commodity, but since at this moment she is figuratively beyond slavery and her abuser is not her master, her sexual exploitation illustrates the continuation of the female body being used as a medium of exchange. Sethe is twice violated by both the engraver and his son who looks on.

Because words in connection to the body were often a source of pain for Sethe, the depiction of her scars stand in where words cannot. This reflects the notion of pain

and its unsharability, its unrelatable nature. Sethe could not find the words to speak the pain of her back; thus the metaphor of the tree is applied but even it proves to be insufficient. Amy Denver, the white woman who saves Sethe and helps to deliver her daughter, Denver, describes the scars on Sethe's back as a chokecherry tree with cherry blossoms blooming from its branches (79). Sethe adopts this metaphor, yet her scars reveal the truth of her experience and not the sanitized version that Amy Denver attempts to remake it as. In fact, Sethe's scar is also described as a wrought iron maze when Paul D kisses it (20). It then is described simply as a "revolting clump of scars. Not a tree as she said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he [Paul D] knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to [. . .]" (21). Sethe's scars belie the soothing metaphor of the tree that characterizes her back. The brutality visited upon her body is what Paul D witnesses – revolting, the sight of them which silences Baby Suggs. They bear witness to Sethe's pain even as it is undergoing a more sanitized recontextualization.[45]

The scars speak the undeniable truth of Sethe's life experiences and they endure making it impossible to remove them from memory. It is also inevitable that because Sethe has not articulated the reality of her scars, that pain continues to be passed down due to the silence around them. We see this in the way that Sethe's pain is connected to

[45]A. Timothy Spaulding argues that "Morrison establishes her postmodern slave narrative [*Beloved*] in opposition not only to the truth claims of realism and objectivity of traditional history but to the ways the form itself contributes to our tendency to abstract and aestheticize the history of slavery" (62).

her mother's pain. Although she makes great effort to avoid the same fate for her children, ultimately their pain is intertwined with hers. It is worth noting that Sethe is pregnant with Denver when she is beaten. Also the violent act of taking her milk compromises her ability to nurse and nurture her other young child who has gone on ahead of her to Ohio (17). So in both respects, her children's viability is implicated in her own abuse. Rather than have her children endure the hardship that she has experienced under slavery, she would rather see them die by her own hand. Ultimately, this act leaves a large wound for many in the narrative. Beloved represents the quintessential wound in the novel. She bears her own scars and embodies the unspoken pain of many former slaves in the work, particularly the women.

Beloved represents what Stamp Paid refers to as "black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181). There are many instances in the novel of these cases. Mae Henderson elucidates this, asserting that Beloved:

> [S]ymbolizes women in both the contemporaneous and historical black communities. Affiliated with the experiences of various women in the novel, Beloved represents the unsuccessfully repressed 'other' of Sethe as well as other women in and associated with the community – including Ella, whose 'puberty was spent in a house where she was abused by a father and son'; Vashti (the wife of Stamp Paid, who had ferried Sethe and others across the Ohio River to free land), who was concubined by her young master, and the girl who (as rumor had it) was locked up by a 'whiteman' who had used her to his own purpose 'since she was a pup.' Beyond this, however, Beloved is associated with her maternal and

> paternal grandmothers and the generation of slave women who failed to survive the 'middle passage.' [. . .] It is, in fact, Beloved's implication in the lives of the collectivity of women that makes it necessary that all the women in the community later participate in the ritual to exorcise her. (75)

Henderson eloquently sums up Beloved's interrelatedness to the women in the novel and the specific pain that is often repressed in the subconscious because of its unspeakablilty. Ella, a former slave who helps to free other slaves, recalls her own unspeakable abuse saying it was "the lowest yet" (256) and that "You couldn't think it up" (119). For Ella, the acts committed against her cannot be expressed in language or even imagined. It is in this way that Beloved's presence articulates a collective trauma.[46]

We also have to consider Beloved as a scarred body herself. She bears her own scar – shaped in the form of a smile around her neck – from the violence she experienced at Sethe's hand. She also is intimately connected to Sethe's and Denver's lives, demonstrating both the primary and larger generational relationships and how they bear upon each other. Her example is a physical representation of the collapsing of boundaries between historic and private pain, between the living and the dead.

The tragedy of Beloved's own story is written on her body. In order to save her from the potential sexual abuse that permeates the female slave experience, Sethe takes "ownership" of her daughter's body and kills her. The wound of this act is so deep within the family that the ghost of her daughter haunts 124 Bluestone Road. When Sethe

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[46]See Shu-li Chang's "Daughterly Haunting and Historical Traumas: Toni Morrison's Beloved and Jamaica Kincaid's The Autobiography of My Mother."

suspects that Beloved is the woman who shows up at her home when she, Paul D, and Denver return from the carnival, she begins to attempt to explain why she had to kill her. Sethe's central question, the only thing she needs to know is "How bad is the scar?" (184). This question resonates throughout the novel since it is filled with numerous psychologically and physically scarred bodies.

Beloved formulates a kind of answer in her own way. She functions as a speaking scar that merges various voices of abused black women in slavery. The section dedicated to Beloved speaking is a fragmented piecing together of stories that follow no real narrative form. The language is in many ways broken. Cynthia Dobbs in "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited," argues that in this novel "Something in language must be not merely transcended, but *broken*, for a message between members in the community to work" (567). Beloved's words reflect a sense of broken language and broken identity, attempting to make sense of pain that resists expression. Feelings of "hurt" and abuse are interwoven throughout her recounting of her experience. She describes being taken and losing her mother; additionally, she references a man in a house who hurt her and the hurt inflicted by her mother (214-215). Lines from the passage read:

> Where are the men without skin?
>
> Out there. Way off.
>
> Can they get in here?
>
> No they tried that once, but I stopped them. They won't come back.
>
> One of them was in the house I was in. He hurt me.
>
> They can't hurt us no more. (215)

At points, it is unclear whether Sethe or Beloved is speaking. The emerging narrative attempts to tell the story of what was once unspeakable. Also, through the combining of voice, Morrison draws a long line from the experience of the Middle Passage to the circumstances of Beloved's death. In this way they are all interrelated, one event impacting the way others are experienced.[47]

Additionally, when Sethe, Beloved, and Denver speak, they come together in a way that reflects the relationship between history and the present. The women come together as veritably one woman evinced by the repeating of "you are my face" (216) and Denver recalling that she drank Beloved's blood along with Sethe's milk (216). Denver best represents the coming together of history and the present. She functions as storyteller in the novel because it is through her that we learn of both Sethe's and Beloved's innermost thoughts. In one instance when she is attempting to tell Beloved about Sethe's journey from slavery to freedom, the narration reads: "She swallowed twice to prepare for the telling, to construct out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved" (76). Arguably, this net not only holds Beloved but the collective descendants of the historical wounds of slavery. Denver's telling of this history presents the opportunity for the pain to be redressed. We can see this in a more collective way when the women come to expel Beloved from Sethe's home; they do so as a casting away of their own historical demons.

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[47]See Sharon Holland's *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and Black Subjectivity* (p. 43).

Beloved's presence functions as a reminder of this history and the parasitic relationship she has with Sethe demonstrates how dwelling in pain or continuing to re-live one's traumatic past can have a destructive effect. Although Beloved's pain and memory cannot simply be discarded, the act of telling and speaking the wounds of slave women creates a space from which to move forward. The group of women in the community who come to remove Beloved also "speak" their bodies' wounds, causing a kind of collective catharsis that transforms their physical and psychological scars into language. Ella in particular recounts her wounds, having been "beaten every way but down," losing teeth to the brake and remembering "scars from the bell" that were thick as rope around her waist (258). Together, the women come to a vocal articulation that expresses their pain:

> For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (161).

Words, which had long betrayed these women, words they did not know how to read or write, words they could not or dared not speak, so much jeopardy in utterance, are now transformed to express the litany of abuses done to their bodies and the actions they had to take to protect themselves and those they loved.

The transformation of physical scars into words is also very powerful in *Kindred*, where the protagonist Dana directly feels the effects of the silence about her family's historical scars. Also, *Kindred* reflects much of Nicolas Abraham's theories on transgenerational haunting. Although Dana is many generations removed from her family's slave history, she is transported back into this history. The tug of the past on Dana is an example of what Abraham calls, "*the existence of the dead buried within the other*" (175). Butler is able to present such a narrative possibility through her use of the genre of speculative fiction. In the novel, Dana travels several times into the antebellum slave era to her ancestral home in Maryland and witnesses acts that neither her familial nor historical documents record. This travel occurs on both a psychological and physical level whereby she loses consciousness in her present life in 1976, Los Angeles, California and is transported to the 1800s in Easton, Maryland, a central location of her slave and white ancestors. Dana's supernatural transport can be read as a result of her ancestors unwittingly passing down their pain because it has yet to be reckoned with and largely forgotten. She finds in her repeated travels to the past that nothing had or could truly prepare her for the acts of brutality that she witnessed on an almost daily basis.

In most cases, Dana's travel occurs whenever there is a threat to her white male ancestor's (Rufus Weylin) life. When she is summoned into the past by young Rufus, she begins to recall the gaps left out of her family bible, the only authenticating document of her family's history. As she remembers the details her grandmother Hagar included, she realizes that they too were incomplete because it was likely that "most information about her life had died with her" (28). Dana also notes that although Rufus Weylin is mentioned in the family bible, no one had mentioned that he was white (28). Dana's experiences in

the past of her ancestors bring to light the history that is undocumented, especially as it relates to slave life.

Not only does Dana have to contend with the historical absences in her family history, but she has to confront her own inability to account for those absences in attempting to document her own journey into the past. As a writer by trade, Dana is adept at using language to convey what she experiences; however, when she attempts to write down her experiences on the Weylin plantation, she struggles with articulation. In one instance when she returns to her home in California after being on the Weylin plantation, she makes an effort to write about some of her experiences, in hopes of making sense of them. She narrates, "Once I sat down at my typewriter and tried to write about what had happened, made about six attempts before I gave up and threw them all away. Someday when this was over, if it was ever over, maybe I would be able to write about it" (116). Dana struggles to write about experiences that seem unbelievable and defy expression. On one occasion, after returning from the Maryland plantation back to her reality in 1976, her cousin sees bruises from a beating by Tom Weylin who is the plantation master and Rufus' father. She assumes that Dana's husband Kevin is responsible for them. Dana cannot disabuse her of this notion because she feels the truth is unbelievable so she allows her to believe that this is true. She swears her to silence trusting that her cousin would keep her secret (116). Even in the present, Dana cannot speak about the wounds of her experience in slavery.

Dana's inability to write her body's pain is even more intensified when she is on the Weylin plantation. As a slave, her knowledge of reading and writing could cost her life. Indeed, it is significant that Dana's first beating from Tom Weylin comes as a result

of her teaching a slave, Nigel, to read and write (107). This is particularly troubling because for Dana writing is a form of freedom. Dana being punished for something as vital to her as reading and writing is a direct blow to her ability to use her strengths as a writer to cope with the trauma she experiences on the plantation.

When Dana is called back for a final time, after her ancestor Alice kills herself by hanging as a result of years of being raped and bearing children by Rufus – her struggle to articulate her thoughts and experience is magnified. Dana, who has developed a close relationship with Alice, is very emotional after her death. After Alice's funeral, Dana steals away to the Weylin library to attempt to write her feelings down. In this instance she uses writing to express what she could not say aloud (252). However, she explains that "It was a kind of writing I always destroyed afterward. It was for no one else. Not even Kevin" (252).[48] Dana's inability to share her writing illustrates Scarry's notion of pain as a destroyer of language. Scarry describes the experience of pain and torture as one in which everyday objects can be re-appropriated as tools of oppression (Scarry 67). For Dana, books and writing utensils acquire a different meaning. Once the center of her existence, she is not free to read or to write for fear of being beaten.

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[48] Elaine Scarry discusses how in torture, everyday objects can be transformed into weapons, thus annihilating their original meaning/use. The refrigerator becomes a bludgeon, lampshades, showers, ovens, etc. become weapons (41). In essence, "The appropriation of the world into the torturer's arsenal of weapons is a crucial step in the overall process of torture" (45).

Also, her act of destroying her writing reflects how the audience is implicated in the telling.[49] It is not just that Dana has trouble finding words to express her experience, it also that in slavery the threat of the wrong person reading your words, of having a glimpse into the interior life where your pain resides, comes at great emotional and physical risk.

Octavia Butler depicts this physical and emotional risk in great detail. She, like Morrison, uses the trope of the scar and the physical pain accompanying it as a way to shed light on experiences in slavery that defy language. Butler pays particular attention to physical pain, the central characteristic of slave life. Pain is so central to *Kindred* that it takes on its own identity. Dana once refers to it as being a friend (113). Her experience with pain is so intimate that she accepts it as a part of her everyday reality. In her time travel she is not a silent observer. Dana is thrust into the middle of difficult situations and forced to negotiate her body which is an interstitial figure balancing disparate worlds and people. Gregory Hampton argues that "Butler allows Dana to speak what was once

[49] Karla Simcikova notes Butler's own awareness of audience as she wrote her novel and how it contributes to what she decides not to include. Butler says, "One of the things I realized . . . was that I was not going to be able to come anywhere near presenting slavery as it was. I was going to have to do a somewhat cleaned-up version of slavery or no one would be willing to read it" (cited in Simcikova 350). In the face of unbearable truth, Butler moderates her storytelling in light of her intended audience (s).

unspeakable. Similar to Denver in *Beloved*, Dana functions as an intermediary between the past and the present. Her body and voice are used to call attention to events that have been lost to history. In this way in the *Kindred* narrative the body is positioned as the scene of the unspeakable" (115). Indeed, Dana's body functions as a kind of *tabula rasa* to echo Mae Henderson. Much of the physical pain of slavery is written on her body as a way of bearing witness to these traumatic experiences.

Dana not only has to address her own physical pain, but also the pain of her ancestors. For her to conceptualize and express the true nature of the physical pain that her slave ancestors experienced, she must understand it. Butler is careful to detail the various kinds of physical pain experienced in slavery. One primary function of pain for Dana is conditioning. She ruminates early in the novel on whether or not she would or could endure the physical pain her ancestors endured in slavery; however, over time, she comes to realize that she can and often does as a means of self-preservation both of body and mind. Although Dana experiences painful moments in her first travels back into time, these moments become more focused and directed in the service of making her a slave. Dana initially comes to know pain and violence's power to inspire fear when she interacts closely with Margaret and Tom Weylin. On Dana's third trip, Kevin is with her; he poses as her master which gives them a reason for her to sleep in his room rather than on a pallet in the attic of the Weylin home instead of the attic with the house slaves. Because Margaret Weylin objects to Dana sleeping in Kevin's room, she slaps Dana and calls her a "filthy black whore" (93). Although Dana desires to strike Margaret back, an earlier memory of seeing a slave whipped by Tom Weylin keeps her from doing so. Tom Weylin uses the spectacle of violence against a male slave as a way of stoking fear in other slaves

(92). Dana explains that she fears the thought of being whipped by Weylin greatly and is psychologically scarred from witnessing the beating.

Seeing a slave being beaten begins the process of silencing Dana. More and more she is troubled by the way in which physical anguish is normalized on the plantation. The acceptance of hardship and personal angst is particularly troubling for Dana. She witnesses slave children re-enacting an auction (99). Although she is disturbed by this, she acknowledges that this is evidence of their reality – that even as children they have come to accept the possibility of being sold away from their families at any time. In the face of this, Dana asserts to Kevin that "you don't have to beat people to treat them brutally" (100). She soon, however, is beaten by Tom Weylin after he discovers her using a book from his library in order to teach the young slave boy, Nigel, to read and write. Her description of this moment is vivid. She says, "[The whip] came – like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin . . ." (107). The ellipses represent the struggle to find language with which to express this pain. She describes herself as being in overwhelming pain, which causes her to vomit and want to die just to stop the pain.

Dana's pain defies true description; therefore, her scars are what function as a way of confirming her experience and expressing its true horror. The violent beating sends her back to 1976 in her home where she is alone. (Kevin is left behind because he was not with her at the moment she drifted out of consciousness – his only way of entering and exiting the antebellum South is through physically touching Dana's body.) She finds that her blouse is stuck to her body and that her back was badly cut up. She recalls, "I had seen old photographs of the backs of people who had been slaves. I could

remember the scars, thick and ugly. Kevin had always told me how smooth my skin was. . .” (113). Again Dana’s words wander off leaving ellipses. She again has no way of making sense of her scarred back. It is in this way that Dana knows that she is permanently altered.

Speaking to Lena Ampadu, Octavia Butler makes clear that Dana “could not have come through this experience without having scars. The scar is physical but there are many other kinds. She could never look at herself and not remember” (70). Butler positions the scar as the only true form of communicating these painful experiences. These undeniable markings of the body confirm and document pain in profound ways. Dana herself notes this when she returns to Rufus after her first beating: “I rubbed my back, touched the several long scabs to remind myself that I could not afford to make mistakes. [. . .] I didn’t have to touch the scabs on my back to be conscious of them” (129). Tom Weylin’s beating serves the purpose it intended to serve; Dana slowly becomes conditioned to be more docile and careful in order to avoid their brutality. She laments that she is becoming like Sarah, whom she originally criticizes as being too subservient, and she regrets that initial judgment.

When she is beaten after attempting to run away, Dana begins to acquiesce more to Tom and Rufus. Her life had become more about avoiding pain and ensuring her and her family’s survival. She explains, “Slavery was a long slow process of dulling” (183). Her final beating occurs when she is punished and forced to work in the field because Rufus feels that she let his father die. This beating illustrates her limited options and the extent to which the pain has broken her. Fowler, the overseer, forces her to endure back-breaking labor and beats her with the whip which causes her to double over in a “blaze of

pain" (212). She is traumatized by this experience and finds herself cringing and jumping at the sound of his voice (213). His actions are especially surprising to Dana because she recalls that "even Tom Weylin hadn't hit slave women [as forcefully as Fowler had]" (212).[50] Dana must choose between the overwhelming pain of the work or working at a slower pace, which would provoke a beating by Fowler. She realizes that she has run out of options and again welcomes unconsciousness and even death because either would allow her to go "away from the pain" (213). Cumulatively, these acts serve to render Dana subservient. She understands that she is helpless and that she has no way to escape.

Although the abuse Dana experiences places limitations on her ability to express herself, scars from that abuse in some instances speak for her in relating to other slaves. They act as a sign of her status as a slave confirming that she would not betray others out of loyalty to her master. For example, when Dana intervenes as Alice's husband Isaac is beating Rufus for raping Alice, Isaac distrusts her. But Alice reassures him by explaining that Dana was given a "whipping once for teaching a slave to read. Tom Weylin was the one whipped her" (120). The fact that Dana has experienced this pain and has scars to document this experience is a way of identifying with other slaves. In this respect, their

[50] Kevin tells Dana that during their separation he witnessed a pregnant woman die from a beating. "This woman's master strung her up by her wrists and beat her until the baby came out of her – dropped on the ground" (191).

markings from beatings become transformed, reinforcing a sense of community and shared struggle.

There are other experiences that slave women experience that Dana does not - specifically sexual abuse. These stories are largely lost to the historical record because of the social stigma of expressing them. Dana witnesses the struggles that Sarah, Tess, and Alice endure as a result of sexual violence. Sarah, the house cook, bears the pain of her children being sold away from her largely in silence. Her children were the result of repeated rape by Tom Weylin and Sarah informs Dana that they were sold because of Margaret Weylin's spite. Sarah says, "She wanted new furniture, new china dishes, fancy things you see in that house now. [. . .] So she made Marse Tom sell my three boys to get money to buy things she didn't even need!" (95). Sarah not only has to contend with the emotional effects of sexual abuse, she has to reckon with being separated permanently from her children, with the exception of Carrie, whom Tom Weylin allowed Sarah to keep in order to ensure her docility and obedience. Again, as in the case with Denver, Dana is an intermediary who takes in the stories of others so that they will be heard and potentially retold.

Butler is able to tell the story of sexual violence visited upon slave women through Dana although Dana does not directly experience it herself. This is powerfully illustrated through the slave Tess, who is forced into sexual relations with Tom Weylin and when he tires of her he passes her along to Jake Edwards, the overseer at the time. He sends Tess into the fields to work so that he can keep close watch over her. Distraught, Tess laments, "'You do everything they tell you' she wept, 'and they still treat you like a old dog. Go here, open your legs; go there, bust your back. What they care! I ain't s'pose

to have no feelin's!'" (182). Tess's words reveal the multi-leveled wounding of black women in slavery. In the continued use and abuse of her body, she is confronted with the reality that she is not considered a person with feelings of any kind.

It is Alice's experience, however, that Dana finds most difficult to grapple with and express, primarily because Alice's pain bears so much on Dana's life. Dana's first true encounter with Alice is when Dana intervenes in the fight between Isaac and Rufus. Dana also experiences a prolonged time with Alice when Alice is brought back to the Weylin plantation "bloody, filthy, and barely alive" (146), beaten and attacked by dogs, after she tries to run away with Isaac. It is in this moment that Rufus co-opts her body making her a slave whereas she was once a free woman. Alice, like Dana, has to become conditioned into slavery, so we witness her being made to be more docile despite her anger at being torn from her husband.

The sexual abuse visited upon Alice's body become even more significant when Dana is forced to participate in helping Alice go to Rufus' bed peaceably. The reality of the situation is that neither woman has the power to say no. When Dana speaks with Alice about the possibility of her giving herself to Rufus without force, she tells Alice "I can't advise you. It's your body" (167). Alice responds to this defiantly but with some small air of resignation: "Not mine. [. . .] Not mine, his. He paid for it, didn't he?" (167). Alice knows that as a slave her body does not truly belong to her; thus she is unable to deny Rufus of his desire. Caught in an overwhelming sense of helplessness, Dana and Alice know that their bodies are not their own and that they can be used at will for anyone's whim. In this intimate connection with Alice, Dana realizes just how much her life is dependent on Alice's abuse. She says, "It was so hard to watch him [Rufus] hurting

her – to know that he had to go on hurting her if my family was to exist at all" (180). In this instance, Butler highlights the long historical arc of black female sexual abuse that so many families were founded upon but rarely acknowledged.[51]

For Dana, articulating Alice's experience becomes even more difficult the longer Dana stays on the Weylin plantation. They become interconnected in ways that overwhelm Dana and also place her in the same kind of jeopardy as Alice. Rufus, upon entering Alice's cabin one day, suggests that they are two halves of the same woman. He greets them saying, "Behold the woman. [. . .] You really are only one woman. Did you know that?" (228). Although Dana is not sexually abused in the way that Alice is, she is deeply connected to Alice's sexual oppression which illustrates Abraham's notion of the unfinished business of the ancestor continuing to haunt the descendant (171). Dana witnesses first-hand the stories of cruelty against her female ancestor that are left out of the family bible.

Dana's connection to Alice's body and the ordeal of her time travel to the Weylin plantation is powerfully severed when Rufus tries to rape her. Dana returns to the antebellum era once more after Alice hangs herself, and Rufus focuses his sexual desires upon her. She stabs him with a knife in order to prevent the assault after realizing that she

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[51] Robbie McCauley makes this point saying: "That kind of rape [occurring on plantations] changed who we were as a people and that was not our choice. We didn't choose to make ourselves as a result of that rape, we had to improvise ourselves" (Patraka 30).

had no choice: "A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her" (260). Dana finally places a limit on the extent to which she would be abused, preferring death to being violated in such a manner. Her choice results in the loss of her arm. Losing her arm in the struggle with Rufus illustrates that she cannot come through such a horrific experience and remain whole.[52] In this way, Dana's own flesh becomes implicated in the act of witnessing. Losing her arm and being forced to leave it behind in the antebellum era, demonstrates just how much Dana's body is connected to her ancestral history. Although the loss of the arm is a transformative act because she asserts power over Rufus, the reader is left to wonder whether or not Dana will be able to tell her family's story, which represents the stories of other slaves as well.

In fact, in *Kindred* and *Beloved* there is some ambiguity as to whether or not the story of pain and brutality visited upon these slave women can be told openly and without consequence. After their harrowing experience, Dana and Kevin return to Maryland only to find little documentation of Weylin plantation history. They find nothing in newspapers or any documents connecting the Weylin family to Alice and the children she bore by Rufus and they could find nothing explaining the true circumstances of Rufus's death. After Dana searches for answers to all the gaps in the document, Kevin tells her that "You've looked [. . .] And you've found no records. You'll probably never know"

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[52] See Lena Ampadu's "Racial, Gendered, and Geographical Spaces in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*" and Lisa Long's "A Relative Pain: The Rape of History in Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*."

(264). The only thing Dana has in remembrance is the scar from Tom Weylin's boot and a missing arm to document her experience. Unless she tells the story, it will likely be lost to history as well. Dana leaves this in doubt because when she returns to Maryland in the present day, she says to Kevin, "If we told anyone else about this, they wouldn't think we were so sane" (264). Dana remains tentative as to whether or not she will take the risk of telling the story.[53]

There is a similar ambivalence that occurs at the end of *Beloved*. If Beloved embodies the scar that many of the characters, particularly the women in the novel bear, then the work ends with a certain forgetting of her. Like the previous nature of their own histories, she is "disremembered and unaccounted for"; she is forgotten "like a bad dream" (274). The novel ends with Morrison's refrain: "It was not a story to pass on" which transforms into "This is not a story to pass on" (275). Ultimately, there is uncertainty around whether or not the story of these struggles will be acknowledged and recorded or if they will be discarded and forgotten. If forgotten, this complicates the

[53] Ashraf H.A. Rushdy explains that "given the tension between memory and historical records as it is represented in this novel [*Kindred*], we might suggest that Dana's losses and scars figure the way that the past exacts a cost which is not just psychic" (138).

notion of healing historical wounds, because to tell the story, to speak one's pain and most importantly to be heard and have that pain validated helps to mitigate suffering.[54]

Perhaps the novels themselves are the testimony that the protagonists in the works cannot fully tell. However, if we are to work within the space of the novels, the open wounds remain because of the precarious nature of the stories' survival. In the same way that audience plays such a significant role in theater with Parks and McCauley engaging and provoking the audience to shift their attention to the pained black female body, what audience will hear Dana and Alice's story or the story of Sethe, Beloved, and the women who come to expel her? It is possible that Denver and Dana (both representatives of the future generations) will endeavor to tell what is unbelievable or should not be passed on? The question of whether or not stories of such horrific brutality can and should be told is taken up further in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Rather than focusing on the visual representation of pain as we see in Morrison and Butler's novels and Parks and McCauley's plays, Jones and Danticat are concerned with the aftermath of what occurs when pain and scarring is articulated and how it affects future generations affected by this history. Jones and Danticat also raise questions

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[54] Antonius G.C.M. Robben argues that "[t]he contest of memory denies conflicting parties sufficient room to work through their traumas, hinders them from gradually standing back from the past and proceeding from testimony to historical interpretation and from re-experience to commemoration" (qtd. in Griffiths 2).

regarding how to move forward after the telling of the story, particularly as it relates to strategies for survival.

Doubling, Double Telling, and Testimony in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*

As demonstrated in *Beloved* and *Kindred*, the translation of physical pain into language is a difficult but important process. Returning to Elaine Scarry is clarifying because she explains both the language destroying nature of pain and the consequences of silence around that pain. She makes the point that:

> [T]he difficulty of articulating physical pain permits political and perceptual complications of the most serious kind. The failure to express pain – whether the failure to objectify its attributes or instead the failure, once those attributes are objectified, to refer them to their original site in the human body – will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation. (14)

Therefore, to remain silent about one's pain is to promote one's invisibility. Also, it devalues one's pain. In terms of black women who have endured systemic historical pain, remaining silent furthers their disempowerment and dehumanization. This is precisely what Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* attempt to circumvent.

More than any of the works examined in this study, these novels directly engage the impact of traumatic memory and storytelling on the body of the black female descendant emerging out of this history. Whereas in *Beloved* and *Kindred*, painful stories of the past were often unspoken, stories of past pain in *Corregidora* and *Breath, Eyes,*

Memory are at the center of each narrative. Both works explore notions of trauma, crisis and history which allows for a deeper consideration of how pain is passed down due to its unresolved and complex nature. They both conjecture that healing and resolution from traumatic events are possible and that history does not necessarily have to be framed in the context of trauma but in the context of survival.

Naomi Morgenstern's "Mother's Milk and Sister's Blood: Trauma and the Neoslave Narrative" discusses trauma in narratives that revisit slavery and what is accomplished in retelling these stories. By examining the purpose of telling painful stories of slave life, Morgenstern makes clear that telling the story of slavery to some type of productive end "troubles the opposition between a pure repetition of the past (trauma) and representation through narrative" (117). Indeed, trauma and slave narratives are intertwined in ways that resist objective telling and witnessing. However, this telling is necessary because most narratives about slavery have been lost to obscurity or purposely suppressed. The complex nature of telling this kind of trauma raises the important idea that the telling of a traumatic tale can also serve to empower, to cast a necessary light on a moment in history, and can potentially facilitate healing from the traumatic event in ways that break the cycle of trauma narratives as ongoing and necessarily repetitive tales. In order to advance this discussion, Morgenstern introduces the idea of testimony and testifying as an alternative way to understand the telling of traumatic narratives.

Morgenstern cites Geneva Smitherman who explains how "testifyin" is a form of ritualized communication among blacks which validates their shared experiences. Smitherman states, "To testify is to tell the truth through 'story' . . . [sic] the content of

testifying, then is not plain and simple commentary but a dramatic narration and communal reenactment of one's feelings and experiences" (qtd. in Morgenstern 105). Testifyin' and giving testimony for African Americans is a therapeutic act. When the testimony is about a traumatic experience, we have to consider how telling the tale can foster healing not only for the individual but to those implicated in the telling, while also narrativizing undocumented historical experiences. To testify can also be an act of defiance against those who have endeavored to suppress one's story. The possibilities for giving testimony about a traumatic experience and how testifying can be a form of healing is the subject matter taken up in *Corregidora* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. These novels demonstrate the ways in which the telling of traumatic narratives can be alternately traumatizing and/or transformative.

Corregidora relates the story of multigenerational trauma of the slave women owned by Portuguese slave owner Corregidora and their descendants. The novel is primarily centered on Ursa Corregidora who is the youngest descendant of their family and lives presently in Kentucky in the 20th century, many years beyond slavery. It is an interwoven tale of how Ursa negotiates life in the aftermath an accident that leaves her without the ability to have children and it is the story of her female ancestors who have made their own history of sexual abuse and exploitation in slavery a key part of the family's identity. There are often interpolations of Ursa's ancestors' narratives as the story of her experience is told.

Although the novel includes multiple perspectives, it is in essence, Ursa's story. Her pain is what initiates the action in the novel and it is her image, particularly the jeopardy of her body in public space, that is at the heart of the narrative. *Corregidora*

opens with Ursa's husband Mutt Thomas's preoccupation with her public display. At the time, Ursa is a featured blues singer at Happy's Café. On the stage, Ursa has the power of voice, often singing self-authored songs and receiving praise for her talents. However, Mutt cannot move beyond his view that Ursa's position is merely an exploitative one. He doesn't like the men in the café "messing" with Ursa and explains that although he knows it is not physical, they "mess with they eyes" (5). Mutt cannot conceive of Ursa being viewed by other men beyond the framework of sex and misogyny.

In light of Mutt's myopic view, Ursa's public role is made more significant. Gayl Jones offers the initial image of Ursa on stage in direct response to ideas similar to the one that Mutt holds, which assumes that all displays of black women's bodies are inherently perverse and made for consumption. Jones re-writes notions of the black female body as disempowered and exploited. In support of this, Patricia Cabrera in her work "(Em)Bodying the Flesh: Mythmaking and The Female Body in Gayl Jones' *Song for Anninho* and *Corregidora*" makes the point that "Jones' literary contribution to the revision of the black woman's body calls our attention to the vicissitudes of black women who, at least in this instance – by not fulfilling the maternal role are confined to the realm of invisibility" (112). Indeed Ursa is framed in the context of her identity as blues singer, rather than other traditional women's societal roles. Her visibility is a central part of her persona and it is this visibility that is a catalyst for subsequent action in the novel. Within moments of our introduction to Ursa, she moves from an empowered body to a pained one. When Mutt physically confronts her about her performances, he causes her to fall down the stairs at the back of Happy's Café. Subsequently, she miscarries a pregnancy and has to have a hysterectomy leaving her unable to bear children. The text

then explores how Ursa grapples with her painful experience, her difficulties articulating her pain and the multiple levels of physical and psychological scarring with which she has to contend.

After she is released from the hospital, Tadpole McCormick, the man who would go on to become her second husband, tells Ursa about her inability to express her pain and anger about her experience. He explains, "They said you had those nurses scared to death of you. Cussing them out like that. Saying words they ain't never heard before. They kept saying 'What is she, a gypsy?'" (8). Ursa is unrecognizable in her pain and this alienates her from others. Specifically, her friend Cat Lawson is afraid to interact with her because she doesn't "like to come around when women have their evil spells" (14). In these instances, all of Ursa's expressions of pain are characterized as foreign, evil and implicitly dangerous. She primarily retreats into silence, often suppressing expressions of pain or feeling. When Tadpole attempts to discuss the accident, she responds by telling him "I can't talk about it" (8). There are also several occasions in the novel where Ursa repeatedly notes "I said nothing" in response to difficult conversations regarding her life and family history.[55] Her silence in the text prevails in the sense that she retreats within herself as she recovers from her traumatic accident. However, this is but one level of the effect that her accident has on her.

[55] See Jennifer Cognard-Black's "'I Said Nothing': The Rhetoric of Silence and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora.*"

When Ursa returns from the hospital, she and Tadpole are preoccupied with her surgical scar. Ursa explains to Tadpole that she can just feel that she is going to be left with a bad scar once her stitches are gone (17). Tadpole also touches the scar and she remarks, "It's worse when you touch it than when you look at it" (18). In this instance, it is only the sentient act of touching the scar that makes it more real.

Interestingly Ursa experiences another form of scarring that others can indeed feel and bear witness to – the change in her singing voice. As she heals from her hysterectomy, Ursa sings for Cat who notices the difference in her voice. After Ursa sings "Trouble in Mind," Cat explains, "Your voice sounds a little strained, that's all. But if I hadn't heard you before I wouldn't notice anything. I'd still be moved. Maybe even moved more because it sounds like you been through something" (44). Cat aptly notes that Ursa's singing voice is a window into her inner life, something that Ursa has resisted sharing. Her singing voice, however, belies her innocence. She is no longer the same person that she was before her accident and her voice reveals that. Thus, the space in which she felt most comfortable expressing herself is now a mechanism for revealing things she would rather not make public.

In addition to her physical scar and the change in her voice, Ursa's experience also affects her ability to feel sexual pleasure. With Tadpole, this is especially apparent during their love making. He is concerned with whether or not he is hurting her during sex and asks if it hurts to which she often replies "no" (49, 83). He eventually becomes unsatisfied with this answer and responds, "You hurting somewhere baby. I know you hurting somewhere" (83). Ursa's reluctance to discuss her feelings with Tadpole after the accident in addition to the difficulty in their lovemaking serves to alienate him from her.

This tension and distance leads to cruelty when Tadpole begins an affair with a young woman, Vivian, whom he has hired to sing at Happy's Café. When Ursa confronts the two of them after finding them in bed together, Tadpole dismisses her and exclaims that "She [Vivian] got more woman in her asshole than you got in your whole goddamn cunt" (89). This degrading comment triggers traumatic memories for Ursa in relationship to her family history and negative associations with sex. Ursa's memories are also compounded by the fact that she cannot bear children, which makes her unable to fulfill her female ancestors' imperative that she make generations.

Ursa drifts into her subconscious where she releases a great deal of what she has been feeling about not being able to bear children. In response to the repeated question, "What bothers you?" from Mutt who is only present in Ursa's mind, she says, "It bothers me because I can't make generations [. . .] It bothers me because I can't fuck [. . .] It bothers me because I can't feel anything" (90). Ursa confesses the emotional toll the accident has had on her; significantly, her regrets are primarily related to idea that others cannot use her body to fulfill their own desires.

Ursa's female ancestors' urging that she "make generations" is rooted in their efforts to produce offspring who would go on to tell the story of the violence and brutality they endured in slavery. As a result, Ursa's body is implicated in a long history that becomes both heritage and burden. She describes being told the story of Corregidora's reign of abuse so graphically that it seemed her foremothers "squeezed Corregidora into me" (103); she feels as if her body is being taken over by an overpowering entity. Corregidora's presence in her life is so strong that she holds on to his last name after marriage. In one sense, Ursa is claiming power over this name by

choosing to keep it. This is a choice her foremothers did not have. Potentially, Ursa can use her life to influence the Corregidora legacy. However, keeping this name is also confining because it continues to bind her to the abuser responsible for her ancestors' trauma.

Greater evidence of how her body is bound to her female ancestors' is her initial response when she returns from the hospital. She tells Tadpole that one of her central regrets is not being able to advance her family legacy by producing children. She explains that the women in her family "were suppose to pass it [their family history of sexual exploitation] down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget" (9). To this end, Ursa's body and the bodies of those who would come after her are not simply bodies but also texts. In another subconscious moment, Ursa imagines herself telling Mutt "I have a birthmark between my legs. [. . .] But it's your fault all my seeds are wounded forever. No warm ones, only bruised ones, not even bruised ones. No seeds" (45). Ursa acknowledges that her body is marked by her history and is something she seemingly has little control over. Although she struggles with the personal injury of no longer being able to produce seeds, the larger implications of why this is important are what hold the most pain for her.

In the essay, "Memory, History and Self-Reconstruction in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*," Siréne Harb makes the point that Ursa faces the literal and figurative threat of her body "becoming a museum for the perpetuation of a past that Great Gram thinks is dying" (122). Harb aptly uses the term "threat" in describing the challenges Ursa faces in light of this overpowering history. After years of having the story of Corregidora forcefully squeezed into her, Ursa too is traumatized by these past experiences. The novel

itself exemplifies this trauma. Naomi Morgenstern asserts that the novel is a "traumatized text, a text about trauma. As such it cannot be so linear, nor can it leave the past behind. There is no question of retrieving a repressed memory and putting it in its place" (108). The novel represents a confluence of history where Ursa cannot so easily separate her present pain from her female ancestors. Their past is a past that has not passed.

Cathy Caruth offers greater insight into Ursa's foremothers' painful and repetitive retelling of the past. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, she argues that "The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives [. . .] often emerges as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the *correlative crisis of life*" (7). Ursa's foremothers are in a crisis of survival that keep them perpetually reliving their abuse. Their rememberances are a constant returning to the site of the original wound. Ursa recalls sitting in Great Gram's lap as she told "the same story over and over again" (11). Ursa also notes that as her Great Gram told the story, "It was as if the words were helping here, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than memory" (11). Returning constantly to the story, Great Gram struggles to make sense of her experience and to transform it into something powerful for her. By telling the story over and over again, she attempts to erase the history of violence visited upon her and her offspring at the hands of Corregidora.[56]

[56]Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's "Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones' Corregidora" cites Dori Laub who discusses survival

Great Gram and female slaves like her primarily functioned as prostitutes in the Brazilian slave system. In Brazil, "slave women were used more as prostitutes than as 'breeders,' mostly because the international slave trade continued in Brazil throughout the tenure of slavery and eradicated the need for the slave population to reproduce itself" (qtd. in Goldberg 451). Great Gram recalls being made to engage in sexual relations with both Corregidora and his wife. Additionally, she and her daughter were made to have sex with various men as sanctioned by Corregidora. In a greater intensifying of the wrongs done to their bodies, the historical records of their lives as slaves were destroyed. Great Gram explains, "[T]hey didn't want to leave no evidence of what they done – so it couldn't be held against them. And I'm leaving evidence. And you [Ursa] got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. [. . .] That's why they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them" (14). Great Gram's defiance and her concern with historicizing her family's past calls attention to the role that history plays in the narrative.

When asked why she chose Brazil as the setting for Corregidora, Gayl Jones states that focusing on the Brazilian landscape helped her "[get] away from things that some readers consider 'autobiographical' or 'private obsessions' rather than literary inventions" (qtd. in Wall 126). She also notes that setting the novel in Brazil helped give

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testimony and the Holocaust. Laub makes the point that "survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive" (Goldberg 464). This need is certainly present with Ursa's foremothers.

perspective on the American experience (127). What Jones does with this setting is call attention to the African Diaspora and the multiple kinds of abuse slaves endured in different regions in the West. By bringing light to prostitution in the Brazilian slave system, we are able to understand the many levels of abuse black women endured. Also, Jones' referencing of Palmares in the novel, a successful Brazilian maroon society, functions as a metaphor for the possibility of overcoming past pain and transforming it. Siréne Harb explains, "Modeled after an African political system which protected the diversity and freedom of its subjects, Palmares defended its autonomy against a number of attacks by armed forces from Holland to Portugal" (130). We see Ursa's foremothers inspired by the strength of the people of Palmares in endeavoring to expose the abuse committed against them. However, their efforts are limited because they are fixated on retelling the story even to the detriment of their offspring. Ursa has to overcome the negative effects of being told the story of her foremothers' history in such a traumatic way. She undergoes an arduous process of working through the pain of her foremothers' history in order to tell their stories in an empowering way.

Throughout the narrative we see Ursa's foremothers struggling to tell their stories. These attempts have numerous implications for their own emotional well-being but it most significantly impacts Ursa. Ursa's foremothers suffer from the dual trauma that comes when one's pain is denied. Thomas Keenan explains that a double trauma occurs in situations such as these: "On one hand, there is a cataclysmic event which produces symptoms and calls for testimony. And then it happens again, when the value of the witness in the testimony is denied, and there's no one to hear the account, no one to attend or respond – not simply to the event but to its witness as well" (qtd. in Griffiths 2).

Struggling with this double trauma, Ursa's foremothers look to her as well as her mother to function as witnesses and help them correct the historical record. There is great value in witnessing one's pain; however, for Ursa, being a witness bears a great burden. She is also made to be a passive witness, reprimanded for asking questions (14, 61) and made to be silent and not engage directly with the story.

We can think of Ursa as a traumatized witness. As the story of Corregidora is told to her over and over again, she takes on the story as her own. She becomes so entangled with Corregidora's legacy that she cannot part with her last name after marrying. She also bears the burden of this history because her female ancestors depend upon her body to continue to tell the tale. Ursa's only inheritance is this verbal history. Ann DuCille makes the point that Ursa is "the last in a long line of black women haunted and emotionally burdened by history – by a legacy of rape, incest, and patriarchal psychosexual abuse, passed down through four generations like a sacred heirloom" (qtd. in Jacobe 117). Indeed Ursa inherits a legacy of pain and this keeps her bound to her past in a way that holds her captive. It is one of her first scars. Ursa recalls her Great Gram saying, "*They burned all the documents, Ursa, but they didn't burn what they put in their minds. We got to burn out what they put in our minds, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness. That scar that's left to bear witness. We got to keep it as visible as our blood*" (72). Ursa is scarred with her past and admonished to continue to scar future generations that she bore. In many respects, this scar is manifest in her relationships with men. She recalls Mutt asking her "*Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs?*" (45). She cannot give herself fully to any relationship because her mother and grandmothers made sexual pleasure taboo. Men, she learns, are tools to help her fulfill

her foremothers' wishes to make generations. Thus, she has difficulty establishing relationships based on mutual pleasure and affection.

Ironically, Ursa's inability to have children is what frees her from feeling compelled to re-live her foremothers' past. Through her personal scar, she is forced to seek other alternatives beyond the use of her body as a reproductive mechanism in order to positively articulate her foremothers' story of abuse and of survival. Ursa uses the act of giving testimony, which functions as a mechanism of collective healing, in order to shed light on her foremothers' suppressed history. She does this through her position on stage as a blues singer. Because she struggles with her own pain following her accident, she engages in multiple levels of testimony that empower her and by extension her foremothers. In her return to the stage, her inner thoughts reveal Ursa grappling with complexity, particularly as it relates to love, pain and pleasure. She reflects:

> *They call it the devil blues. It ride your back. It devil you.* I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he's [Mutt] done, hear it. All those blues feelings. That time I asked him to try to understand my feeling ways. That's what I called it. My feeling ways. My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain? That's the way it always was with him. The pleasure somehow greater than the pain. My voice screaming for him to take me. And when he would, I'd draw him down into the bottom of my eyes. They watched me. I felt as if they could see my feelings somewhere in the bottom of my eyes. (50-1)

The stage provides Ursa with a voice to tell her own story of pain. She does so seeking some aspect of recognition, wanting the audience to "see what he's done" and to feel "those blues feelings." Importantly in her testimony, she realizes that her pain is not her entire story and that she must embrace its complex nature in order to articulate the truth of her experience. She refuses to think of herself as a wounded body. Rather, she is triumphant in returning to the stage and using it as a space of empowerment.

It is after she returns to the stage that she realizes that she can advance her foremothers' legacy through song and performance. In a powerful subconscious revelation where she defends her singing of the blues to her mother, who considers it "devil's music," Ursa says to herself,

> *Then let me give witness the only way I can. I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee to rub inside my eyes. When it's time to give witness, I'll make a fetus out of grounds of coffee. I'll stain their hands. Everything said in the beginning must be said better than in the beginning.* (54)

The lyrical and blues-like quality of this passage resonates. Ursa's song bearing witness to her foremothers' past takes notions of disempowerment and overturns them. She radicalizes the idea of reproduction by suggesting that she can make a fetus from her hands, refusing to allow her inability to reproduce preclude her from telling her family's story. Additionally, because coffee was a central crop to the Brazilian slave trade, she takes a commodity and declares that she will use it to highlight the ways in which her foremothers' bodies were also commodified. She intends to tell the story on her own terms, better than it was told in the beginning. Here we see Ursa moving toward a

stronger and more forceful testimony that is quite unlike the repetitive double telling that has confined her foremothers to their past for many years.

Ursa is determined to tell the history, but not be held captive to it. She utilizes blues expression to provide empowering testimony for her foremothers. Cheryl Wall makes the point that, "The blues provide the structures of feeling that give her [Ursa] access to that part of her family history that was not only unwritten but also unspeakable. She develops the powers of imagination and empathy that allow her to fill the gaps in the stories her foremothers have passed down" (138). Inspired by blues testimony, Ursa uses creative expression to transform the traumatic narrative that is her family history. She contemplates, "I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life *and* theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world" (59). Fusing the new world with the old one is another element of positive retelling. Ursa is determined to move beyond the site of the wound and find a space for an articulation of the self beyond the narrow framework of pain. She thinks of questions she would have asked her foremothers had she been able to do so: "How many generations had to bow to his [Corregidora's] genital fantasies? [. . .] And you with the coffee-bean face, what were you? [. . .] And you, Grandmama, the first mulatto daughter, when did you begin to feel yourself in your nostrils? And, Mama, when did you smell your body with your hands?" (59). Ursa's questions call for her ancestors to relate to their bodies differently. They have been unable to do so because of the abuse they have suffered. For Ursa's grandmothers, Corregidora causes them to view their bodies negatively. They cannot choose romantic partners and they have little ability to perceive sex as pleasurable. To answer these questions would be to explore unknown territory, but

it too is a part of their suppressed history. It is the facet of the self that they were too afraid to connect with. Ursa's questions reveal the complexity in telling the story. Siréne Harb notes that "Instead of inscribing the horrors of the past on her body, [. . .] Ursa must learn how to work the historical process in reverse. [. . .] Ursa has to discard some of the horrible details of the past without losing sight of the importance of preserving the memory related to the traumatic events recounted to her" (122). Certainly, Ursa endeavors to find a way to "work the historical process in reverse" choosing to focus on other unspoken aspects of her family history in addition to those purposely destroyed. However, Ursa does not necessarily discard details of the past; rather, she finds a way to mediate both extremes, again balancing ideas of pleasure and pain as we saw earlier in her return to performing.

Her foremothers are fixated on one aspect of their lives to the neglect of other parts of their sentient bodies. It is Ursa's goal to embrace the full spectrum of their experience. Also, Ursa's mother has been unable to embrace her own sexuality because she too is a traumatized witness to Corregidora's violence. Not only that – she is a product of that violence. Ursa understands that she must tap into her mother's "private memory" in order to construct a complete story of their family history. This private memory has implications for Ursa as well because her mother's private memory includes that of Ursa's father, Martin, whom she never knew. Ursa relates, "I couldn't be satisfied until I had seen Mama, talked to her, until I had discovered her private memory" (104). Like Ursa, her mother was not a direct recipient of Corregidora's abuse. Many of the stories she knows are ones that were passed down to her by her mother and grandmother. She heeds their directive to make generations and Ursa is the direct result of this. She

also struggles in her relationships with men, particularly in terms of sex, and we can infer that this is a result of the scars she bears from being repeatedly told the story of Corregidora. When Ursa speaks to her mother about Corregidora, she recalls that "It was as if she had *more* than learned it off by heart, though. It was as if their memory, the memory of all the Corregidora women, was her memory too, as strong with her as her own private memory, or almost as strong" (128). Ursa's mother internalizes the Corregidora women's memory to such an extent that it becomes her own. She even does this to the neglect of her own emotional life, specifically as it relates to her relationship with Ursa's father.

Because of Ursa's mother's inability to fully connect emotionally to her husband, their relationship is fraught with violence and pain. After Ursa is born, Martin and Ursa's mother married; however, he left the family because he experienced a great deal of tension living in the Corregidora household. Ursa's mother also resisted sexual activity with him after Ursa was born. Martin subsequently resented her and accused her of leading him "bout as far as a woman can take a man without giving him nothing" (121). When she comes to him in attempt to repair the relationship, he beats and humiliates her publicly. However, Ursa's mother suppresses this abuse because she is primarily concerned with the rehearsing of injury relating to life on the Corregidora plantation rather than attending to her own pain. She explains that in many ways Martin was correct in suggesting that she had led him on. She states, "I carried him to the point where he ended up hating me, Ursa. And that's what I knew I'd keep doing. That's what I knew I'd do with any man" (121). Unknowingly, she bears allegiance to one man – Corregidora. In the same way that Corregidora forbid the prior generations of Corregidora women to

have relationships with other men beyond sexual exploitation and abuse, Ursa's mother confines herself to the same reality. Although she does not directly experience the trauma of rape, she remains in the liminal space between life and death and refuses to embrace either. Thus, Ursa's attempt to learn her mother's private memory, not only helps Ursa to tell a more complete story, but it is a release for her mother who until this point had no one to witness her pain.

Moreover, her mother serves as a cautionary tale for Ursa. She realizes that by limiting her possibilities in love relationships and holding her pain within, she neglects her personal needs because she carries the guilt of not being able to reproduce. Once she connects with her mother and creates a way to continue the story of her family through restorative testimony, she also reconnects with Mutt, both of whom are seeking redemption from the mistakes made in the early stages of their relationship. Like Ursa, Mutt internalizes his family history, particularly the one story he knew about his family's slave past. His great-grandfather, who was a blacksmith, earned enough money to buy freedom for himself and his wife. Mutt explains that "then he got in debt to these men, and he didn't have any money, so they come and took his wife" (150). This provides some insight into the potential reasons for Mutt's insecurities about Ursa and other men watching her on stage. Perhaps he lived with the fear that his wife could be taken and he would be powerless to prevent that from occurring. Interestingly, however, Mutt makes a conscious attempt not to let that history determine his life. He tells Ursa, "Whichever way you look at it, we ain't them" (151). Ironically, it is Mutt who offers Ursa the most help in fashioning a life for herself that is not destructively intertwined with her past. When they connect 20 years after Ursa's accident, Ursa is able to fully realize that idea.

Mutt's words "we ain't them" resonates in terms of Ursa breaking free from the burden of her past. This is most embodied in the final moments of the novel where she is giving Mutt oral sex. As she does this, she experiences a revelation of what Great Gram must have done to Corregidora for him to allow her to leave the plantation. In that moment, Ursa takes on her entire family history but offers a complex and clarifying perspective on it:

> I held his ankles. It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora – like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore? (184)

In her contemplation of the multiple levels of pain endured by the women in her family, Ursa does not choose a simple rationalization of their life experiences. Arguably, she devalues her foremothers' pain by equating it to hers and her mother's. But read differently, she is choosing not to let the abuse be the dominant narrative – that abuse no matter the level – does not have to continually be re-lived but can be overcome. This is most evident in Ursa's decision to love a man and share her body with him, although he has taken from her the ability to conceive offspring. She embraces both the pleasure and pain of love. Mutt repeats to Ursa, "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you" (185). And in a tender moment of vulnerability, Ursa cries and tells him, "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" (185). Holding each other in embrace, they have both

accepted the jeopardy of love and its pleasurable as well as painful aspects. Through her blues testimony and her allowing herself to love, Ursa begins to write a new narrative for herself and her family, one that embraces love's complexities and honors her past.[57]

Overcoming trauma and traumatic witnessing is also something that Sophie Caco struggles with in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. Sophie, however, is more implicated in her foremothers' pain than is Ursa because she is the product of rape and she is also forced to endure the generational practice of "testing" in which young girls are checked for confirmation that they have maintained their virginity. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is primarily the story of Haitian-born Sophie Caco who, after years of separation, reconnects with her mother Martine when she has to leave her Aunt Atie and Grandmother Ifé in order to live with her in the United States of America. During her time spent with Martine, Sophie learns of the circumstances of her birth and her mother's subsequent fragile psychological state as a result. It is out of this context that Sophie must establish her identity and the novel traces her attempts to do so.

Although the work is many years removed from slavery, the haunting presence of the sugar cane fields are a symbol of the many years of slavery and post-slavery

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[57] Cheryl Wall similarly argues that Ursa's inability to have children prompts her to obtain new understandings of her family story and new ways of telling it. She writes, "*Corregidora* appropriates the blues for literary purposes, to inform a novel that represents the possibility of confronting the past, surviving the present, and constructing a future that moves beyond pain to love" (139).

imperialism that undergird the novel. Like many post-slavery societies, the vestiges of the institution continued (and arguably continue) to impact those who have descended from it. As *Breath, Eyes, Memory* illustrates, this impact is particularly significant for women. In "The Unmaking of the World: Haiti, History and Writing in Edouard Glissant and Edwidge Danticat," Carole Sweeney writes, "After the official end of slavery in Haiti, sexual violence continued to be meted out as a form of social and political control; indeed, as UN documents demonstrate, the rape and sexual torture of women was an unofficial part of the Duvaliers' tactics on rural populations" (57). Thus, the novel draws important connections between the violence of slavery and the present day violence that women, in particular, are victims of. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, like *Corregidora*, illustrates the enduring nature of historical pain and how it is unwittingly passed down. Also, Sophie's act of testimony functions in a similar way to Ursa's therapeutic blues singing. Both women struggle to honor their family history while not being victims of it.

As a child, Sophie learns incrementally about her status as a young woman in Haitian society and the potentially precarious life that she might lead. From her infancy until the age of 12, she lived with her aunt Atie in Croix-des-Rosets. Atie mothers her and ensures that she receives a good education. Sophie is a large part of her family's hope for the future. Atie relates to her that she should take advantage of the opportunities that neither she nor Sophie's mother Martine had. She tells Sophie, "Your mother and I, when we were children we had no control over anything. Not even this body" (20). In telling Sophie this, Atie makes her aware that the opportunities that she has are not ones to be taken for granted.

Ironically, although Atie desires to make Sophie aware of her freedom and the many possibilities that exist for her life, she along with Martine bind Sophie to a responsibility to their family that gives her little control over her own body. Martine brings this into greater focus when Sophie comes to live with her. She tells her, "You are going to work hard here [in the United States] [. . .] and no one is going to break your heart because you cannot read or write. You have a chance to become the kind of woman Atie and I have always wanted to be. If you make something of yourself in life, we will all succeed. You can *raise our heads*" (45). Martine's words carry great responsibility for Sophie and a potential burden. Sophie's life is framed here as one that is restorative for previous generations of her family as well as herself. This alone is not necessarily a negative prospect; however, just as Atie tells Sophie that hers and Martine's bodies were not their own, Sophie's body or rather existence is not her own. Unwittingly, Atie and Martine are encumbering her with their expectations and not allowing her to determine her own.[58] These conversations with Sophie are but one element of her learning about the struggles of previous generations of women in her family. Arguably before Sophie

[58] That Atie and Martine attempt to control her body in the way that their bodies were controlled when they were young women is reminiscent of Cathy Caruth's use of Freud's analysis of the story of Tancred and Clorinda in which Tancred unwittingly commits the same injury to Clorinda, by wounding her with his sword a second time, and he does so because the voice that cries out from the wound witnesses a truth that he does not and potentially cannot fully know (Caruth 2-3).

develops her own sense of identity, it is already colored by her witnessing the hardships of those before her, most clearly illustrated with her witnessing of Atie and her mother's pain.

As a young girl, Sophie is keenly aware of Atie's loneliness and regret over the course of events that have influenced the present state of her life. Sophie makes Atie a Mother's Day card that she does not accept, reminding Sophie that she is not her mother (8). Also, Atie experiences internal longing for Donald Augustin, a wealthier man in Croix-des-Rosets for whom Atie has an unrequited love. Sophie is often privy to Atie's sadness at the missed opportunity of this relationship. On one occasion, when Donald goes into his home to be with his wife, Atie cries during the night and tells Sophie, "Don't you ever tell anyone that I cry when I watch Donald and his wife getting ready for bed" (17). Atie's private pain, whether it relates to her inability to read or the unfulfilled dreams in her life, is something that Sophie is influenced by at an early age. She is closely acquainted with the limitations that women like her aunt and mother faced, particularly their lives in the sugar cane fields, their only source of financial support and the closest they were to notions of progress within their community. Atie shares morbid stories of people dying in the cane fields, including Sophie's grandfather (4). Sophie's time with Atie gives her a context for the pain that characterizes her family's history. The pain of this history is seen to a greater extent with Sophie's mother Martine. Although Martine has left Haiti for the United States, she still carries the trauma of her personal and familial history with her. When Sophie joins Martine in the United States, she becomes a traumatized witness to her mother's pain.

Upon her arrival in New York, Sophie is struck by her mother's abject body. She notes her mother's emaciated frame and her physical weakness. Sophie recalls, "Her fingers were scarred and sunburned. It was as though she had never stopped working in the cane fields after all" (42). Martine's body is still marked by her time in the cane fields. That experience has left an indelible mark on her flesh and she struggles to remove it. She purchases skin lightening creams, affects a perfect French accent, and even has a romantic relationship with a Haitian man who also lives in New York and has a higher social status – Marc Baptiste. Marc is a lawyer and Martine states that "In Haiti, it would not be possible for someone like Marc to love someone like me. He is from a very upstanding family. His grandfather was a French man" (59). Martine's preoccupation with her own social status and looks are direct reflections of her long held feelings of inferiority.

Martine is not only marked by her traumatic experiences in Haiti and years of unresolved pain, she has to grapple with the external scar which is manifest in the body of her daughter Sophie, the direct product of her rape in the cane fields. Martine is not as detailed in retelling her experience as Ursa's foremothers are, but it is an ever present reality for her. When she mentions the circumstances of Sophie's birth to her, Martine says simply, "A man grabbed me from the side of the road, pulled me into a cane field and put you in my body" (61). Accompanying this curt sentence are the nights when Martine experiences night terrors that often awaken Sophie. On many occasions Sophie helps her mother in the aftermath of the nightmares. In one instance, Sophie's face frightens her mother after she awakens because it possibly bears resemblance to her father, the rapist (81). Because of this, Sophie struggles with a complicated existence.

She is a living manifestation of Martine's subconscious fears, the product of such a painful and terrifying part of Martine's life. She is also traumatized by seeing her mother in this state. The sleepless nights that accompany Martine's nightmares are also Sophie's.

Sophie's negotiation of such a complex existence becomes even more difficult when her mother begins to submit her to testing. Testing is a long held tradition in Sophie's family and many others in Haiti. It is a practice where a young girl's mother takes her finger and places it into her daughter's vagina in order to see if the hymen is intact, thus confirming her virginity. Martine describes testing to Sophie as a mother's duty. She explains, "When I was a girl, my mother used to test us to see if we were virgins. She would put her finger in our very private parts and see if it would go inside. [. . .] The way my mother was raised, a mother is supposed to do that to her daughter until her daughter is married. It is her responsibility to keep her pure" (60). This fixation on young women's purity is often described as a "virginity cult." In fact, Sophie uses this term as she attempts to make sense of the practice of testing (154). Helen Scott in "*Ou libéré*? History, Transformation and the Struggle for Freedom in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*" also makes the point that:

> The novel is saturated with images of blood and bleeding women, in particularly intense form in the folk tales of the woman who cannot stop bleeding until she is transformed into a butterfly (87-8), and the bride who bleeds to death at the hands of her new husband (154-5). [. . .] The weight of women's oppression gives rise to the virginity testing that drives the plot. Women, as carriers of culture, pass on the lessons of womanhood, defend the double standard that simultaneously sexualizes women and

> prohibits their sexual activity. [. . .] Women are objects whose bodies belong to men and are simply taken care of by women in the interim. (466-7)

By opting into this cult of virginity, Martine upholds the societal assumptions that place women in the position of sexual objects, free to be taken at will by men. Her obsession with Sophie's purity is both a continuance of the past, which she has attempted to flee and an internal need to ensure that Sophie does not endure a similar fate as her own. However, the act of testing has a detrimental effect on Sophie.

In her writing, Edwidge Danticat has always been concerned with bringing to light stories about Haitian life, particularly women's stories that are often repressed. She says, "Watching the new [sic] reports, it is often hard to tell whether there are real living and breathing women in conflict-stricken places like Haiti. The evening news broadcasts only allow us a brief glimpse of presidential coups, rejected boat people, and sabotaged elections. The women's stories never manage to make it to the front page. However they do exist" (qtd in Sweeney 58). By bringing attention to violence against women, Danticat is also shedding light on how the violence of slavery which is rooted primarily in race is continued in gender-based violence, where previously oppressed men inflict violence upon women, which deepens the women's oppression. This transition is even more troubling with the practice of testing since women perform this on their daughters to assure their purity for men.

Sophie is traumatized by the pain and emotional aftermath of the testing. It is not until Sophie develops a relationship with a man, her neighbor Joseph, who is nearly Martine's age, that Martine begins to test Sophie. As the testing continues, Sophie,

powerless to stop it from occurring, uses "doubling," a method where she replaces a negative experience with a memory of a comforting one. Doubling also has a long history in Haitian culture. Sophie explains, "There were many cases in our history where our ancestors had *doubled*. Following in the *vaudou* tradition, most of our presidents were actually one body split in two: part flesh and part shadow. That was the only way they could murder and rape so many people and still go home to play with their children and make love to their wives" (156). Sophie's psychic translocation of her body during the testing takes her to places like a field of daffodils or to a place where she can hear Tante Atie's voice (155) relieving her momentarily from her present pain. However, as she describes the doubling here, it is rooted in brutal acts of violence and only serves as a temporary alternative to long and enduring pain. Because Sophie has no other methods with which to cope, she takes on learned experiences of doubling and inflicting violence on her own body as a way to relieve her helplessness and to put a stop to the testing.

In order to subvert her mother's power over her body, Sophie takes a pestle and breaks her hymen which she describes as "the veil that always held my mother's finger back every time she *tested* me" (88). The imagery of the veil signals Sophie becoming her own person and not continuing to adhere to the practices of her past. By breaking her own hymen, she breaks free of the cultural assumption that women's bodies are to be preserved for the pleasure of men.[59] Sophie connects the act to a fable from her

[59] The need to break free from this practice and the cultural implications that accompany it are something that Sophie could not fully explain to Joseph because he did not understand. However, she articulates well the release that comes from

childhood. It is the story of a woman who constantly bleeds from her unbroken skin. The woman petitions Erzulie to help her and Erzulie informs her that she can no longer be a woman and must take on another life form in order to stop bleeding. The woman requests to be a butterfly and once she is transformed, her bleeding ceases. (87-8). In relationship to this, Sophie represents someone removing herself from the strictures of her familial beliefs and seeking an identity beyond the one she has known her whole life. She knows that by breaking her hymen to end the testing, she will also be breaking from her mother. In fact once Sophie fails the testing, her mother instructs her to leave her home and to go to Joseph.

Sophie's act of imposing physical harm upon herself as a way to free herself from the act of testing is a form of empowerment although it is simultaneously a painful act and it does not truly address the cultural restrictions that have caused her to inflict pain upon her own body. Several critics have noted, Helen Scott in particular, that "When no other options seems possible, the Caco women turn their latent power against their own bodies" (476). Sophie harms her own body so that she is not continually harmed by the testing. In this way, she is further implicated in the long history of violence that has plagued generations of women in her family. Carole Sweeney makes the important point:

> The history of violence haunts Danticat's novel at every turn: the violation of the female body, the dispossession of slavery, the lacerating wounds of

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her act. She says, "Joseph could never understand why I had done something so horrible to myself. I could not explain to him that it was like breaking manacles, an act of freedom" (130).

> the machetes in the cane fields, the sweatshop labour in Port-au-Prince factories, the "testing" and breaking of the hymen, father-son teams of dictators and torturers, the gangs of Macoutes dressed in makeshift quasi-military outfits. In New York, the accumulated memory of violence is subdued but not overcome. The attempt to articulate the violence occurs at the site of the women's bodies; Martine and Sophie's traumas are addressed not through language but through the starving and bleaching and straightening of the body in an effort to discipline the unruly memories of the past lodged in the body. Speaking the "tale" through the silence of the trauma is a narrative process of breathing life back into a blocked memory, a vital part of recovery in therapeutic strategies for trauma victims. Speaking and telling the tale gives shape and presence to memory that has been spectral in its ability simply to disappear: "The tale is not a tale unless I tell." (64)

In Sophie's case, her body speaks and offers one kind of alternative, which is to inflict violence upon herself as a method of coping. This is also evident in her struggle with bulimia and the hatred of her body.[60] Eventually, however, she chooses an alternative

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[60] Sophie's bulimia and the hatred of her body are other areas of a kind of self-inflicted pain that bear more discussion. The struggle with bulimia is multi-leveled. In one sense Sophie is so unused to having a consistent supply of food that eating becomes a kind of illness. Feeling that she must eat large amounts because there would be no guarantee that such a meal would be available in the

from the self-inflicted violence, the doubling, and other less productive forms of coping with her pain. Although she struggles under the historical weight and pain of her foremothers, she uses testimony represented in the idea of "telling the tale" as a way to move beyond the trauma that continues to reproduce itself and is passed down from one generation to another.

Sophie "tells the tale" of her experience as a form of therapy and as a way of giving light to the confluence of events that foreground her own pain. The influence of her mother's pain on her own life in addition to the trauma she experienced from the testing cause Sophie to have nightmares and suicidal thoughts of her own. She relates that she often wondered if her mother's anxiety had been passed down to her: "Her nightmares had somehow become my own, so much so that I would wake up some mornings wondering if we hadn't both spent the night dreaming about the same thing: a man with no face, pounding a life into a helpless young girl" (193). Frightened by this and also not wanting to pass down this anxiety and fear to her daughter Brigitte, who is conceived shortly after she unites with Joseph, Sophie is determined to break what she begins to understand is a cycle of violence within her family. In order to tell the tale,

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near future, is one of the driving impulses behind her condition. Also, however, she purges food when confronted with difficult situations such as Joseph desiring to make love to her – something she does with great pain. She rejects food in the way that she desires to reject a sexual relationship. It is a form of defense.

Sophie takes important steps toward giving voice to the unspoken within her family and within herself.

Sophie is in many ways a transformational figure in the novel because she is the product of the oppressed and oppressor. Her mother is raped by a member of the Tonton Macoutes. The Tonton Macoutes were formed during the 1959-1986 regimes of father and son Papa and Baby Doc Duvalier (Sweeney 60). Ironically, they were trained by the US National Guard. They "specialized in sexual torture of women" and "were notorious for their almost supernatural ability to 'disappear' people in the dead of the night" (Sweeney 60). The Tonton Macoutes represent the transfer of Western racial oppression to internal violence that is committed against women on the basis of gender oppression. Additionally, Sophie's family name is Caco. Danticat writes that the Cacos were "named after a bird whose wings look like flames, and named after revolutionaries who fought and died in flames" (235). By naming Sophie's family after this group, Danticat uses Sophie's body as a space of conflict and resistance. Helen Scott explains that Sophie's family name recalls "the rebel Cacos who, among other things, resisted the U.S. American occupation of 1915-1934 [. . .]. The novel thus demonstrates how 'a living history' is 'powerfully embodied in Haitian culture'" (462). Sophie is able to take the conflicting aspects of her identity and transform them into powerful testimony in the novel. This allows her to speak about her experiences and bring to light the sexist and abusive nature of practices like testing that torment young Haitian girls.

Sophie first addresses the ramifications of testing on her and other young girls who experience this with her grandmother and mother when she returns to Haiti after giving birth to Brigitte. When Sophie confesses to her grandmother Ifé that the testing

has affected her sexual relationship with her husband to the extent that she has nightmares, her grandmother is extremely saddened. She places her statue of Erzulie in Sophie's hand and says, "My heart, it weeps like a river, [. . .] for the pain we have caused you" (157). Her grandmother, in expressing her sorrow over Sophie's pain, realizes that all of her female ancestors are implicated in passing down this tradition. We can assume that "we" in this case stands for many more than Grandmé Ifé and Martine.

Sophie is also finally able to confront Martine about the testing and realizes that this practice is not simply a method created by mothers to harm their daughters, but a result of the societal expectations that men are the primary owners of women's bodies and those bodies must be pure at the moment of marriage so that the woman does not bring shame to her family. Martine explains to Sophie, "I did it, [. . .] because my mother had done it to me. I have no greater excuse. I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about being raped was that it made the *testing* stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day" (170). By drawing a parallel between her rape and the testing, Martine crystallizes the extent of the pain of the testing. Through Sophie, Martine is able to open up about the multiple levels of psychological trauma that she has struggled with from her youth to the present. It is this kind of productive dialogue that Sophie seeks to engage in so that she can work through her own pain and trauma.

In addition to questioning her mother and grandmother about the testing, Sophie joins a support group for women who suffer with sexual phobias. This group is comprised of women who are working through their own sexual traumas and histories of abuse and it provides a safe space for them to connect with one another as they share

their stories. Significantly, they repeat affirmations that begin with the statement "I am a beautiful woman with a strong body" (202). This statement is powerful in that it transforms the weak and abused body to one that is physically strong and beautiful. The statement allows Sophie and the other women in the group to feel a sense of power and ownership over their own bodies in ways they had not felt in their past. Attending these meetings also helps Sophie to see how her present pain is influenced by her mother's. As she burns her mother's name in the fire – a ritual where all the members of the group burn their abuser's name in fire as an act of empowerment - Sophie contemplates, "I knew my hurt and hers were links in a long chain and if she hurt me, it was because she was hurt, too. It was up to me to avoid my turn in the fire" (203). Once Sophie is able to tell her tale in an empowering way, she feels closer to becoming free from this long history of pain. She is also determined to not continue passing it down, to not have her daughter burn her name in the fire or to have nightmares relating to the testing. Additionally, she uses therapy and the act of speaking and giving voice to her pain. These cumulative acts provide Sophie with an outlet to release the pain of her past and move beyond it.

It becomes clear that Sophie's method of coping will yield more positive results than her mother's coping method which includes inflicting pain on herself in an attempt to free herself of the past. Semia Harbawi in "Against All Odds: The Experience of Trauma and the Economy of Survival in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*" notes how acts of self erasure and self mutilation can serve as a possible defiant act in the novel. She makes the point that "[Danticat's] female characters manage to espouse a defiant stance as a strategic heaving towards survival against the odds of invisibility and

silence" (44). While this is certainly true for Sophie, who transforms her violence and self erasure into direct confrontation with the past, it is not the case for Martine who kills herself and her unborn child because of the psychological toll the pregnancy takes on her. Indeed, her mother is so haunted by the taboo of sexuality that she cannot free herself from that past, so death is her final act of defiance. Martine's death serves as a lesson for Sophie who was dangerously close to employing her mother's methods of dealing with her trauma. Because she creates an alternative option for herself, her previous defiant acts of inflicting pain onto her body do not have to progress to an ultimate erasure of the self.

Recalling the Caco and imagery of red, Sophie uses images of red and blood to represent empowerment. She dresses her mother in a defiant red two piece suit, a color her mother loved, for her funeral. Her lover Marc disapproves; however, Sophie is clear that her mother is going to be free and should therefore not be concerned with social or religious tradition (228). By picking the brightest red that she could find in her mother's wardrobe, she is honoring her mother and undoing the social stigma of blood and bleeding on women in Haiti whose value is measured in the amount of blood they emit after sexual intercourse on their wedding night. Her act is also in response to the fable that describes a man parading his deceased wife's bloody sheet as evidence of her purity when she marries him. Martine's bloody sheets after her death tell a different kind of story, one that is representative of the psychological torment of a woman raised in and victimized by gender based oppression. Helen Scott makes the important observation that when dressing her mother in the color red for her funeral, "Sophie repeats the expression that the color is 'too loud' [originally stated by Marc] and thus emphasizes the way that women are silenced by the material and cultural forces that restrict them" (475).

As a final confrontation and perhaps the most significant, after the funeral, Sophie takes to the cane field where her mother was raped and attacks the cane (233). She snaps stalks and beats against them to the point that she bleeds. This blood imagery resonates in that it too counters the society's preoccupation with women's blood and sexual purity. Here Sophie draws blood in defiance of the culture that allowed her mother's rape to go unpunished. She also does it in defense of herself because she has also suffered as a result the socially sanctioned violence against women in Haitian society. Ultimately, Sophie is able to connect with her mother not on the basis of historical pain but on their love for one another. This connection frees her and provides her with the answer to the question posed to her by her grandmother and Tante Atie after her confrontation in the cane field – *Ou libéré?*. Although her answer is ambiguous, Sophie will likely be able to answer that question positively one day because she has chosen an alternative path to negotiating her trauma. Sophie identifies with her mother's pain and, with the help of her grandmother, recognizes their connection to one another that exists beyond time and space, a place where "breath, eyes, and memory, are one, a place from which you carry your past like the hair on your head" (234). Sophie moves toward carrying that past without letting that past overtake her.

Sophie in *Breath, Eyes Memory*, and Ursa in *Corregidora* are able to take forms of traumatic retelling that recount their painful family histories and construct from them testimony that allows them to not continue to be victims of their past. By choosing to courageously confront the taboo aspects of their history and to get to the heart of how their family traumas and pain are passed down from generation to generation, they offer a sense of hope that these negative patterns of double telling and re-enactment of painful

experiences can be replaced with alternative means of honoring one's history without being a victim of it. Also, through their acts of witnessing, they validate the pain of the past for their foremothers. Although this witnessing traumatizes them, they are able to work through the trauma to be a voice for future generations. The next chapter of this study will take up Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Where we see a ritualistic passing down of pain in *Corregidora* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Hartman and Kincaid ask us to contemplate the historical impact of this pain even when the direct connection to this past is lost or inaccessible. Their works broaden our discussion to consider the societal role in sustaining unresolved or open wounds and how one crafts strategies of survival in this context.

Cut off from the Body: Self Creation in Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

"What to call the thing that happened to me and all who look like me?
Should I call it history?
If so, what should history mean to someone like me?
Should it be an idea, should it be an open wound and each breath I take in and expel healing and opening the wound again and again, over and over, or is it a moment that began in 1492 and has come to no end yet?"

"In History" – Jamaica Kincaid

"I was intent upon tracing an itinerary of destruction from the coast to the savanna. They [Ghanian émigrés] went to be healed. I went to excavate a wound. The expatriates crossed the Atlantic to break the chains of slavery, and I did so doubting that I would ever be free of them."

"I was loitering in a slave dungeon less because I hoped to discover what really happened here than because of what lived on from this history. Why else begin an autobiography in a graveyard?"

Lose Your Mother – Saidiya Hartman

Unlike the previous narratives discussed throughout this study, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The*

Autobiography of My Mother are written from the perspectives of historical loss and separation. As we saw in the previous chapter with Jones' *Corregidora* and Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the protagonists struggled with negative connections to their foremothers' historical pain as a result of traumatic retelling which influenced their own understanding of their bodies. Hartman and Kincaid, however, engage in a kind of wound "excavation" in the process of coming to new understandings of the self because they are long-removed from the history that impacts them in the present. History in Hartman's and Kincaid's works is framed in the context of loss and this loss has multiple implications for the self. Thus, it is fitting that their works utilize the genre of autobiography as a way of working through the effects of being cut off from one's history and the identity struggles that result from this disconnect. Because often it not only involves the telling of the story of the self but also the telling of the stories of others, autobiography allows for a certain kind of creative telling.

Hartman and Kincaid employ autobiography as a literary strategy and they challenge its limits in order to capture the precarious nature of being impacted by, yet cut off from one's history. Jana Evans Braziel's *Caribbean Genesis: Jamaica Kincaid and the Writing of New Worlds* explores this idea, particularly as it relates to Kincaid's body of work and her manipulations of autobiography in order to not only capture the story of the self but the stories of others. Braziel describes Kincaid's work as "alterbiographical," a kind of autobiography that challenges of boundaries of genre "as they are predicated on notions of genealogy, genius and race" (13). Specifically, Braziel explains that

> In Kincaid's *alterbiographic* texts, she challenges the presumed insularity and discreteness of the autobiographical form, opening it to

> representations of alterity: through *alterbiography*, Kincaid powerfully writes other into self, biography into autobiography, annihilation into creation, and death into life. She thus forces us to rethink the presumed boundaries of these terrains; she does so through her transmutations of genealogy and genre. (3)

It is in this way that Kincaid is able to write not only the story of the protagonist Xuela's mother (who dies at the moment Xuela is born), but also her father's story, her own story and the story of the Carib people.

I would like to expand Braziel's analysis to include the idea that Kincaid also writes the story of the black female body in the West through the experiences of Xuela and the various layers of gender and racial subjugation she endures, particularly early in her life. Xuela's life experiences reflect the precarious nature of the black female body in a post-slavery/post-colonial society. Saidiya Hartman takes up a similar approach in her characterization of being cut off from history as losing one's mother. While Hartman does not deal with the black female body in detail, she does offer valuable context for self creation in the face of historical disconnect. Additionally, Hartman highlights the historical pain visited upon black bodies throughout the slave trade and the periods following, and further explores the notion of the historical wound and how to grapple with the effects of this wound. Taken together, Hartman and Kincaid extend our thinking on the role of history in the context of the open wound relating to the history of the black female body in pain. Because the historical referents in both works are veritably lost to history**,** they approach strategies for healing in different ways, particularly in ways that are centered on the self. In doing so, Hartman and Kincaid fashion ways to move beyond

the historical wound in order to have the potential for healing. They focus more specifically on the notion of self creation and the articulation of one's self that is not primarily identified as a product of historical pain and this allows us to envision new possibilities for black female identity. Kincaid, in particular, challenges the boundaries of gender and race which reaffirms Braziel's characterization of her approach as alterbiographical.

Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* highlights the significance of Kincaid's approach in her work because she focuses on how one conceives of their identity in the face of historical disconnect. *Lose Your Mother* is Hartman's first hand documentation of her experience tracing the history of the Atlantic slave route. For approximately one year, she travels throughout Ghana to significant landmarks of the slave trade, specifically Elmina Castle and the towns of Salaga and Gwolu. In the work, we witness Hartman grapple with varying degrees of loss and feelings of homelessness. The central premise: that to be a slave means that you "lose your mother" (155), is the overarching theme of the narrative.[61] Hartman notes the various methods employed to cause a slave to forget his or her country and the many stories of slavery that inevitably end with the slave losing the mother (155). She writes, "Never did the captive choose to forget; she was always

[61] Hartman was largely inspired by a letter she received from one of the boys who greeted her at the entrance of Elmina Castle. A young boy, Isaac, gives her a letter that states: "Because of the slave trade you lose your mother, if you know your history, you know where you come from" (85).

tricked or bewitched or coerced into forgetting. Amnesia, like an accident or a stroke of bad fortune, was never an act of volition" (155). This forgetting is the primary entry into Hartman's narrative – it is the first part of her struggle to recover the memory of the African slave past and to go toward some degree of redressing the slave and descendants of slaves' positions as "strangers," without a true sense of home in the world.

Autobiography figures into the work as Hartman recalls her own family's resistance to remembering the painful slave past in their own ancestry. Early on, Hartman details a theme of pain as characterizing these memories and as a force that drives the desire to forget. Through her family, she establishes an overarching example of the resistance to remembrance and the pain of memory. She says, "Big Momma had never spoken of her life in slavery, nor had Ellen or Ella [her Poppa's grandmother and mother]. Poppa could fill in only the bare outlines of their lives. The gaps and silences of my family were not unusual: slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable" (13-14). This silence echoes much of the silence around the experience of slavery in general and the experiences of black female slaves in particular.[62] Hartman's struggle to recover her suppressed family history is then reflected in a larger sense during her travels through Ghana as she researches the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The frustration of being unable to access aspects of both her familial and slave past brings her to questions that interrogate the meaning of her identity and issues

[62] Ironically, slavery, which forced the enslaved to forget or let go of one's history resulted in a willful forgetting, where the past is marred by pain and shame.

of legacy. She asks, "If ruin was my sole inheritance and the only certainty the impossibility of recovering stories of the enslaved, did this make my history tantamount to mourning? Or worse, was it melancholia I would never be able to overcome?" (16). Hartman encapsulates the long struggle that characterizes the experience of those of African heritage living in the diaspora. The separation from one's historical past is a form of ruin with little potential for recovery of that past. The difficulty accessing one's history, and, in Hartman's case, the pain associated with that history, reflects Elaine Scarry's ideas on the struggle to give voice to pain.[63] Because Hartman has little direct connection to the family members who endured the pain that continues to impact her today, she is seemingly caught in a perpetual mourning that limits her ability to work through the pain of this history. It is the attempt to answer the above questions and understand her identity in this context that the work sheds light on.

Hartman unearths various narratives that provide insight into the experiences that captured Africans endured as they were being taken into slavery. One salient example of how her discovery of various untold aspects of this history has resonance for her in terms of her black female identity is the story of a young slave girl who meets her death by being severely beaten after refusing to dance nude for the traders on the slave ship ironically named *Recovery*. Hartman connects deeply with this story and spends a great deal of time on the young girl's tragic experience. The slave girl's killing becomes the center of the abolition debate when, in 1792, William Wilberforce uses her case as an

[63] See Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*.

example of the horrors of the slave trade and why it needed to end. Images of the young girl assaulted on the ship were passed throughout the city of London in order to make the public aware of the brutality of the slave trade (145). Hartman recounts this story as an illustration of how much history has been suppressed, especially as it relates to the abuse visited upon the black female body. It is in this way that Hartman participates in (similar to previous authors discussed earlier in the study) "recovery" of the abused black female body. Hartman attempts to bring this pain to light, but she ends the retelling with the realization that the young girl's story was one of many and the magnitude of loss is too great. Hartman narrates, "If the story ended there [with the girl's beating]. I could feel a small measure of comfort. I could hold on to this instant of possibility. I could find a salutary lesson in the girl's suffering and pretend a story was enough to save her from oblivion. I could sigh with relief and say, 'It all happened so long ago.' Then I could wade into the Atlantic and not think of the *dead book* [the journal of blacks who died on the slave ship]" (153). The example of the slave girl and the untold stories of those who filled up the "dead book" illustrate the ways in which the history of the slave trade and its attendant pain is elusive to its descendants. In the face of this, Hartman ruminates on what one does in the face of historical loss especially when attempting to understand the self without the benefit of knowing one's history.

She finds inspiration in the story of the people of Gwolu (a small outpost that provided refuge for fugitive slaves) and their acts of self-creation as a counter to the slave experience. During her travels to Gwolu, Hartman notes that: "For all this [freedom], they were willing to begin anew. Knowing that you don't ever regain what you've lost, they embraced becoming something other than who they had been and naming themselves

again" (225). The fugitive experience here becomes emblematic of Hartman's own feelings of displacement and the larger lessons it holds for descendants of African slaves who reside in the West. She contemplates, "If I learned anything in Gwolu, it was that old identities sometimes had to be jettisoned in order to invent new ones. Your life just might depend on this capacity for self-fashioning" (233). Hartman highlights these radical acts of self creation as a potential coping method for being disconnected from one's history. In her analysis she acknowledges that some aspects of one's past are potentially unrecoverable, especially in the cases of descendants of slaves. Rather than allow this reality to negatively impact her sense of self, she finds empowerment in the act of recreating the self and starting anew. This approach is quite significant for blacks in the West who have long been defined by the paradigms emerging from their history as an enslaved people and this is even more so the case with black women who are negatively defined in both the contexts of race and gender. What Hartman does is create a possibility to free one's self from the implications of the past and define one's self on her own terms.[64]

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[64] This is something I note in my essay, "Navel-erasing: Androgyny and Self-Making in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*." In it I cite Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Woman, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality, and Feminism*, particularly her discussion of "navel-erasing" vs. "navel-gazing" (28). Minh-Ha argues that navel-erasing is an act of forgetting without annihilating, using the context of one's history in order to envision a different kind of future and not be circumscribed by past

The conscious act of self-creation in light of being traumatically disconnected from one's past is precisely what we see occurring with Xuela Claudette Richardson in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Embodying Hartman's refrain that to be a slave or a descendant of slaves means that you "lose your mother," Xuela is always already caught in this particular state because her mother dies when she is born. Xuela's father places her in the care of his laundress Ma Eunice, thus beginning her life as a veritable orphan and a wanderer. Xuela only has access to fragments of her family history, and the novel illustrates her attempts to understand herself in spite of the limited information she has about her past. She embodies the kind of self-creation that Hartman ruminates on in the latter part of her work. Xuela is figuratively a stranger in the world, burdened with numerous hardships, so beginning anew is her primary method of coping with her status in society. Hartman's theories on jettisoning one's identity to begin anew along with Xuela's own act of self creation offer pathways for how black women can define themselves beyond the paradigms emerging out of the history of the black female body and pain.

Although Xuela is literally disconnected from the pain of her foremothers, her early life is influenced by her foremothers' pasts. At the beginning of the novel, Xuela relates her own pain and historical disconnect which frame the narrative. She

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methodology. Implicit in its meaning, then, is a sense of movement between understanding the role history plays in shaping the self, yet existing in a way that is not encumbered by the weight of that history.

contemplates, "that my loss had made me vulnerable, hard, and helpless; on knowing this I became overwhelmed with sadness and shame and pity for myself" (4). Being a young girl of Carib descent in a postcolonial and post-slavery society, Xuela already understands that she is at a disadvantage. Thus the loss of her mother and her state as a veritable orphan intensifies this hardship. It also reflects the larger experience of those displaced or left vulnerable as a result of slavery.[65]

Xuela's only memories of her mother, who was also an orphan (199), are primarily fragments which she tries to piece together throughout the work. She can only access the memory of her mother's body in dreams and in these dreams, she only sees a small fragment of her mother – her heels. Xuela relates her vision of her mother in the

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[65] Kincaid makes the point that her later work becomes concerned not necessarily with literal mother/daughter relations, but overarching themes of mother country. She notes that while much of her work has focused on mother/daughter relationships and similar themes, the mother/daughter dynamic has come to serve as an allegory of master/slave – colonizer/colonized relations. She states "[There are] wider implications than . . . the immediate mother and daughter [relationship] . . . . I'm really writing about mother country and subject daughter country. It certainly led me to see that I was obsessed with the powerful and powerless and the strong and the weak . . . . I've outgrown the domestic implications of the mother and the daughter, and now it has wider implications for me" (qtd. in Gregg 928).

dream, "She wore a long white gown, the hem of it falling just above her heels; she came down and down, but no more of her was ever revealed. Only her heels, and the hem of her gown. At first I longed to see more, and then I became satisfied just to see her heels coming down toward me. [. . .] Night after night I saw only her heels, only her heels coming down to meet me, coming down to meet me forever" (18-19). The repetition of the language of "heels coming down to meet me" signals Xuela's likely fixation on her own birth. Of course, her only physical encounter with her mother is in the moment of delivery with Xuela exiting her mother's body and witnessing only her heels. In this way we see Xuela perpetually trapped in her infancy struggling to envision her mother's body but has no access to it. The lack of access to her mother's body is also reflective of her lack of connection to her mother's people, her Carib ancestors whom Xuela declares are extinct.[66] She explains that her mother was among the last survivors of this group and Xuela describes them as, "living fossils, they belonged in a museum, on a shelf, enclosed in a glass case" (197-8). It is striking that Kincaid would choose such language because it calls up the memory of Saartjie Baartman's genitalia being kept in a glass case in Paris's Musée de l'Homme. The description of the Carib people and the limited visual image of her mother illustrates just how deeply Xuela has been cut off from her history.

In spite of her lack of connection to her mother and her Carib ancestors, the implications of their identities impact Xuela in many ways. She comes to characterize her status in the world as that of the "conquered," again reinforcing her vulnerability. In

[66]It is important to note that Xuela's suggestion that the Caribs are extinct is a bit of an overstatement. There are small groups of Caribs still in existence.

Vulnerable States: Bodies of Memory in Contemporary Caribbean Fiction, Guillermina De Ferrari discusses writers who examine the notion of the vulnerable body and the role it played in the subjugation of enslaved and colonized peoples. She explains how in order to justify colonization and slavery, there needed to be an established inferiority of the prospective subjects, an inferiority often carried out through the body:

> This inferiority was grounded in the physical traits of the natives and the slaves so that the body itself was made to yield the symbolic reasons for the subject's own political and social domination. That colonial agents felt compelled to find in the physical body a justification for their political position reveals that colonial domination was effectively based on the vulnerability of the material body to the forces of symbolic power. (2)

Kincaid re-creates this vulnerability through Xuela who as an infant was literally orphaned and unprotected. Her father places her in the care of his laundress Ma Eunice, who nurtures Xuela in her infancy. One significant representation of Xuela's vulnerable and abject body is early in the text when she compares herself to her father's soiled clothes that he brings to Ma Eunice's for cleaning. She says,

> It is possible that he emphasized to her the difference between the two bundles: one was his child, not his only child in the world but the only child he had with the only woman he had married so far; the other was his soiled clothes. He would have handled one more gently than the other, he would have given more careful instructions for the care of one over the other, he would have expected better care for one than the other, but which one I do not know. (4)

It is here that we witness a clear demonstration of Xuela's status in her world. She inhabits a precarious existence, unsure that her life and care is worth more to her father than his clothes. Thus, from the outset, Kincaid troubles Xuela's body in ways that render it abject and vulnerable.

Subsequently, Xuela experiences varying degrees of physical pain that reflect the historical physical pain inflicted upon those subjugated by slavery and colonialism. Xuela makes clear that as a black woman in her society she is worth little. She feels a small degree of sympathy for her younger sister who does not understand that she is not valued in her family and in larger society because she is not a man (114). Xuela relates that women (particularly black women) are exchangeable and expendable, free to be abused and exploited for any reason. This reality is no clearer than in her own experiences of physical pain – the first instance, occurring early in the novel when she breaks Ma Eunice's china plate that depicts the English countryside (9). She refuses to apologize for doing so and this prompts Ma Eunice to punish her severely. Ma Eunice makes her kneel on her stone heap in a spot that got direct sun all day long and hold two large stones above her head. Xuela contemplates,

> Why should this punishment have made a lasting impression on me, redolent as it was in every way of the relationship between captor and captive, master and slave, with its motif of the big and the small, the powerful and the powerless, the strong and the weak, and against a background of earth, sea, and sky, and Eunice standing over me, metamorphosing into a succession of things furious and not human with each syllable that passed her lips – with her dress of a thin, badly woven

> cotton, the bodice of a color and pattern contrary to the skirt, her hair, uncombed, unwashed for many months, wrapped in a piece of old cloth that had been unwashed for longer than her hair? (10).

Xuela's vivid description of this scene and her analysis of it in the context of master/slave relations reveals just how enduring this history is in her own life. That Ma Eunice, a woman clearly worn from her work as a laundress, would punish Xuela so harshly for breaking a plate with the idealized image of England exhibits the extent to which that idealization permeates Ma Eunice's psyche. Her punishment of Xuela is a reminder of this unequal relationship and the pain that endures. This is revealed when that relationship is challenged.

She receives a similar punishment from her father for daring to transgress class and cultural boundaries. Xuela recalls an encounter between her father and a gravedigger Lazarus when she is a young girl. During this encounter, Lazarus comes to her father's home and asks to borrow nails for the roof of his house. When young Xuela's father refuses Lazarus the nails, she reminds him that they indeed have nails to give, naively thinking that her father merely did not remember this. After Lazarus leaves the home, Xuela's father drags her to the shed and pushes her facedown into the barrel of nails. She recalls that while doing this, "He spoke patois, French or English, from the time he was a boy and I associated him speaking patois with expressions of his real self and so I knew that this pain he was causing me, this suffocating me in a barrel of nails, was a true feeling of his" (190). Clearly Xuela's father holds the position of power as someone who represents the "victors". He is a man of higher status in society and he works in law enforcement as a jailer. He casually denies assistance to Lazarus and physically wounds

his daughter for challenging him regarding this. Xuela notes the complexity of this moment.[67] Reflecting on her father's negotiation of his own divided sense of identity for he is both Irish and African, Xuela explains,

> For my father, the sea, the big and beautiful sea, sometimes a shimmering sheet of blue, sometimes a shimmering sheet of black, sometimes a shimmering sheet of gray, could hold no such largesse of inspiration, could hold no such abundance of comfort, could hold no such anything of any good; its beauty was lost to him, blank; to look at it, to see it, was to be reminded of the despair of the victor and the despair of the vanquished

[67]There is a similar mystery around her father's history. His father was a Scottish man who had many children with different women in various parts of the English-owned West Indies. Perhaps the anecdote that embodies Xuela's father's enigmatic background is the story of Lazarus, who Xuela continually comes into contact with in the novel. One notable encounter reads: "He looked like an overworked beast, he looked like a living carcass; the bones in his body were too prominent, they were close to his skin, he smelled sour, he smelled of stink, he smelled like something rotting (141). Lazarus' abject body becomes symbolic of the destroyed past. She is repelled by him but also drawn to him. During a brief encounter with him, she sees his pubic hair and notes that it was red like the color of her father's hair, thus suggesting that they are potentially related. His decaying body also signals a history that refuses to be buried in the same way that Xuela's mother's history is a subtle influence on her existence.

> at once [. . .] and the bottomless well of pain and misery that the conquered experiences – no amount of revenge can satiate or erase the perpetration of a great injustice. (192)

Xuela draws connections between her father's infliction of physical pain on her to the larger experience of physical pain for those who are products of the conquered. She also asserts that there is no healing for the wrongs of this history, suggesting that these wounds are still open with little potential to be healed. This notion is what characterizes her own physical representation. Throughout the novel, her body is in a constant state of wounding from physical pain. Perhaps the most stunning example of this is during her stay with her father's friends Jacques and Lise LaBatte.

Due to the strained relationship between Xuela and her father's wife, her father takes her to the LaBatte's home to live. During her stay in this home, Xuela befriends Lise, someone whom she says was perhaps the only friend she had ever had (67); however, she learns that Lise desires that she become pregnant by Jacques and bear children that Lise is herself unable to have. One night while alone, Jacques approaches Xuela, takes her into the room where he counts his money and rapes her. Xuela is conflicted by this act, noting moments of pleasure and pain, but the pain of the act stands out as most profound in her description. She says, "And the force of him inside me, inevitable as it was, again came as a shock, a long sharp line of pain that then washed over me with the broadness of a wave, a long sharp line of pleasure: and to each piercing that he made inside me, I made a cry that was the same cry, a cry of sadness, for without making of it something it really was not I was not the same person I had been before" (71). Here we witness Xuela's pained body exploited by the wealthy as a way to use her

as a tool of production – continuing to produce bodies for someone who holds a degree of power over her.[68] Xuela refuses to be used in this way and has an abortion after becoming pregnant with Jacques' child. She describes the pain of this,

> For four days I lay there [in the place where she has the abortion], my body a volcano of pain; nothing happened, and for four days after that blood flowed from between my legs slowly and steadily like an eternal spring. And then it stopped. The pain was like nothing I had ever imagined before, it was if it defined pain itself; all other pain was only a reference to it, an imitation of it, an aspiration to it. (83)

Xuela endures many layers of pain following LaBatte's act. Kincaid's depiction is significant because it illustrate how the history of black female pain in the West can bear on the present. Also, as noted in the previous chapter, LaBatte's rape of Xuela illustrates how the abuse of the black female body transfers from slaveowner or colonizer oppression to internal gender-based oppression.

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[68] This is also reminiscent of Aimé Césaire's concept of "thingification." He explains, "Between the colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape [. . .] No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production" (42).

Although the pain from the abortion is the result of Xuela's decision, it is a consequence of the larger exploitation of her body. This experience, however, marks a point of transition for Xuela where she moves from disempowered subject to exerting more control over her body and by extension her life. Guillermina DeFerrari notes, "Women are the counterforce that sustains a patriarchal society, and the constant erasure of the womb brings with it the impossibility of a mere change of hands of the old plantation system through the acquisition of capital by the emerging black bourgeoisie. [. . .] Xuela empowers herself by refusing to become an instrument of the history reconstruction project" (175). Indeed, Xuela's act writes her body out of the larger narrative of historical exploitation that black women have endured under the slave system. It is here that we see *The Autobiography of My Mother* being a form of "alterbiography" for the black female body. Allison Donnell argues that:

> In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid locates her writing within a genre with a strong tradition of women's writing and feminist criticism, as well as one which consciously brings to the fore questions concerning her own identity as a writer, a woman and an American-Antiguan subject. However, at the same time she forces an immediate dislocation from this generic positioning, signaling that this work is not seeking to define itself unproblematically as a piece of life-writing which takes either herself or her mother as its subject, but as a piece which addresses the multiple imbrications of self, m/other and writing. (qtd. in Braziel 105)

Indeed, the work goes beyond a simple autobiographical framework. It is a work with larger implications for black women in particular. Throughout the novel, Xuela

comments on the devaluation of black women in her culture. Not only does she note this in her own experience but in the experiences of her half-sister Elizabeth who was not as valued as her brother was. Xuela continually notes the disadvantage that came with being a black woman, specifically in terms of social and sexual stigma. As evidenced in her early life, she is a victim of multiple levels of abuse attributed to her Carib ancestry and female identity. It is until she aborts Monsieur LaBatte's child that she begins to write herself out of the narratives that threaten to keep her in a place of subjection.

In the period following her abortion, we can see Xuela make decisive steps toward self definition and invention, which are rooted in her understanding and connecting with her body. Upon leaving the LaBatte's home and vowing to never bear children, she spends a period of her life working sifting sand for a road being built between Loubiére and Giraudel (96). She purchases the clothes of a dead man and this becomes her work attire; also, she cuts off her hair. She notes her androgyny, "I did not look like a man, I did not look like a woman" (99). Xuela embraces the ambiguity of her body in this state and she utilizes this moment as an act of self-discovery, saying:

> I came to know myself, and this frightened me. To rid myself of this fear I began to look at a reflection of my face in any surface I could find: a still pool on the shallow banks of the river became my most common mirror. [. . .] My own face was a comfort to me, my own body was a comfort to me, and no matter how swept away I would become by anyone or anything, in the end I allowed nothing to replace my own being in my own mind. (99-100)

Xuela literally takes possession of herself. Realizing that her body has been abused and exploited, she shifts the power away from her exploiter and to herself. In taking ownership and comfort in her body, she is creating new possibilities for understanding herself as an individual and not one marred by the implications of her identity. It is a choice. Jana Evans Braziel notes that:

> Xuela's self-metamorphosis in language establishes the parameters or *corps-texte* for birth, rebirth, death, transformation in body and language: it is not a writing of the body, or a writing on the body; it is a writing of body into being in and through language. Words write the body; the body articulates or refuses words or annunciation. And Xuela comes into being, drifts out of being through words announced and renounced, spoken and refused, written and erased. (109)

We see Xuela's self-creation through language most poignantly when she declares, "I refused to belong to a race, I refused to accept a nation. I wanted only, and still do want, to observe the people who do so. The crime of these identities which I know now more than ever, I do not have the courage to bear" (226). By refusing identification of any kind, Xuela illustrates Saidiya Hartman's notion that sometimes old identities had to be jettisoned in order to invent new ones (233). Xuela inherits dispossession and oppression. Rather than claim this as her identity, she chooses to overcome it by rejecting her past and attempting to begin anew. While some critics have read this as limiting (debilitating

even)[69], Nicole Matos reads Xuela's actions as agency granting in many respects. She explains that the refusal of definition is not uncharacteristic of colonized people's acts of power and resistance. Matos cites Julia Kristeva and postcolonial critic Michael Dash in arguing that "colonized peoples may chose to celebrate the domain of the body in their literature as a refusal of 'corporeal determinism'[24], that is, as a declaration of self-rule. In such literature, the unencumbered body functions as an emblem of 'revolutionary potential'" (845). We see Xuela tap into this revolutionary potential in several ways throughout the text. Her defiance certainly functions as empowering for her, especially as she attempts to construct an identity unencumbered by implications of her black female identity.

Xuela's attempts to free her body from the historical stigmas of black womanhood are clear in her comparison of herself to her lover Philip's wife, a white English woman. Significantly, Xuela's first encounter with her was viewing the woman rubbing her

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[69] Joanne Gass primarily frames Xuela's actions in the context of loss. She says, "Xuela, by becoming the 'designated crier,' the one 'who repeats over and over [the] list of violations, the bad deeds committed,' gives voice to her defeated and nearly annihilated people, the Caribs, and to her mother, for her mother's voice is her voice. Xuela's victory is, of course, a bitter one, for in order to win, she must lose. She has made herself sterile; therefore, she will not perpetuate the subjugation she and her people continue to suffer. Her victory lies in saying 'No'" (75).

breasts in the mirror (158). Xuela describes the woman's body as hard and her presence stilted. She represented the idea of a lady, an assignation that Xuela suggests that she herself exists outside of. She says, "for it is true that a lady is a combination of elaborate fabrications, a collection of externals, facial arrangements and body parts, distortions, lies and empty effort. I was a woman and as that I had a brief definition: two breasts, a small opening between my legs, one womb; it never varies and they are always in the same place" (159). She also asserts that Philip's wife would never describe herself that way. Xuela's characterization of herself as a woman and her description of her body in such basic terms attempts to separate her body from any social meaning or significance.

Ironically, in the process of Xuela attempting to free herself of the stigma attached to her black female identity, she develops more clarity about her past and family history as the novel goes on. This reflects the natural ambivalence that would come with having limited information about one's history and being cut off from it in general. Xuela revises some of her remembrance of her mother's history near the work's end. She moves beyond the infant fixation on her only memory of her mother's body, her heels, and attempts to paint a more vivid picture of her. "She was tall (I am told – I did not know her, she died at the moment I was born); her hair was black, her fingers were long, her legs were long, her feet were long and narrow with a high instep, her face was thin and bony, her chin was narrow, her cheekbones high and wide, her lips were thin and wide, her body was thin and long; she had a natural graceful gait; she did not speak much" (198). Xuela is able to envision her mother's body after the process of coming to terms with her own. This reaffirms that Xuela's process of freeing herself is a productive act toward healing the open wound of black female bodily exploitation in the West.

She even gains clarity on her father and his psychological struggles with being half-Scot and African. Xuela explains that her father "rejected the complications of the vanquished; he chose the ease of the victor" (186). Her father uses his Scottish heritage in order to raise his status in society; however, he is haunted by the realities of his hybrid identity and the inescapable aspects that come with being one of the "vanquished". Xuela offers an additional perspective on him, revealing him as a complex man in terms of identity politics as evidenced by the fact that he chose her mother, who was Carib, to be his wife. We see Xuela paint an intimate picture of the complexity of his emotions (and his psyche in general) after her mother's death. She says,

> People say he suffered over this loss [the loss of Xuela's mother], the loss of the only woman he had married; people say he was broken by this; people say he did not enjoy life then; people say that a great sadness came over him and this led to a deep devotion to God and he became a deacon in his church. People say this, people say these things, but people cannot say that because of his own suffering he identified with and had sympathy for the sufferings of others; people cannot say that his loss made him generous, kindhearted, unwilling always to take advantage of others, that goodness in him grew and grew, completely overshadowing his faults, his defects; people cannot say these things, because they would not be true. (201)

Xuela reveals her father's many contradictions as she gains clarity on who he is as a person. Just as she gains a clearer sense of her mother in both image and persona, she is able to do so in terms of her father. This all comes as she turns inward to understand

herself as an individual. It is important to note that for all Xuela's efforts toward self-empowerment in light of her history, her work is primarily a beginning. At the novel's end, Xuela is alienated calling into question whether or not the pain of her history is something that can be overcome. This is reminiscent of the epigraph of Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. "Once a great wrong has been done it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end." In one sense, Xuela's story certainly reflects this sentiment, but her complexities make it difficult to suggest that she will be perpetually caught in the historical wrongs committed against black women in Western history.

Because Kincaid presents Xuela, a character destabilized at the moment of her birth and disconnected from her history, *The Autobiography of My Mother* reflects notions of postmodernity and embraces instability as an act of freedom. Jana Evans Braziel notes, "*The Autobiography of My Mother* enacts, but also refuses, such historical recovery [such as that in the story 'Biography of a Dress']: the novel forcefully reminds its contemporary readers of harsh (historical) colonial legacies; it does so – beautifully, lyrically, violently, nihilistically – through its textual imbrications of self and racial alterity (i.e., death), subjectivity and its impossibilities, being and nonbeing" (121). Kincaid does not offer simple interpretations of history and does not assume that everyone is connected to their history in the same ways. She creates a narrative that tells multiple stories and interrogates multiple ways of negotiating the lingering effects of historical oppression and subjugation. For Xuela, because she is cut off from her history in many ways, she has to work from within in order to grapple with the ramifications of

her black female identity. She does so by giving her mother a face and a history. However, she attempts to not dwell in the pain of that history. She endeavors (with questionable success) to recreate herself. This reflects Hartman's ideas of jettisoning one's prior identity in order to forge a new beginning. While previous works in this study are more intimately connected to the female ancestor's wounded body, Kincaid deals with Xuela as a separate entity. Xuela invents herself, moving between states of masculine/feminine, conqueror/conquered, etc. This allows her to claim a sense of power in moving forward and beyond the wound. Both Kincaid and Hartman suggest that these kinds of acts are key to survival and both writers implicitly promote the notion that when faced with an unrecoverable history or an un-healable wound, sometimes the only productive response is to begin anew. Xuela takes steps toward this in ways that other protagonists discussed throughout this study have not. In this sense, she is a transformational figure.

Conclusion

Making Black Female Bodies Matter

In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Saidiya Hartman compellingly asserts that "the effort [of John Rankin, a white man who attempts to identify with the slave in order to expose the cruelty of the system] to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible" (19). The invisibility of black pain (and, in terms of this project, black female pain) has long been something people of African descent have had to grapple with. Hartman locates this lack of intelligibility and its origins in the slave system and we continue to see the ramifications of insensitivity to black pain in present day events such as the 2005 tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, LA, the brutal raping of women in places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the continual blind eye that Western media turns in relation to missing, killed, or abused people of color. Edwidge Danticat maintains that this painful reality was one of the motivations for *Breath, Eyes, Memory*.[70] This is why exploring pain as a feature of black female life is so significant in the works that I have discussed throughout this study.

For black women, the invisibility of pain comes with multiple levels of invisibility. bell hooks in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* makes the point that in the film industry and in society in general black women do not register as women (118).

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[70]See Carole Sweeney's "The Unmaking of the World: Haiti, History, and Writing in Edouard Glissant and Edwige Danticat."

She argues that in film "the woman to be looked at and desired is 'white'" (118).[71] Thus, much of this project has been in the service of bringing to the fore works that focus on humanizing black women and bringing to light, long ignored black female pain.

Collectively, the works I have examined show that because black female pain has been often dismissed and ignored, this constitutes an open wound in the black female body politic. Denying the historical abuse and pain visited upon the black female body causes the wound to fester. Antonius C.G.M. Robben makes the point that: "People cannot mourn their losses when others deny that those losses took place. [. . .] [T]he contest of memory denies conflicting parties sufficient room to work through their traumas, hinders them from gradually standing back from the past and proceeding from testimony to historical interpretation and from re-experience to commemoration" (qtd. in Griffiths 2). This is precisely what we see in early pieces about the black female body which are rife with dehumanizing rhetoric about black women.[72]

The works examined in this project seek to acknowledge black female pain in order to open a space for mourning, acknowledgement and potentially healing. They take on the challenge of rendering pain into language in order to bring about this reckoning.

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[71]Again, we can look to Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" for more insight on how black women were not considered as women. In Middle Passage, one was neither male nor female, merely a subject to be counted as a quantity (72).

[72]See Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*.

Recalling Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* that pain resists and actively destroys language (4), and that there are political consequences to allowing pain to remain voiceless (12), the works I have examined in this study are very significant in the effort to make black women's pain more visible. They overcome the cultural structures that would deem black female pain insignificant. Scarry also makes the point that: "It is not simply accurate but tautological to observe that given any two phenomena, the one that is more visible will receive more attention" (12). This is why visibility in reference to the historical lack of acknowledgement of black female pain is essential in the effort to deal with the open wound in the black female body politic.

Throughout this project, I have analyzed works that build upon one another in the service of bringing attention to black female pain. Suzan-Lori Parks' *Venus* and Robbie McCauley's *Sally's Rape* offer a historical context for the onslaught of the devaluation of black female pain in the West. Their works provide a foundation upon which to build this analysis. Additionally, they exhume the pained black female body and place it in a contemporary context in order to address the ongoing impact of the historical wounds endured by black women. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* then move us further in their depictions of black female bodies in pain, most notably through the image of the scar and its various representations. These novels cause us to consider how pain is passed down and the impact that unacknowledged pain has on future generations. Continuing this line of thought, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* call for a consideration of the continual wounding that occurs throughout generations when pain is not addressed. They offer narratives that

transform the traumatic retelling of historical pain into empowering testimony for the descendants of women who endured that pain. These works go toward considerations for healing historical wounds. Lastly, Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* challenge the idea that one has access to and understanding of the historical pain endured by one's ancestors. Caught between being impacted by this pain yet cut off from it, the central figures in both works must invent new ways of understanding the self in the face of historical disconnect. Hartman and Kincaid present possibilities for moving beyond the wound in ways the other works do not. Overall, this project has brought to light the importance of acknowledging the long history of black female pain. This effort serves to humanize black women and move them beyond the reliable stereotypes of Mammy, jezebel, etc.

In essence, this project can be characterized as the ongoing effort to make black female bodies matter. Not in the sense of simply thinking about the black female as a subject for discussion. Black women have certainly been featured in cultural discourse but primarily in objectifying contexts. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams make the point that "In Europe in the nineteenth century, the body of the black female symbolized three themes – colonialism, scientific evolution, and sexuality. Virtually always when she is depicted she is either a sexualized mythology or a neutered anomaly, defined by her sexuality or lack of it" (2). This is true not only for Europe but for most Western countries who engage with the black female body. bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* provides more clarity on the devaluation and the narrow views regarding black women. She argues:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group of "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgement of the interests of black women; when women are talked about racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about the focus tends to be on black *men*; and when women are talked about the focus tends to be on *white* women. (7)

hooks highlights the marginalization of black women that has caused them to fall outside of the realm of persons to sympathize with or have empathy for. Essentially, black women are often left out of consideration when it comes to matters of pain and abuse.

The groundbreaking work *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* expresses a similar sentiment as hooks in making the case for Black Women's Studies. Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith make the argument that: "The political position of Black women in America has been, in a single word, embattled. The extremity of our oppression has been determined by our very biological identity" (xvii). Indeed, black women in the West are caught in the precarious position of being doubly oppressed and unrecognized. This sheds light on why as pained bodies, black women receive relatively little attention. They are often lost in discussions

in both women's studies and black studies arenas (although it is important to note that contemporary efforts in both areas of study have gone a long way in correcting this).[73]

Hortense Spillers "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" provides clarity for the roots of this marginalization in her examination of the underlying causes of black female dehumanization. One notable argument she makes is that in Middle Passage, there was no distinction between male and female. "Under these conditions [the slave trade], one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as *quantities*. The female in 'Middle Passage,' as the apparently smaller

[73]Additionally, this is why I chose to focus on writing by black women because much of the early discourse on black women's bodies does not include the voices of black women themselves. This is reflective of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?". She writes: "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (102). In the case that Spivak describes here, the subject is rendered mute, unable to articulate her own thoughts regarding her circumstances and position in the world. Conversely, in the context of the black female body, black women writers struggle with the paradox of invisibility and visibility. The body is objectified and the voice is silenced; thus it is important to feature and recognize these voices, particularly with respect to the subject matter.

physical mass, occupies ‘less room’ in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart” (72). The transition from viewing black women (and black people in general) as quantities to persons has been a long and enduring process. Beyond simply acknowledging their personhood, black women are continually viewed in the narrow contexts of sexual savages, mammy figures, or asexual. Black women writers in particular are continually working to counterbalance these misconceptions. The work that the writers in this project contribute is that they cause us to view the black female body beyond the limiting and reliable paradigms referenced above. They force us to see the black female body as pained and human.

Judith Butler is particularly clarifying in her work *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* with regard to thinking about how acknowledging suffering is a key step to recognizing one’s humanity. Butler examines this concept in the framework of HIV/AIDS and how expressing the attendant suffering can serve to legitimize groups largely affected by the illness, particularly homosexuals. She argues,

> To the extent that homosexual attachments remain unacknowledged within normative heterosexuality, they are not merely constituted as desires that emerge and subsequently become prohibited. Rather these are desires that are proscribed from the start. And when they do emerge on the far side of the censor, they may well carry that mark of impossibility with them, performing, as it were, as the impossible within the possible. As such, they will not be attachments that can be openly grieved (236).

Because of the disavowal of homosexual love in larger society, the concept of grieving for the loss of homosexual love is one that is unfathomable to some. However, the need to provide spaces for grieving the loss of a loved one to HIV/AIDS, forces public acknowledgement of homosexual love and by extension humanity. Butler gives as an example the NAMES Project Quilt begun in 1987 to memorialize those who have died from HIV/AIDS (236). This provides clarity on the significance of acknowledging another's suffering. Legitimizing suffering subsequently legitimizes the sufferer. Doing so is crucial to the process of healing.

In many respects, I think of this project as a space for working through the trauma not only of the original abuse visited upon the black female body, but for working through the trauma that continues long after the historical wound when the original pain is denied. Judith Butler affirms that "Insofar as grief remains unspeakable, the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed. [. . .] The emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus critical to survival, to the reassembling of community, the reworking of kinship, the reweaving of sustaining relations" (236). She goes on to suggest that publicly acknowledging death is inherently "life-affirming" (236). Taking this into consideration, the acknowledgement of black female pain affirms black female personhood and suffering. This study attempts to bring together the many works that dedicate themselves to the life-affirming act of acknowledging pain.

While the works I examine begin the important act of recognition, there is more work to be done and this is evident in the current climate where black pain in general and black female pain in particular is disavowed or the struggles of people of color delegitimized. One study that seeks to raise a similar consciousness is Rebecca Wanzo's

The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling. Wanzo takes up the story of Jessica Lynch, the celebrated American female prisoner of war who becomes a tool of propaganda in support for the Iraq war of 2003. Lynch was featured in news stories while other soldiers in her unit who were also captured (with Lynch) were relegated to the background. This relegation was particularly troubling when it was revealed that another female prisoner had been captured along with Lynch – a black single mother named Shoshana Johnson.

Because Johnson fell so clearly outside of idealized American notions of womanhood, the significance of her capture went grossly under-reported. Wanzo uses this example to make the larger point that:

> Activists for issues affecting African American women often struggle to get the media and legislators to see black female citizens as representative of their audience and voters, or to address their specific needs, but their struggle is not unique, as African American women are obviously not alone in their lack of political currency. Like many other identity groups, they struggle to gain a rhetorical foothold in a crowded field of competing interests, sometimes in coalition with segments of their racial, gendered, or class identities. (5)

I would argue that the larger underlying factor in getting legislative and media attention paid to the struggles of African American women (and people of color in general) is the long history of disavowal of black female pain. As a result, the long and enduring history of denying the legitimacy of pain of black women has resonance today.

Wanzo makes the point that "Johnson and other African American women serve as case studies for national struggles to mobilize affect against both specific rhetorical obstacles (the history of representations about black women) and the sentimental logic that determines which citizens deserves [sic] sympathy" (6). Indeed, the effort to bring to light the invisibility of black female pain is ongoing and it is my hope that this project contributes to this effort. One need only examine news media stories of reports on missing, abused, or murdered women to note the wide discrepancy between which groups of people are reported on and which groups are relegated to the margins. The groups that often receive attention are largely white, female, of middle class status or higher, and attractive. Taking these factors into account, it needs to be acknowledged that many types of people are left out of this characterization. Thus, if this work inspires larger discussions not just about black women but devalued groups of people in public discourse in general, it will be gratifying to see.

Although Wanzo's work focuses on black women in the United States, the central ideas in her study are also evident in international respects. As Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Gayl Jones' *Corregidora*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother* show, the history of violence committed against the black female body has global implications. In fact, the aforementioned works call attention to the long-term effects of this violence on the psyches of those living in post-slavery and postcolonial societies. We see a move from slaveowners and colonizers being the perpetrators of violence against black women to black men becoming the primary abusers. The transition to internal, gender-based violence committed against women

demonstrates just how deeply this history of violence has permeated the psyche of these oppressed groups.

Working backward, a reading of *Native Son* long ago provided inspiration for this project. The work dramatizes black female devaluation and insensitivity to black female pain in a stark manner with the figures Bessie, Bigger Thomas' black girlfriend, and Mary Dalton, the white daughter of Bigger's employer. In order to convict Bigger Thomas of the murder of Mary Dalton, the body of Bessie, whom he brutally rapes and kills, is brought out for evidence. The text reads:

> To offer the dead body of Bessie as evidence and proof that he had murdered Mary would make him appear a monster [. . .]. They were using his having killed Bessie to kill him for having killed Mary, to cast him in a light that would sanction any action taken to destroy him. Though he had killed a black girl and a white girl, he knew that it would be for the death of the white girl that he would be punished. The black girl was merely 'evidence'" (306-7).

That Bessie was simply evidence that Bigger Thomas was capable of rape and murder encapsulates the lack of sympathy in Western history for black female pain. Richard Wright offers an example par excellence that brings to light the ideas my work has endeavored to uncover. It seeks to raise consciousness about the need to confront the long history of the black female body in pain. Doing so legitimizes and empowers black women who have struggled for recognition simply as women.

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