

Unthinkable, Unprintable, Unspeakable: Transgression in Postwar African American Literature

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues that African American literary representations of transgression, meaning boundary exploration, reveal a complex relationship between sex, desire, pleasure, race, gender, power, and subjectivity ignored or dismissed in advantageous yet constrained liberatory readings/framings. I trace transgression to confront the critical dismissal of, or lack of engagement with African American literature that does not “fit” ideologically constrained projects, such as the liberatory. The dissertation makes a unique methodological intervention into the fields of African American literary studies, gender and sexuality studies, and cultural history by applying black, queer writer and critic Samuel R. Delany’s conceptualizing of “the unspeakable” to the work of his African American contemporaries such as Iceberg Slim, Octavia Butler, Gayl Jones, Hal Bennett, and Toni Morrison. Delany theorizes the unspeakable as forms of racial and sexual knowing excessive, or unintelligible, to frameworks such as the liberatory. The unspeakable is often represented in scenes of transgressive staged sex that articulate “dangerous” practices of relation, and, as such, is deprived of a political framework through which to be critically engaged. I argue that the unspeakable can be

used as an analytic allowing critics to scrutinize how, and why, much postwar African American literature has been critically neglected or flattened. In tracing this negligence I contend with the conservatism of much contemporary African American literary scholarship that continually reads through frameworks of respectability, resistance, and liberation.

I am participating in the construction of what I call “Delanyian theory.” To articulate and advance new reading/archival practices of African American literature this project uses the unspeakable and Delany’s use of Jameson’s “paraliterature” to develop a Delanyian theoretical approach through which to analyze transgression. While scholars have acknowledged Delany as a critic in his own right, none to my knowledge have published an application of his theories to the literature of his African American contemporaries. In applying Delanyian theory I advance a reading practice that recognizes and values alternative African American political gestures. The chapters pair texts that were produced during the postwar time period of the 1960s-1980s but that have not been historically read together. That period saw an uprising of liberatory identity politics and counter-cultural movements and their aftermath, such as second-wave feminism, gay rights, Civil Rights, and Black Power, thus I consider how the texts’ use of the unspeakable implicitly or explicitly critiques the epistemological and political structures, including the liberatory, informing the context of their production. Reading transgression in the canonical texts allows me to analyze the unspeakable elided in liberatory framings. Reading transgression in the lesser-known texts, when paired with the canonical texts, allows me to argue for the critical value of paraliterature in reimagining the archive.

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Introduction

“Perhaps the most insidious and least understood form of segregation is that of the word.”

—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 24

Critic Beth Coleman states it plainly—“black people are famous for representing suffering” (78). From slave narratives onward African American literature, which is “treated as a political statement” (Basu “Public and Private” 193), largely gets positioned within the dominant frameworks of oppression and liberation.¹ Critics often read African American literature as “liberatory,” meaning they trace the literature’s *presumed* inherent anti-racist and/or anti-sexist resistance to oppressive power structures. Liberatory politics, in the context of black studies, are affiliated with freedom and the gaining of nationally recognized social and political rights and equal citizenship for African Americans. Thus it is unsurprising that much African American literature is framed to serve a liberatory agenda. As critic Darieck Scott states, “the project of resistance...informs African American inquiry” (*Extravagant* 9).

One of the most prominent liberatory resistance strategies used by middle-class African Americans in the Progressive Era was what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed the “politics of respectability.”² This strategy originated during the “Women’s Era” of 1880-1920 and was primarily used by clubwomen of the black women’s movement originating in the Black Baptist Church (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*). In many ways the politics of

¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham notes, “The language of race has historically been what Bakhtin calls a double-voiced discourse—serving the voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation” (“African-American Women’s History” 267). Likewise Jennifer C. Nash argues, “certain analytical frameworks—injury and recovery—have *become* predominant,” particularly within the black feminist archive (25, emphasis in original). This phenomenon informs literary criticism as well. For example, the cover blurb of a recent theoretical anthology *Contemporary African American Fiction: New Critical Essays* reminds readers “the African American literary tradition is about survival and liberation” and the Intro states the predominant question guiding critical assessments of African American literature should be “how does it free us [African Americans]?” (1). See also J. Martin Favor’s *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* in which he suggests the oppression/liberation binary is problematic because it may “limit the ways in which one can read African American literature...the critic of African American literature often restricts too severely his or her scope of intellectual inquiry into the construction of racial identity” (3).

² Refer to Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*.

respectability emulated “The Cult of True Womanhood,” a late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ideology that pervaded American culture and enforced the idea that a virtuous woman’s civic duty was to nurture her husband and children in the realm of domesticity.³ Many African American clubwomen, public intellectuals, and writers such as Mary Church Terrell, Pauline Hopkins, Anna Julia Cooper, and Francis Harper used the politics of respectability to identify as morally upstanding and sexually chaste in response to the vicious stereotypes that black women were sexually lascivious.⁴ Such stereotypes predominantly emanated from American chattel slavery and were continually pronounced within the classist, racist, sexist power structures of the Post-Reconstruction era (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*).⁵

According to Darlene Clark Hine, black women engaged the politics of respectability by representing themselves as “super moral,” not only for their own protection and uplift but also for justice and opportunity for all African Americans (915). In presenting themselves as “super moral” “these women, who thought of themselves as “sorely needed missionaries” (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 186), reconstructed and represented their sexuality through its absence—through silence, secrecy, and invisibility” (Higginbotham, “African-

³ Refer to Candice Jenkins *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* for her study of respectability, domesticity, and intimacy.

⁴ For a history of the development of black female sexual stereotypes refer to, among other texts, Jennifer C. Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, E. Frances White’s “The Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Constructing Science, Race, and Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century,” Patricia Hill-Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* and *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, Higginbotham’s “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” bell hooks’ *Ain’t I A Woman? Black Women and Feminism*, Anne Fausto-Sterling’s “Gender, Race, and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of ‘Hottentot Women’ in Europe, 1815-1817,” Sander Gilman’s “The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality,” Susie Prestney’s “Inscribing the Hottentot Venus: Generating Data for Difference,” and Winthrop D. Jordan’s *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*.

⁵ Stereotypes of sexual degeneracy did not pertain only to black women, but extended to black men as well. As critics including Franz Fanon, Siobhan Sommerville, Roderick Ferguson, and Darieck Scott, among countless others have discussed, “blackness is primarily associated in Western (and Western-influenced) cultures with perverse, nonnormative sexuality” (Scott, *Extravagant* 6). See Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, Sommerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, and Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*.

American Women's History" 266). Their motto was "Lifting as We Climb" (Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* 206), a phrase that resonates with uplift ideology such as that espoused by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. The motto suggests that the liberatory, driven by the intention of inclusive rights and citizenship for particular groups of people excluded at any given historical moment, is wed to the politics of reception. In other words, many people engaged in liberatory politics often abide by norms of respectability in order to be received by an influential audience that has power to supposedly bestow some level of social and political recognition and equality on those that are marginalized.

Consider a familiar scene. In the "Battle Royal" chapter of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* the narrator is forced to perform a racialized spectacle of sexualized violence before he is allowed to deliver his Booker T. Washington-esque speech regarding "humility" as "the very essence of progress" (17) to a group of powerful white men. He stares, dangerously, at a naked white woman, he desperately fights other black men, blindfolded, in a boxing ring, he grasps for brass tokens on an electrified rug, he loses all "dignity" (22). Through the ordeal he remains obsessively driven to deliver his speech, believing fiercely in "the rightness of things" (30). As he delivers it he chokes down blood, speaking louder, emphasizing words more clearly to fight through the audience's laughter (30). And he is rewarded, with a scholarship to a "state college for Negroes" (32), for what is a cumulative racialized performance of debasement.

In its satire of Washingtonian rhetoric, the "Battle Royal" chapter contains a critique of the liberatory act of speechifying inherent to African American identity politics trafficking in myths of "charismatic leadership."⁶ In other words, this scene and the novel more generally reveal "the myth—or *fiction*—that charismatic leadership [historically a liberatory strategy] is a

⁶ See Erica R. Edwards' *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership* for her analysis of charisma, what she calls "a structuring fiction for liberatory politics" (xv), and its manifestation through speechifying.

necessary precondition for social change, political access, and historical progress” (Edwards xviii, emphasis in original). That *Invisible Man*’s obsession with “spectacles of race leadership [and] public political performance” (Edwards 106) is represented in a chapter simultaneously providing one of the most visceral scenes of sexualized racism/racialized sexuality in American literature is partially what makes the chapter such a powerful critique. While the narrator understands the rhetoric of his speech to be merely a performative strategy that “worked” in the past (Ellison 17), his “naïve” belief (Ellison 15) in the success of such strategies disallows him from recognizing, at the time, the machinations of race, power, sex, and violence that keeps him trapped within a vicious racist cycle of containment that *depends* upon his performance of such assimilationist gestures. In other words, the cycle of racist containment relies on the narrator’s uplift politics and liberatory aspirations in order to keep him “in the cards” of a historical pattern (Ellison 15) that uses his naivety to perpetually reiterate itself, a phenomenon I discuss in chapter four of this dissertation. And the narrator is haunted by this relationship, though he does not, for a long time, understand it; “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” plays over and over in his dreams (33).

Returning to historical considerations of respectability and reception, in *Figures in Black* Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the liberatory urgency of the African American literary tradition and how such literature was largely received during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as evidentiary. Gates reminds readers of racist Enlightenment thought (for example, that Africans had no history/no memory/no literature, thus attesting to their inhumanity) which shaped the contours of African American cultural production coming out of the context of American chattel slavery. He writes “If blacks were to signify as full members of the Western human community, they would have to do so in their writings” (*Figures in Black* 6). Literacy therefore was both a

technology and a commodity with which the African's right to be considered human could be negotiated (*Figures in Black* 11). As a result, Gates writes, "Few literary traditions have begun or been sustained by such a complex and ironic relation to their criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, *a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its potentially harshest critics*" (26, emphasis mine). Thus "The critic became social reformer, and literature became an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person" often within the confines of strategically necessary, yet nonetheless over-determined political projects (*Figures in Black* 30).

Unsurprisingly then, one of the predominant concerns in African American literary arts has been, for centuries, "How Shall The Negro Be Portrayed?" (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*).

Critic Gene Jarrett observes

Ever since the late nineteenth century, the problem of African American literature divided the American literati into two groups that are in extreme ideological disagreement. The first group, de facto deans of literary movements, wielded enough authority to dictate the critical and commercial conditions for African American literature. William Howells in the 1890s, Alain Locke in the 1920s, Richard Wright in the 1930s and 1940s, and Amiri Baraka in the 1960s and 1970s arbitrated public expectations that black writers should write authentic literature demonstrating *racial realism*, which supposedly portrayed the black race in accurate or truthful ways. Howell's minstrel realism, Locke's New Negro modernism, Wright's New Negro radicalism, and Baraka's so-called Black Aesthetic shackled the creative decisions and objectives of many black authors (1, emphasis in original).

These (mainly) intraracial ideological pressures, combined with the problems faced by black writers in a predominantly white publishing industry,⁷ created a fraught context for the production and reception of African American literature. As critic Biman Basu explains

⁷ See John K. Young's *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*, Zora Neale Hurston's "What White Publishers Won't Print," and Justin Gifford's "Harvard in Hell: Holloway House Publishing Company, *Players Magazine*, and the Invention of Black Mass-Market Erotica" and *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing* for further discussions of the relationships between black authors and white publishers.

Because African American writers have been forced to respond to a racist literary establishment, we have, in past, seen discourses—historically necessary and necessarily compromised—surrounding ‘racial uplift’ [and] ‘the Negro problem’...this sort of criticism is still pervasive today and is usually aimed at texts that explore issues that the African-American critical community is, perhaps with good reason, extremely sensitive about (“Public and Private” 194).

Here one thinks of W.E.B. DuBois’s unflattering assessment of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* as a novel that made him feel “distinctly like taking a bath” (Lewis 225) and of Richard Wright’s infamous critique of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for being too “folk” (“Between Laughter and Tears”).⁸ Today, as I discuss in chapter three, this criticism manifests in the debates about “‘Black-lit writers versus street-lit writers’” which raises questions such as “Who’s ‘better’? Who’s more ‘real’? Who is most true to the spirit and needs of African America? Who’s ‘progressive’? Who, in the words we hear so often, ‘is more positive for the Black community?’ Who’s least embarrassing?” (Smith 189). With these issues in mind Gayl Jones sums it up, stating, “Conflict between aesthetic, political, and social responsibilities...involves dilemmas in Afro-American literary tradition” (“Interview with Gayl Jones” 42) and critic LaMonda Horton-Stallings notes, “The manufacturing of a canon is problematic in any context, but especially in Black culture” (“I’m Goin” 182).⁹

The critics above speak not only to the history of African American literature but also the history of its critical, political over-determination. And while Toni Morrison claims “much of

⁸ “The folk” is also a problematic concept in African American literary history. See, for example, Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and George Schuyler’s “The Negro Art Hokum,” as well as book length studies such as Sonnet Retman’s *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression* and J. Martin Favor’s *Authentic Blackness*.

⁹ Critics including Mikhail Bakhtin, Cornel West, Nathaniel Mackey, Philip Brian Harper, Roderick Ferguson, and Robert Reid-Pharr remind us that canonization is a cultural process that attempts to suppress the heterogeneity of meaning and render specific ideas and values universal. As Toni Morrison states “Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate...is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 132, emphasis in original). Refer to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, West’s “Minority Discourse and the Pitfalls of Canon Formation,” Mackey’s *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*, Harper’s *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*, Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black*, Reid-Pharr’s *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*, and Morrison’s “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.”

the research and analysis [in literary studies] has rendered speakable what was formerly unspoken,” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 132) critical framings of African American literature remain predominantly interested in particular reading practices bound to discourses of national citizenship and cultural nationalism organized under what Higginbotham calls “the metalanguage of race”¹⁰ that “uncritically render[s] a monolithic ‘black community,’ and ‘black experience’” (“African-American Women’s History” 256) in need of liberation.¹¹ In other words, liberatory framings constitute a strategically necessary, yet over-determined political project that, rather than rendering “speakable what was formerly unspoken,” continues to ignore what I later discuss as “the unspeakable” for fear of its potential to derail political resistance projects.¹² The liberatory remains influenced by the continual residue of respectability politics that has proliferated since the 19th century.¹³

Although considered “both subversive and conservative” (Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History” 272), respectability politics are “an apparatus of social control” (Lee xi) because they pressure subjects to abide by a hyper-prescriptive code of propriety framed as resistance. Containment here means a process that flattens, silences, and/or manipulates

¹⁰ Higginbotham describes “the metalanguage of race” as a framework that “speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race” (“African-American Women’s History,” 255). That being said, “Race,” she argues, “not only tends to subsume other sets of social relations, namely, gender and class, but it blurs and disguises, suppresses and negates its own complex interplay with the very social relations it envelops...the characterization ‘the race’ obscures rather than mirrors the reality of black heterogeneity” (“African-American Women’s History” 255, 270).

¹¹ Refer to Reid-Pharr’s *Once You Go Black* for his critique of this trend.

¹² My research, like Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America*, largely takes the critical framing of a specific body of literature as its object of critique. Nguyen articulates his concerns thusly: “the way critics have tended to read [Asian American] literature, as cultural works that demonstrate resistance or accommodation to the racist, sexist, and capitalist exploitation of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans, may be as much a *reflection of the critics’ professional histories, political priorities, and institutional locations* as what may be found in historically framed close readings of the works themselves” (3-4, emphasis mine). He argues that “the rigid discourses of American racism and Asian American literary criticism that shape the reception and interpretation of the literature” preclude critics from recognizing “the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations” (4, emphasis in original). Many thanks to Chris Patterson for bringing my attention to the parallels between my work and Nguyen’s.

¹³ Refer to White’s *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* for a book length study of this phenomenon.

subjects and objects in an attempt to stabilize race, sex, and gender identities. Higginbotham writes

Racial uplift, while invoking a discursive ground on which to explode negative stereotypes of black women, remained locked within hegemonic articulations of gender, class, and sexuality...[It] equated normality with conformity to white middle-class models of gender roles and sexuality. Black leaders argued that 'proper' and 'respectable' behavior proved blacks worthy of equal civil and political rights. Conversely, nonconformity was equated with deviance and pathology and was often cited as a cause of racial inequality and injustice ("African-American Women's History" 271).¹⁴

The politics of respectability therefore succeeded in creating class-based distinctions of social and socio-economic status.¹⁵ As Higginbotham explains

On a host of levels, racial uplift stood at odds with the daily practices and aesthetic tastes of many poor, uneducated, and 'unassimilated' black men and women dispersed throughout the rural South or newly huddled in urban centers...The politics of 'respectability' disavowed, in often repressive ways, much of the expressive culture of 'the folk,' for example, sexual behavior, dress style, leisure activity, music, speech patterns, and religious worship patterns ("African-American Women's History" 172).

Thus, the ideologies of respectability hardened into a critical attitude of sexual repression throughout the centuries and "problems deemed too far astray of respectability are subsumed within a culture of dissemblance" (Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History" 272).

Since the Progressive Era respectability politics have been increasingly critiqued within African American critical and fictional texts as a paradigm in which blacks condemn white racism while imitating white middle-class moral codes (Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood* 168).

And respectability politics have been argued to be a futile tactic effecting little material change.¹⁶

However due to, among other factors, the continual conservative influence of the black church

¹⁴ In making this point, Higginbotham cites a speaker at the 1904 National Baptist Convention who stated, "Unfortunately the minority or bad Negroes have given the race a questionable reputation; these degenerates are responsible for every discrimination we suffer" ("African-American Women's History" 272).

¹⁵ Refer to Lisa B. Thompson's *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* for an analysis of this phenomenon and its contemporary implications.

¹⁶ Refer to Lee's *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture*, Jenkins' *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, and Morris' *Close Kin and Distant Relatives* for such analyses.

and the historical silence regarding issues of African American sexuality and gender within many African American communities, such sexual repression continues to resonate and intensify among African Americans, particularly in regards to black female sexual pleasure and both male and female queerness.¹⁷ For example, Jenkins argues “ideologies of black uplift popular during [the Progressive Era]...certainly has remained a part of the African American cultural imaginary throughout the twentieth century and arguably into the twenty-first” (*Private Lives* 15) and Lee claims “Through rigid self-surveillance and careful policing of each other’s bodies, many black women continue to hold each other accountable to middle-class sexual decorum” (x).

It may seem contradictory to associate respectability politics with liberatory politics due to the former’s affiliation with conservatism and the latter’s liberal, “radical,” and/or resistant intentions. However liberatory politics are often entangled in discourses of uplift/assimilation that marginalize subjects who do not “fit,” or marginalize aspects of subjects’ identities deemed problematic to strategic, yet ideologically constrained politics.¹⁸ Consider, for example, the ways in which Black Nationalism, historically considered radical and liberatory, has come under critique—most notably by black feminist/womanist critics—for phallocentrism and homophobia¹⁹ that in hindsight complicate the movement’s liberatory agenda. In other words, in its aftermath critics and scholars have argued that the movement was deeply marginalizing due to its conservative attitudes towards sex and gender (attitudes that echo respectability politics). And *much* has been written critiquing feminist theory for developing a liberatory framework of

¹⁷ See, for example, such analyses in Hill-Collins’ “Why Black Sexual Politics?,” in *Black Sexual Politics*, Jenkins’ *Private Lives*, *Proper Relations*, Horton-Stallings’ *Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, and Shayne Lee’s *Erotic Revolutionaries*.

¹⁸ For instance, Lee states “Scholars are quick to calculate the effects of a politics of respectability as an instrument of regulatory regimes in the everyday lives of black women, but are slow to appraise how it influences black feminist scholarship” (xi).

¹⁹ See, for example, Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Barbara Smith et al.’s *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*, and White’s chapter “Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counterdiscourse, and African American Nationalism” in *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*.

resistance that reinscribes respectability politics.²⁰ Yet despite the ways the liberatory can reiterate respectability politics and regardless of the scholarly attention to this fact, reading African American literature through liberatory frameworks remains the predominant critical default.

Arguably this tendency is likely due to liberatory critical frameworks, such as Marxism and feminism, equating marginalized subjects with the “resistance-as-subject” paradigm (Baudrillard, *In the Shadow*). Basu states, “Classical Marxism posits the subject predicated on consciousness as an agent of resistance and capable of enacting historical change,” noting, as a result, that there exists in humanist discourse an “unexamined valorization of the subject as historical agent” (*Commerce* 6). Indeed, as Jean Baudrillard critiques, “The resistance-as-subject is today unilaterally valorized and held as positive,” and “liberation, emancipation, expression, and constitution as a political subject are taken to be valuable and subversive” (*In the Shadow* 107). Structures of power, including dominant critical frameworks, demand that we “constitute ourselves as subjects, to liberate ourselves, to express ourselves at any price, to vote, to produce, decide, speak, participate, play the game” (*In the Shadow* 108). Therefore “resistance-as-subject,” Basu argues, is precisely “to play the game” (*Commerce* 15).

Furthermore ironically, the resistance-as-subject paradigm, used largely by white critics to frame marginalized persons/minority discourse, and thought to be subversive and liberatory, can be patronizing. For example, Robert Reid-Pharr states,

Why in responding to the claim that Black American persons are, in fact, agents of history and, moreover, that we have chosen (in however limited a manner one

²⁰ Referring to feminism as a “system of sexual judgment” (152) Gayl Rubin states “Progressives who would be ashamed to display cultural chauvinism in other areas routinely exhibit it towards sexual differences” (“Thinking Sex” 154). Refer to Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Lee’s *Erotic Revolutionaries*, Carole S. Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, White’s *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, and Pat Califia’s *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* for critical assessments of feminism’s tendencies toward conservative ideologies that suppress and oppress transgressive female sexuality in the name of liberation.

wishes to use that term) the very modes with which we address questions of difference do critics inevitably return to a sort of metaphysics of difference in which Black Americans are refigured as animated objects, noble victims, the vaguely discernable subaltern, the never fully articulate other? (*Once You Go Black* 148).

In other words, as Reid-Pharr observes, the liberatory tradition can succeed in erasing the marginalized subject's agency, choice, responsibility, and desire—his/her very subjectivity—in the name of constructing the resistance-as-subject archetype. And, furthermore, considering the liberatory tradition's over-determined focus on resistance-as-subject, critic Saba Mahmood asks, “Does the category of resistance impose a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the [liberatory] narrative of subversion?” (9). I, like Mahmood, contend that it does.

In this dissertation I recognize that the liberatory tradition within African American literature and criticism is a discursive political project mobilized for social recognition and rights. Furthermore, I recognize that liberatory critical assessments of African American literature are often simultaneously *critical* of the means, such as respectability politics, frequently employed to achieve the desired social and political ends.²¹ As Higginbotham notes, “the site of counter-discourse is itself contested terrain” (“African-American Women's History” 274). However,

²¹ Many African American critical texts engaged with liberation contain within themselves critiques of the dominant ways such political projects are framed. See for example Carby's seminal study *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, White's *Dark Continent of Our Bodies*, and Reid-Pharr's *Once You Go Black*. For instance Reid-Pharr states, “I should just go ahead and state straightforwardly here that part of the reason that I am so resistant to notions of a profound black tradition that not only underwrites but dictates contemporary black cultural production is that I recognize that these same ideas underwrite logics of segregation and apartheid... this tendency to treat tradition as sacred that I believe remains unchallenged in the current practice of (Black) American Studies” (*Once You Go Black* 13-14). Furthermore he argues, “An overemphasis on tradition, memory, what I have called the profundity of Black American history and culture, has the effect of strangling that history, stifling that culture” (*Once You Go Black* 121). Also White, while deeply engaged in a black feminist political project, nevertheless critiques black feminism, black nationalism, and writers such as Toni Morrison and James Baldwin out of “concern with the ways that we build political cohesion and form community by drawing too narrowly the boundaries of our (imagined) community” (14).

although liberatory readings/framings of African American literature often recognize, or advance, critiques of dominant forms of resistance, those forms of resistance open to critique remain bound by the politics of respectability. For example, it is more common to read critiques of the political limitations of the Black Panthers than it is to read about how promiscuous, public gay sex among African American men can be understood as a political gesture. It is more common to read critiques of the politics of respectability than it is to read about black women's agency and/or pleasure in spite of, or perhaps as a result of, embodying, playing with, refuting, or otherwise engaging with, to borrow Hill-Collins' phrase, "controlling images" (*Black Feminist Thought*). Critic E. Francis White calls this phenomenon "the Janus-faced nature of counterdiscourse" (5). She states "in the process of developing a counterdiscourse, some stories are suppressed...[to] help regulate our social and political behaviors" (5). The gravity of trauma that contributes to the oppression/liberation binary that largely frames African American literature can dissuade critics from seeking pleasure in archives of pain.²² As Lee observes, "academics consume themselves with detecting patriarchy up to its old tricks again, attentively unearthing oppression but seldom advocating agency, autonomy, and pleasure" (xii).

It is, of course, important to keep in mind the "conceptual prison" (Scott, *Extravagant 7*) of working with black pleasure, for, as Scott reminds us, black sexuality is assumed to be without choice or self-mastery (*Extravagant 7*). He reminds us that there is always the danger of unintentionally making "obscuring spectacles" of black sexuality that reify the consolidation of whiteness and its social and political privileges (*Extravagant 7*). However, even with this important caveat in mind, I contend that critical liberatory discourse, by functioning as a

²² It is important to note that some contemporary critics of African American literature and culture are either working with trauma to "read [it] vigorously against the grain," such as Scott does in *Extravagant Abjection* (13), or are moving away from the topic entirely. For instance, in her work on black female sexuality, pleasure, and desire in the porn industry Nash explicitly states her goal is to move away from a black feminist "'protectionist' reading of representation" so as to seek "possibilities rather than pain" (3).

“protectionist” framework (Nash 3), is a process of conformity that epistemologically and politically contains African American literature in an attempt to stabilize the texts to perform particular ideological work. By epistemology I mean, as Roderick Ferguson states, “an economy of information privileged and information excluded” (*Aberrations* ix). The stakes of such epistemological containment are that “Subject formations arise out of [or are suppressed by] this economy” (*Aberrations* ix) to which I would add so too the disciplining of objects, such as the canonizing and teaching of literature.²³

Because much African American literary criticism is influenced by the conservatism of respectability politics and a critical over-determination of resistance-as-subject wed to the oppression/liberation binary, it can deter engagement with work, or aspects of work deemed non-liberatory. The liberatory tradition tends to function as an implicit or explicit epistemological and political containment project that marginalizes or ignores (often sexual) elements of African American literature that read as excessive, or unintelligible to many readers and critics because such gestures lack “public language...[and] social discourse” through which to critically interpret them (Delany, “Sword and Sorcery” 144). This is not to suggest that such excessive representations are apolitical. Rather, as I contend, such representations often *are* political gestures. However, they are not understood as such because they lack a discernible political framework thru which to be critically engaged and are, instead, often pathologized.²⁴ As

²³ Refer to Ferguson’s “Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionality” in which he discusses, among other things, Foucault’s lecture “The Discourse on Language” regarding the disciplining and institutionalizing of “truth” and “knowledge.” The distinctions that comprise such organizing principles, Ferguson explains, “operate as a system of exclusion” (166).

²⁴ In “Thinking Sex” Rubin states “much stigma adheres even to scholarly investigation of sex” (154). She discusses “the hierarchy of sex” noting there is an “imaginary line between good and bad sex...the line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos. It expresses the fear that if anything is permitted to cross this erotic DMZ, the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across” (152). Furthermore she argues, “sex is always political” (143). And she notes that those who embody and practice unspeakable sexualities and sexual relations “are subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions” (151).

Ferguson notes, “Pathologizing the material heterogeneity embodied in African American nonheteronormative formations disciplines its critical possibilities” (*Aberrations* 21).

Throughout this dissertation I problematize dominant critical modes of reading/framing African American literature as liberatory by claiming that it flattens and constrains the archive. As Morrison argues, “judging [African American literature] solely in terms of...political correctness...cripple[s] the literature and infantilize[s] the serious work of imaginative writing” (“On the Unspeakable” 134). Likewise, poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey contends

Failures or refusals to acknowledge complexity among writers from socially marginalized groups, no matter how ‘well-intentioned,’ condescend to the work and to the writers and thus, are hardly the solution they purport to be, but are a part of the problem. Allied with such simplistic readings is the tendency to overlook variance and divergent approaches in the writing from such groups, especially to overlook writing that defies canons of accessibility (*Discrepant Engagement* 18).

As Morrison and Mackey make plain, many critics, intentionally or not, flatten and manipulate African American literary texts to advance liberatory discourse. I argue that while the liberatory tradition is a strategically necessary project, it is over-determined by respectability and reception. And, as author and critic Samuel R. Delany, writing as his critical alter ego K. Leslie Steiner states, “Art that is exhausted by the politics around, above, and beneath it tends to be transient and, ultimately, lifeless” (“‘The Scorpion Garden’ Revisited” 28).

Clearly then, “Absences of vital presence in...American literature may be,” Morrison suggests, “the insistent fruit of the *scholarship* rather than the text” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 139, emphasis mine). After all, African American literature is rife with under-theorized forms of racial and sexual knowing. Delany calls this “dangerous” discursive landscape “the scorpion garden” (“The Scorpion Garden” 14). Following Gayl Rubin’s still relevant call for “an urgent need to develop radical perspectives on sexuality” (“Thinking Sex”

148) I propose that one theory we can use to explore such excess is Delany's conceptualizing of "the unspeakable" as articulated in his 1992 essay "On the Unspeakable." "On the Unspeakable" is a text of primary importance to my methodology as its concepts inform how I read the primary fiction in my dissertation. In the essay Delany describes the unspeakable as those matters that are "extralinguistic...equally difficult to describe, to define" (58). As Delany conceives of it, the unspeakable is an erotic articulation of certain "dangerous" practices of relation, dangerous in that they "represent lines of communication, fields of interest, and exchanges of power" that I interpret as transgressive ("Sword and Sorcery" 136-137). Transgression here means acts, often considered "deviant," that allow subjects to play with the elasticity of subjective and external limits or boundaries.²⁵

Delany's "On the Unspeakable" is written in the form of a Möbius strip, lacking a clear beginning or end, with dual columns of pornographic and critical prose theorizing "the unspeakable" that indiscernibly meld into one another. Interestingly, in moving between modes, the reader cannot tell where the accounts begin or end, or if they are disparate narratives. Because of the entwined format Delany's tone never shifts, thereby lending a flat, even mundane effect to the pornography. Thus the Möbius strip form allows Delany to meditate on a set of tensions inherent to the narrative(s), for example "the division between everyday and unspeakable, difficult and extralinguistic, banal and evil (58)." These divisions, Delany claims, "may be the prototype for all social division" (58). He states, "It's as if we must establish two columns, with everything of one mode relegated to one side and everything of the other relegated to the other" (63-64). The essay's form thus mirrors the content of Delany's critique, as it models how the unspeakable is, on one hand, inextricable from the every day, and is, on the

²⁵ For example, I think of Scott's provocative readings of transgression as the pleasure and power of abjection, most notably represented in Delany's *The Mad Man*. Refer to *Extravagant Abjection* for this, and other related analyses.

other hand, constantly under threat of containment. However, the essay's ultimate discursive gesture is revealing "desire lies like a bodily boundary between the everyday and 'the unspeakable'" (65). Delany writes, "The positioning of desire is a result of social power" however "the content of desire does not contain...social power" (66). Thus, Delany seems to be arguing, desire is highly useful as an analytic of power relations.²⁶

In addition to understanding the unspeakable as a manifestation of certain "dangerous" practices of relation, Delany conceives of it as "a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general...it comprises the endlessly specialized tropes...required to speak or write about various topics at various anomalous places in our complex social geography" (61-62). In other words, the unspeakable illuminates the generic conventions of the articulable, or, for my purposes, the respectable, as I discuss in chapters two and three. Delany writes, "What [desire] contains, if anything other than itself, is that tiny part of the freedom of language associated with abjection" (66).²⁷ I contend that Delany's greatest contribution to discourses of race and sex lies in his concept of the unspeakable, thus the unspeakable provides the primary theoretical lens through which I analyze canonical and non-canonical fiction written by his African American contemporaries Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Iceberg Slim, Octavia Butler, and Hal Bennett.

²⁶ On the topic of desire and power Ferguson points out that Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was originally titled *The Will to Know*. He states "The French title reminds us that, for Foucault, sexuality was not an object to analyze in and of itself but a reason to assess the productive and discursive nature of power—power realized through knowledge, as well as power realized through the *desire* for knowledge" ("Administering Sexuality" 159, emphasis in original).

²⁷ Abjection is a concept I work with throughout my dissertation. Jacques Lacan introduced the term into psychoanalysis and Julia Kristeva popularized it as a theoretical framework. However, throughout my dissertation I more so use critics Hanjo Berressem and Darieck Scott to support my analysis of abjection, which I understand as degradation.

I use Delany's conceptualizing of the unspeakable (different than Toni Morrison's conceptualizing)²⁸ because there is a need for a more nuanced and complex account of African American political gestures beyond what is articulated (or silenced) thru the liberatory. From Linda Brent's rape in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to Beloved's extralinguistic description of the Middle Passage in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, it is evident that excess is inherent to African American literature. Within such literature there are black subjects, sexualities, actions, utterances, and other narrative elements that cannot be contained by liberatory frameworks, and the fiction represents various tactics of transgression meant to "cut across (although not erase!) those wavering boundaries which define the power systems of the world" (Davis 164). Such tactics, as I analyze in the following chapters, include evasion, ambiguity, negative affect, BDSM power dynamics, abjection, the drive to failure, and the embrace of shame. Reading such transgressive tactics as manifestations of Delany's unspeakable is, I argue, highly productive to critical explorations of subjectivity and the social world, and to the development of new reading and archival practices.

While I argue that the tactic of transgression can trouble forms of containment that seek to delimit sexuality, desire, gender, and race, I do not intend to suggest that such a tactic is liberatory. As Delany states, "Transgression, sexual dissidence, and the role of the pariah... must be removed from salvationist discourse if they are to be anything more than a return to orthodoxy" ("The Thomas L. Long Interview" 136). In other words, I do not argue that the tactic of transgression "solves" or "transcends" the problems of containment, but rather reveals its

²⁸ Morrison's articulates the concept in "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" as "...the informing and determining Afro-American presence in traditional American literature" (145). She states, "Another [critical focus for African American literature] is the examination and reinterpretation of the American canon, the founding nineteenth century works, for the 'unspeakable things unspoken': for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure—the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine" (135-136).

structuring logic and, by extension, the ways in which we read/misread/don't read the archive, and why. Like any alternative framework, transgression is always in danger of "returning to orthodoxy" and becoming the new order. While Julian Wolfreys writes "transgressions, being many, multiple, and endlessly inventive and self-differentiating, avoid such determinations, such laws of order, logic, and narrative" (8), he also writes "to isolate them according to a master narrative is to fall foul into critical recuperation into...structured convention" (8). This is why I am careful to not construct a binary in which I critique liberatory politics by proclaiming that the unspeakable and transgression are "more liberatory" (or liberatory at all).

In fact transgression, while generally understood to be "indicative of breaking a law, doing something illicit, disrupting order and rebelling against social norms (Wolfreys 1),²⁹ is re-conceptualized in my dissertation. It is *not* about "crossing the line." To this end Delany writes

The unspeakable is, of course, not a boundary dividing a positive area of allowability from a complete and totalized negativity, a boundary located at least one step beyond the forbidden (and the forbidden, by definition—no?—*must* be speakable if its proscriptive power is to function). If we pursue the boundary as such, it will recede before us as a limit of mists and vapors. Certainly it is not a line drawn in any absolute way across speech or writing. It is not a fixed and locable point of transgression that glows hotter and brighter as we approach it till, as we cross it, its searing heat burns away all possibility of further articulation ("On the Unspeakable" 61).

Rather, the unspeakable, manifesting through tactics of transgression, can be understood as an analytic used to explore certain practices of relation and allowable utterances. To engage the unspeakable then is not only to analyze on a formal and aesthetic level, but to scrutinize how, and why, much post-war African American literature has been critically neglected or flattened. By tracing this negligence, I contend with the predominant conservatism of much

²⁹ Refer to Wolfreys' *Transgression*, Jenks' *Transgression*, and Stallybrass and White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* for historical and cultural overviews of the concept.

contemporary African American literary scholarship that continually insists on reading through frameworks of respectability, resistance, and liberation.

By applying Delany's concept of the unspeakable to other African American authors I am participating in defining what I am calling Delanyian theory so as to develop a new approach through which to analyze literary representations of transgression. While scholars have acknowledged Delany as a critic in his own right, none to my knowledge have published an application of his theories as a framework through which to analyze African American literature. It is of paramount importance to my project to situate Delany within a broader social/historical context to explore the ways in which his work resonates in conversation with the work of other critics engaging analyses of, among other issues, black feminism, respectability politics, queerness, and transgression. This dissertation therefore builds upon the crucial work of critics analyzing transgression in African American culture including Saidiya Hartman, Robert Reid-Pharr, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Shane Vogel, Candice Jenkins, Darieck Scott, Biman Basu, and Jennifer C. Nash.³⁰

Regarding my methodology, I take inspiration from Higginbotham's assessment that "borrowing and blending work by black intellectuals, white feminist scholars, and other theorists...speaks to the tradition of syncretism that has characterized the Afro-American experience" ("African-American Women's History" 253). With this in mind, as I analyze the primary fiction I "blend" queer theory, kink theory, and queer of color critique to provide a theoretical context that compliments Delany's concepts of the unspeakable. In doing so it is my hope that, as Morrison argues, "the application of recent literary theories to Afro-American

³⁰ Refer to Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, Reid-Pharr's *Black Gay Man*, Bond Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where 'Black' Meets 'Queer,'* Vogel's *Scenes of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*, Jenkins' *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, Basu's *The Commerce of Peoples: Sadomasochism and African American Literature*, and Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy*.

literature [helps] noncanonical texts [to] be incorporated into existing and forming critical discourse” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 134). Queer theory is of particular importance to my analyses of the unspeakable and the tactics of transgression that it manifests through for, as Eve Sedgwick explains, “one of the things queer can refer to [is] the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resolutions, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituents of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (*Tendencies* 8).

Aside from the work of such critics as I mention above, little scholarly attention has been given to transgressive excess within African American literature despite the fact that it is rife with it.³¹ Considering that historically “critics and promoters have [had] to be concerned with how a body of [African American literary] work is going to look and appeal to whites [and] Canon formation asks what whites will think” (Horton-Stallings, “I’m Goin” 182), African American literature is a marginalized body of work within the American literary canon.³² And transgressive African American literature, particularly that which is deemed “too negative, too guttural, too animalistic, too ‘ghetto’” is even more so (Horton-Stallings, “I’m Goin” 182). Of transgressive excess Delany states, “Because the reality of the situation is intricate and often difficult to articulate—and because an overall fictional model preexists that is simpler and generally accepted; and because the whole situation lies outside the boundaries of the ‘socially accepted’ anyway—often its easier to let the extant rhetoric hold unchallenged sway” (*Times Square Red* 150). As I have argued, much African American literary and social criticism remains

³¹ Although we consider different bodies of literature, my research resonates with Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, particularly her focus on shame, negative affect, forms of degradation, and other representations critics have largely ignored in the name of transformation and liberation.

³² For more on canon formation and African American literature refer to Morrison’s famous lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” which concerns “the [largely] separate confinement” of African American literature from the canon of American literature (124). See also Horton-Stallings “I’m Goin Pimp Whores! The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative.”

influenced by the “extant rhetoric” of respectability politics and, as Heather Love states, “critics have ignored what they could not transform (147).³³

Respectability politics maintain a wary relationship to articulations of transgressive, racist, and/or hypersexual stereotypes because such gestures can be conceived as detrimental to narratives of African American racial progress. Therefore excess, particularly transgressive excess, can complicate critical readings/framings of African American literature as liberatory because often such transgressive excess reveals a complex, unspeakable relationship between sex, desire, pleasure, race, gender, power, and subjectivity that troubles clear narratives of resistance. Perhaps this is because the tactic of transgression often fails to articulate easily identifiable “freedom” for those who engage it, and is sometimes read as “a sign of revolutionary backsliding [or] self-hatred” (Scott, *Extravagant* 254). Or, perhaps transgressive desire has been repressed in political readings/framings of African American literature because, as Claudia Tate states, it “engenders in us what I suspect to be vague feelings of emotional discomfort—anxiety, shame, and/or guilt” (*Psychoanalysis* 9-10).³⁴

However Scott also observes, “our responses of shock, offense, and anger or squeamishness to what are, after all, fantasy representations are in part, of course, shields against uncomfortable experience and the knowledge—the recognitions—that might accrue from the examination of this discomfort” (*Extravagant* 220). Thus Delany’s work is most central to my dissertation because much of his critical and fictional work is unwilling to shy away from producing such discomfort and in fact, as I argue in chapter one, aims to do so as a pedagogical

³³ See Lee’s *Erotic Revolutionaries*, Jenkins *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, and White’s *Dark Continent of Our Bodies* for analyses of this residual influence.

³⁴ Gayl Jones states “Sex is a metaphor, yes. I can understand the negative reactions to the use of sex in the books. It’s something I’m interested in as a dilemma of subject matter in Afro-American literature. There’s a lot that can be said about it (“An Interview With Gayl Jones” 46).

exercise.³⁵ And, perhaps most importantly, Delany's transgressive subject matter is almost always in excess of critical frameworks such as the liberatory. Delany, "make[s] 'fluid' what is 'normally static'" (Alterman, as quoted in Fox, "The Politics of Desire" 48) and in his work "Blurring of distinctions is both a technique and a theme" (Renault, as quoted in Fox, "The Politics of Desire" 48). In other words, Delany's work both mirrors the way in which I intend for transgression to be understood and, through the unspeakable, it provides a model on levels of both content and criticism of new ways of reading African American literature. I thus make use of Delany so heavily in this dissertation because his theorizing of the unspeakable works exceptionally well as a theoretical framework through which to analyze much African American literature that has been policed for its rhetorical, discursive, and generic "non-respectability." Delany writes, "...we must always reserve a margin to deal with what is excluded from articulation" ("Aversion" 140), in other words, he suggests we must always reserve a space to critically contend with excess. Delany demonstrates that the silence surrounding the unspeakable is a site of perpetual marginality and therefore a site for the posing of questions and the opening of discussions that are actively suppressed in canon building and critical discourses that emerge in institutional contexts such as higher education.³⁶

In my readings of the novels I largely focus on the unspeakable in scenes of staged sex and their associated "perversions" such as kink, pornography, abjection, and disrespectability, to analyze the tactics of transgression at work. Scenes of staged sex seem to be particularly useful sites to open up conversations for, as Delany writes, "Sex is a process to be integrated into one's

³⁵ For analyses of Delany's importance as a writer and critic refer to, among other texts, James Sallis' *Ash of Stars: On The Writing of Samuel R. Delany*, Carl Freedman's *Conversations with Samuel R. Delany*, Jeffrey Allen Tucker's *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference*, Robert Elliot Fox's *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany*, Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, and Delany's own *The Straits of Messina* in which he writes as his critical alter-ego K. Leslie Steiner to appraise his own work.

³⁶ Refer to Ferguson's book *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* for his argument concerning the institutionalization of difference.

life over an astonishing range of specific and bodily ways. And the frightening, troubling, deeply unsettling insight we all now have to live with is that that range of possibilities *far* surpasses” the types of divisions that constrain us (“Sex, Race, and Science Fiction” 219, emphasis in original). It bears stating here that I in no way intend to posit that black sexuality, even as it is problematically rendered aberrant by centuries of racist thought, is somehow “distinctive” or “exceptional.”³⁷ Rather, I attempt to situate my critiques within the framework articulated by Scott that suggests “...the alienation of an embodied consciousness is common to all humans. Blackness is...in the Americas *one*...of the primary means to access that alienation and its (perhaps surprising) powers...[it] grants us a vantage point for viewing the movement, direction, and inchoate shapes that characterize or arise from the fluid potentialities of subjectivity formation itself” (*Extravagant* 13, 12). Scott notes that because blackness is so over-determined, presentation of, or access to indeterminacy is potent (*Extravagant* 24). In other words, blackness *can be* an analytic that may allow one to consider the breadth and limits of subjectivity and consider counterintuitive possibilities for power, agency, and pleasure (*Extravagant* 24).

Michel Foucault famously writes of “a regulated and poly-morphous incitement to discourse” regarding sex and sexuality (*History of Sexuality* 34). He states

Rather than the uniform concern to hide sex, rather than a general prudishness of language, what distinguishes these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it (*History of Sexuality* 34).

However “sexuality” Delany argues, “is always occurring partly inside language and partly outside it” (“Aversion” 132). He emphasizes, “the bulk of the extraordinarily rich, frightening,

³⁷ Refer to Ishmael Reed’s critique in which he states “is there something that distinguishes black pleasure from white pleasure or yellow or brown pleasure? Can pleasure be defined and discerned according to race? Is there something about black pleasure that attracts members of other races? Do members of other races see something unique about black pleasure, something that can’t be found in their own origins?” (“Introduction: Black Pleasure” 169).

and complex sexual landscape has been—and remains—outside of language” (“Aversion” 143). As a post-structuralist Delany has written much on the value of deconstruction to reveal and problematize social divisions, particularly regarding language. He writes, “...what has been let into language has always been highly coded. That coding represents a kind of police action that, even while it is decried in the arena of politics, often goes among us in the academic area of Gay Studies, unnoticed” (“Aversion” 138). He goes on to state “...even with the surge of linguistic freedom...and with the movement toward political freedom...what is accepted into language at any level is always a highly coded, heavily policed affair. Though strictures relax or tighten at different places and in different periods, the realization never means that the policing or coding has been escaped” (“Aversion” 139). What Delany is saying here is that even within the liberatory discourse that academic criticism engages and produces, structures of value exist that censor expression, particularly regarding race and sex and their interrelations. Indeed, as I have argued, academia often intentionally or not polices language and literary representations in the name of liberatory ideology,³⁸ and this critical over-determination is partially what some of the novels I analyze in this dissertation encourage readers to contend with.

None of this is to suggest merely “some sex acts occur in an ideal silence apart from the word, while others are swaddled in a constant, approved, and privileged discourse” (“Aversion” 132). Rather, language is “an articulated and variegated set of discursive fields, many of them interpenetrating, but many of whose distinct levels bear a host of economic relations to each other” (“Aversion” 132). This hierarchy of language allows Delany to suggest that, ultimately, “all human activity takes place inside language. But...all human activity takes place inside *certain orders of language* and outside certain others” (“Aversion” 132, emphasis mine). Put

³⁸ The recent debate in the academy regarding “trigger warnings” speaks to this issue quite astutely. Refer to J. Jack Halberstam’s essay “You Are Triggering Me!: The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma.”

another way, the unspeakable reveals what is articulable within specific genres and their affiliated “coded” and socially recognizable discourses (“Aversion” 132). Engaging the unspeakable as an analytical practice allows one to “expose...the critical operations and external machinery” inherent to containment (Diana Fuss, as quoted in “Aversion” 132) to continually question *why* things are hierarchically structured in the manner that they are and to conceive of alternatives. For Delany, a literary exploration of desire, sex, and power, and what can and cannot be translated into various orders of language allows him to trouble hierarchies of “normal” and “abnormal.” Ultimately for Delany, the problem of social division is the delineation of norms and the construction of containment based off of such arbitrary, artificial “universal similarities, shared necessary conditions, defining aspects, and inescapable essences” (“Aversion” 142).

The unspeakable thus reveals a critical assessment of the value delineations of social divisions, particularly of race and sexuality.³⁹ In much of his work Delany theorizes desire, sex, and power through the unspeakable to advocate for the eroticization of difference and the maintenance of marginality. Pleasure, as Delany conceives of it then, can seem to be utopic in that it can seem to stand outside of the social. However central to his work and to this dissertation more broadly is the crucial need to remember that “pleasure” is not a code word for “liberation.” As Delany states “the only thing *really* (read: politically) transgressive about my report is that I never let myself pretend, in my various ecstasies, that I have somehow transgressed the social—so that I will not think I have freed myself of the responsibility of telling the entailed social truths I see” (Rowell, “An Interview With Samuel Delany” 41). Rather pleasure, particularly when seemingly antithetically connected to representations of violence and

³⁹ Delany details this argument in essays such as the “The Paradoxa Interview” and “The Politics of Paraliterary Criticism” in *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary*.

abjection (such as what we see in many of the texts I read in the following chapters), can invite an engagement with suppressed public discourse.

However Delany argues, “In order to negotiate the unknown with any precision and intelligence, analysis has to become speculative” (Lorberer 63). Thus the primary question driving this dissertation is a speculative one: How does the unspeakable, as represented in these texts, articulate “dangerous” practices of relation that not only trouble the containment of interrelated, yet distinct issues of race, sex, gender, power, and desire, but of the literature itself? In liberatory framings of African American literature the complexity of the unspeakable is often flattened as limit/taboo or as the problem to be escaped for freedom. What then does a critical engagement with the unspeakable, in which it is *not* considered a “problem” that needs to be silenced or transcended, allow for us to read in these texts? And how do we read and theorize the unspeakable, particularly considering that it lacks a dominant political framework and public discourse through which to critically engage such representations?

I explore my central research question by asking sub-questions throughout my dissertation including: how does the unspeakable and the tactics of transgression it manifests through trouble epistemological and political containment and challenge critical over-determination? How do respectability politics and liberatory politics function as forms of containment that delimit the framing of African American literature? What pleasure is to be found through embodying sexually submissive roles and stereotypes and how does such embodiment shape racial, sexual, and gendered power dynamics? How, if at all, is black female agency intimately entangled with transgressive sexual actions and practices? How do depictions of eroticized racism complicate/reveal racialization, responsibility, and choice? By tracing the unspeakable through diverse literary representation of transgression I am interested in what

conversations are opened up, what new ways of reading present themselves, and how else we might situate the rich, varied body of African American texts together.

By using Delany's unspeakable as a critical framework I make a unique methodological intervention into the fields of African American literary studies, gender and sexuality studies, and cultural history to argue for alternative reading practices that reimagine the archive of African American literature without epistemologically or politically containing it. Using Delany's concept of the unspeakable allows me to analyze literary representations of transgressive excess on the levels of language, genre, and affective reader response. Delany's concept of, and literary deployment of the unspeakable, as mobilized through the tactic of transgression, can help us (re)consider representations of the unspeakable in the work of African American writers such as those I engage with in this dissertation and those I do not including Chester Himes (truly the ghost in the machine of this project), Donald Goines, Clarence Cooper Jr., Carlene Hatcher Polite, Adrienne Kennedy, and Cecil Brown, among others. Wolfreys explains formal/aesthetic transgressions, such as those inherent to the work of Delany and many of his African American contemporaries provide "an aesthetic response to the political, ideological, cultural and historical demands for stability and self-sameness in the constitution of identity" (8). Reading the work of Delany and his contemporaries through the theoretical/aesthetic framework provided by his concept of the unspeakable may contribute to reclaiming much of the work from critical obscurity; the end goal being an attempt to destabilize forces that often institutionalize African American literature by in turn marginalizing or delimiting such literature's socio-historic, cultural complexities.

Some Notes on the Text Pairings

In each chapter I pair texts that historically have not been critically read together to envision an alternate teleology of African American literature. More specifically, I pair paradigmatic “black feminist” writers (Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, and Octavia Butler) with masculinist authors (Iceberg Slim and Hal Bennett) and speculative writer Delany. I situate “highbrow” literature such as *Sula*, *Corregidora*, *Eva’s Man*, and “Bloodchild” with “lowbrow” paraliterature including queer pulp (*Hogg*), street lit (*Pimp*), science fiction (*Trouble on Triton*), and pornography (*Lord of Dark Places*). In doing so I reveal that similar themes echo in, across, and through the “high” and the “low,” the “literary” and the “paraliterary,” the “feminine” and the “masculine,” the “respectable” and the “perverse.” The idea for constructing my dissertation as a series of unusual pairings comes from my chair and mentor Louis Chude-Sokei, who not only formally introduced me to the work of Delany, but provided me the primary conceit for what became chapter three of this dissertation “Abjection as Pleasure: BDSM Power Dynamics in the Literature of Octavia Butler and Iceberg Slim.” It is Chude-Sokei who is responsible for illuminating for me the connections between masculinist street lit and black feminist fiction.

All the primary fictional texts I analyze were produced from the 1960s-1980s during the uprising of identity-based liberation movements and their aftermath, such as second-wave feminism, gay rights, Civil Rights, and Black Power. I consider how representations of the unspeakable in the primary fiction trouble the epistemological and political containment projects that emerged within the social/historical contexts in which the texts were produced. Reading transgressive excess in the canonical texts allows me to analyze the unspeakable often elided in liberatory framings to advance its critical discourse. Reading transgressive excess in the under-acknowledged texts, when paired with the canonical texts, allows me to argue, through Delany’s

use of Fredric Jameson's "paraliterature," for the critical value of the work as we reimagine the archive of African American literature.

All the texts I analyze represent issues of power that, because they are not restricted to an antagonistic black/white binary, go under-theorized. Delany suggests, "Power is what distinguishes the psychic discourse of desire from the social rhetoric of sex" ("The Rhetoric of Sex" 20). In my readings I occasionally explore the implications of his statement by adding "race" to the formula. In other words, I read desire functioning as a critique of not only the social rhetoric of sex, but also the social rhetoric of race and intraracial racialization. I read desire as contouring power relations in ways ignored or dismissed in liberatory assessments that predominantly shape the social rhetoric of sex and race. Specifically, several of my pairings are shaped by critic Louis Chude-Sokei's suggestion that hypersexual representations inherent to 50s-70s masculinist lit can be read as inspiring representations of violent sex and sexualized violence in black feminist texts of the 70s and 80s.⁴⁰

While it is important to remember that many black women wrote fiction in this time period from a developing black feminist standpoint to represent female voices that were being silenced or ignored in the Black Power/Arts Movement and to disrupt the ideology that blackness was synonymous to masculinity, it is also true that black feminist literature written by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Cade-Bambara, among many others, produced, in many instances, representations of violent sex, sexualized violence, and black female sexuality that delved even deeper into the realm of the unspeakable than did the

⁴⁰ Notably, this connection is omitted in Gates' 2013 article "Why Richard Wright Hated Zora Neale Hurston" in which, under the auspices of providing a "comprehensive" history of African American literary representations of sex, he unsurprisingly leaves out the street lit tradition entirely. He states, "Far too often, the vitality of black vernacular expression didn't spill over into the written tradition. With the exception of Hurston, this sad state of affairs remained generally the case in the black novel until the revolution in the representation of black sexuality created after 1970 by black women writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan and a host of others, drawing upon the precedent set by Hurston's bold representation of Janie, and James Baldwin's controversial depictions of both homo- and hetero-eroticism in his novels of the '50s and '60s."

work of their male contemporaries. Horton-Stallings, a scholar of street lit, makes clear the connection when she states, “I am aware that if I had not found [street lit writer Donald] Goines...I might have missed Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, or Toni Cade Bambara” (“I’m Goin’” 176). If we consider to what extent the literary tradition of masculinist street lit invited/inspired the issues explored in black feminist fiction, we can understand the latter body of work as not necessarily antagonistically responsive to, or even necessarily critical of the street lit tradition but, rather, intimately connected.

What sets the two traditions apart is that black feminist fiction, by virtue of its massive white female readership and the manner in which it has been conscripted into dominant liberatory narratives of what Jennifer C. Nash calls “injury and recovery,”⁴¹ succeeded in making representations of violently eroticized gender relations more mainstream than the street lit writers did. Issues that black feminist fiction presents us with such as abuse, rape, incest, battery, misogyny, the trauma of the past, the afterlife of slavery, racism, community, and recovery, have come to be understood as conventions of the genre. While giving voice and artistic expression to these themes is crucial considering that the literature reflects situations women (and men) do, of course, experience, the transgressive nature of much black women’s writing of the 70s and 80s has been forgotten in over-determined readings of such literature through tropes of injury and recovery (i.e. trauma). And, by virtue of such over-determination, the intense level of unspeakable eroticized violence inherent to this rich body of literature has been underexplored.

⁴¹ There is an uncomfortable historical association that cannot be overlooked here when considering that the majority readership of black women’s writing is white women and the predominant readership of slave narratives in the post-bellum period was also white women, and that sentimentality has been revealed as the driving affective response to such literature. One thinks of Baldwin’s assessment of sentimentality in “Everybody’s Protest Novel” when he writes “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always therefore the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty” (12).

My pairings attempt to address this. However Delany reminds us, “We must not, for a moment, ever think...that our exploration of discourse is free, complete; rather, those explorations are always policed by discourses already set in place” (31). As I attempt to consider ways to re-read and restructure the African American literary canon Delany helps me ask: How might the discourses of desire and the rhetoric of staged sex complicate the “already set in place” racializing political discourses inherent to many readings/framings of African American literature, such as those that over-determine black feminist fiction? Using Delany’s unspeakable allows me to consider transgressive sex as a discourse, in addition to or distinct from injury and recovery, that inspires equally complex questionings of race, gender, and power.

Chapter Overview

The following chapters provide different strategies for reading the unspeakable. All chapters offer a comparative analysis of two novels; chapter one reads one novel through the other, thereby treating the first as a theoretical framework in and of itself, chapter two reads the novels as companion pieces, chapter three reads one text as evocative of the other, and chapter four uses the canonical novel as a gateway text to read the second, critically unknown novel. The chapters offer an analysis of material that is clearly transgressive and analysis of material that may seem rather tame; analysis of relations that are queer, sadomasochistic, abject, and “perverted,” but also relations that are heterosexual, heteronormative, and, occasionally, less concerned with sex and sexuality than with issues of desire, choice, and agency (although, of course, sex and sexuality can serve to represent such issues).

These different analyses are meant to demonstrate that the unspeakable as a framework is not limited to scenes of staged sex. In the context of African American literature one thinks of

various representations that could be analyzed through the unspeakable including Nella Larsen's depiction of passing in *Passing*, George Schuyler's deconstruction of white supremacy and biological racialization in *Black No More* and his vision of black fascism in *Black Empire*, Wallace Thurman's meta-critique of assimilation and intraracial intimacy/community in *Infants of the Spring*, Zora Neale Hurston's rewriting of the Moses tale in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Paule Marshall's immigrant family dynamics in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and Jamaica Kincaid's in *Autobiography of My Mother*, Charles Johnson's slaves in *Oxherding Tale*, Paul Beatty's critique of the political in *The White Boy Shuffle*, and almost anything Ishmael Reed has ever written, among many more examples.

In the chapters that follow I first mobilize Delanyian theory by reading Gayl Jones' second novel *Eva's Man* (1976) through the unspeakable as articulated in several of Delany's essays and through his notoriously "unpublishable" novel *Hogg* (1969). I explore how both *Eva's Man* and *Hogg* use the unspeakable aesthetically and affectively to critique forms of epistemological containment and critical over-determination, and to encourage the reader to become meta-aware of his/her inclination toward such actions. In chapter two I read Toni Morrison's second novel *Sula* (1973) as a companion text to another Delany novel, *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976). Although generically disparate, both texts almost solely focus on gender and sexuality and both use the unspeakable to explicitly critique the identity politics endemic to the time of their production and such politics' inherent assumption of liberation. They do so in reverse manners, however. I use a framework of negative affect theory as articulated by queer theorists J. Jack Halberstam, Lauren Berlant, and Lee Edelman to analyze how *Sula's* protagonist's marginality implicitly and explicitly critiques those caught within ideologies of respectability. On the other hand, in envisioning a claustrophobic "freedom"

advanced by liberatory identity politics, *Trouble on Triton* provides ironic commentary on the inclusion of and commodification of difference. I use Roderick A. Ferguson's concept of "the will to institutionality" to support my reading of the novel's problematizing of diversity's ruptural possibilities.

I next utilize critical frameworks of BDSM power dynamics advanced by Lewis Call and Biman Basu to explore Octavia Butler's 1984 short story "Bloodchild" as evocative of *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, the 1967 autobiography of Iceberg Slim, godfather of African American "street lit." "Bloodchild"'s exploration of race, sex, gender, power, sadomasochism, and domination echoes paraliterature such as *Pimp* and other 50s-70s African American street lit. BDSM power dynamics negotiate power in the twined everyday|unspeakable but, rather than transcending the social, allow one "the power to create context" in which signs and signifiers can take on different meanings (Call, "Structures" 148). I analyze the texts' representations of submissive subjects' unspeakable pleasure in asymmetrical power dynamics of abjection. Because both texts explore the subordinate subjects' pleasure, or suppression of that pleasure, they trouble the idea that pleasure experienced through subjection and/or abjection can necessarily, or solely be attributed to an abusive past or pathology, or that such pleasure is a form of psychological compensation for deeply internalized oppression. However, in considering agency I raise the at times ambiguous notion of consent—an idea "thoroughly troubled in sadomasochistic practice" (Basu 20).⁴²

⁴² BDSM and consent are of course intimately connected practices. Call writes "the culmination of a theoretical tradition which began when Masoch added the concept of consent to the philosophy of erotic power, [created] the category of practices and strategies which would eventually come to be known as BDSM" ("Structures" 150). That being said, Basu reminds us "In their ideal forms sadism is nonconsensual, and masochism is consensual" (*Commerce* 10).

The chapter works with Lacan's use of the phrase *jouissance*,⁴³ a concept he drew from the writings of Georges Bataille.⁴⁴ In the Lacanian sense, *jouissance* denotes a form of sexual enjoyment (in French *jouir* is slang for "to come") that transgresses the law of homeostasis described in Freud's pleasure principle theory. Rather *jouissance* seeks the splitting of the subject through the excessive sexual pleasure|pain that can come with abjection. In this sense, *jouissance* can be understood as a form of what Call theorizes as "postanarchist kink." Often it is in moments of abjection that the male characters in *Pimp* and "Bloodchild" experience disrupted claims to Control over females and over themselves. In addition to being unable to control the females, the male protagonists experience an inability to control their embodied desires and the Lacanian concept of subjectivity, in which the self is constituted through desire. In other words, they cannot control the subjectivity that emerges in response to their kinky proclivities for abjection.

I conclude the dissertation by continuing an analysis of the complicated relationship between desire, power, abjection, and agency. While Delanyian theory provides the critical framework for the entire dissertation in that his concept of the unspeakable allows me to make the critical analyses and arguments I do throughout, in this chapter I rely less directly on Delany, and more so on those cotemporary critics that have been deeply influenced by him, such as Reid-Pharr and Scott.⁴⁵ In the final chapter I read Gayl Jones' neo-slavery novel *Corregidora* (1975) as a text that employs two tactics of transgression engaged in queer theory and queer of color

⁴³ Refer to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960* for Lacan's discussion of *jouissance*.

⁴⁴ Bataille's contribution to Lacan's thought was largely forgotten, mainly because Lacan did not make direct reference to the influence. See Dylan Evans's "From Kantian Ethics to Mystical Experience: An Exploration of Jouissance" in Danny Nobus's *Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

⁴⁵ Reid-Pharr has been a longtime friend and collaborator of Delany's. He has produced critical scholarship on Delany's work, and they have written the prefaces to each other's books as well. See, for example, Reid-Pharr's article "Disseminating Heterotopia" and "Sex, Race, and Science Fiction: The *Callaloo* Interview." See also Delany's preface to Reid-Pharr's *Black Gay Man* and Reid-Pharr's preface to Delany's *Phallos*. And refer to Scott's *Extravagant Abjection*, "The Fine Details: Torture and the Social Order," and "Delany's Divinities" for his critical work on Delany.

critique—the drive to failure and the embrace of shame—as ways of troubling familial power dynamics. Specifically this chapter considers protagonist Ursa Corregidora as existing in tension with the power dynamics between the Corregidora women, as Ursa must express her subjectivity in a way counterintuitive to their demands. I use my reading of this canonical text as an opportunity to invite a dialogue about Hal Bennett’s largely critically un-acknowledged novel *Lord of Dark Places* (1970) as a text that also envisions a protagonist experiencing a complex relationship to sex and an overabundance of guilt and shame that manifests in eroticized emotional, psychic, and physical violence.

Both *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* critique myriad sexual racialized violences enacted on the black body, both materially and epistemologically. Like *Eva’s Man*, *Corregidora* has also received its share of critical rancor and/or dismissal due to Jones’ so-called “negative” portrayals of black men, women, and black life in general.⁴⁶ Arguably what such critics find troubling, as I argue in chapter one and continue to explore in this chapter, is that Jones’ first two novels do not merely critique, but also *represent* forms of sexualized, racialized violence *enacted* by the very same black subjects that suffer under it. In other words, her novels, like Bennett’s, challenge assumptions of black innocence held sacred in liberatory frameworks.

Critics understandably respond negatively to representations of intraracial sexualized violence because such representations are often seen as pathologizing. And negative representations of black people have long been thought to contribute to the damaging, damning sexualized, racialized stereotypes African American communities fight, often through literature, to dismantle. Yet Jones’ early novels, and *Lord of Dark Places* purposefully transgress against a dominant African American shared cultural understanding to not “air one’s dirty laundry” in

⁴⁶ Refer to Casey Clabough’s *Gayl Jones: The Language of Voice and Freedom in Her Writings* for a comprehensive overview of Jones’ critical reception.

public, the implications of which I explore in this chapter. Ultimately, although the issues of subordination and abjection, “perversion” and transgression, sex, pleasure, and desire remain heavily fraught topics, the disciplines of African American, queer, and feminist literary studies increasingly explore these representations, and my dissertation contributes to this crucial, emergent work. Let us, then, enter the scorpion garden.

Chapter One

“Perverse Ambiguity”: The Unspeakable at Work in *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man*

“I cannot claim ‘political compulsions’ nor ‘moral compulsions’ if by either of these one means certain kinds of restrictions on ‘imaginative territory’ or if one means maintaining a ‘literary decorum.’ I am interested in human relationships, but I do not make moral judgments or political judgments of my characters.”

—Gayl Jones, “About My Work” 233

Rowell: “You cannot deny that you are a disturber of bourgeois peace, that you smash borders that the middle class perpetually erects, and that you interrogate and mock the ideologies and values the middle class deems sacred.”

Delany: “...it might be more accurate to say that, rather than smashing borders, I wander where I wish to...If borders are breached in the process, well...”

—Charles Rowell, “An Interview with Samuel Delany” 39-40

Introduction:

This chapter explores how two of the most transgressive African American novels ever written mobilize Samuel R. Delany’s conception of the unspeakable. The first novel, Delany’s own infamous *Hogg* (1969) has been deeply ignored and actively avoided; the second, Gayl Jones’ *Eva’s Man* (1976) is warily canonical⁴⁷ but, as critic Biman Basu notes, “much criticism of *Eva’s Man* simply does not do justice to the complexity of the text” (“Public and Private” 196). As the epigraphs reveal, both Delany and Jones (in her early work) refuse to allow “political correctness” to stifle their literary representations. Toward this point Jones states

There are moments in my literature, as in any literature, that have aesthetic, social, and political implications but I don’t think that I can be a ‘responsible’ writer in the sense that those things are meant because I’m too interested in contradictory character and ambivalent character and I like to explore them without judgments entering the work—without a point of view entering (Rowell, “An Interview With Gayl Jones” 43).

Indeed critic Diane Johnson remarks, “Jones seems to record what people say and think as if it were no fault of hers...Perhaps art is always subversive in this way” (7). Likewise Delany views

⁴⁷ Refer to Madhu Dubey’s chapter “‘Don’t You Explain Me’: The Unreadability of *Eva’s Man*” in her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* for a detailed exploration of her statement “Predictably, then, the contemporary critical assessment of *Eva’s Man* was almost unanimously unfavorable” (89).

writing as a process of boundless exploration stating “I’m interested in characters only as each is a locus for allowing certain sorts of sentences to be uttered—by the character or about the character” (Olsen 25).

Both *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* represent viciously violent yet eroticized, overly sexualized worlds. *Hogg* represents hyper-real and *Eva’s Man* surreal contexts trafficking in images of “copulation...disintegration, [and] dismemberment” that “in their direct material aspect are the main elements in the system of grotesque images” (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 25). Regardless of the facts that the hyper-real, the surreal, and the grotesque often function in the representation of fantasy, and extreme fantasies of taboo should not be understood as representing an interchangeable relationship to everyday actions, the novels’ respective content is nonetheless unspeakable. Not only is the language and imagery of both novels affiliated with abjection, but they also provide and produce “risky ideological implications” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 102). Basu notes, “if the violence [of *Eva’s Man*] is disturbing, it serves to underline the violence of the discursive formations which circulate around and circumscribe the subject” (“Public and Private,” 207). While Basu is talking about *Eva’s Man*, he could just as easily be discussing *Hogg*. In other words, through their conflation of seemingly disparate representations of violence and sex and pleasure and pain, both novels reveal how the social conventions delineating the everyday from the unspeakable are purposefully obfuscated within structures of containment.

Critic Darieck Scott (one of the only scholars to deeply contend with Delany’s transgressive novels *Hogg* and *The Mad Man*) suggests, “Delany in *Hogg* is trying to enact on the page the structural fit between the violence that is usually rhetorically cordoned off in the realm of harm and the sexual that often...is positioned as occupying the realm of pleasure” (“The Fine Details” 253) but the same can be said of Jones’ project in *Eva’s Man*. Through their

representations of the unspeakable both novels “challenge the reader to pay attention to the way the acts [of violence and sex/pleasure and pain] and their meanings converge and diverge” (Scott, “The Fine Details” 252). In their confluences of desire, sex, power, and violence, both novels trouble the delineation between “victim” and “agent,” thereby making it difficult to determine the texts’ ethical standpoints (if there are, in fact, any).⁴⁸ The novels use symbolically loaded protagonists (a young male criminal in *Hogg* and a purportedly “crazy” murderess in *Eva’s Man*) to make us question the concept of “oppression” in general, and the latter novel especially dislodges the assumption that the oppressed are virtuous due to their oppression and innately innocent because of it. The novels’ “perverse ambivalence” (Jordan 37) partially accounts for why they are so transgressive.

More than their similar content, *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* are interesting to put into conversation together because their representations of the unspeakable frustrate reader interpretation. I use interpretation here as Susan Sontag defines it in “Against Interpretation” to mean “the conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain ‘rules’ of interpretation” (5). Both *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* are told in first person, a tactic Jones finds to be “most authentic” for the manner in which it allows the protagonist to explore his/her “inner landscape” and dissuades the author from “explaining motives” (Rowell, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 37). Both novels are largely told through interior monologues as their respective narrators for the most part employ silence. *Hogg*’s 11-year old narrator speaks one word in the entirety of the novel and *Eva’s Man*’s eponymous protagonist stays “brutally silent...as if she were rebelling against language” (Dixon 246). She reiterates the refrain Jones uses in both *Corregidora* and *Eva’s Man*—“I said nothing.” Of *Eva’s Man* critic Jerry W. Ward, Jr. states it guarantees “nothing more than the fact of [its] existence...[It] is fiction as critical, insinuating

⁴⁸ Critic Michael Cooke understands *Eva’s Man* to be “a curt, elided whydunit” (92).

communication. Thinking in, with, and about can no longer rely on the protection of traditional conventions of reading” (251, 256).

Both texts challenge reader assumptions of genre, plot, character, and ideology and make it impossible to rationalize the texts’ transgressive visions. Ultimately then, readers are thwarted as these novels suggest that interpretation is, in essence, violation (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 104), particularly when considering that interpretation “makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (Sontag 10). Writing as his critical alter ego K. Leslie Steiner, Delany notes, “*Hogg* is not a novel to be interpreted. It is a novel to be experienced” (“‘The Scorpion Garden’ Revisited” 29). One can understand this sentiment when considering that Delany has argued, “I can and must observe how reading also rigidifies (as it preserves), how it excludes, (as it selects), how it lulls into acceptance (as it excites to understanding)” (Rowell, “An Interview with Samuel Delany 33). I argue that *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* activate the unspeakable as both an aesthetic and affective technique to critique these forms of epistemological containment and critical over-determination, and to encourage the reader to become meta-aware of his/her inclination toward such actions.

The first part of this chapter situates *Hogg* within its political moment of the late 1960s, as the novel is, in many ways, a manifestation of America’s worst nightmare of the counter-culture and the aftermath of the Sexual Revolution. The liberatory resistance movements that came out of this historical period are assumed by some critics to be the only “constructive” channels possible for routing the kind of anger seen in a novel such as *Hogg*. However both *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* offer explicit critiques of racist, heterosexist power structures of the 1960s

and 1970s⁴⁹ *as well as* implicit critiques of the tendency for resistance movements to articulate an exclusionary political vision. Because Delany is disinterested in ideologically constraining his work he is largely marginalized, as I briefly discuss. However what I next argue is that the unspeakable *is* a viable political tactic, it just goes unrecognized as such because it does not conform to an ideological political structure that renders it legible to many critics or readers.

I read the unspeakable in *Hogg* as a positive engagement with the eroticism of difference and marginality. But I also consider why and how such eroticism (considering the novel's primary theme of consensual juvenile/adult sex), is unspeakable and challenging to readers' inclination to rationalize. I conclude this section by discussing the novel's critique of rationality as its most forceful encouragement toward reader meta-awareness. That *Hogg* retains an air of infamy and critics approach it, if at all, with a kind of charged fascinated disgust (much as the psychiatrist, police, and curious public—all surrogates for the reader⁵⁰—approach Eva in *Eva's Man*) is not surprising considering its subject matter, especially, above all, its graphic representation of a transgressive, consensual juvenile/adult sexual relationship. Such material is so challenging that it makes *Hogg* an unlikely candidate for a productively transgressive text exploring difference in a "positive" manner, as is, perhaps, Delany's goal. However, as I argue in this section of the chapter, *Hogg* is such a text. As a testament to its positive affective nature Delany, writing as his alter ego K. Leslie Steiner states, "*Hogg* is a novel...that, in the face of monumentally unpalatable material, can move us, can touch us" ("The Scorpion Garden' Revisited" 28).

Eva's Man, on the other hand, seems less interested in the unspeakable's "positive"

⁴⁹ Refer to Dubey's chapter "Don't You Explain Me: The Unreadability of *Eva's Man*" in her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* for her argument that *Eva's Man* both critiques Black Aesthetic politics and obscures its critique.

⁵⁰ For example Basu notes "the reader is analogously placed in the position of the psychiatrist, or that of the 'listener'" ("Public and Private" 201).

potential. In part two of the chapter I begin by discussing Jones' novel in the historical context of its criticism. Like *Hogg*, *Eva's Man* is also understood by some as a nightmarish representation that critics read as primarily threatening to the Black Aesthetic⁵¹ movement it came out of and to black men, more specifically. Jones herself even calls the novel a "horror story" (Harper, "Gayl Jones" 361). And she has stated *Eva's Man*, (like *Hogg*, a text of anti-rationality), provides "a kind of challenge for the listener" (Tate, *Black Women Writers* 92). Basu notably observes "Ideological analysis of race and gender in black women's fiction often restricts itself from asking questions about the very possibilities of representation and being. The result, in short, is that ideology is dislocated from ontology" ("Public and Private" 193). In other words, an over-determined focus on ideology can ignore the complexity and nuance of lived reality.

Representations of "grotesque realism" such as what we see in *Hogg* and *Eva's Man* cannot be easily conscripted into ideology because they are so heavily bound to unspeakable ontology.

Bakhtin, whose analyses of carnival very much focused on "degradation" (meaning, for him, the materiality of the body and the earth), notes "grotesque images preserve their peculiar nature, entirely different from ready-made, completed beings. *They remain ambivalent and contradictory*" (25, *Rabelais* emphasis mine), echoing Jones' driving creative impulse to maintain "contradictory character and ambivalent character...to explore them without judgments entering the work—without a point of view entering" (Rowell, "An Interview With Gayl Jones" 43).

As I explore in part two, through its use of anti-rationality *Eva's Man* complicates conservative and liberal concepts of intraracial male/female relationships. Specifically, the novel

⁵¹ In referring to the "Black Aesthetic" movement here I am specifically denoting Dubey's use of the term as she employs it to discuss *Eva's Man* in her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic*. In her use of the term Dubey means "the aesthetic program advocated by black cultural nationalists in the 1960s and 1970s" (163) such as Amiri Baraka, a black literary "dean" (Jarrett, *Deans and Truants*).

reframes “abuse” as eroticized “interactions” of compulsion/repulsion. Relatedly, as I discuss in this part of the chapter, one of the most transgressive aspects of *Eva’s Man* is the way it plays with the over-determination of trauma and the pathology of hysteria in order to refuse critical interpretation while simultaneously drawing attention to (what the novel seems to understand as) the self-serving motives of such critical over-determination. The novel dares us to pathologize Eva as “crazy” in and of herself⁵² (as opposed to understanding crazy as a metaphor, as some critics read it),⁵³ because it knows we will not if we, first, operate under the assumption that the oppressed are virtuous, and second, if we understand *Eva’s Man* to be a text about trauma demanding the kind of critical reverence such cultural artifacts produce and demand. The text therefore relies on its knowledge of our readerly propensity for over-determination to reveal our continual elision of the subject shrouded in the unspeakable who we ultimately fail to see and understand on her own terms, particular in regards to what I read to be her excessive desires.

Part I: Situating *Hogg* in Context

Hogg (“a work of pornography” by Delany’s own estimation)⁵⁴ was begun in 1969, finished in 1973, and existed in publishing purgatory for 20 years until its release in 1994. It is one of the most extreme American novels ever written and, clearly, one of its most notoriously

⁵² Much of my analysis of *Eva’s Man* is inspired by Louis Chude-Sokei’s lectures in his Spring 2014 seminar “Race, Sex, and Transgression in Contemporary Black Literature” and the ensuing class discussions.

⁵³ See for instance Candice M. Jenkins’s reading of the novel in which she understands Eva’s madness to be “the most extreme example of a larger cultural insanity” represented as such to iterate “the incredible necessity of resisting [the] conscriptive effects” of power (184). See also Clara Escoda’s article “Strategies of Subversion: The Deconstruction of Madness in *Eva’s Man*, *Corregidora*, and *Beloved*” in which she claims “madness works in these texts to reveal the oppressive control the ideologies of racism and sexism effect on the black community” (29).

⁵⁴ Delany states, “*Hogg* is a work of pornography—that is, it was pornographic for the writer at the time of writing” (“The Scorpion Garden” 1).

“unpublishable.”⁵⁵ However Delany who has expressly stated “I don’t like to talk about ‘easing the reader’ (Olsen 25) has suggested also, “I don’t think the *boundaries* (which, finally, are set in place by critics) are the proper concern of the writer (“Reading/Delany” 83-84). With this lack of readerly concern in mind Delany (referencing Ray Davis) states that *Hogg* is perhaps one of the only American novels that “really *is* filled with precisely what conservative forces in the country claim is rampant in *all* pornography...violence against women, torture, murder, racism, filth, the exploitation of children, and other acts too perverse to name” (“The Making of *Hogg*” 307). In the novel, Franklin “Hogg” Hargus references his transgressive actions and tells the narrator “people don’t even want to see shit like that. I mean, they’d be happier pretending it didn’t even happen” (39). “But,” he assures the narrator and reader alike, “you’re gonna see enough of the kind of stuff I usually do” (39), and indeed, we see it all.

Of *Hogg* Delany writes “[It] is an angry book—one I think is hard to understand outside of its historical context” (Roberts 120). That historical context is the fallout of McCarthyism as well as the Nixon Era/Vietnam War and the rise of countercultural resistance movements that were happening concurrently as Delany was writing *Hogg*. He finished writing its first draft several days before the Stonewall Riots in New York City that effectively ushered in the Gay Liberation movement. Thus *Hogg* is, by Delany’s own estimation, “...the last, or among the last, pre-Stonewall gay novels written within the United States” (Roberts 121). He continues “It was written by a twenty-seven year old black gay man who was as furious and as outraged by the sexual condition of the country as any of those black queens back on Waverly Place” (Roberts 121). As critic Jeffrey Allen Tucker states, *Hogg* “gave expression to [Delany’s] hostility toward a heterosexist society, an anger that had no constructive outlet prior to the modern Gay Rights

⁵⁵ For an in-depth discussion of *Hogg*’s notorious production/publication history refer to “The Making of *Hogg*” in Delany’s *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary*.

movement” (4). Here Tucker clearly articulates his bias toward liberatory movements (presumably due to their ideologically-defined political frameworks) as the *only* “constructive” outlet possible for an artist or activist experiencing such anger. Tucker’s sentiment suggests why the unspeakable, in lacking a legible political framework, goes largely critically unengaged. However, important to bear in mind, as a counter-narrative to the potentialities of such liberatory movements that Tucker is, in essence, referencing Delany surmises “All political action within a given political system perpetuates that system if only because that system has defined which actions are and which actions are not political” (*Heavenly Breakfast* 34).

Perversion (a form of transgression) can be a political tactic however, as a critical engagement with *Hogg*’s unspeakable subject matter reveals. Delany explains that the unspeakable and its intimate connection to the everyday are the social shadows of the legalistic system of surveillance, discipline, and punishment that helps to produce identity delineations (“On the Unspeakable” 65). This system of oppression, inherent to a heterosexist power structure such as that which Stonewall and *Hogg* were responsive to, insists on the maintenance of stable, normative sexual identities and thereby criminalizes so-called “perversion.” This often renders “perverts” ripe for violence in the name of societal “protection,” as evidenced, for example, by the proliferation of violent social and civil unrest surrounding non-normative identities in the 1960s. Given its location at the intersection of countercultural sex, race, and gender resistance movements, one can situate *Hogg*’s portrayal of outlaw bikers, criminals, “freaks,” queers, and “niggers” as existing in a queer counterpublic⁵⁶ pornotopia. A pornotopia, as defined by critic Stephen Marcus, is a world outside of real time and space that Delany describes as “the land where any situation can become rampantly sexual under the least increase in the pressure of

⁵⁶ For an analysis of queer counterpublics refer to Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics*.

attention” (Enright 147). And, counter to Tucker’s claim, in *Hogg*’s pornotopia Delany’s characters engage transgression as a political tactic, as much as an act of unspeakable pleasure.

Delany, although increasingly less so, remains marginalized within American, and African American literature and literary criticism, partially due to his use of pornographic representations and his interest in maintaining the visibility of transgressive difference and perversion.⁵⁷ As this chapter’s epigraph suggests, Delany’s marginalization is because his work does not conform to the oppression/liberation binary that much African American literature is often critically framed by/read through. This is not to suggest that such critical readings/framings are not necessary, useful, and important, because they are. It is to suggest however that such readings/framings can flatten rich discursive possibilities inherent to African American texts through misreading, misrecognizing, or ignoring the unspeakable because it does not easily “fit” into particular critical containment projects. Certainly much of Delany’s work, in which he actively theorizes transgressive forms of desire, sex, and power, does not easily fit into these critical framings. For example, *Hogg* is racist in that it represents discriminatory characterizations and epithets. Its representations of sex and desire *are* misogynistic, degrading, and deeply challenging for readers. However, does this make the text any less informed with political intentions or possibilities, or any less ripe for rich analytical engagements?⁵⁸ Not if one understands the unspeakable—particularly as it informs *Hogg*’s rape, murder, lack of compassion, incest, pedophilia, perverse sexual acts, and juvenile sexual agency and pleasure—as engendering a reading practice that challenges the inclination of many critics and readers to rationalize, or epistemologically contain, works of art and their representations of desire.

⁵⁷ Delany, writing as K. Leslie Steiner notes “I still doubt if Delany-the-pornographer will ever be an accepted writer. His message is too dark” (“‘The Scorpion Garden’ Revisited” 30). Although “Steiner,” writing in 1973 well before *Hogg* was ever published, also presciently notes, “I predict the book will be discussed” (“‘The Scorpion Garden’ Revisited” 31).

⁵⁸ I ask the same questions about Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp: The Story of My Life* in chapter three.

In his essay “Delany’s Dirt,” Ray Davis offers one interpretation of the political, cultural, and aesthetic value of Delany’s engagements with the confluences of desire, sex, and power. Davis writes, “Desire, like art, is privileged to cut across (although not erase!) those wavering boundaries which define the power systems of the world. As such, it can, like art, be used to shore up those systems. Or, as such, its expressions can be a courageous, humanizing reminder of the limits of those systems. Porn, as the art which most directly expresses desire, thus has a great deal of power at its disposal—which may be why its so circumscribed” (164). Exploring the interrelation between the affective responses of arousal and unease, present when reading *Hogg and Eva’s Man*, attests to the manner in which the unspeakable “has a great deal of power at its disposal” to trouble assumptions about sex, race, gender, and power. In other words, the unspeakable—mobilized by engaging transgression as a political tactic—suggests an attempt to complicate the delimitation of identities and what can, and cannot, be spoken of or written about.

However, as stated in the Introduction to this dissertation, Delany is not interested in exploring the transgressive as a traditionally liberatory political project meant to “free” oneself of oppressive power structures, as was the strategic vision of many of those resistance movements happening concurrently as he was writing *Hogg*. Delany’s work thus reminds critics of the crucial need to continually push beyond the tired idea that transgression is simply, or even necessarily, a shock tactic. Rather, as Delany’s work (and all the texts I analyze in this dissertation) illustrates, transgression is often a highly personal exploration of the elasticity of subjective boundaries. Such exploration means to destabilize the notion of controlling visions of stable subjectivity. Yet it is also crucial to remember that *Hogg’s* unspeakable subject matter remained so even within the countercultural context of its time, as its notorious publication history suggests. By engaging transgression as a critique, both Delany as a writer and his

fictional protagonists in *Hogg* are able to trouble interrelated, yet distinct issues of race, power, sexuality, subjectivity, and desire inherent to the narrative but informed by history and material politics. Although Delany acknowledges that articulating the unspeakable will not guarantee the intended effects of the speaker, remaining silent out of a fear of failure is “a form of oppression” (“On the Unspeakable” 64). *Hogg* therefore testifies to Delany’s political intention to “always reserve a margin to deal with what is excluded from articulation, no matter the apparent inclusiveness” (“Aversion” 140).

Perhaps no Delany novel—and no work of African American fiction—engages the unspeakable more so than *Hogg*. In a review on the book jacket of the second edition printing of *Hogg* John O’Brien writes, “*Hogg* is a truly significant book. It is distasteful, raw, and upsetting; it also treats some of the sexual taboos that Americans do not want addressed in either art or politics. *Hogg* is an artistic triumph, as well as a political one.” The novel is told from the point of view of the 11-year-old unnamed male narrator, often referred to as “cocksucker” due to his sexual predilections. The narrator recalls his involvement with Hogg and his gang of “rape artists” over the course of 72 hours. The narrator, a former prostitute, first discovers Hogg raping a woman in an alley. When Hogg sees the narrator spying on him they engage in sexual acts together including fellatio and urolagnia. Hogg reveals to the narrator his occupation and takes him to the home of a wealthy man named Mr. Jonas who pays Hogg for the rape and negotiates for three more. Hogg and the narrator join up with his gang and the five engage in a long night of rape and murder while performing sexual acts with one another. During the third rape, Denny, (the youngest member of the gang other than the narrator), pierces his penis with an unsterilized nail, causing massive infection. He is soon after driven to insanity by his self-inflicted pain and

commences a massive killing spree. Eventually several bikers kidnap the narrator and take him to the docks where they sell him into sex slavery to a tugboat operator named Big Sambo (one of several characters in the novel nicknamed with a racist epithet). There the narrator engages in transgressive sexual acts with Big Sambo and Rufus and Red, two dockworkers, but soon after Hogg “rescues” the narrator by reclaiming him. They find Denny hiding in Hogg’s truck and manage to conceal him from the cops, eventually driving out of town where Hogg drops Denny off at a truck stop and leaves him to hitchhike. On the way back to town Hogg and the narrator engage in more sexual acts together, including coprophagia. Hogg reveals to the narrator that he has a developing emotional attachment to him and he outlines a future in which the narrator is to be chained up like a dog and subjected to any number of unspeakable sexual and violent acts by a large group of adults. Meanwhile the narrator silently schemes how to escape from Hogg and return to Red and Rufus at the docks. When Hogg asks the narrator what he is thinking about, the narrator utters “‘Nothin’,” his only word in the novel (219).

In *Hogg* Delany’s affiliation with difference and perversion is intimately explored through one of the most prominent outcast identities of the period—the outlaw biker—and his reputation for anarchy.⁵⁹ In the late 1960s and early 1970s as outlaw motorcycle clubs and gangs continued to rise in prominence after World War II, the outlaw biker archetype was being explored/exploited and eroticized/fetishized in niche markets such as in specialty (often pornographic) trade publications like *Colors Motorcycle Magazine*, *Barred*, *Choppers Magazine*, *Cycle Orgy*, *Biker Orgy*, and *Easyriders* (Brinkman). The outlaw biker archetype was often conflated with criminals, queers, sex fiends, and other social outcasts in an explosion of Hollywood and independent films in the late 1960s and early 1970s that were either explicitly

⁵⁹ Another compelling reading of *Hogg* would be to put it in conversation with Pat Califia’s speculative pornographic novel *Doc and Fluff: The Dystopian Tale of a Girl and Her Biker* as it explores comparable themes through similar representations, but through the perspective of women.

“biker flicks” or that featured biker subculture. Such films, coming in the wake of László Benedek’s *The Wild One* (1953), include Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Russ Meyer’s *Motorpsycho* (1965), Roger Corman’s *The Wild Angels* (1966) and *Naked Angels* (1969), and Melvin Van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) and often intended to present “chilling evidence of a collapsing social order” (Osgerby). Thus *Hogg*’s inherent anger, eroticized through the outlaw archetype, accounts for why Delany characterizes two of the text’s rape artists, Hogg and Denny, as the “avenging angels for all the ‘spies’ and ‘niggers’ and ‘freaks’ gathered in the basement in the [novel’s] first chapter” (Roberts 121). Delany characterizes Hogg as his personal “emissary of destruction” and Denny as Hogg’s “apostle” (Roberts 121). Interestingly, Hogg and Denny are both white, one of the primary reasons being that Delany, at the time of writing *Hogg* in the late 1960s, “couldn’t conceive of a black reaching [adulthood] with anything like the potential for that sort of action, without being killed first” (Roberts 121). The narrator, however, is black, a fact that he does not reveal until the very end of the novel when he thinks, “I wondered how they’d feel when they finally noticed I was a nigger” (266).⁶⁰

The criminalization of perversion and its unspeakable residue finds its strongest articulation in the consensual juvenile/adult sexual relationships between Hogg and the narrator, and the narrator and Red and Rufus, at the heart of the text’s transgressive vision. These relationships Delany suggests are what readers find most disturbing about the novel (Enright 134). Yet working with and through discomfort to analyze the unspeakable allows one to interpret *Hogg*’s tactic of transgression—and its commitment to the social—at work. Many of *Hogg*’s characters luxuriate in the unspeakable parts of themselves, as seen in the pleasure and contentment Hogg and the narrator share after particularly transgressive sex acts involving

⁶⁰ Interestingly, and inexplicably, this content is excluded from the first edition of the novel. The narrator’s interior monologue here is quoted from the novel’s second edition.

bodily waste. However, the perverse pleasures shared by Hogg, the narrator, and his gang, do not lie outside the realm of the social and are instead fully open to social “policing” by the gang’s members. For example, throughout *Hogg* we see instances of intra-group social policing when Hogg directs his gang members to look out for one another as a means to help temper the extremities of their actions, or when he saves Denny from the police and instructs him to cease committing murder. “Policing” is a challenging term because of its connotations of negative asymmetrical power. However it is a term that Delany often uses in his “silent interviews” to suggest that perversions should be public and subject to the social contract such intra-group policing aims for, as opposed to secretive, invisible, and criminalized which can foster external willful denial and internal abusiveness. Delany states “one of the largest factors in abuse is fostered by the secrecy itself and lack of social policing...privatization and criminalization remove them from any such social surveillance and increases the possibility of abuse” (Enright 143-144).

To critically engage the unspeakable in *Hogg* is to recognize that the narrator’s desire to escape Hogg and return to Rufus and Red suggests a positive engagement with the eroticization of difference. For example, Delany suggests the narrator’s desire to return to these men is because he realizes he can obtain from them the same forms of sexual pleasure without having to also engage in rape and murder. Delany writes “I want the narrator to move into more stable *social* conditions; that’s how, as perverts, we grow up and mature in this society—moving from a socially untenable fantasy, such as Hogg’s actions represent for most of us, to a more socially tenable reality, such as Rufus and Red’s way of life represents” (Enright 136). Delany is therefore interested in maintaining the public visibility of marginality, difference, and perversion not to “normalize” them to the point of banality but to construct a more secure social condition

for transgressive persons and acts. Delany's representation of consensual juvenile/adult sexual relationships in *Hogg* is not intended to remove transgressive actions from social responsibility. Rather he represents "the critical operations and external machinery" of transgression to trouble structures that oppressively deny identities different from the heteropatriarchal norm and deny the reality of certain desires that, though perverse, are also productive.

The fact that *Hogg*'s primary inter-generational relationship is *consensual* and "doesn't *feel* abusive...[as] the reigning wisdom [suggests] that all such relationships *must* be" is what Delany claims readers find most disturbing about the novel (Enright 134, emphasis in original). Thus in *Hogg* Delany encourages his reader—through a challenging experience of confronting unspeakable consensual juvenile/adult sex and desires—to directly contend with the politics of containment. Wolfreys writes that reading transgression "involves a reorientation of the act of reading, so that reading, responding to those codes or traces that gesture beyond narrative or representational coherence...becomes itself transgressive" (12). To induce such a cognitively dissonant reading experience is Delany's conscious aesthetic choice, as he deliberately places the characters in a "high stress situation...in a relational space in which its 'health' simply *can't* be judged" (Enright 141, emphasis in original). The narrative action of *Hogg*'s pornotopia contributes to the text's "distortions of presentation" which allow the reader to recognize that in the very act of reading *Hogg* he/she is undergoing a transgressive experience with the unspeakable (Enright 147).

Yet if one understands some of the novel's criminal protagonists to be political agents of transgression, how is one to consider the narrator? Through its complication of abuse, desire, and consent, *Hogg* forces a consideration of the political stakes of shifting the sexualization of

children from victimhood to agency.⁶¹ “The unspeakable,” Delany writes, “comprises the wounds on the bodies of abused children [and] it is certainly any pleasures at such abuses, even private, pornographic, onanistic” (“On the Unspeakable” 62-63). He also suggests, “Things that are forbidden, especially in childhood, are often sexualized—and that includes words and acts that traditionally degrade. As long as that’s the case, many folks will come to find what degrades sexually exciting” (Roberts 122). It is this conflation of pedophilia, pornography, and pleasure that makes *Hogg* such a challenging text because, even if those issues were not difficult enough, the narrative maintains an ambiguous relationship to an *always* informed consent—the seemingly crucial element that makes similarly pornographic texts written by Delany, such as *The Mad Man*, often more comfortable for critics to engage.⁶² Indeed within *Hogg* there is at times unclear line between sex with a willing child and molestation. We see this when Rufus remarks indignation about Big Sambo’s incestuous relationship with his juvenile daughter Honey Pie and compares it to his own sexual relationship with the narrator. Rufus remarks, “That nigger ain’t nothin’ but a damned child molester! You don’t do a little girl like that, even if she is your own—less’n she wants it as bad as this little fucker here do. I know she like it—but I don’t know if she like it like him” (168).

Indeed *Hogg*’s narrator is a sexually submissive juvenile, yet he is represented as an agent of his own sexuality deriving pleasure in perverse acts with adults. However there *is* textual evidence to suggest that at times the narrator is oppressed, such as in the scene where he engages in coprophagia with Big Sambo. The narrator thinks “I pretended Big Sambo’s ass was Hogg’s, and licked harder...Big Sambo shifted again, grunted again: then he reached back and

⁶¹ Refer to Pat Califia’s *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex* and Gayl Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” for analyses of this issue.

⁶² See for instance Tucker’s *A Sense of Wonder* in which he astutely analyzes *The Mad Man*, yet leaves analysis of *Hogg* “to more intrepid critics” (4). I also explore the complications of consent in chapter three’s reading of Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp* and Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild.”

rubbed my head. ‘Hey boy,’ he said. ‘That was real fine. But you give it a rest now, you hear?’ Even though I couldn’t pretend anymore, Big Sambo’s rubbing my head made me feel better. I’d been about to cry” (144). However despite this scene Delany gives no indication that the narrator is a victim. The narrator never expresses judgment about his own position or about the violent sexualized acts that occur around him and that he engages in as a willing participant. In fact Delany states,

the narrator is *not* [a victim]. Perhaps that helps make the book as disturbing as people so often find it. We have an overarching sentimental model that says an underage child involved in sex *must* be a ‘victim’—or, if not (and that is the soiled, nasty underside of sentimentality), then some sort of monster of the *Bad Seed* variety. But *Hogg*’s narrator is neither, though he takes part willingly in rapes, assaults, and brutalization (“The Making of *Hogg*” 306).

Does the relationship between Hogg and the narrator, then, represent an exploration of consensual erotic power exchange—rendered through sexualized slavery—such as we see in Delany’s *Nevèrjon* series for example?⁶³ Because *Hogg*’s central narrative comprises only 72 hours, and because the narrator is scheming to run away at the end, one wonders if the narrator’s and Hogg’s desires remain mutually congruent, or if they are beginning to diverge. One could read the end of the novel as the narrator’s rejection of Hogg’s growing emotional intimacy/attachment to him. In fact, one could read the narrator as resistant to emotional intimacy in general, as he reveals, at one point, an experience of being kidnapped and held captive for sex by two young men that he deeply disliked largely due to their refusal to engage in any “rough stuff” with him (266).⁶⁴ The narrator states “They were all into talking ‘bout how much they really loved me and only sucked on me and wouldn’t let me suck them off or pee on me or fuck my ass or nothin’...It made me feel all dirty and helpless and really scared” (266). As

⁶³ Using the critical work of Lewis Call, Biman Basu, and Darieck Scott I explore the concept of “eroticized play slavery” and some of its literary representations in chapters three and four.

⁶⁴ Again, this part of the novel is left out of the first edition, but found in the second edition.

Scott reads it “It is *not* being held captive for sex that makes the narrator feel victimized; indeed, the two boatmen he plans to escape to at the end of the novel have promised to hold him captive, too. It’s the particular sexual acts and *affection* he’s held for that were not to his liking” (“The Fine Details” 268, emphasis mine). In other words, it is the way in which abjection is recuperated into conventional narratives of intimacy and romance that disturb the narrator.

Regardless of the narrator’s relationship to emotional intimacy as conflated with transgressive sex acts (an analysis of which is deserving of its own chapter) the fact that Delany is willing to represent a child’s sexual fantasies, desires, and pornographic pleasure is testament to the fact that much of his work involving children (including for instance *Dhalgren*, “The Star Pit,” and the *Nevèryon* series) troubles the assumed affiliation between children and innocence. This troubling is important work because, as media scholar Henry Jenkins writes “Too often, our culture imagines childhood as a utopian space, separate from adult cares and worries, free from sexuality, outside social divisions, closer to nature and the primitive world, more fluid in its identity and its access to the realms of imagination, beyond historical change, more just, pure, and innocent, and in the end, waiting to be protected or corrupted by adults” (“The Innocent Child and Other Modern Myths”). Such innocent representations of childhood, which traffic in nostalgia for something that never existed, are often used as a form of epistemological containment because issues of pedophilia and pederasty, even, and particularly when the relationship is consensual, remain largely unspeakable.

Thus, to return to Delany’s conception of sex existing “inside” and “outside” certain orders of language, innocent, nostalgic representations of childhood are often used as a protective shield to deny engagement with unspeakable issues of juvenile sexuality and desire. Of course, almost any cultural production that represents children’s sexuality is subject to legal

sanctions (something that likely contributed to *Hogg*'s notorious publication history) and therefore there is little room to publically explore or articulate children's fantasies and desires. And yet *Hogg* invites an uncompromising exploration of and fulfillment of such transgressive fantasies and desires while working to extract over-determination of juvenile/adult sexual relationships from assumptions of, or suggestions of victimization. That Delany chooses to trouble such cultural assumptions through the paraliterary genre of pornography suggests that, as Davis argues, it is specifically through the exploration of desire that one is able to play with the boundaries of the unspeakable and the everyday that construct social divisions.

While Delany is not constructing transgressive narratives that can be discerned as conventionally liberatory (or liberatory at all), to scholars of African American literary and cultural studies his aesthetic and theoretical tactics can nevertheless be understood as radically advantageous. This is because, among other reasons, *Hogg* (as well as *Eva's Man*) allows for an open exploration of transgressive desire as a form of pleasure and pain not *necessarily* bound to abuse or trauma, or, not *solely* explained by a past history of abuse and trauma. Understandably abuse and trauma are historical specters that haunt much African American literature representing forms of slavery and neo-slavery such as Jones' *Corregidora* (which I analyze in chapter four), Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for example. These foci also often structure literary criticism that traces slavery's contemporary residue, as seen in Ashraf Rushdy's *Neo-Slave Narratives*, Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, and Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, for instance. However to read transgression as predominantly entangled with abuse and/or trauma often makes it difficult to read it in alternative manners.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Although reading it in this manner can also be illuminating, as I discuss in chapter four's analyses of Jones' *Corregidora* and Hal Bennett's *Lord of Dark Places*.

In his engagement with desire—such as *Hogg*'s consensual, rather than abusive juvenile/adult sexual relationships—Delany seeks to disassociate pleasure and pain from abuse and explore the erotic possibilities of degradation, as encouraged by the unspeakable's affiliation with “that tiny part of the freedom of language associated with abjection” (“On the Unspeakable” 66). The pleasure of abjection informs Scott's argument that Delany's pornotopic landscapes—which critic Robert Elliot Fox suggests “become actualized in those spaces in [his] fictional worlds specifically set aside for the practice and fulfillment of desire” (*Conscientious Sorcerers* 101)—are at once both subjugating and psychically (not socially) freeing.⁶⁶ This is because, while Delany represents complex issues of sex, race, and gender, often through the erotics of abjection, he does not take up ego or defensive self-posturing (Scott, *Extravagant* 30). Scott finds abjection to be necessary to erotically exploring the realms of sexual transgression in ways that intellectualizing denies (*Extravagant* 204-205). In other words, the body has knowledge, often accessed through an abandonment of ego, which the mind sometimes refuses to acknowledge (i.e. it provides the ontology that ideology suppresses). Scott notes that Delany's characters in his transgressive fictions are not, from what we can tell, traumatized or looking to transcend a history of pain. Rather they seem to be on a quest for knowledge through abjection, and at the very least, are able to activate a pornotopic imagination that mobilizes transgressive sexual acts (*Extravagant* 235). *Hogg* thus explores the perversity of pleasure; crucial work in the critique of censorship, for as Delany writes, “nothing encourages the practice of political torture and sabotages the pursuit of happiness more than blanket restrictions on speaking, in precise, articulate, and graphic terms about either [pleasure or suffering]” (“Pornography and Censorship” 297).

⁶⁶ Refer to Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*.

The engagement with difference and perverse pleasure and pain that informs *Hogg's* narrative and its production and reception history is the unspeakable at work. Of the novel Delany states his intention is to “mark out a discursive field in which, by the end, the reader can no longer even say the words “normal” and “abnormal” without putting them in quotation marks” (“The Making of *Hogg*” 308), thereby accomplishing the kind of challenging reading practice often integral to work informed by transgressive intentions.⁶⁷ Again, transgression is not the crossing of a boundary. It is, rather, the subject’s exploration of the contours and elasticity of boundaries. Understanding the logic of, and playing within these borders is central to transgression, for as Hogg explains it in one of his monologues,

‘I ain’t never met a normal, I mean normal, man who wasn’t crazy!’ Loon crazy, take ‘em off and put ‘em away crazy, which is what they would do if there wasn’t so many of them. Every normal man—I mean sexually normal, now—man I ever met figures the whole thing runs between two points: what he wants, and what he thinks should be. Every thought in his head is directed to fixing a rule-straight line between them, and he calls that line: What Is...that’s what a normal man thinks is reality. On the other hand, every faggot or panty sucker, or whip jockey, or SM freak, or baby fucker, or even a mother fucker like me...we know, man, that there is what we want, there is what should be, and there is what is: and don’t none of them got anything to do with each other unless—unless we make it. And the only way you can get from one to the other is to know that, don’t you see?...And they don’t know that, so that makes ‘em crazy’ (121-122).

Hogg speaks to the tactic of transgression’s ability to trouble containment and as such, a reader may find himself or herself engaged in Hogg’s philosophizing. Yet for readers to consider the novel’s “brutalizers [to] have sympathetic qualities” by considering with compassion and/or interest Hogg’s philosophizing, or to interpret Hogg, Denny, or the narrator as “avenging angels” is another element that Delany suspects readers find “most unsettling” about the text (Enright

⁶⁷ For a comprehensive study of post-1970 “aggressive,” “user-unfriendly” America fiction (including *Hogg*) and reader response theory refer to Katherine Hume’s book *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel*.

127-128, 132). He writes, “That someone like Hogg could illicit our sympathy—that (even momentarily) we should find him poignant, human, and struggling for happiness (rather than monster or victim)—*is* going to trouble. Well, *Hogg* is a story written to trouble” (“The Making of *Hogg*” 310). In this assessment we see how Delany’s use of transgression speaks to the need for continual public engagement with difference and the different. Such exploration reveals the manner in which the logic of “normal/abnormal” is continually reframed and restructured.

As productive as this tactic of transgression is, as Delany states about *Hogg*, “It’s not a nice book. I don’t think you should try to make it into one” (Enright 135). Again, this is a critique against rationalizing what should remain ambiguous. As a text informed by the unspeakable, *Hogg*—ending with the narrator’s one spoken word “Nothin’,”—refuses to answer questions, to rationalize, to conclude with a satisfactory explanation or any resolutions whatsoever. This gesture is perhaps the text’s ultimate unspeakable gesture for, as Delany writes, “the unspeakable lies in the silence, beyond the white space that accompanies the text...toward a [conclusion]...that finally is not to be found” (“On the Unspeakable” 66). Not only does the content of the novel trouble the reader’s desire and ability to rationalize, it inherently engages an aggressive form of anti-rationality, often thru a representation of sadism. In *Masochism* Gilles Deleuze suggests that a driving intention for sadists, at least a sadist such as the Marquis de Sade whose transgressive work is a literary predecessor to Delany’s pornography,⁶⁸ is to “demonstrate that reasoning itself is a form of violence” (18).

Hogg discusses his murder of a man named Jimmy as retaliation against what Hogg deems to be Jimmy’s insanity for attempting to justify his acts of violence and rationalize the unspeakable. Hogg states

⁶⁸ Refer to Delany’s discussion of de Sade’s influence on *Hogg* in his essay “The Scorpion Garden” in *The Straits of Messina*.

“You heard the way he was goin’ on, about his *reasons*? The motherfucker was crazy as a fuckin’ jaybird...The fucker is up there *with* us, beatin’ on the bitch, and fuckin’ on the bitch, and just getting’ into the whole thing. Then he’s gonna turn around and tell us he’s got *reasons* for actin’ like he’s doin’? Now you do somethin’ like that, man, ‘cause you *want* to. ‘Cause you get your fuckin’ jollies that way. ‘Cause that’s the way you like it. But can you think of a goddamn *reason* for doin’ something like that, the way we done them women?—of somethin’ they could of possibly done to someone else to make that alright, like he’s tryin’ to tell us?” (96-97, emphasis in original).

In many ways, *Hogg* the novel and Hogg the character reveal to us the extent to which the so-called “normal” people of the world (aka the Mr. Jonases and the Jimmys) repress their collusion in everyday violence and/or rationalize their participation in such violence to remove themselves from taking full, or any responsibility for the pleasure they obtain from violence. Instead, the “normal” people hire sadists, such as the Hoggs of the world, to enact their dirty deeds for them (Scott, “The Fine Details” 264).⁶⁹

Delany notes

Sadism is classically known as ‘the perversion of the philosophers.’ Presumably when you realize that you gain real and deeply desired pleasure by doing things that *truly* hurt other people, you face the sort of *aporia* that *must* start you thinking about the nature of the social world that defines good and evil and your own place—and the place of other beings—within it (“The Making of *Hogg*” 309, emphasis in original).

Here Delany suggests it is not that sadism inspires one to begin rationalizing and delineating good from evil, rather it throws one into an *aporia* (paradox) because one’s lived experience fails to match with the arbitrary social construction of ethics such as “good” and “evil”⁷⁰ that mask, as James Baldwin states, “the fathomless baseness shared by all humanity” (“Preservation” 594).

The delineation and containment of such ethics, as encouraged by rationality, can have the effect

⁶⁹ See Scott’s article “The Fine Details: Torture and the Social Order” in which he argues *Hogg*’s primary theme is about “the practice of our everyday living in a society that depends for its operation on various kinds of violence that it does not acknowledge” (253).

⁷⁰ Refer to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

of rendering one isolated from considering one's role in the construction of such ethics, not to mention one's engagement with the world and other people within it. Thus Delany suggests a "secondary motif" of *Hogg* is a critique of "our lack of care and simple ignorance of the way the world works [which makes it so] we, the audience, destroy thousands on thousands of people unknowingly" (Enright 145). Hogg understands the way the world works; he, the narrator, and the rest of the gang *own* their acts of unspeakable pleasure and pain as evocative of appetite, desire, and agency and they do not attempt to obfuscate such acts through the over-compensation of rationalizing. "For all his monstrosity," Michael Hemmingson argues, "Hogg is a creature who knows what he is, knows what he does, one who has accepted himself and his world" (128).

Yet when we consider that "Hogg is the nightmarish Other who understands both the 'systems of the world' ...and also how those systems depend upon the surreptitious assistance of those 'outside' the system" (Scott, "The Fine Details" 261) how are we to hold it that neither Hogg nor Denny are caught and punished at the end of the novel? In "The Making of *Hogg*" Delany acknowledges the many questions readers are left with upon finishing the novel such as "What punishment should Hogg receive for what he's done...? What punishment should Denny receive...?" but states, "the final question must be: personally, how are *you* engaged by these questions?" (307). For the reader to acknowledge his/her own desire to rationalize and his/her own experience of pleasure and discomfort⁷¹ in reading the text is to illustrate, as Delany articulates, "that the sexualization of forbidden, despised, rejected acts, substances, language, and symbols represents an order...of social memory" (Roberts 122). In other words, it is to

⁷¹ Ray Davis has described his reading experience of the novel as one of "perverse pleasure." "I can claim," he states, "that the pleasure is inextricably threaded with pain—but that hardly makes the pleasure less perverse...perhaps that's why I find *Hogg* so fascinating and so indefensibly satisfying" (177). Michael Hemmingson has described himself as both "repelled and fascinated" when reading the novel (127). And Laura Chernaik described her experience thusly "Delany is one of my favorite writers, and yet it took me weeks to read *Hogg*...I found it too upsetting to continue reading for more than a half-hour at a time...It evokes, in the reader, an extraordinary range of emotional and physical responses: from sexual arousal, to laughter, to nausea; from empathy, to sorrow, to fear" (19).

reveal the unspeakable's interrelation with the everyday and the manners in which the unspeakable is obfuscated in the construction of our social fabric. As literary critics, we engage in archival reframings to mine such social memory. Because, as I contend, it is in the unspeakable where lies Delany's greatest contribution to discourses of race and sex, literary explorations of the unspeakable written by his African American contemporaries must therefore be critically reconsidered. We must re-read instances of transgression in these texts that often elide critical readings/framings that remain locked in the oppression/liberation binary.

Part II: Interpretation Violation: *Eva's Man* and Critical Over-Determination

While Gayl Jones is more canonically celebrated than Samuel Delany is, both have been marginalized within African American literary criticism throughout much of their careers.⁷² And this chapter's epigraphs reveal, this is likely in large part due to the fact that Delany has never cared to fit his creative work to structures of middle-class propriety (such as respectability politics) as the above analysis of *Hogg* makes plain, and neither did Jones when writing her first two novels *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's Man* (1976). Yet despite their myriad similarities and reputations as difficult, challenging texts *Eva's Man* is widely critically engaged, whereas *Hogg* is, for the most part, culturally buried. Why? Perhaps it has something to do with the ways in which the unspeakable representations in *Eva's Man* are often critically recuperated into familiar

⁷² Delany, to a large extent, remains marginalized, although critical considerations of his tremendous body of work have been increasing over the last decade. As many critics have noted, Black Nationalist critics and black feminist critics alike in the 1970s marginalized Jones. And controversies in Jones' personal life throughout the 1980s overshadowed her creative output. She later capitulated to the dominant ideologies that her earlier work (such as *Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*) critiqued, which perhaps contributed to a reinvigorated critical consideration of her work as liberatory. As a testament to this capitulation she even states "Now I am extremely 'double-conscious' when writing anything about sexuality" (Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones" 46-47) and "I should mention that the male characters in those early novels are unfortunate, like the sexual theme—in this society that looks for things to support stereotypes" (Rowell, "An Interview with Gayl Jones" 51).

black feminist literary frameworks of gendered trauma and attempted liberation⁷³ whereas no such reading is possible for *Hogg*.

Much like *Hogg*, *Eva's Man* situates its characters in contexts of brutal over-sexualization. The narrative recalls the story of 43-year-old Eva Medina Canada, a transient tobacco worker with an extensive history of aggressive sexual attention from men. Eva is imprisoned in a mental institution/women's prison for poisoning and then castrating a man named Davis Carter. Prior to the murder Eva stayed with Davis in a hotel for four days where they engaged in extensive acts of transgressive sex. In the hotel room, Eva and Davis invoke a Bakhtinian spirit of excessive abandonment⁷⁴ and explore "the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 18). At times the sex is so transgressive that language literally fails to represent its excessiveness. Thus, much of Eva and Davis's sexual interactions are "outside" of language and are revealed in disjointed abstract fragments that make it difficult to determine what, exactly, is occurring. In fact there are several instances relayed in the narrative where Davis is urging Eva to do something ambiguous to him that she cannot, in those moments, bring herself to do (121, 175-176). At one point (either real or imagined) Davis hands Eva money and says to her "You know you the woman. Kill him, but don't make him bleed...I said kill him, but don't make him bleed." In response Eva opens her fingers and says, "I can't do it, Davis" (175-176). These moments suggest that yet another unspeakable reading of the novel could be interpreting Davis as a "death-bound subject" requesting his own murder and mutilation, to borrow Abdul R. JanMohamed's term (*The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archeology of Death*).

⁷³ In his critical assessment of *Eva's Man* Basu notes, "More recent criticism, which offers alternative readings of the text, is, then, put in the awkward position of "rescuing" the text not only from some of its [early] critics but also from some [transgressive] pronouncements of its author" ("Public and Private" 196).

⁷⁴ Refer to Carol Margaret Davison's article "Love 'Em and Lynch 'Em: The Castration Motif in *Eva's Man*" for a Bakhtinian reading of the novel.

In the wake of the murder Eva turns herself in and returns to the scene of the crime, however she stays silent⁷⁵ when police officers, psychologists, fellow inmates, and the media (all of whom can be considered reader-surrogates) are constantly trying to prod her for an explanation of her actions. Melvin Dixon claims that in her refusal to speak “Eva remains imprisoned literally and figuratively by her silence that simply increases her passivity and her acceptance of the words and definitions of others” (246). However, rather than reading her silence as passive, I read it as an active mobilization of the unspeakable to refuse intimacy with the reader. Jones’ narrative strategies (and Eva herself) refuse to explain/rationalize Eva and her actions whatsoever, knowing to what extent she is always already over-determined by other characters, readers, and critics alike.

Unlike *Hogg*’s consecutive progression of events and clear narrative perspective, *Eva’s Man* lacks a linear narrative structure and a cohesive narrative voice. The story is told in many temporal registers at once, through a multitude of narratological strategies, including the relaying of memories both real and imagined. The text’s representations of these memories—including from Eva’s childhood, from her first prison stint for stabbing a man at age 17, of her husband James “Hawk” Hunn, of her experiences in the tobacco industry, and of her time spent with Davis—are all revealed incoherently, thereby resisting any clear reading. Thus, through Eva’s silence and her refusal to capitulate, *Eva’s Man*, like *Hogg*, challenges the reader’s inclination to rationalize and epistemologically contain the unspeakable represented on nearly every page.

However *Eva’s Man* engages the unspeakable through its formal elements even more so than

⁷⁵ Of Eva’s silence Jones states “Eva refuses to render her story coherently. By controlling what she will and will not tell, she maintains her autonomy. Her silences are also ways of maintaining this autonomy” (Tate, *Black Women Writers* 97). Refer to Darlene Clark Hine’s article “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance” for her discussion of the ways black women used silence (a “culture of dissemblance”) in order to “protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives” (915). Refer also to Evelyn Higginbotham’s article “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” for her analysis of a culture of dissemblance through which, she argues, “black people endeavored not only to silence and conceal but also to dismantle and deconstruct the dominant society’s deployment of race” (266-267).

Hogg. In what Madhu Dubey calls the novels' "unreadability," the experience of reading *Eva's Man* mirrors the content of the novel. The novel elicits the same frustrated reading experience that Eva experiences from her inability to articulate agency, particularly sexual agency, on her own terms.

Just as the predominant default reader response to *Hogg* is to pathologize the relationship between the narrator and Hogg as one of child molestation and/or to assume the narrator's victimhood,⁷⁶ a default critical reception of *Eva's Man* is to read the novel as an "indictment against black men" (Pickney 27). Critics read Eva's poisoning and castration of her lover Davis as a feminist action of retaliation against her oppressor motivated by the traumas of her past as the object of relentless male sexual attention.⁷⁷ Such readings are inspired by the historical moment of *Eva's Man's* production, especially when considering that black women's literature produced in the 1970s (such as the work of Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones) was directly responsive to the Black Nationalist period of racialized collectivity that privileged race above gender. Much of the masculinist literature of the Black Nationalist period was reactive to white racism, representing the terrain of racialized violence as one of black/white antagonistic power relations. Much of the black masculinist literature of the 1950s-1970s focused predominantly on white racism and focused less on a critical engagement with intra-racial relationships, particularly instances of black male sexism/misogyny directed toward black women.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Michael Hemmingson's review "In the Scorpion Garden: *Hogg*" in which he states, "The young narrator is, at first, another spectator, if not victim, of Hogg's world" (126).

⁷⁷ For this exact reading, as well as variations on it refer to Nickesia Gordon's "On the Couch with Dr. Fraud: Insidious Trauma and Distorted Female Community in Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*," Madhu Dubey's "Don't You Explain Me": The Unreadability of *Eva's Man*" in her book *Black Women Novelists*, Jerry W. Ward, Jr.'s "Escape From Trublem: The Fiction of Gayl Jones," Loyle Hairston, "The Repelling World of Sex and Violence," and Darryl Pickney's "Review of *Eva's Man*," among other essays.

The major intervention that Jones and other black women novelists writing in the wake of Black Nationalism are responsible for is shifting the landscape of violence into the gendered domestic space and specifically toward representations of intraracial violence between black men and black women. Black women's novels and coterminous burgeoning black feminist/womanist theory⁷⁸ were therefore widely criticized as diverting from racial politics to focusing on sexual politics in a manner that demonized black men and was therefore complicit with white racism. And considering the massive white female readership of black women's fiction, masculinist critics and writers such as Addison Gayle, Jr. and Ishmael Reed were quite vocal in their denunciations of such literature's content. Reed referred to black women writers as "neoconfederate writers" who were "whipping up hysteria" of national anti-black male sentiment (Martin). Reed also argued that (predominantly female) readers consume eroticized intraracial violence in black women's texts without concern for black men because "black males have always been the scapegoats" (Martin). In other words, we, as a nation, (Reed claims) already consider black men to be criminals and oppressors deserving of punishment, which sheds particularly uncomfortable light on the aforementioned critical default reading of *Eva's Man*.

Thus, given this political, social, and historical context it is unsurprising that, particularly in its initial critical reception in the late 1970s, the characters of *Eva's Man* are read as archetypes of black gender relations (i.e. Eva is read as "all black women" punishing Davis "the black Everyman" for centuries of subjugation and domination).⁷⁹ According to Reed's

⁷⁸ Dubey suggests published black feminist theory can be dated from Barbara Smith's 1977 essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (163).

⁷⁹ For this reading see, for example, Addison Gayle, Jr.'s "Black Women and Black Men: The Literature of Catharsis," John Updike's "Eva and Eleanor and Everywoman," Ron Karenga's "On Wallace's Myths: Wading Through Troubled Waters," and Askia Toure's essay "Black Male/Female Relations: A Political Overview of the 1970s." However see also Carol Davison's "Love 'Em and Lynch 'Em" in which she claims "Strongly resembling the sexually harassing and violating men in Eva's life, Davis effectively represents "Everyman" in this novel" (400). And in a critique as recent as 2007 Candice M. Jenkins states, "I do want to suggest that Davis's murder is Eva's

assessment, narratives of intraracial violence are so familiar to readers to the point that we critically over-determine the content of a novel such as *Eva's Man* without even close reading it. We just assume Eva killed Davis because he must have been oppressing her and/or because he is emblematic of the collective black male presence in her life. And we read Eva's act, or want to read her act, as one of liberation. Candice M. Jenkin's provides such a reading in her book *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. She claims Eva's murder and castration of Davis "frees Eva from the violent grip of not only Davis, but all the men in her past" (179). Eva's act of castration has therefore been read literally as "the most direct, shocking, and brutal attack on phallogentrism in African American Literature" (Davison 396). In other words, Eva's actions have been read as an ideological metaphor rather than as acts specific to their ontological context perpetrated by an individual actor on another individual actor.

Readings such as these consider the subject(s) to be merely historical symbols, never existential or individual,⁸⁰ calling to mind James Baldwin's famous critique of the "cowardly obtuseness of...liberals [who] could deal with the Negro as a symbol or a victim but had no sense of him as a man" (*The Fire Next Time* 58). Of *Eva's Man* Jones herself has stated "I'm sure people will ask me if that's the way I see the essential relationship between men and women. But that man [Davis] and woman [Eva] don't stand for men and women—they stand for themselves, really" (Harper, "Gayl Jones" 361). She also notes "Eva Canada stands for no one but Eva Canada" ("About" 233). Thus it is crucial to note that Eva, as if to dissuade flat interpretations, provides no motive for why she murdered Davis, and certainly never suggests that she sees him as a paradigmatic black male that she feels inclined to punish. Interesting to

retaliative reaction against the man who has come to embody the entirety of male desire for and violence against her" (177).

⁸⁰ Of course, on the other hand, the problem of reading for individualism in African American literature is the conflation of "individualism" with conservative Horatio Alger ideologies that disregard structural inequity.

note is Jenkins's over-determined assumption that Eva is caught in "the violent grip" of Davis when, if you read the novel closely, Eva (and the text) never describes Davis as violent other than the moment he realizes Eva has poisoned him and he grips her waist "hard enough to break [her] ribs" (*Private Lives* 127) right before he dies. Otherwise, Davis is consistently represented as attentive, even tender. Eva herself states Davis treated her like "a husband," patiently waiting to "arouse her till [she] was ready" (95). While the novel hints at many different motives for Eva's murder of Davis, for instance his "coldness," his lack of candor about his wife, his supposed "imprisonment" of Eva in the room,⁸¹ and his assumptions about her sexuality, none of these can fully answer why Eva did what she did and the novel purposefully refuses a definitive answer is possible.

What happens when we read Eva's crime as a motiveless crime (*crime sans raison*) in the tradition of French transgressive philosophy such as expressed by Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet, and Michel Foucault? Is Eva in prison for the crime she committed, or for the crime she intended, but perhaps did not commit? For example, although Eva thinks she castrated Davis with her mouth and "bit the whole thing off" (167), the police report states otherwise. Faced with this revelation Eva says "I did...I wanted to" (167). Due to the unreliability of Eva's narrative voice and memories paired with the fact that many of Davis's actions are ambiguously represented in contradictory manners throughout the narrative, and considering that many of Eva's "motives" are projected on her by the reader-surrogates in the novel such as the psychiatrist⁸² and the press, one need be wary of reductive readings. *Eva's Man*

⁸¹ Many critics, including Dubey and Jenkins read Davis as "imprisoning" Eva in the room and holding her "captive" but I believe the text offers counter-evidence to this assumption, as I later discuss.

⁸² In reading the critical analyses of *Eva's Man* one can see to what extent the psychiatrist in particular functions as a reader-surrogate. For example, Jenkins uses the psychiatrist's pathologizing assessment "I think [Davis] came to represent all the men you'd known in your life" to support her argument that echoes this assessment (177), and Dubey ultimately interprets Eva's madness through the psychiatrist's assessment of her inability "to separate the imagined memories from the real ones" (10). While both critics critique the psychiatrist, it is evident that his voice is

works hard to elicit this meta-awareness in its reader through revealing to what extent its reader-surrogates produce pathologizing narratives the more they attempt to rationalize and interpret Eva and her actions. At one point the police captain, conversing with the psychiatrist, assumes that Davis must have beaten Eva to warrant his murder. He therefore conscripts Eva and Davis into familiar gendered (and often racialized) narratives of abuse. He states:

“She got any marks on her?”

“No, not a mark one. We had one of the policewoman look her over.”

“No scratches, or nothing?”

“No sir.”

“He didn’t beat her or anything?”

“No sir” (69).

The policeman is incredulous, as evidenced by the way he re-frames his question three times. His incessant questioning suggests that he cannot fathom Eva and Davis’s relationship as *not* physically abusive. Yet in the constant refusal of the policeman’s assumption of physical abuse the novel not only makes it clear that Eva was not, in fact, beaten, but that her relationship with Davis and her subsequent violent actions against him cannot be explained through narratives of abusive inter-gendered relationships advanced by both oppressive external power structures (such as the police), and liberatory political frameworks (such as black feminism/womanism) alike.

Interestingly, Jones suggests that male critics are not so much upset by the “negative” representations of men in black women’s’ fiction, but are more so upset by “the kinds of risks with the erotic imagination that women—especially black women—aren’t supposed to take” (Rowell, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 48). Throughout the novel Jones does *not* represent relationships between black men and black women as solely patriarchal and misogynistic,

treated as a voice of authority because he echoes the same rationalizing narratives that the reader himself or herself also entertains.

counter to criticisms advanced by Gayle and Reed, among others. Rather, in *Eva's Man*, Jones takes the risk to represent male/female relationships as mutually erotically destructive—motivated by equal parts compulsion and repulsion. For example Elvira, Eva's prison cellmate, relays a tale of a man who “drove every woman he had crazy...committing suicide and stuff, and even when these women knew how he'd done all these other women, they still wanted him” (17). And a central underlying narrative in *Eva's Man* is about “the queen bee,” a woman (and a blues archetype)⁸³ in Eva's childhood community who was rumored to “kill every man” she went with, and yet, “[the men] still come” to be with her (17). When Eva tells Davis of the queen bee they have different interpretations of the gendered suffering endemic to her myth. Their conversation reads:

“The queen bee. I don't know if she knew that's what people called her. It must've been hard, though. She must've been sucked hollow. She must've had nothing left.”

“Naw, those men kept bringing it to her. She must've sucked them hollow. That's why they died. Cause *they* had nothing left.”

“Naw, it was harder on the woman.”

“Shit, I don't even think it's a real woman anyway,” Davis said. “Somebody you just made up.”

“Yes, there was a woman called the queen bee,” I said (73-74, emphasis in original).

Their conversation is one of vulnerability regarding who the violently vulnerable subject is, suggesting the dominant gendered understandings of the suffering men and women experience at the hands of the other. Eva suggests that in giving all her love away to men that could not commit themselves to her the queen bee must have been “sucked hollow,” whereas Davis suggests the queen bee was satiated by endless amounts of male attention (“those men kept bringing it to her”), suggesting that she had an excessive hunger that left men bereft. When

⁸³ “Queen Bee” is the name of a Koko Taylor blues song. For an analysis of *Eva's Man* as evocative of the blues see E. Patrick Johnson's essay “Wild Women Don't Get the Blues: A Blues Analysis of Gayl Jones' *Eva's Man*.”

Eva refuses to agree with his interpretation Davis delegitimizes her in an attempt to save face for revealing his own vulnerability. Later, in one of the many scenarios that echo an earlier narrative moment, Eva and Davis argue about whose desire drives *their* continual sexual interactions. Davis accuses Eva, stating, “I know you can’t leave me alone” to which she responds “Naw. It’s *you*” (121, emphasis in original). Neither wants to claim their need/desire for the other, again wary of the type of intimate emotional vulnerability sexual relationships can come to produce. They thus code their compulsion for one another as repulsion for the other’s excessive sexual appetite.

In another instance of gendered vulnerability Eva recalls the sexual and emotional dynamic between her parents as one of “love/hate” (37). Eva’s mother cheats on her husband, subtly making sure he is aware of it by not covering up the evidence of her lover’s cigarettes left behind on the coffee table and not concerning herself with making sure her lover is out of the house in time before her husband returns from work. It is as if Eva’s mother is encouraging her husband to dominate and claim her through the violent sex he eventually perpetrates with the repeated refrain “Act like a whore, I’m gonna fuck you like a whore” (37). Additionally there is an ancillary narrative about Eva’s cousin Jean who cannot stay away from her abusive husband Alfonso and seemingly purposefully initiates her beatings (92) that always ritualistically occur in front of the same hotel. At one point their cousin Otis describes to Eva and her mother a typical situation between Jean and Alfonso that he witnesses. He states,

“We had to pass this hotel, and then she said—said it real quiet, I almost didn’t hear it. ‘I had to think he was you before I could do anything,’ she said. I just looked at her, you know.

“‘Then why in the hell did you let him fuck you then? I don’t want nobody fuckin you.’

“‘I didn’t let him fuck me.’

“‘I said I don’t want nobody fuckin you.’

“‘I didn’t let him fuck me.’

“Then there were no words, just him hitting her” (92).

Otis explains to Eva’s mother, “*She* starts it, Marie. Not him. She starts it and then he finishes it. She’s the one wants it” (92, emphasis in original). Jean herself echoes this sentiment, telling Marie that although she tried to leave Alfonso once he came to bring her back. And she states, “You want to know something? When he came and got me, I was ready to go back” (56).

Otis states that in witnessing Jean and Alfonso’s dynamic he experiences disgusted fascination, describing it thusly, “It was like I didn’t want to cut in, you know. Like I wanted to just keep watching...I didn’t even want to put my hand in, but then I knew I couldn’t just stand by watching like that” (93). As consumed as he is with Jean and Alfonso’s sexual dynamic which he considers “crazy,” Otis “couldn’t be talked into making his own life, because he still felt that they were his ‘mission’ [to save]” (102). In its representations of compulsion/repulsion *Eva’s Man* critiques the assumption that practitioners of transgressive eroticism (such as those acts that conflate abuse with pleasure) are pathological. Rather, like *Hogg*, it suggests that such subjects may instead be engaging the unspeakable. *Eva’s Man* reveals that through acts of rationalizing and/or epistemological containment such as Otis’s obsessive drive to “save” his perverse cousins from themselves, the external observer is as much driven by compulsion/repulsion (“I wanted to just keep watching...”) as those practicing the unspeakable acts. Just as *Hogg* critiques “normal” peoples’ interpolation in everyday violence, *Eva’s Man* reveals that “missions” to save the “victims” can be scapegoats used to mask the compulsion/repulsion of witnessing others’ presumed suffering.

As the above representations reveal, one of the novel's most transgressive features is the way it regularly reframes abuse as "interaction."⁸⁴ For instance, Jean and Alfonso's ritualized erotically abusive relationship is described as "working all that blues out of them" (93). And although Jean tells Marie "Nobody understands. I don't understand" in response to peoples' confusion about her choice to remain in an abusive relationship (56), eventually Otis declares "Maybe [Jean] knows more than any of us do" (44). Just as Delany suggests the narrator's *lack* of victimhood is what readers find most troubling about *Hogg*, it is perhaps the fact that abuse is *not* represented as solely reprehensible, and is at times represented as *pleasurable* (particularly for women) that readers find so challenging about *Eva's Man*. Jenkins notes "even the most violent moments in Jones' text are overlaid with the experience, the expression, of eroticism" (*Private Lives* 154), fitting considering Jones notes a driving force behind her work is to "see the erotic as an authentic method of expression" ("Toward" 1). Thus the novel is not only about the patriarchal power men wield over women, but is also about the eroticized violence both genders can (and do) interpolate one another within. *Eva's Man*, much like *Hogg*, therefore challenges our interpretations of how we read and understand victimization.

The question of whether or not Eva was held hostage in the hotel room by Davis is an ambiguous plot point, however critics often default to an interpretation that Eva was held captive.⁸⁵ Yes, at one point Eva shares a memory via interior monologue of a man keeping her hostage in a house so that she can remain "where [he] can find [her]," but it is unclear if that man is Davis or Hawk, her former husband (115). And yes, Davis tells Eva "We ain't going out" (66)

⁸⁴ In her reading of *Eva's Man* Jenkins suggests, "Jones' text might align intercourse and brutality, or might just as easily depict murder and mutilation as erotic exchange" (152). I also analyze the reframing of "abuse" as "pleasurable interaction" in chapter three's reading of Slim's *Pimp* and Butler's "Bloodchild."

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Jenkins's chapter "Doing Violence to Desire" in her book *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, Françoise Lionnet's essay "Geographies of Pain: Captive Bodies and Violent Acts in the Fictions of Myriam Warner-Vieyra, Gayl Jones, and Bessie Head," and Hershini Bhana Young's article "Inheriting the Criminalized Black Body: Race, Gender, and Slavery in *Eva's Man*" in which Young not only reads Eva as Davis's captive, but reads Eva as evocative of slave women in general.

as he makes it clear he wants her solely for sex (95). However right before he is poisoned to death Davis tells Eva he plans to get her a duplicate key to the room made, suggesting that he is not, in fact, keeping her against her will (127). And he leaves her alone multiple times in the hotel room over the course of the four days, at which point she could have left at any time if she had decided to do so.

It is in its mobilization of the unspeakable that *Eva's Man* continually reveals Eva to be neither solely victim nor agent. She is both, and in making her identity so complex the novel is critiquing critical over-determination that constructs such binaries. Eva both acts and is acted upon out of a sense of raw sexual need. She expresses sexual agency throughout the novel, stating early on that she asked Davis to "join her" (6) at her bar table when they first meet and thinks, once at the hotel "I could feel I wanted him already" (20). In prison she states "I kept wanting [Davis]" (159) suggesting she never ceased desiring him⁸⁶ even in a context that many readers and read-surrogates in the novel seek to interpret as one of captivity and abuse.

Crucial to bear in mind is the burgeoning black feminist/womanist theory developing simultaneous to the novel's production because the novel can be read as complicating such thought. This accounts possibly for why *Eva's Man* was left out of much black feminist theorizing at the time of its publication.⁸⁷ Dubey states, "The critical neglect of Jones is not surprising, for her novels do not confirm the ideological aims or the formal predilections of black feminist criticism. Jones' fiction cannot be absorbed into a tradition impelled by the struggle

⁸⁶ While in prison Eva continually recalls/fantasizes about a multitude of sexual scenarios in which she allows Davis to sexually consume her, thinking to herself "Breath and sweat and desire riding my back...I licked the palms of my hands. I bit shadows. I put my legs around his neck" (154, 157). After the murder she is haunted by her sexual desires throughout the remainder of the narrative, not necessarily because she is ashamed or traumatized by her actions, but because she has so many unfulfilled desires that her literal containment in prison disallows her from fully fulfilling.

⁸⁷ Dubey notes "Gayl Jones' fiction is conspicuously absent from most black feminist works on the black women's fictional tradition, including Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists*, Susan Willis's *Specifying*, and Marjorie Pryse and Hortense Spillers's *Conjuring*" (2).

against negative stereotypes” (*Black Women Novelists* 2). Jones states, “To deal with such a character as Eva becomes problematic in the way that “Trueblood” becomes problematic in *Invisible Man*. It raises the questions of possibility. Should a black writer ignore such characters, refuse to enter “such territory” because of the “negative image” and because such characters can be misused politically by others, or should one try to reclaim such complex, contradictory characters?” (“About” 233).

Eva’s Man often represents black female sexuality through the use of stereotypes, and/or represents black female sexual pleasure in the embodiment and performance of such stereotypes. By representing black female sexual pleasure in degradation (a theme I analyze throughout this dissertation), the text deeply troubles strands of early black feminist/womanist thought that would eventually come to articulate the influential 1980s “politics of domination,” “matrix of domination, “and” controlling images” theories of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. Jones herself states that her representations of black female transgressive eroticism are often misunderstood as capitulating to controlling images (i.e. those images propagated by dominant society to render black female subordination “natural”). She states “[white women’s] assertion of eroticism can be an act of self-assertion and an act of ‘controlling’—whereas for a black woman it seems merely to assert, confirm, and affirm what *they’ve* [racist society] thought all along; and more unfortunately it refers collectively rather than simply personally” (Rowell, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 46).

Black feminist/womanist theory was/is a crucial liberatory politics that aims to intervene in contexts of intersectional oppression.⁸⁸ However *Eva’s Man* complicates the emphasis on telling one’s story to bear witness to the injustices of everyday black life that black

⁸⁸ In “A Black Feminist Statement from the Combahee River Collective,” Barbara Smith and others articulated a groundbreaking theory of intersectionality in which black female “sexual identity combined with their racial identity...make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique.”

feminism/womanism encourages. In *Eva's Man* everyone prods Eva to talk and express her intentions, her feelings, her motives, and her story. Dixon reads this obsessive incitement to speech as the reader-surrogates attempting to persuade Eva to “assume full responsibility for her acts” (246). However I read the reader surrogate’s actions as, again, motivated by their own erotic pleasure gained through living vicariously through the presumed trauma of others. As Elvira tells Eva “I guess what you done excites people” (77). While black feminist/womanist thought purports to respect that one’s story has to be told on one’s own terms when and how one wants to share it, *Eva's Man* complicates the impetus to share one’s story in general.

In addition to criticizing the coercion to speak, the novel can also be read as critiquing the impetus to over-determine trauma. The criticism here seems to stem from such over-determination’s uncomfortably close proximity to pathologizing. By prodding Eva to connect her actions to presumed trauma, the psychiatrist, media, and other prying reader-surrogates pathologize Eva and her family. The text reads:

Even now people come in here and ask me how it happened. *They want me to tell it over and over again.* I don’t mean just the psychiatrists, but people from newspapers and things. They read about it or hear about it someplace and *just want it to keep on living...They want to hear about what happened between my mother and father* as well as what happened between me and that man. One of them came in here and even wanted to know about my grandmother and grandfather. I know when I’m not getting things straight, but they say that’s all right, to go ahead talking...They say they’re helping me. I’m forty-three years old, and I ain’t seen none of their help yet” (4-5, emphasis mine).

Eva’s assessment “They want me to tell it over and over again” because they “just want it to keep on living” suggests the manner in which incitement to discourse can produce trauma.⁸⁹ And once trauma is articulated, institutional forces can seek to cathect it to familiar pathological

⁸⁹ Refer to Cathy Caruth’s study of trauma *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* in which, paraphrasing Freud, she states “[traumatic] repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear...as a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside of their wish or their control” (1-2).

narratives, in this instance, narratives of racialized dysfunctional families that echo *The Moynihan Report*⁹⁰ (i.e. “They want to hear about what happened between my mother and father”). The reader-surrogate characters in the novel prod Eva to explain/justify/rationalize herself and her actions to they can epistemological contain her and her actions. And while they purport to “help” her, she “ain’t seen none of their help yet,” testifying to the self-serving motives such “help” attempts to mask.

Eva’s Man therefore advances Delany’s concept of the unspeakable’s need to remain, to some extent, “outside” certain orders of language to protect against the invasiveness of well-intention “help” and its pathologizing narratives. This can most clearly be seen in Eva’s interaction with the psychiatrist, for instance, as their dynamic is one of eroticized coercion framed as “help.” The scene is worth quoting at length for the manner in which it represents society’s pathological (and eroticized) objectification of “the Other” to make itself feel “helpful” in “alleviating” the suffering of The Other. The scene reads:

He leaned toward me. He said he didn’t just want to know about the killing, he said he wanted to know about what happened after the killing. Did it come in my mind when I saw him lying there dead or had I planned it all along. His voice was soft. It was like cotton candy. He said he wanted to know how it felt, what I did, how did it make me feel. I didn’t want him looking at me. I had my hands on my knees. My knees were open. I closed my knees.

“I want to help you, Eva.”

I said nothing.

“Talk to me.”

I wouldn’t.

“You’re going to have to open up sometime, woman, to somebody. I want to help you.”

I looked at him, still saying nothing. He sat watching me for a long time and then he said, “I’ll see you, Eva.”

⁹⁰ *The Moynihan Report*, officially titled *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, was a 1965 report written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a sociologist and later U.S. Senator. While it purported to be an in-depth study of black poverty in the United States, it effectively pathologized black people, claiming that a relative absence of nuclear families resulted in poverty and other social problems. See Hortense Spillers’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” for a famous critique of *The Moynihan Report*. I also discuss the *Report* in relation to Toni Morrison’s *Sula* in the following chapter.

He got up and left. I listened to his footsteps down the hall. I kept my knees squeezed tight together (76-77).

In this scene there is an eroticized invasive desire on the part of the psychiatrist to know from Eva “How did it feel?” (77) and to get her to “open up.” Eva is often asked the intimate question “How did it feel?” by many characters; in fact it is the driving question of the novel, always posed simultaneously erotically and invasively, which is apropos to a text using the unspeakable to critique epistemological containment. But why should Eva speak to such disciplining forces as psychiatrists and policemen when they have her criminal file open and are reading from it verbatim (70)? In other words, considering to what extent Eva is always already over-determined, what does she have to gain from speaking? Delany states, “When it’s a matter of competing discourses and you simply feel that one of them is not addressing you, depending on your inner resources, sometimes I think it’s best to remain silent” (Rowell “An Interview with Samuel Delany” 43).

Eva’s jumbled memories also critique the obsessive encouragement to share. For example Eva’s interior monologue at one point reads:

“How did it feel, Eva?” the psychiatrist asked.

My mother got an obscene telephone phone call one day. A man wanted to know how did it feel when my daddy fucked her.

“How did it feel?” Elvira asked.

“They told me you wouldn’t talk. They said I wouldn’t get one word out of you,” the psychiatrist said. “did you feel you had any cause to mutilate him afterwards? Why did you feel killing him wasn’t enough?”

“How did it feel?” Elvira asked.

“How did you feel?” the psychiatrist asked.

“How did it feel?” Elvira asked.

“How do it feel, Mizz Canada?” the man asked my mama. She slammed the telephone down.

“Eva. Eva. Eva,” Davis said...

“I don’t want to tell my story” (77, emphasis mine).

Here again we see the erotically invasive, obsessive driving question of the novel posed so many times by so many people that it ultimately drives Eva into staunch refusal to speak. And by refusing to tell her story, Eva is, in essence, denying the belief advanced by critics such as Tucker that liberatory political frameworks are the only “constructive outlet” for articulating anger. As *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* reveal the unspeakable is another outlet. And even though it does not necessarily produce liberatory or positive results (which is likely what Tucker means by “constructive”) mobilizing the unspeakable constructively reveals the limitations of the liberatory to function as an always-effective outlet for agency and autonomy.

Faced with Eva’s refusal to speak/share the characters do not know what to do with her and constantly try to explain her to herself and interpret her with their own reductive rationalizing. Eva resents people that think they can contain her in ready-made narratives, such as Elvira who says to her, “I know everything about you, you know” (161) to which Eva repeatedly responds “Don’t fuck with me” (166). Likewise when she first meets Davis he presumes to know how to interpret her sexually and says to her “I can tell you something about you... You ain’t been getting it, have you?” (7). Faced with Eva’s silence Davis pushes his interpretation of her further stating, “I don’t expect you to say nothing. I can read your eyes” (7). “Can you?” Eva responds, challenging his presumptuousness. Jenkins suggests Davis “believes he can ‘read’ them because [Eva] fits into gendered parameters of desire that are already fixed” (*Private Lives* 170), an assumption that Davis later uncomfortably realizes he was wrong about.

At another point in the novel, Freddy Smoot, the boy that provides Eva with her first sexual experiences as a child, runs away from her when she does not resist his attempted rape and thereby fails to respond in the expected manner. “I didn’t know what he’d seen in my eyes,” Eva thinks, “because I didn’t know what was there” (120). This suggests that not only is Eva at

times seemingly unaware of her own power as an unreadable subject she is perhaps also unaware of the extent to which her unreadability unsettles people who attempt to rationalize and contain her. Or is she unaware? At one point the detectives pathologize Eva through her “crazy” eyes.

They state:

“She talked yet?”

“No.”

“Look at those eyes. A woman got to be crazy to do something like that.”

“Or want you to think she’s crazy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do something so people will think she has to be crazy to do it” (65).

The concept of “crazy” is a particularly rich representation to consider when reading the unspeakable in this novel. By constantly referring to Eva as “crazy” the novel is forcing the reader to contend with his/her interpretation of Eva as such. Or, as the detective’s statement “Or want you to think she’s crazy” suggests, Eva could be using the role of “crazy” as a form of epistemological containment; as an easy answer to “explain” her unspeakable actions that otherwise lack a legible discourse. Or perhaps we can understand Eva’s “craziness” to be a self-conscious parody of containment. As Bakhtin suggests, “In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official ‘truth’” (*Rabelais* 39). The latter two possibilities suggest Eva is not, in fact, as unaware of her unreadability as certain narrative moments suggest.⁹¹

As a testament to Eva’s unreadability, even the sex Eva and Davis share is at times unsettling for Davis because he cannot read Eva’s affective responses. And Eva refuses to engage with him in a dialogue about it. For example at one point Eva states

When he came out of me he was sweating, but I wasn’t.

⁹¹ Refer to Sally Robinson’s chapter “We’re All Consequences of Something: Cultural Mythologies of Gender and Race in the Novels of Gayl Jones” in her book *Engendering the Subject: Gender and Self Representation in Contemporary Women’s Fiction* for her analysis of Eva’s varying “subversive strategies” (167).

“Don’t you ever sweat?”

“No.” I smiled.

“You made me tired,” he said...

“You’re too serene,” he said.

I said nothing.

“How do you feel about it, Eva?”

“It doesn’t matter” (118).

Like *Hogg*’s narrator, Eva seems to lose interest when raw sexuality turns to the realm of intimacy, considering that intimacy, in a sense, can be a form of over-determining the meaning of the act of sex itself. Throughout the text Eva refuses intimacy. Although she engages in extensive transgressive sex with Davis, she will not share her story with him, nor will she let him know her “inside out” like he proclaims to desire (45). Davis often urges her to be emotionally intimate with him. For example, he asks her ““What else have you got to say?”” to which she replies ““Nothing.”” ““Eva, why won’t you talk about yourself?”” he implores, to which Eva “said nothing” (67). Finally he asks, ““Why won’t you talk to me, Eva?”” (101). Yet while she is reticent to speak, she excessively shares of herself sexually, and Davis is upset by her continual energy. “You should be all fucked out” he says to her and “He wasn’t joking” (66). Eva, angry at the way in which Davis is trying to regulate her responses retorts, “You got what you wanted, didn’t you?” (66). Again both subjects employ compulsion/repulsion to mask the vulnerability each experiences in their exploration of transgressive sex.

Later in the novel in a scene which I read as the negative turning point in their sexual dynamic, Davis tells Eva her failure to abide by socially prescribed codes of normativity “ain’t natural” and therefore, he tells her, “You ain’t natural” (120). Eva claims, “I’m natural” to which Davis retorts, “Shit, if you was natural, you wouldn’t even be here, woman. You wouldn’t even a let Davis Carter lay a hand on you. Not for free” (121). Here Davis is suggesting that the “natural” narrative to explain their sexual interactions would be if Eva were a whore charging

Davis for sex rather than engaging in it “for free.” What is “not natural” therefore about Eva and about their circumstance is, according to Davis, Eva’s desire within it—in other words, her choice to engage sexually with him “for free” because she *wants* to. He cannot read Eva and her “free” desire for him and therefore blames her for his inability to interpret her and contain her.

Clearly then, one of the primary critiques the novel makes through its use of the unspeakable regards the delimiting of black female sexuality. While it is (purposefully) impossible to determine Eva’s motive for the murder, a potential reading can be advanced that Eva is angry at Davis because he refuses to recognize her sexual agency and desires solely because they exist “outside” of certain orders of discourse (particularly discourses of desire) and are therefore unrecognizable to him. Indeed, Jenkins suggests, “Eva Canada does seem to be driven by rage...hers is the rage of a woman silenced by the normative sexual order” (*Private Lives* 171). In some respects Davis thus comes to embody the violence of containment, not because he supposedly holds Eva captive in the room (which, again, I do not necessarily read him as doing), and not because he supposedly represents phallocentrism in general, but because he is, at times, threatened by Eva’s unspeakable sexual appetites and attempts to make her feel self-conscious about it. However even *this* reading is troubled by the manner in which Davis also asks Eva to do ambiguous things to him sexually that she is unable, in the moment, to do (121, 175-176) which suggests that Davis *encourages*, rather than delimits their transgressive play to levels yet unexplored by either. It is not adequate, therefore, to suggest Eva kills Davis because he suppresses her sexuality.

In fact, as horrific and excessive as Eva’s murder and mutilation of Davis is, it is an act of abuse reframed as one of pleasurable interaction for Eva in which she expresses autonomy by using Davis’s body to fulfill the full range of her unspeakable sexual desires. The scene reads:

I put my hand on his hand. I kissed his hand, his neck. I put my fingers in the space above his eyes, but didn't close them...I put my forehead under his chin...I put my tongue between his parted lips. I kissed his teeth...I opened his trousers and played with his penis. My mouth, my teeth, my tongue went inside his trousers. I raised blood...I slid my hands around his back and dug my fingers up his ass, then I knelt down on the wooden floor, bruising my knees. I got back on the bed and squeezed his dick in my teeth. I bit down hard...Blood on my hands and in his trousers. Blood in my teeth...I got the silk handkerchief he used to wipe me after we made love, and wrapped his penis in it. I laid it back inside his trousers, zipped him up. I kissed his cheeks, his lips, his neck. I got naked and sat on the bed again. I spread my legs across his thighs and put his hand on my crotch, stuffed his fingers up in me. I put my whole body over him. I farted" (128-129).

Dixon, who reads Eva as a tragic character primarily because her "acts of language and the moral choices they involve...hinder regeneration [i.e. liberation]" states, "Eva's active love of Davis in death is proof of her ultimate failure as a woman trapped forever in the limited capacity of her feelings" (247, 248). However rather than reading her as a "failure" we can read her as a woman who, because her desires are unspeakable, is exercising the tactic of transgression to its ultimate excessive manifestation. Jenkins suggests the murder is necessary because it allows Eva to "'safely' express her desire for [Davis] without the risk of...the intense exposure of desire plus an assumed pathology" (*Private Lives* 178). Eva has to kill Davis before allowing herself to fully engage her desires to sexually consume another human being, whereas the narrator and Hogg consensually use one another's bodies to do so.

Critic Hershini Young suggests "Eva uses her body as a site of resistance to violence" (380). However if we consider Eva's actions through Scott's formulation "not-saying = not-seeing = not-knowing...enables, and sometimes (most times?) demands violent, tortuous *doing*" ("The Fine Details" 259, emphasis in the original) we can understand Eva's murder of Davis not as a form of resistance to violence but, rather, as an embrace of violence as the order of discourse through which Eva articulates her unspeakable sexual desires. Delay notes "Indeed it is...[t]he

positioning of desire which always draws us to ‘The Unspeakable’ in the first place” (“On the Unspeakable” 38). *Eva’s Man* is therefore a novel critiquing containment’s deep suppression of excessive desire that forces it into the realm of the unspeakable. Reading Eva’s murder of Davis as a scene of unspeakably transgressive sexuality complicates critical over-determination to read the murder as Eva’s act of retaliation for her lifetime of sexual trauma. What the murder reveals, instead, is the extent to which transgressive pleasure complicates liberatory narratives.

Eva refuses to represent her murder as a liberatory act; instead she relays it to the reader viscerally, to elicit an affective response of inescapable compulsion/repulsion. In the midst of recounting the murder, Eva reiterates the driving question of the novel, “*How did it feel?*” (128, emphasis in the original) to which she responds: “A red swollen plum in my mouth. A milkweed full of blood. A soft milkweed full of blood. What would you do if you bit down and your teeth raised blood from an apple? Flesh from an apple? What would you do? Flesh and blood from an apple. What would you do with the apple? How would you feel?” (128). Even here Eva refuses to reveal to us her motive, instead turning the question back on us in her only direct address to the reader (“What would you do?” How would you feel?”). These questions echo Delany’s suggestion that what we are left with, finally, (as we were at the end of *Hogg*) is how *we* personally are engaged with the questions we have at the end of the novel. Like *Hogg* then, *Eva’s Man* actively interpolates the reader to contend with his/her moral judgments in yet another ontological “high stress situation...in a relational space in which its ‘health’ simply *can’t* be judged” (Enright 141, emphasis in original).

In killing Davis Eva does not “free” herself of her past.⁹² Jones herself states, “In *Eva’s Man* there’s no transcendence” (Rowell, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 48). But whereas Dixon

⁹² While Jenkins suggests the murder of Davis “frees Eva from the violent grip of not only Davis, but all the men in her past” (179) Dubey argues “Eva obsessively remembers her past in an *unsuccessful* attempt to order and

reads Eva as “never gain[ing] control over her voice, her past, or her identity” and “never com[ing] to terms with her past” (245) I read Eva as purposefully confronting her past and embodying its stereotypes, largely because they provide her with a sense of power through which to engage the unspeakable. For example, in the wake of the murder Eva, long fascinated by the queen bee, takes on a similar *femme fatale* identity thinking, “I’m Medusa...Men look at me and get hard-ons. I turn their dicks to stone” (130). Both Dixon and Dubey read this moment as Eva “embracing received images of women as *femmes fatales*” (Dixon 245) projected upon her by Davis and other men. They therefore read Eva as “psychologically imprisoning” herself in “male-created stereotypes” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 91) (i.e. “controlling images”) that are, ultimately, “debilitating” (Dixon 245).⁹³ And while this may be so, does this adaption negate Eva’s pleasure and/or sense of agency in performing as the projection of a stereotype?⁹⁴ This is particularly pertinent when considering Dubey’s assessment that “Characters [in *Eva’s Man*] are entirely constructed by the distorted perceptions of others; the novel presents no original, essential selfhood that escapes this stereotypical structuring” (*Black Women Novelists* 91).

As stated, Eva possesses a (purposefully) unreadable body, much like *Hogg’s* narrator, making it difficult to conscript such subjects into dominant narratives of abuse, trauma, and resistance. Although Eva is described in a multitude of over-determined ways—as a “bitch” (10), “evil” (10), a “devil” (35), a “demon” (148), a “bad woman” (174), “easy” (19), a “wild woman” (3), “savage” (141), a “male lion” (16) with an uncombed mane (3), “just like a man” (75), a “hard woman” (7), numb (51), “lost” (101), “too serene” (118), hypersexual (8), and a “queen

transcend it” and “The cyclic structure of *Eva’s Man* offers no possibility of redemption” (96, emphasis mine). Additionally Keith Byerman argues “[Eva’s] act does not free her from her own or the world’s obsessiveness, but only forces her into the self-imprisonment of narcissism” (99-100) and Dixon analyzes the novel as a whole to be representative of “one woman’s self-inflicted failure to achieve redemption” (245).

⁹³ Likewise Jerry W. Ward, Jr. suggests, “Eva is the victim of her own passivity, her tendency to accept the Playboy fantasy of what a woman is” (254).

⁹⁴ I ask a similar series of questions in chapter three regarding female performances of controlling “bitch,” “whore,” and “freak” images.

bee” (17, 153), none of these stereotypes/archetypes fully fit, and none adequately explain Eva or her story. To rationalize why she would, first, choose to engage in the sexual circumstances she was in with Davis, and secondly, why she would kill him, Eva is often described as a “whore” (4) and as a jealous lover (4, 17), supposedly angry about Davis’s wife. However, such answers are deemed, by Eva, to be futile, to be nothing more than “the easiest answer [the legal prosecutors] could get” (4). And also crucial to note, as Dubey points out, “Nowhere in the novel are these images revised or superseded, as Eva never articulates her sense of difference from these stereotypical constructions” (*Black Women Novelists* 93), suggesting the novel’s meta-awareness that any protestation or alternative construction on Eva’s part would just as easily be conscripted into ready-made interpretative frameworks by both characters and readers alike.

Eva confounds critical interpretation in her embrace, rather than refutation of stereotypes. In fact it is through her performance of stereotypes that Eva most clearly articulates her sexual desires, as if performing as a stereotype provides her with a clearer sense of herself and her desires.⁹⁵ Embodying her Medusa role after the murder Eva thinks, “It was good to...think about being naked and being taken. No, fucked...I wanted to be fucked. I wanted him to fuck me up the ass” (130). Later, when Elvira asks Eva what the doctors are suggesting about the murder and about her necrophilic use of Davis’s body, Eva tells her “They think I was trying to fuck him when he couldn’t fuck back” (159). But Eva is quick to counter that gendered pathologizing, stating, “I think I was trying to *get* fucked” (160). In other words, the doctors interpret Eva as performing a gendered stereotype of female sexual desire that wishes to literally remove the phallus to divest sex of its supposedly threatening, phallogocentric power. However in her *femme fatale* identity, Eva both adopts a dominant role yet expressly fantasizes about extreme sexual subordination mobilized by agency. She states, “I think I was trying to *get* fucked,” in other

⁹⁵ We also see this with Toni Morrison’s character Sula, who I analyze in the following chapter.

words, she states she was trying to be sexually taken the way she desires, throwing the victim|agent binary into disarray.

Eva's Man's refusal to represent “positive images” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 93), particularly of black women, again helps explain the novel's conspicuous absence from much early black feminist literary theory. Dubey points out “early black feminist critics resume this necessary work of reversal and revision [of stereotypes], regarding the literary stereotype as the most visible site of struggle for cultural control and determination” (*Black Women Novelists* 3). That *Eva's Man's* refuses to do this work partially accounts for one of the most famous critical appraisals of the novel—poet June Jordan's 1976 *New York Times Book Review* in which she lambasts *Eva's Man* for providing “sinister information” with a lack of a “clear moral or political function” (36). She states, “I fear for the meaning of this novel. What does it mean when a young Black woman sits down to compose a universe of Black people limited to animal dynamics? And what will such testimony, such perverse ambivalence contribute to the understanding of young girls in need of rescue and protection?” (37).

Here, just as we saw in Tucker's brief assessment of *Hogg* and his ultimate refusal to engage it, because the unspeakable does not provide a blueprint for “rescue and protection” (i.e. for liberation) we see how the unspeakable can become the target of critical anger and/or elide critical attention because its mechanisms do not fit within clear moral or political ideologies. Put another way, Jordan is evidently disturbed by the manner in which the transgressive representations in *Eva's Man* refuse to provide “a clear, didactic judgment” (Dubey, *Black Women Novelists* 94) of stereotypes and instead offer a “perverse ambivalence” about their function. Interesting to note, the final line in Jordan's review is “Who is she?” (37), echoing

Davis's questions to Eva "Who are you?" "Where did you come from?" (20) and the driving narrative question posed to Eva throughout the novel "How did it feel?"

Toward the end of the novel Eva attempts to answer some of these questions by speaking to the psychiatrist. But it spills out in a jumbled, contradictory manner, no more illuminating than any other point in the novel. Eva ultimately suggests that "it was his whole way" that made her kill Davis although, when asked specifically what he did to her she states, "I don't know. How should I know. I don't know. I don't know. That was all I could do" (174). She killed him she says, "to fill in the feelings" (169). The psychiatrist pushes her to elaborate, to explain what she means and when she cannot (and/or refuses to), he defaults to narratives of trauma. He asks/suggests, "Did [Davis] do something to frighten you? He humiliated and frightened you, didn't he?" (167) and "Did you think Davis was [your cousin] Alfonso?" (169). Again we hear the psychiatrist rationalizing Eva's experiences into narratives of victimhood and abuse. And again we hear him conflating Davis into a (presumed) pathological, abusive black Everyman. That their exchange culminates in Eva's repeated cry, "Don't explain me. Don't you explain me. Don't you explain me" (173) and in violence, "Matron? Matron! Hold her! Hold her!" (174) is unsurprising, as Eva's tolerance for others' rationalizing has reached a breaking point. Eva's vehement repetition of "Don't explain me. Don't explain me. Don't you explain me" is a refrain that could summarize the novel's use of the unspeakable. Ultimately Eva's violence, Basu argues, "is a response to the violence inherent in the logic of explanatory categories" ("Public and Private" 203). Eva's violence is the tactic of transgression that mobilizes the unspeakable's critique of containment.

In her essay "About My Work" Jones states

“I do not have a political ‘stance,’ but I am interested sometimes in the relationship between history, society, morality, and personality. I believe that all literatures can have political uses and misuses. Sometimes politics can enhance, sometimes it can get in the way of imaginative literature. Sometimes politics or political strategies, like any kind of strategy and system, can be useful in the organization and structuring of one’s work, the selecting of character, of event, the choosing of ideas, but it can also tell you what you cannot do, tell you what you must avoid, tell you that there’s a certain territory politics won’t allow you to enter, certain questions politics won’t allow you to ask—in order to be ‘politically correct.’ I think sometimes you just have to be ‘wrong’; there’s a lot of imaginative territory that you have to be ‘wrong’ in order to enter” (234).

In this chapter I have argued that both Samuel R. Delany and Gayl Jones take the risk of being “wrong” by mobilizing the unspeakable to enter transgressive imaginative territory dissuaded and disallowed by the ideologies of “politically correct” liberatory politics. In his 1996 review of *Hogg*, titled “In the Scorpion Garden,” Hemmingson notes

Some aficionados of Delany’s work may not receive *Hogg* in a positive light and will wonder why Delany has chosen to have this work put into the world with his name on it, where other, less courageous writers might have opted to use a pen name or to suppress rather than seek publication. Part of the fascination of this novel lies not with the pornography itself but with the author who has produced it, who stalwartly walks from the scorpion garden and cries, ‘Yes, this is also inside me, as well as the other stuff, and I’m sharing this part of myself with you, too’” (127).

In other words, Hemmingson seems to suggest that what is, in fact, so transgressive about *Hogg* is not the pornography, per say, but the fact that Delany chooses to reveal and *own* his choice to represent the unspeakable. And readers, while this may confound us, cannot deny the compulsion/repulsion we experience in contending with this fact. On the other hand, toward the end of her otherwise compelling reading of *Eva’s Man*, Dubey states “The first-person narration of *Eva’s Man* thus helps to contain the novel’s controversial thematic material...facilitated by the unreliability of the narrator” (*Black Women Novelists* 102) and “Eva’s madness functions as a

kind of safety valve, *allowing readers to dismiss* the more uncomfortable moments of the novel as the distorted fabrications of an insane mind” (*Black Women Novelists* 102, emphasis mine).

I disagree and suggest that *Eva’s Man*, like *Hogg*, does not provide, and is expressly disinterested in providing a “safe” reading experience. Neither novel allows respite or reprieve from their unspeakable representations or from the challenges presented to the reader. And this is the point. At their cores, both *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* consistently transgressively push forward in the face of containment from characters, readers, and critics alike. They are novels that, through their aesthetic and affective use of the unspeakable, force readers to contend with, not dismiss, the “uncomfortable moments” and the critical default to rationalize them.

Chapter Two

Claustrophobic “Freedom”: Critiques of the Liberatory in *Sula* and *Trouble on Triton*

Jones: “[Sex] is problematic for Afro-American writers—even more so women (and why many of our early writers scrupulously avoided it)—because when you write about anything dealing with sexuality it appears as if you're supporting the sexual stereotypes about blacks. So do you scrupulously avoid the subject as the so-called uplift writers did or do you go ahead with it?”

—Charles Rowell, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 46

“We know that what’s wrong with utopian thinking in general is that large scale social engineering just doesn’t work.”

—Samuel R. Delany, “The Second *Science-Fiction Studies* Interview” 330

Introduction:

In the previous chapter I used Samuel R. Delany’s concept of the unspeakable as theorized in several of his nonfiction essays and mobilized in his novel *Hogg* to inform my reading of Gayl Jones’ novel *Eva’s Man*. I analyzed how the unspeakable can function to not only thwart critical interpretation, but, in doing so, can force the reader to become meta-aware of his/her inclination to rationalize and epistemologically contain what seeks to evade explanation. In this chapter I read Toni Morrison’s second novel *Sula* (1973) and Delany’s *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976) as companion texts that, although generically disparate (*Sula* is understood to be a paradigmatic black feminist novel whereas *Trouble on Triton* is a Nebula Award-nominated science fiction novel), nevertheless are thematically comparable.

Both novels are almost solely concerned with issues of gender and sexuality. And both use the unspeakable to explicitly critique the identity politics endemic to the time of their production and such politics’ inherent assumption of liberation. The novels leverage their critiques in different ways, however. Whereas *Sula* uses difference to critique conformist ideologies of so-called liberation, through representing the commodification of difference *Trouble on Triton* specifically challenges the notion that, to quote bell hooks, “marginality” is “a

site of resistance.”⁹⁶ It is interesting therefore to read *Trouble on Triton* in conjunction with *Sula*, as the former provides a counter-narrative to *Sula*’s representation of difference’s ruptural possibilities.

Both *Sula* and *Trouble on Triton* were published in the midst of 1970s social and political upheaval motivated by what was later to be called “identity politics” or “identity based liberation movements.” Identity based liberation movements are “the movements demanding voting rights, civil rights, and equality for various disenfranchised groups” in which subjectivities are essentialized and mobilized for political intentions (Alcoff 1).⁹⁷ For example, the Black Power movement of the 1950s through the early 1970s made “the dangerous move in America of public black self-determination” (Coleman 73) and in doing so aggressively forced the nation to reconsider African Americans’ place in society. The second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s advanced issues facing women, such as reproductive rights, to the forefront of American politics, and the black feminist/womanist movement of the 1970s articulated consciousness of interlocking, later to be called “intersectional” oppression. The 1969 Stonewall Riots helped turn the cause of gay rights from an issue involving a small group of activists into a widespread protest advocating for Gay Liberation. Many of Morrison’s and Delany’s literary contemporaries of the 60s and 70s, such as Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Sonia Sanchez, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Michelle Wallace, and Alice Walker to name several, solidified their identities as political, theoretical, and literary activists all working with and through an analytic of identity politics, respective to whatever essentialized subjectivities were relevant to the political project at hand. The radical cultural zeitgeist inherent in the literature, art, consciousness raising, and political momentum of the 60s and early 70s seemed,

⁹⁶ Refer to hooks’s essay “Marginality as Site of Resistance.”

⁹⁷ As Lauren Berlant notes in *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life*, “the experience of identity might be personal and private, but its forms are always ‘collective’ and political” (2).

therefore, to be primarily focused on fetishizing identity politics as a means toward gaining social and political justice for marginalized subjects.

Yet while it was initially “viewed by many Americans as *confirming* rather than *challenging* democratic institutions, and *expanding* rather than *threatening* popular political values” identity politics have come to be understood by critics on both the Right and the Left as “politically limited and misguided” (Alcoff 1, 2, emphasis in original). Judith Butler, famous for her critiques of the identity politics of gender, has stated, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (“Imitation” 13-14). As testament to the paradox produced by identity politics used in the service of both oppressive and liberatory ideologies critic Roderick A. Ferguson notes,

The historic arc that begins in the late 1960s signifies a profound change within modern institutions in the West. Administrative power had to restrict the collective, oppositional, and redistributive aims of difference at the same time that administrative power had to affirm difference to demonstrate institutional protocols and progress. We must read this affirmation as not simply a moment of encouragement but as a moment of subjugation⁹⁸ (“Administering Sexuality” 163).

Furthermore he states, “One could argue that the will to institutionality among groups and communities associated with difference emerged precisely after the critical upheavals of race, gender, and sexuality of the post-civil rights era” (“Administering Sexuality” 167). In other words, Ferguson suggests what those mobilizing identity politics ultimately seek is not just social recognition, but institutionalized legitimacy.

Although it did not come to be called “identity politics” until the 1970s, Toni Morrison has remarked on its influence on African American writers producing work in the early to mid 20th century. She states “James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston—

⁹⁸ Lauren Berlant calls this action “the violence of normativity” (*Cruel Optimism* 28).

all had been called upon to write an essay addressing the ‘problem’ of being a ‘Negro’ writer. And “that no-win situation—inauthentic, even irresponsible, to those looking for a politically representative canvas; marginalized by those assessing value by how ‘moral’ the characters were (*Sula* xii)” is where the black writer finds herself. Disavowing identity politics Morrison explains that in writing *Sula*

My only option was fidelity to my own sensibility. Further exploration of my own interests, questions, challenges. And since my sensibilities were highly political *and* passionately aesthetic, it would unapologetically inform the work I did. I refused to explain, or even acknowledge the ‘problem’ [of being a ‘Negro’ writer] as anything other than an artistic one. Other questions mattered more. What is friendship among women when unmediated by men? What choices are available to black women outside their own society’s approval? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community? (*Sula* xiii).

Morrison uses her character Sula to explore these questions. And as the Gayl Jones epigraph at the beginning of this chapter suggests, even Morrison’s act of writing *Sula* and its representation of a sexually transgressive black woman is an act of individualism (contrary to identity politics) within the “individualistic” yet, as it is/was perceived by a white readership, “racially uniform and socially static community” of African American writers.

What, for Morrison, is the motivation for speaking the unspeakable, which, although she conceptualizes the unspeakable differently from Delany,⁹⁹ is a driving intention of her work? Of her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (itself widely critically acknowledged as a transgressive novel) Morrison states, “the opening [of the novel] provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 149). Whereas Jones’ *Eva’s Man* challenges reader intimacy, Morrison believes in fostering it, stating of such sharing “If [the novel’s protagonists] have any

⁹⁹ As stated in the introduction to this dissertation, Morrison conceptualizes the unspeakable as “...the informing and determining Afro-American presence in traditional American literature” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 145).

success, it will be in transferring the problem of fathoming [the unspeakable] to the presumably adult reader, to the inner circle of listeners. At the least [the protagonists] have distributed the weight of...problematical questions to a larger constituency, and justified the public exposure of a privacy” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 149). For Morrison then, to speak the unspeakable is to publically share the burden of its complexity so as to make it a foremost issue in critical and cultural discourse. Whereas *Hogg* and *Eva’s Man* engage the unspeakable to explore evasion, *Sula* and *Trouble on Triton* speak the unspeakable as a mode of direct critique.¹⁰⁰ This does not mean, however, that I understand the unspeakable, in its candidness, to necessarily be a form of resistance, nor do I understand it to be liberatory.

Like Morrison, Delany was not, and is not, engaged in a project of fetishizing identity politics. In a 1998 interview he stated “In a time when identity politics is sustaining a necessary and clarifying attack/analysis...I am interested in the ‘identities’ (I use the term in its most informal manner) of those who have fallen through the categorical cracks without having slipped wholly free of the nets of desire” (Rowell, “An Interview With Samuel Delany” 37). While *Trouble on Triton* was written almost 20 years prior to this statement, it provides a rather prescient critique of the privileging of identity politics and the resultant commodification of difference it often engenders by exploring one such subject who has fallen through the categorical cracks. Historically and socio-culturally speaking it is interesting to analyze *Trouble on Triton* as a critique antithetical to the utopic gestures of many of Delany’s contemporaries working within and through identity politics to gain social and judicial recognition and rights for

¹⁰⁰ Hortense Spillers notes, “I am not entirely sure that *Sula* speaks for us on the lower frequencies—although she could very well. The importance of the text is that she speaks at all” (“A Hateful Passion” 75). On the other hand, Yung-Hsing Wu advances a reading of *Sula* similar to my reading of *Eva’s Man* as a novel that is in no way forthcoming. Rather, he suggests, the novel strains the representation of ethics by representing them as a “reading problem” (i.e. as “a problematic subject for reading” 782). Refer to his essay “Doing Things with Ethics: *Beloved*, *Sula*, and the Reading of Judgment.”

marginalized subjects. One cannot read the novel without considering it as both a curiously antithetical product of its socio-cultural and historical moment and an ironically precise social critique relevant to the socio-political zeitgeist.

At their cores both *Sula* and *Trouble on Triton* are very much about the tensions between community and loneliness; more specifically, about the rigidity of identity politics that structure a community into a seemingly cohesive unit to the detriment of certain subjects that do not cohere. Both novels feed the socially constructed delineation of “inside”/“outside” society.¹⁰¹ Both *Sula*’s and *Trouble on Triton*’s respective protagonists are constructed as “outsiders” (either by the dominant society or in their own minds) whose ways of being are in tension with the manners and mores of their respective communities.¹⁰² Both novels also represent the (to greater or lesser degree) self-imposed alienation one can experience when refusing to abide by social codes of conformity. Yet whereas Sula is an outlier who will not abide by those codes, *Trouble on Triton*’s protagonist Bron Helstrom relies on the codes endemic to state-sanctioned “freedom” that promise myriad privileges and fulfillment (i.e. “the good life”) in an attempt to make sense of himself, his relationships, and his place in society.

As I do throughout this dissertation I use Delany’s conceptualizing of the unspeakable and the tactic of transgression that the unspeakable manifests through as the guiding framework through which to read the novels. Specifically for *Sula* I focus on that aspect of Delany’s theory

¹⁰¹ “Inside/outside” society is, of course, a false delimitation, as both need the other to self-perpetuate. hooks states “To be in the margin is to part of the whole but outside the main body” (“Marginality” 341). For example, Sula is considered the embodiment of evil by the townspeople of Medallion, Ohio where the narrative occurs. However, not only do they find a way to accept evil, they “let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invent ways to alter it, annihilate it or prevent its happening again” (89-90). They position “evil” in sharp relief to their sense of self-righteous “goodness” so as to define themselves through a process of what Nicole Fleetwood calls “negative differentiation” (*Troubling Vision* 69). The narrator states, “They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117-118). In other words, they need the “outside” to construct the “inside.” Sula, on the margins, “simply helped others define themselves” (95) as part of the main body. When Sula dies, the townspeople “had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made” (153).

¹⁰² On the other hand, Spillers argues “Sula is not the ‘other’ as one kind of reading would suggest, or perhaps as we might wish, but a figure of the rejected and vain part of the self—ourselves” (“A Hateful Passion” 75).

of the unspeakable that I use predominantly throughout this dissertation—“dangerous... lines of communication, fields of interest, and exchanges of power” (“Sword and Sorcery” 136-137)—to read its protagonist and her transgressive actions. Sula’s engagement with the unspeakable is “dangerous” because her actions do not conform to dominant social and political frameworks such as respectability politics that seek to contain subjects as normative. Sula throws the construction of normativity into crisis, thus her desires are also unspeakable because they are illegible to her community and therefore evocative of dangerous possibilities. Ferguson notes “*Sula* allegorized not only the conditions of black women’s gender and sexual regulation, but also a desire to formulate identities and social practices that could withstand and provide alternatives to those limitations” (*Aberrations* 132). In other words, Sula’s tactic of transgression represents different subjectivities and modes of relation that, although understood as threatening to the community, are not necessarily intended to be so even as they critique containment and so-called liberation.

While she does provide explicit critiques of such forms of what Ferguson calls “regulation” (what I call “containment”), Sula inherently problematizes the oppression/resistance binary animating many African American political and critical projects. Hortense Spillers notes, “We do not see Sula in relationship to an ‘oppressor,’ a ‘whitey,’ a male, a dominant and dominating being outside the self. No Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest—black/white, male/female, good/bad—will work here. Instead, Sula emerges as an embodiment of a metaphysical chaos in pursuit of an activity both proper and sufficient to herself” (“A Hateful Passion” 54). Rather than positioning herself in resistance to something or someone, Sula is primarily interested in using the tactic of transgression to become “something else to be” (Morrison, *Sula* 52). In being “something else” Sula is compelled by possibilities not yet

imagined nor represented in her community. And, as revealed in her visions toward the end of her life, such possibilities are “not...restricted to the realm of personal identity” but are “extended to social practice as well” (Ferguson, *Aberrations* 133). Thus *Sula*, much like *Hogg*, mobilizes the unspeakable actions of its protagonist to advance the necessity of maintaining difference. To imagine what alternatives exist, these texts represent difference as central to the exposure of containment’s structuring logic and the subject’s interpolation therein.

To read *Trouble on Triton* I use another of Delany’s articulations of the unspeakable as “unspeakable unless accompanied by especially pressing rhetorical considerations” (“On The Unspeakable” 62). The unspeakable is, on one hand, about genre conventions in that it “comprises the endlessly specialized tropes (of analysis, of apology, of aesthetic distance) required to speak...about various topics at various anomalous places in our complex social geography” (“On The Unspeakable” 61-62). Bron fails to abide by this “set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of,” thus I understand him to be a manifestation of this aspect of the unspeakable. As Delany scholar Robert Elliot Fox notes, “It is precisely style...which Bron lacks” (“The Politics of Desire” 45), with “style” here meaning appropriate conventions.

Bron’s desires are unspeakable because, unlike Sula’s self-awareness, he does not, for much of the narrative, know them—his desires are therefore illegible to him. And when he *does* identify his desires they are so anachronistic to his society, a society that has commodified identity politics in the name of countering conservative ideologies such as what Bron’s desires name, that they lack the appropriate rhetorical considerations to be legible within his society’s extensive imagining of “the good life.” Through its exploration of Bron’s unspeakable interactions the novel represents the claustrophobic “freedom” advanced by liberatory identity

politics that *should* ensure a subject fulfillment of his/her desires and a realization of “the good life,”¹⁰³ but can often alienate, instead.

I find it particularly compelling to turn to an explicit critique of the liberatory through *Trouble on Triton*’s counter-narrative of the value of difference—specifically its vision of “the good life” resultant from marginalized people appealing to institutional forces for social, political, and judicial recognition and rights—after analyzing *Hogg*’s and *Sula*’s (arguably) utopic representations of difference and marginality. I contend that it is important to re-examine *Trouble on Triton* in our contemporary moment in which the intersectionality of race, class, sex, and gender continues to exist in a nexus complicated by permissive, as opposed to coercive, capitalist social economies.¹⁰⁴

Part I: *Sula* and The Politics of Respectability

Sula recalls the lives of two black childhood girlfriends—Nel Wright and Sula Peace—growing up in the early part of the 20th century in a predominantly black neighborhood nicknamed “The Bottom”¹⁰⁵ in Medallion, Ohio. The novel begins in 1919, toward the end of The Women’s Era and the concurrent development of respectability politics, yet it written in the late 1960s and the novel ends in 1965. What, then, is the connection between the novel’s engagements with respectability politics, the time of the text’s production, and the decision to end the novel in 1965? Of *Sula*’s production Morrison states, “one needs to think of the

¹⁰³ I use Berlant’s critique of “the good life”¹⁰³ and “conventionality,” i.e. “that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or world has seen fit to formulate” (*Cruel Optimism* 2)) to read *Trouble on Triton*.

¹⁰⁴ As Ferguson states “We are now in a moment in which we must analyze sexuality and other modes of difference as effects of a will to institutionality” (“Administering Sexuality” 166).

¹⁰⁵ For what I consider to be one of the most provocative and interesting readings of *Sula* to date, particularly due to what she understands to be Morrison’s commitment to debasement, refer to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s chapter “Bottom Values: Anal Economics in the History of Black Neighborhoods” in her book *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*. Darieck Scott also reads Morrison as representing abjection. See his reading of *Beloved* in his chapter “Slavery, Rape, and the Black Male Abject” in *Extravagant Abjection*.

immediate political climate in which the writing took place, 1965-1969, during great social upheaval in the life of black people” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 147). She continues, “The publication (as opposed to the writing) [of *Sula*] involved the exposure; the writing was the disclosure of secrets, ‘we’ shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 147).

One cannot help but understand Morrison’s reference to “exposure” of secrets (exposure of the unspeakable) in connection to the fact that *Sula* was written concurrently with 1965’s *The Moynihan Report* and its “exposure” of supposed black familial pathology. Indeed several critics, notably Gregg Santori, Candice M. Jenkins, and Ferguson,¹⁰⁶ have written about the significance of Morrison’s decision to end the novel in 1965, particularly considering what they understand to be the novel’s explicit engagement with *The Moynihan Report*. Jenkins notes that the novel, although taking place primarily between 1919-1941, “is ultimately framed by 1965’s sensibility” (*Private Lives* 89, emphasis in original) revealing the intimate, under-explored connection between liberatory politics (of which *The Moynihan Report* is, ironically, one famous example)¹⁰⁷ and respectability politics. As Jenkins explains, respectability politics were “newly relevant in 1965 because of Moynihan’s highly publicized report, and as such not just the final chapter of *Sula* but the entire text, can be read through 1965’s heightened attention to black intimate behavior, the sexual and domestic practices that, according to Moynihan, made ‘black

¹⁰⁶ Refer to Jenkins’s chapter “Pathological Women” in her book *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* in which she argues “a number of Moynihan’s theories added to an already existing cultural ideology that posited black poverty as black intimate deviance, a sociocultural morass wisely avoided by the middle class. *Sula* responds to and critiques that ideology, and depends upon the significance of the year 1965 to do so” (88, emphasis in original). See also Santori’s article “*Sula* and the Sociologist: Toni Morrison on American Biopower After Civil Rights” and Ferguson’s chapter “Something Else To Be: *Sula*, The Moynihan Report, and The Negations of Black Lesbian Feminism” in *Aberrations in Black*.

¹⁰⁷ Jenkins notes, “Moynihan perceived himself to be doing just the opposite [of pathologizing black people], that is, pointing out the crucial importance of social and economic policies designed to remedy discrimination—by emphasizing the consequences for the black family if such policies were not implemented” (218).

family stability' so culturally anomalous' (*Private Lives* 89).¹⁰⁸ In other words, the dominant African American response to *The Moynihan Report* reinvigorated the respectability politics of an earlier era by "encourage[ing]...the philosophical basis" of respectability politics, i.e. "self improvement and protection through moral reform" (Jenkins, *Private Lives* 70), which suggests that liberation can come to depend on the very forms of conservative ideologies it seeks to resist. Thus we can read the novel as Morrison looking back on an earlier political moment to meditate on its influence in the time of the text's production.

Nel is raised in a nuclear family in a rigid household shaped by her mother Helene Wright's strict adherence to the politics of respectability. Sula, on the other hand, lives in an affective kinship household amid boarders and foster children. Sula is raised by her grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah; women considered by the community to be eccentric and sexually promiscuous. Although raised within a culture saturated by respectability politics, neither Sula nor her mother, Hannah Peace, abides by such ideology. Thus Helene describes Hannah as "sooty" and "slack" (29) possibly for the way "The Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to all her daughters...The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake" (41). The Peace women, in other words, are confident in their sexuality and generous in its expressions, unspeakable traits for black women at the early part of the twentieth century when the narrative occurs, and still, to some extent, today. Indeed Hannah "rippled with sex" (42), wanting and inviting the male gaze (42), and in turn is reviled by the "good" women in the community who state, "'one thing I can't stand is a nasty woman'"(44). Sula learns from watching her mother "that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44), a worldview contributing to her transgressive sexuality as an adult.

¹⁰⁸ See Susana M. Morris's book *Close Kin and Distant Relatives: The Paradox of Respectability in Black Women's Literature* for her discussion of "the ways in which heterosexual marriage is often discussed not only as a panacea for the problems of working-class Blacks but also as a marker of social responsibility and respectability" (2).

However, despite Hannah and Eva's relaxed attitude toward sex and sexuality, they still abide by certain gender norms, such as marriage and reproduction. Sula, on the other hand, does not. Witnessing Sula's sexual and gendered uncontainability Eva asks her "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you (92)." When Sula replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" Eva retorts "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floating around with no man" (92). Jenkins notes, "Sula's threat to The Bottom seems to lie in her will to place herself at the center of her own life" (*Private Lives* 82) in stark contradistinction to the ideology of The Cult of True Womanhood that had, to some extent, influenced her elders. Indeed, Sula "has no wish to 'mother' anyone, let alone the black race in some symbolic concession to a collective need"¹⁰⁹ (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion" 52) such as the ideology of collective uplift advocated and championed by the politics of respectability.

Sula's best friend Nel is an embodiment of the type of woman Eva wants Sula to be. She is raised by Helene who strictly abides by respectability politics to distance herself from her sordid past as the daughter of a "Creole whore" (17). Helene literally embodies the conservatism of the politics of respectability. She "joined the most conservative black church" in her community "and held sway" (18) with her "dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people's manners" and wearing "a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" (18). She "enjoy[ed] manipulating [Nel] and her husband" through her strict, puritanical way of life and succeeds in "driving her daughter's imagination underground" (18). Yet on a train trip to New Orleans to visit a dying relative Nel witnesses, and Helene experiences the limits of respectability's liberatory potential when faced with white supremacy.

¹⁰⁹ Refer to Madhu Dubey's critical assessment "'No Bottom and No Top': Oppositions in *Sula*" in her book *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* in which she analyzes the novel's relationship to black nationalism.

Although boarding the train Helene felt “she had the best protection: her manner and her bearing...[and] a beautiful dress” and although she “walked head high” (19) she is still referred to as “gal” (20) by a white conductor when she and Nel accidentally board a whites-only car. Helene thinks to herself “So soon. So soon, She hadn’t even begun the trip back...and already she had been called ‘gal.’ All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble” (20). Jenkins posits, “Helen’s shame, conveniently signaled by the word ‘vulnerabilities,’ suggests the thorny racial vulnerability inspiring [respectability politics]—the sense that the black intimate subject is always-already exposed to a sexualized racist scrutiny, scrutiny that assumes black sexual and domestic pathology” (*Private Lives* 76). In the face of the patronizing moniker “gal” Helene addresses the condescending train conductor. However “An eagerness to please and an apology for living met in her voice” (20). And as she speaks to him Nel witnesses Helene smile “Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before (21).

Not only is Helene’s smile conciliatory and seemingly complicit in her own subjugation, it is also sexualized. As the narrator notes, Helene smiled “dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor” (21). On the one hand, by smiling and revealing herself to be “all too capable of the sexual availability that she despises and fears” (Jenkins, *Private Lives* 76) Helene capitulates to white supremacy’s assumption of black hypersexuality. This is unforgivable to the other black people on the train who “looked stricken” (21) and afterwards refused to help Helene with her luggage (22). On the other hand, Jenkins suggests Helene’s smile uses respectability politics as a mode of resistance and liberation. She states “Her smile is meant to distinguish her from the other blacks in the car, to make the conductor see her as exemplary—

thereby lessening her vulnerability in the face of his power” (77-78). This too, as Jenkins notes, would account for the other black passengers’ chagrin, as it is a classist action (*Private Lives* 78).

Regardless of the motivation behind her mother’s smile, in the wake of this experience Nel’s understanding of Helene’s subjectivity is permanently altered. The narrative reads, “In the silence that preceded the train’s heave, [Nel] looked deeply at the folds of her mother’s dress. There in the folds of the heavy brown wool she held her eyes. She could not risk letting them travel upward for fear of seeing that the hooks and eyes in the placket of the dress had come undone and exposed the custard-colored skin underneath” (22). It is in this moment that Nel realizes to what extent the politics of respectability serve to mask black female sexual vitality. She realizes black female sexuality, while contained by both white supremacy and black uplift ideologies, nevertheless threatens to “come undone.” And this knowledge of uncontainable sexuality terrifies Nel and makes her fearful the “if [Helene] were really custard, then there was a chance that [she] was too” (22). Thus, as the narrator recalls, “It was on that train...that [Nel] resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her [the way the conductor looked at Helene]. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (22). Although she witnesses its artifice and fallibility, Nel chooses to abide by the façade of respectability politics in the hopes of containing her suspected innate “custard” and sexuality’s anarchic power.

Despite their different attitudes toward sex and sexuality, for a time Nel and Sula are best friends and are highly attached to one another¹¹⁰ to the extent that they are, in Morrison’s

¹¹⁰ There are multiple critical queer readings of the novel. See, for example, Juda Bennett’s queer-theory study of Morrison’s oeuvre *Toni Morrison and The Queer Pleasure of Ghosts*, Kwang Soon Kim’s essay “Playing in the Marginal Space: Unlearning and Queering the Master’s Narrative in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” Sydney Fontyn Lewis’s article “‘Everything I Know About Being Femme I Learned From *Sula*’ or Toward a Black Femme-inist Criticism,” Ferguson’s chapter “‘Something Else To Be: *Sula*, *The Moynihan Report*, and The Negation of Black Lesbian Feminism,” Barbara Johnson’s article “Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louis*, and *The*

estimation, “two sides of the same person, or two sides of one extraordinary character” (Step 13). Despite her resolve to always be on guard, as a young woman Nel allows herself to be sexually daring with Sula, likely because Sula’s sexual agency and lack of judgment invites such transgressive experimentation. As young women existing “In the safe harbor of each other’s company [Nel and Sula] could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things” (55).

In one highly eroticized instance of early sexual transgression the girls walk to town to get ice cream through the wind that “pushed their dresses into the creases of their behinds, then lifted the hems to peek at their cotton underwear” (49). However getting ice cream is merely an excuse to be seen by the town’s men. As Nel and Sula walk past the men the narrative reads

Pig meat. The words were in all [the men’s] minds. And one of them, one of the young ones, said it aloud. Softly but definitively and there was no mistaking the *compliment*. His name was Ajax, a twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty...So, when he said ‘pig meat’ as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see *their delight*.

It was not really Edna Finch’s ice cream that made them brave the stretch of those panther eyes. Years later their own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles, the squatting haunches, the track-rail legs straddling broken chairs. The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them.

They moved toward the ice-cream parlor like tightrope walkers, as thrilled by the possibility of a slip as by the maintenance of tension and balance. The least sideways glance, the merest toe stub, could pitch them into those creamy haunches spread wide with welcome. Somewhere beneath all of that daintiness, chambered in all that neatness, lay the thing that clotted their dreams (50-51, emphasis mine).

Not only do Nel and Sula invite the male gaze, they also “delight” in their objectification as sexually desirable (they consider the objectifying term “pig meat” to be a “compliment”).

Accused,” and Barbara Smith’s canonical *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* which initiated the proto-queer reading of *Sula*.

This scene, with its eroticized references to “cream,” “vanilla,” and “clotted,” is interesting to read in comparison to Nel’s fear of her mother’s and her own inherent sexual “custard.” In other words, the very thing that terrifies Nel (sex and its uncontainability) is the same thing that compels her toward transgression and toward her own sexual awakening at Sula’s side. Nel and Sula’s burgeoning sexuality is referred to as “an unspeakable restlessness and agitation” (59) and in Sula’s presence Nel allows herself to feel “a little raunchy” (95), suggesting transgression’s erotic potential to trouble containment, which is, of course, what also makes Sula’s actions unspeakable and “dangerous” to women like Nel who ultimately wish to control sexuality.

Yet ultimately, due to the way she was raised¹¹¹ and the fact that “Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (83), Nel grows into heteronormativity. She marries Jude, a man that needs Nel in order to fulfill his own gendered expectations through performing “a man’s role” (82), and they have three children together. Nel thus conforms to the gendered and sexual expectations of the women of The Bottom. Morrison states, “Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She *is* the community. She believes in its values” (Step 13, emphasis in original). “Sula” on the other hand, “does not believe in the values of the community” of The Bottom (Step 13).

Part II: Sula’s Negative Affect

¹¹¹ Of Hannah’s and Helene’s mothering styles and their impact on Sula and Nel, respectively, Jenkins notes “The differences between these two styles of mothering point out the role of intergenerational training in the progression of black women’s sexual dissemblance. Morrison’s text seems to suggest that the self-discipline required of black women by the [demands of respectability] is a learned behavior, the logical extension of a prior, maternally imposed discipline” (72).

Hortense Spillers identifies Sula as articulating a “negative, naysaying freedom” through “dark impulses” (“A Hateful Passion” 54, 51). Taking Spillers’s observation as my starting point, I read Sula as performing what J. Jack Halberstam calls an “anti-social, negative, and anti-relational theory of sexuality” (“The Anti-Social Turn” 140). “Anti-social” or the “antisocial thesis”—a theory of negative affect first articulated by Leo Bersani’s observation of “inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known” (*Homos* 76)—is a highly debated concept in LGBTQ studies and queer theory.¹¹² Unfortunately the complexity, and difficulty, of the theoretical questions posed by the antisocial thesis have predominantly been flattened into a “constructive”/“destructive” binary. However, like my use of the concept of transgression, the “antisocial,” as Berlant and Edelman clarify, does not proclaim to “stand outside the social” (xiii). Rather it challenges “the fixity of social forms that seem to define the possibilities for and the limits of relationality” (xiii). In other words, like Delany’s commitment to the social (evidenced by the unspeakable’s inextricability from the everyday), Berlant and Edelman stress the antisocial is not a “simple antithesis to the social but rather [is] intrinsic to it” (xiii) in that it imagines alternate practices of affective relation.

While I do not read Sula’s negative sexual expression (“negative” meaning “the psychic and social incoherences [*sic*] and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity” (Berlant and Edelman vii-viii)) as providing the “freedom” Spillers suggests (especially when considering negative affect’s complex relationship to resistance),¹¹³ I

¹¹² The debate is engaged in multiple forums, but was notably the subject of an MLA roundtable in 2005 called “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory” at which Edelman, Halberstam, Tim Dean, and José Muñoz, among others, spoke.

¹¹³ Regarding negativity’s relationship to resistance Berlant and Edelman state, “Generally negativity signifies a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience. In its disturbance of such totalizations, negativity enacts the dissent without which politics disappears. Negativity, in this sense, is inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation. *However*, by challenging the coherence of the categories through which the subordinated produce their claims for

do understand it as a performance that “upends our understanding of the interconnectedness of intimacy, romance, and sexual contact and replaces it with a harsh but radically realistic recognition of both the selfishness of sex and its destructive power” (“The Anti-Social Turn” 140). Much of the antisocial turn in queer theory concerns a rejection of affirmation and futurity¹¹⁴ (partially accounting for its flattened interpretation as solely “destructive”) in order to “propose a relentless form of negativity in place of forward looking, reproductive and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects” (Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn” 141).

Unsurprisingly then, Sula’s negative affect begins in earnest on Nel’s wedding day. On that day Sula leaves Medallion for a decade to pursue myriad independent adventures around the country, to receive an education at Fisk University, and to have multiple affairs, some supposedly with white men. When she returns she has an affair with Jude, Nel’s husband, as she does with many married men in the community. Jude subsequently leaves his family and the town altogether. In the wake of the affair, in which Nel discovers Sula and Jude “down on all four naked...like dogs” (105), Nel loses her gendered and sexual self that was so intimately tied to respectability and its supposed containment of the sanctity of marriage, monogamy, and family and “pins herself into a tiny life” (165). “For now,” Nel thinks, “[my] thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed [my] heart and the both of them who left [me] with no thighs and no heart just [my] brain raveling away” (111). Sula subsequently finds herself the town’s “pariah” (122) due to her flagrant disregard of the community’s social conventions of respectability meant to assure its women of contained inviolable gendered and sexual identities held sacred in marriage.

legitimation, negativity can also become an *obstacle* to their organized resistance to things as they are” (xii, emphasis mine).

¹¹⁴ See, for instance, Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* and Lee Edelman’s *No Future*.

However to Sula, her act was motiveless and lacking the kinds of cultural, sexual, and gendered significance Nel and the community attach to it. When asked for an explanation of her behavior Sula states, “Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That’s all. He just filled up the space” (144). This is a frustrating non-“rational” “explanation” similar to what Eva in *Eva’s Man* expresses when she suggests she murdered Davis in order to “to fill in the feelings” (*Eva’s Man* 169). Sula does not understand that heterosexual possessiveness is central to respectability politics’ framing of marriage and monogamy and asks Nel “If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145).

Morrison describes Sula in her 1988 lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” as “daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained, and uncontainable. And dangerously female” (153). The most compelling phrase here is “unpolicing, uncontained, and uncontainable” for this evasion is what the tactic of transgression strives to accomplish. As evidenced by her affair with Jude, Sula “behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out” (101). Sula’s tactic of transgression manifests as promiscuous sex that allows her to “look for misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow” (122). Ironically, it is through sex that she seeks to be “completely alone—where she had always wanted to be” (148). She uses negative affect to gain a sense of autonomy in the loneliness that sex activates for her; to feel “a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123). Antisocial negative affect broaches “sociality and sex outside their connection to repair” (Berlant and Edleman xiv), to recovery work, and to liberation.

Sula “rejected those lovers who regarded sex as healthy or beautiful,” choosing instead to engage “dangerous” practices of relation through abject sex that flirts with a BDSM power dynamic (a concept I discuss in depth in the following chapter). Sula

went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place that she could find what she was looking for...during the lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a *position of surrender*, feeling her own *abiding strength and limitless power* (123, emphasis mine).

This passage encapsulates my interest in reading transgression in *Sula* in that it provides a way of recognizing Sula’s unspeakable desire for personal power through sexual submission. It is through Sula’s transgressive sexual practices of blending submission with a sense of autonomy (much as Eva in *Eva’s Man* does as well) that Sula is able to “[meet] herself, [welcome] herself, and [join] herself in matchless harmony” (123).

Sula uses sexualized power play to “reach out...and touch with an ungloved hand” (120) a version of herself that transgression makes accessible. Jenkins reads the reference to the “ungloved hand” as denoting “the bourgeois gentility promoted by [respectability politics], the ‘ladylike’ behavior that an immaculately gloved hand might symbolize” (*Private Lives* 81). She continues, “Sula’s self-touch with uncovered fingers and palm mark her rejection of such propriety—and, in that the image of a glove also suggests the potential *masking* of both identity and actual sensation, the ‘ungloved hand’ recalls the embrace of a fuller, more intense and honest experience of sexuality than that which her community would allow here” (*Private Lives* 81, emphasis in original). Sula “Knew that [the people of the Bottom] despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men” (122), however their

hatred could also stem from their fear of the uncontainability of sexuality that Sula embodies.

Halberstam notes, “in the willing giving over of the self to the other, to power...in a performance of radical passivity,” such as how Sula describes her sexual interactions, “we witness the willingness of the subject to actually come undone” (“The Anti-Social Turn” 151). He continues, “The anti-social dictates an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate; and a radical passivity allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference” (“The Anti-Social Turn” 151).

If we read Sula as performing negative affect, then we need to remember that, just as the unspeakable is politically illegible to many critics, “negativity might well constitute an anti-politics but it should not register as apolitical” (Halberstam, “The Anti-Social Turn” 148).¹¹⁵

Rather, as Spillers states,

Sula is a rebel idea, both for her creator and for her Morrison’s audience. To read *Sula* is to encounter a sentimental education so sharply discontinuous from the dominant traditions of Afro-American literature in the way that it compels and/or deadlocks the responses that the novel, for all its brevity and quiet intrusion on the landscape of American fiction is, to my mind, the single most important irruption of black women’s writing in our era...the novel describes a new dimension of being, moving at last in contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos which tends to overwhelm black female characterization in a monolith of terms and possibilities (“A Hateful Passion” 51-52).

I read Sula’s negative affect as constituting the novel’s articulation of a “new dimension of being” in “contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos” expected of black female characters. Sula’s negative affect undergirds her tactic of transgression and is the political gesture that renders the

¹¹⁵ Berlant and Edelman understand to what extent their engagement with negative affect, particularly within the discipline of LGBTQ studies that has a deep commitment to “reclaiming and repairing lost histories and ongoing practices of delegitimation,” can be misinterpreted as “quietistic, apolitical, nihilistic, defeatist, or even irresponsible” (xii). However they contend (like I contend about the unspeakable), “negativity is not the opposite of politics, not a practice of withdrawal from contesting the terms and structures of existence, but rather a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways” (xvi). For instance, Halberstam notes that there are myriad instances of feminist theorists/artists/activists whose work can be understood within the antisocial/negative affect realm. He mentions, for example, Yoko Ono, Patti Smith, Marina Abramović, Jamaica Kincaid, and Valerie Solanas, among others, to which I would add Gayl Jones, Lydia Lunch, Tracy Emin, Marianne Faithful, and many more.

novel so crucial to American and African American literary history. And while I do not, as Spillers does, read the novel as “the single most important irruption of black women’s writing in our era,” I do maintain that it represents an archetype of black female-authored, black female transgression that has few African American literary peers.¹¹⁶

In her antisocial, negative sexuality Sula represents a mode of sexual knowing alternative to the structuring logic of respectability politics that contain the racially gendered and sexual expressions of women like Nel. Nel, and other women in the community abide by and allow such politics to dictate the expression (or silencing) of their desires. Sula describes such women as spiders who live in fear, relishing their role as “victims”¹¹⁷ rather than seeking to invent a life for themselves in the face of numerous social adversities (120). She thinks

Now Nel was one of *them*. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below. Their eyes so intent on the wayward stranger who trips into their net, they were blind to the cobalt on their own backs, the moonshine fighting to pierce their corners. If they were touched by the snake’s breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role (just as Nel knew how to behave as the wronged wife). But the free fall, oh no, that required—demanded—invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay alive. But alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous. Now Nel belonged to the town and all its ways. She had given herself over to them, and the flick of their tongues would drive her back into her little dry corner where she would cling to her spittle high above the breath of the snake and the fall (120).

¹¹⁶ Sula, the character, often gets compared to Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ursa Corregidora from Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, the latter of whom I analyze in chapter four of this dissertation.

¹¹⁷ The term “victim” has a fraught history in feminism. Naomi Wolf’s book *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* asserts the particularly problematic phrase “victim feminism.”

Here, Sula critiques respectability politics' supposed liberatory promise, revealing it to be a form of containment that drives women into "little dry corners" afraid of the invention, the transgression, needed to "stay alive."

In stark relief to such fearful woman, Sula's lover Ajax (the same man who called Sula and Nel "pig meat" when they were young) describes Sula as one of the two women he had ever met who knew her "life was her own" (127). And this is because

Sula was distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her, and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to give pain as to feel pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life (118).

Here again we have a description of Sula's sexuality as informed by sexual power play ("as willing to give pain as to feel pain"). But it is specifically Sula's selfishness that constructs her as "distinctly different" in stark relief to the values promoted by The Cult of True Womanhood that the politics of respectability emulate. At one point when Nel halfheartedly tries to reconcile with Sula and tells her that men are "worth keeping" (143) Sula states, "Is that what I'm supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?...They ain't worth more than me" (143). And when Nel accuses Sula of being lonely Sula articulates her negative affect to take ownership of that loneliness, replying "Yes. But my *lonely* is mine" (143, emphasis in original).

Ideologies of radical feminism and black feminism/womanism¹¹⁸ might consider Sula to be complicit in her own sexual domination within a patriarchal society. After all, to read a woman's pleasure in what is often considered her "degradation" challenges, in particular, the feminist antipornography movement that vehemently argued women *do not* enjoy pornography

¹¹⁸ Refer to Jennifer C. Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* for an extensive overview of dominant American feminist movements of the 20th and 21st centuries.

or casual or non-romantic sex precisely because such scenarios are read as always already patriarchal contexts that subordinate women and deny them agency or choice.¹¹⁹ I propose that at its core *Sula*, much like *Eva's Man*, is about the black female protagonist's anger at people and institutions that try to explain/rationalize black women's supposedly "aberrant" sexuality. However, I argue such anger is not because Sula finds these rationalizations disrespectful (although many, in fact, are). Rather, it is because these explanations ignore the truth that Sula (like Eva in *Eva's Man*) welcomes sexual acts/actions that are "not natural" (*Eva's Man* 120-121) and that cannot be explained away using conventional narratives of pathology.

Unlike Jones' protagonist, however, Sula hopes to publically claim her "deviant" sexual autonomy in contexts that consider such subjectivity unspeakable. And in doing so she critiques conservative identity politics, such as respectability and radical feminism, that in their liberatory aims disallow, ignore, or over-determine explanations for unspeakable expressions of sexuality.¹²⁰ As such, (as it was with *Eva's Man*), in reading *Sula*

The audience does not have an easy time responding to the [black female] agent, because the usual sentiments about black women have been excised, and what we confront instead is the entanglement of our own conflicting desires, our own contradictory motivations concerning issues of individual woman-freedom. Sula is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously because her audience is forced to accept the corruption of absolutes and what has been left in their place—the complex, alienated, transitory gestures of a personality who has no framework of moral reference beyond or other than herself" (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion" 53).

We do not have "an easy time" responding to Sula because her negative affect and unspeakable actions render her illegible to our dominant political frameworks of liberation. Of the productivity and limitations of black feminism/womanism (one such liberatory political

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Diana E.H. Russell's, Andrea Dworkin's, and Catherine MacKinnon's essays collected in Drucilla Cornell's *Feminism and Pornography* reader.

¹²⁰ Refer to Gayl Rubin's "Thinking Sex: Notes For a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" for her analysis of this issue.

framework that we might seek to read *Sula* through) Higginbotham notes, “Black women scholars...seek to ground a black feminist standpoint in the concrete experience of race and gender oppression. Notwithstanding the critical importance of this work in contesting racism and sexism in the academy and larger society, its focus does not permit sufficient exploration of ideological spaces of difference among black women themselves” (“African American” 270-271). *Sula*, in embodying an “ideological space of difference” represents, as Morrison articulates, “risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community” (*Sula* xii-xiii).

Sula’s tactic of transgression allows her to disregard (although not erase!) the long-standing American social and political hierarchy of sexuality that Gayl Rubin identifies in her seminal essay “Thinking Sex: Notes For A Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” Rubin notes, “According to this system, sexuality that is ‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home...Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad,’ ‘abnormal,’ or ‘unnatural.’ Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial” (“Thinking Sex” 152). *Sula*’s transgressive eroticism allows her to critically explore herself, her sexuality, and gendered/sexualized social worlds in ways illegible to the discourses and conventions of her era, and problematic at the time of the text’s production.

Sula exists on the margins of her society. She “remains Morrison’s most memorable character, largely because she resists categorization” (Bloom 2). By engaging a fiercely independent, transgressive sexuality she exhibits “elusiveness and indifference to established patterns of behavior” (Morrison, *Sula* 127) such as respectability politics that proclaim to provide liberation from white supremacy’s assumptions of African Americans’ “deviant” gender and

sexual identities and intimate, familial relationships. It is through Sula's uncontainability that she throws the socialized constructions of family, motherhood, monogamy, marriage, respectability, and black female racial and gendered decorum into sharp relief, (conventions that dominantly proliferate today).¹²¹ Thus Sula is positioned on the margins as an outlier, a pariah, primarily on the basis of her performances of aberrant sexual and gendered identities. The novel can be read, in one sense, as didactic, as Sula's marginality explicitly critiques those caught within ideologies of respectability. However, rather than merely using transgression to resist respectability, Sula's tactic of transgression allows the text to draw attention to alternative political ideas/practices of social and sexual autonomy.

For example, rather than allowing white supremacy's delimitation of her gender and sexuality to lead her to embrace the politics of respectability as a means to ascertain "freedom," Sula instead embraces white supremacy's de-gendering of black woman as a means to justify her acts of flagrant social and sexual autonomy and she takes a negative stance, stating, "I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?" (142). Morrison states

[Sula] is a masculine character in that sense. She will do the kind of things that normally only men do, which is why she's so strange. She really behaves like a man. She picks up a man, drops a man, the same way a man picks up a woman, drops a woman. And that's her thing. She's masculine in that sense. She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared, she really ain't scared. And she is curious and will leave and try anything. So that quality of masculinity—and I mean this in the pure sense—in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage. She can't get away with that (Step 27).

While Morrison may indeed be essentializing gender roles in this statement, it is clear that one aspect of the productivity of Sula's negative affect is in its troubling of gender and sexual

¹²¹ See Morris's *Close Kin and Distant Relatives* in which she states "Nevertheless, even as the numbers of those pursuing legal marriage decrease in the United States and the Caribbean, the notion that marriage is both an ideal worth pursuing and an example of highly respectable behavior has not gone out of fashion...Indeed, marriage not only has continued to be an ideal for many Blacks in the United States and the Caribbean but in some cases has been ascribed an elevated, almost mythical, status" (2).

conventions inherent to the historical context of the narrative and to the time of the novel's production.

Specifically, Sula's negative affect contributes to what is read by the townspeople as her rejection of community. She "came to [the townspeople's] church suppers without underwear, bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it—relishing nothing, exclaiming over no one's ribs or cobbler. They believed she was laughing at their God. And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible" (114-115). Because Sula's negative affect is illegible to the community's ideologies and threatening to their privileging of collectivity, the townspeople cannot understand Sula's transgressions as anything other than an embodiment of evil. She is described by the townspeople as "a roach" and "a bitch" and they spread rumors that she indeed slept with white men (113). Intercourse with white men is the ultimate unspeakable act for the townspeople who "insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable" (113).

Thus Sula, as a self-possessed, sexually experimental woman expressing her agency and desires without regard for the politics of respectability that contour her community, implicitly and explicitly, purposefully and unintentionally, critiques society from her place on the margins. Spillers suggests, "If we identify Sula as a kind of countermythology [to black women as either "virtuous" or monstrous, victims or emasculating] we are saying that she is no longer bound by a rigid pattern of predictions, predilections, and anticipations...Sula demands, I believe, that we not only see anew, but also *speak* anew" ("A Hateful Passion" 75, 55, emphasis in original). Spillers continues, "Even though [Sula] is a character in a novel, her strategic place as *potential being* might argue that *subversion* itself—law breaking—is [a tactic] that women must confront from its various angles, in its different guises" ("A Hateful Passion" 75, emphasis in original).

However, as is the case with the unspeakable, what Spillers calls Sula's "subversion" lacks legibility to allow the women in the novel to confront it with an open mind. And in performing the unspeakable and in living into a version of the self yet unimagined by society and its social structures, Sula embodies a "metaphysical chaos" (Spillers, "A Hateful Passion" 54)" that made her "dangerous like any artist with no form" (121).

While transgression troubles forms of containment such as respectability politics, I do not intend to suggest that such a tactic is liberatory. In other words, I am not arguing Sula's negative affect or tactics of transgression are alternative programs of liberation or "more" liberatory gestures than the identity politics she critiques. Indeed Harold Bloom states, "No program of Liberation would have saved [Sula] from herself" (2). And Sula dies at the end of the novel, which feeds into criticism that many outlaw women in American literature are ultimately (problematically) punished for their transgressions. However, it is important to note that Sula dies not necessarily as punishment for her unspeakable lifestyle, but rather once "she began to discover what possession was" (131) in her relationship with Ajax. In other words, she dies after she began to conform to gendered and sexual norms of behavior. Morrison explains how the concept of possession functions in the novel stating, "You own somebody and then you begin to want them all the time, which is a community law. Marriage, faithfulness, fidelity; the beloved belongs to one person and can't be shared with other people—that's a community value that Sula learned when she fell in love with Ajax, which he wasn't interested in learning" (Step 15).

Sula's death has been critiqued as the novel's major "failure" because it seems to extinguish Sula's potential to be a disruptive force.¹²² However, what is crucial to bear in mind is Morrison's statement that Sula insists upon a "complex, contradictory, evasive, independent,

¹²² See, for instance, Anne T. Salvatore's "Toni Morrison's New Bildungsromane: Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved*" and Jacqueline de Weever's "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*."

liquid modernity...she is New World black and New World woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to new things. Improvisational” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 154, 153). Sula, who Morrison explicitly states “is perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing” (Step 14), invites a collective, transgressive exploration of boundaries and a questioning of gendered and sexual selves within the constraints of social mores that actively dissuade such unspeakable thoughts. On her deathbed Sula articulates with preternatural foresight the political relevance of her transgressions. In the scene Nel (speaking collectively for the people of The Bottom) scorns Sula’s actions and her expectation of love in spite of them stating, “You laying there in your bed without a dime or a friend to your name having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?” (145) to which Sula responds

Oh, they’ll love me alright. It will take time, but they’ll love me...After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stephen Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like (145-146).

Critic Ayesha K. Hardison (in a tone evocative of the normative tenants of respectability politics) argues that because “she dies alone at the end of the novel” Sula’s “sexuality fails to manifest erotic power” (93). However I contend that, while Sula’s vision is not a “liberatory” vision in that it will not necessarily free subjects from structures of oppression, it *is* an articulation of alternative erotic relations activated by the tactic of transgression. Sula thinks she will be loved, eventually, because she feels that through her actions she gave the townspeople a

glimpse of the power of transgression to trouble sexual delimitation. Sula's monologue therefore mirrors Delany's sentiment in which he states "...the only way I am at all interested in [the] self is precisely when it is in excess of what can be categorized so easily...precisely where it is non-identical to the categories that try to contain [it]; that is, to say, where [the self is] a question"

(Rowell, "An Interview with Samuel Delany" 38). Delany continues,

"All identities...only become interesting when they start to 'leak.' And the leaking process causes them to slide against and seal with others, from which they can never get free:

Black with white, white with black...

Gay with straight, straight with gay...

Male with female, female with male...

Mad with sane, sane with mad..." (Rowell, "An Interview with Samuel Delany" 38).

In other words, on her deathbed Sula articulates the ability of her tactic of transgression to trouble containment as it seeks to advance "uncontained and uncontainable" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 153) expressions of the gendered and sexual self that leak, that "slide against and seal with others," and that invite one to invent alternate modes of social and sexual relation. And, in imagining such transgressions, what Sula suggests here is that many unspeakable taboos and stigmas eventually fade with the passage of time and history; transgression itself is reframed within different social, political, and cultural contexts. Sula seems to understand that transgressive experimentation within the contours of any given social/political context can be beneficial to living a more experimental, inventive life.

Sula insists the only way to live is to live transgressively. On her deathbed she tells Nel, "I know what every colored woman in this country is doing...Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (143). It is not until the end of the novel that Nel realizes, too late and with great sorrow, the extent to which conservative ideologies can sever relationships, specifically

between women, as well as alienate the self from its erotic potential. And she learns that the politics of respectability's privileging of heterosexual intimacy and the heteronormative drive to marriage, monogamy, and reproduction can blind women to forms of homosocial intimacy that may be even more profound and satisfying. At the end of the novel Nel laments,

‘All that time, all that time I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up in her throat. ‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something. ‘O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’

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

Of the ending Morrison states, “Nel...doesn't know about herself. Even at the end, she doesn't know. She's just beginning. She just barely grabs on at the end in those last lines. So that living totally by the law and surrendering completely to it without questioning anything sometimes makes it impossible to know anything about yourself” (Step 14).

Confining herself to a “tiny life” blinded Nel to the fact that clinging to social convention, particularly through rigid sexual containment, was a desperate attempt to self-identify as “good” in contradistinction to Sula's supposed “evilness.” Ultimately then, what Nel begins to learn is that “an embrace of propriety and a rejection of the erotic that is believed to be a source of personal and communal strength...instead offers only limitation and a self-imposed repression” (Jenkins, *Private Lives* 85). And Spillers argues that what Nel mourns in this final passage's “trauma of recognition” is the loss of “her alter ego passionately embodied in the other woman” (“A Hateful Passion” 67, 68), suggesting that Nel longs for her lost erotic possibilities nurtured through the tactic of transgression Sula performed and inspired.

Part III: Institutionalizing Desire in Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton*

Trouble on Triton provides another vision of what it looks like to live “totally by the law and [surrender] completely to it without questioning anything” that “sometimes makes it impossible to know anything about yourself” (Stepto 14). But unlike *Sula*, here the social law is not restrictive—it is permissive, which provides a different philosophical quandary. Delany published *Trouble on Triton* in 1976 (the narrative is set in 2112) in the aftermath of the same identity based liberation movements concurrent with *Hogg’s*, *Eva’s Man’s*, and *Sula’s* production. Writing as his critical alter-ego K. Leslie Steiner Delany states, “What Delany has given us [in *Trouble on Triton*] is a richly detailed treatment of the problem of the liberal, in a society that has radically implemented what began as liberal pipedreams for a better world” (“*Trouble on Triton*” 96).

In the 60s and 70s, radical political movements and their affiliated writers were voicing such “liberal pipedreams” through utopic sentiment of equality and agency manifested through collectivity. Such a society, as one can ascertain from the rhetoric of the time, would assumedly arise once various forms of difference were fully recognized and embraced within the social sphere and such tolerance was reflected in policy. Considering that the identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the rebirth of the utopian literary tradition, it is understandable that institutional recognition of difference and state-sanctioned rights are inherent to such visions of utopian “freedom” within much literature of the time.

However, as critic Edward K. Chan states, while “The literary tradition of utopia had largely been able to concentrate on the political, economic, and social structures necessary to attain the ideal society” it had largely ignored “the subjective experience of those structures” (186). Chan therefore notes “As part of the rebirth of the utopian narrative of the 1970s *Triton*¹²³

¹²³ Throughout his essay “(Vulgar) Identity Politics in Outer Space: Delany’s *Triton* and the Heterotopian Narrative” (2001) Chan refers to *Trouble on Triton* by its original title *Triton*.

was obliged to deal with the issue of individuality that dystopia had brought to the fore earlier in the century” (186). And although “the overriding social unit of *Triton* is not the individual but the group” (Chan 197), by focusing on the alienated psychology of one individual subject, Bron Helstrom, *Trouble on Triton* reveals to what extent utopian visions of freedom, such as state-sanctioned tolerance, neuters the ruptural potential of difference as it commodifies it for the state’s own purposes.

The world Delany envisions in *Trouble on Triton* is an advanced capitalist heterotopia.¹²⁴ The novel highlights the crisis of an increasingly insidious power structure that claims tolerance in the form of policy dissemination while maintaining control of choice and pleasure, effectively rendering difference incapable of the kind of inventive rupture imagined in *Sula*. Ferguson calls this phenomenon “the metastases of institutional affirmation, recognition, and legibility” (“Administering Sexuality” 158). However, despite the subtitle of the book *An Ambiguous Heterotopia*, and despite Delany’s protestations that *Trouble on Triton* is *not* a utopia,¹²⁵ many critics have read the novel as such.¹²⁶ Like Chan, I find that it is more compelling to read the novel as a heterotopia, specifically because “unlike utopia” heterotopia presumes “the inevitability of social difference” (Chan 181).

The novel’s government, The Federation, is represented as fully recognizing its citizens’

¹²⁴ Considering that he cites it in an epigraph to *Trouble on Triton*’s Appendix B Delany likely takes the term “heterotopia” from Foucault’s *Order of Things*. As Delany quotes, Foucault states “Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold... Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names” (*The Order of Things* xviii). Refer to Chan’s reading of *Trouble on Triton* as a “heterotopian narrative” that calls epistemology into question in his article “(Vulgar) Identity Politics in Outer Space: Delany’s *Triton* and the Heterotopian Narrative.”

¹²⁵ Refer to “The Second *Science-Fiction Studies* Interview” for Delany’s discussion of the novel in which he states “any social meaning heterotopia has” he meant to “contrast to the idea of ‘utopia,’ not absorb the idea” (342) and for his meditations on SF utopia more generally.

¹²⁶ See, for instance, David Golumbia’s “Black and White World: Race, Ideology, and Utopia in *Triton* and *Star Trek*,” William Hardesty’s “Mapping the Future: Extrapolation in Utopian/Dystopian and Science Fiction,” Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, and John Fekete’s “The *Dispossessed* and *Triton*: Act and System in Utopian Science Fiction.”

differences, anticipating their desires as tied to those differences, and providing accordingly in predetermined configurations of endless choices and possibilities for “fulfillment” and comfort based upon citizens’ lifestyle predilections. The Federation provides for its citizens’ desires using subjective identifiers, as evidenced by co-ops (*de rigueur* in the 1960s and 70s) in which citizens cohabitate based upon their preferences in regards to family configurations, sex, gender, and sexual activities. It does so in order to institutionalize and contain its citizens via “the good life” and to keep them from questioning the government’s dreadful intergalactic affairs. As Bron, who lives in an all male, non-specific co-op (suggesting his ambivalence toward commodified identity politics) bitterly explains it, “If you’re gay, you find a gay co-operative; if you’re straight you go find yourself one of the male/female co-operatives where everything is all *Gemütlichkeit* and community consciousness; and there’s every combination in between” (99). Bron’s bitterness is directed at the government’s commodification of difference to provide its citizens with a sense of *Gemütlichkeit*—cordiality, good will, peace of mind, belonging, and social acceptance. However, like all of Triton’s citizens Bron, a white, male ex-prostitute originally from Mars, has no “freedom” without strict adherence to the structures of tolerance that his adopted city provide. Bron thus realizes his freedom is a “contractual freedom” (8) and that he, like everyone, is ironically “oppressed by the system” (26) that gives its citizens everything they could desire.

It is interesting to consider the repercussions of legally sanctioning difference in the name of “tolerance.” Although its citizens like to applaud Tethys’ broadmindedness, particularly in comparison to Earth’s intolerance, (for example they state, “our culture allows, supports, and encourages behavior that simply in the streets of both licensed and unlicensed sectors, would have produced some encounter with some restraining institution if they were indulged in on

Earth a hundred years ago” (226) and “this isn’t some goddamn police state. Where do you think we are, Earth? (62)), Tethys nevertheless is a society that is stiflingly claustrophobic because all lifestyle choices, daily modes of existence, and social economies of interaction are tightly controlled by the state in the name of granting subjective autonomy.

I find it useful to read the novel through Ferguson’s “queer of color analysis”—a theoretical approach imagined “in the move beyond identity politics”—which “extends women of color feminism by investigating how intersecting racial, gender, and sexual practices antagonize and/or *conspire* with the normative investments of nation state and capital” (*Aberrations* 29, 4, emphasis mine). I specifically use Ferguson’s concept of what he calls “the will to institutionality”¹²⁷ as I am not interested in antagonism here so much as I am interested in the collusion of identity politics with state-sanctioned “freedom.” Ferguson describes “the will to institutionality” as “the calculus that seeks to determine the properties and functions of those modes [of difference]” (“Administering Sexuality” 163). Although in his analysis of the will to institutionality he focuses on institutions of higher learning, Ferguson asks a question that can be applied to all institutional contexts (such as Triton under the administration of The Federation). He inquires, “What changes does a mode of difference undergo in administrative contexts” meaning “not only discrete institutions but an entire historical ethos” (163)? I use his understanding of “administration” as “historical ethos” to read how difference is incorporated in The Federation.

Within the advanced capitalist society of Triton, “freedom” and privilege is the currency with which the government keeps its citizens complacent so they won’t acknowledge, question, or be curious about Triton’s grievous geo-political affairs. There is a war between Neptune and

¹²⁷ See his book *The Reorder of Things: The University and Its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, particularly the chapter “Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionality,” for an in-depth analysis of this concept.

Earth being fought, ironically, over social welfare (152) and all Triton's citizens know (although most deny and/or ignore) that it will be quick to implicate itself in the conflict. Triton's social "freedom" therefore is one of the inherent privileges unique to a society rife with power, which produces both "the redundant formality of the orderly, licensed world" (8) and the "contractual freedom" of the unlicensed-sector of the city (the u-l) (8). It is Triton's acts of opaque colonial warfare and their purposeful obscurity that afford Triton's citizens their freedoms.¹²⁸

The novel can be read as a prescient critique of tolerance in the name of containment as well as the related gentrification of outlaw spatial economies that has proliferated. Tethys, the city on Triton where Bron lives, is an ordered society in the "licensed sector" of the city in which there are structures with names such as "the hegemony lobby" (1) and signs that state "KNOW YOUR PLACE IN SOCIETY" (4). It is also a society of state-sponsored lawlessness and "freedoms" in the u-l. The city is literally structured into spatial configurations of containment and transgression. However the u-l is a "pseudo-outlaw" spatial economy of transgression, pseudo because the city's founders produce it in anticipation of the fact that "most cities develop, of necessity, such a neighborhood anyway" (8). As the text intimates, such spaces as the u-l are necessary because they "fulfill a complex range of functions in the cities' psychological, political, and economic ecology" (8). Indeed, like pre-Giuliani Times Square, spaces of excess—such as that which the u-l is simulating—are arguably crucial spaces due to their evasion of containment, their eroticization of difference, and their purposeful maintenance of marginality; the necessity of which Delany speaks to in his sociological study/memoir *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue* and in many of his essays.

Inside the u-l citizens can have access to immediate gratification for any manner of kinks

¹²⁸ For an analysis of liberal modernity's intimate connection to state-sanctioned violence, see Chandan Reddy's book *Freedom With Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the U.S. State*.

and perversions involving sex, drugs, and a simulated sense of possibility and danger. Additionally, one can have immediate sex, race, and psychological reassignment surgeries as well as sexual refixation treatments to alter the objects of one's desire. Because the u-l is sanctioned by the state and because the state controls and disseminates pleasure and supposed fulfillment, any sense of genuine "danger," "thrill," or "satisfaction" that one would expect to experience in a legitimate "outlaw" zone, such as a pre-gentrified Times Square porn theater or a Christopher Street bathhouse, for example, is vacuous.¹²⁹ I use the concept of "outlaw" zones as exemplary of Foucault's concept of heterotopias, spaces "considered 'Other' at various levels of difference... that exist [not outside the social, but] segregated from the 'normal' workings of everyday society...in idea if not in form" (Chan 203). In such heterotopic outlaw spaces one can and does operate according to rules unique to the space itself. And while all spatial contexts operate according to specific conventions, heterotopias maintain "an allegiance to order, but an order that defies, or is in excess of, our own understanding of order" (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xix as paraphrased in Chan 201). In other words, while heterotopic outlaw spaces remain regulated by the unofficial laws of social decorum, routine, and expectation (Delany, *Trouble on Triton* 8), they nonetheless maintain an element of transgressive unpredictability.

As with the steady gentrification of Times Square and New York City in general, Tethys (which Delany states was "modeled on New York" ("The Second *Science-Fiction Studies* Interview" 344), and the u-l specifically, represent a culture in which there are no longer legitimate "outlaw" zones, only simulated ones. The u-l's transgressive unpredictability is simulated. Walking in the u-l is common practice for "These wholesome Outer Satelliters...desperately accepting of any World-bound decadence [as] it supplied some sort of

¹²⁹ Refer to Delany's seminal study of queer urbanism *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's article "Sex in Public" for a discussion of queer counterpublics.

frisson.... ordinarily missing from their small world lives” (67). In other words, people walk there in order to *feel* like they are being transgressive. Bron thinks, “Here anything may happen; and the only thing my apprehensiveness assures is that very little will” (9). After all, in the u-1 “the shocking was commonplace” (112). And despite knowing the u-1’s simulated transgressiveness, within it Bron still behaves using the proscribed manners, acting with a heightened sense of danger “because you were supposed to be more suspicious in the u-1” (9). The u-1 therefore represents formulaic state-sanctioned lawlessness that both simulates an erotic sense of apprehension, possibility, and suspicion of the unknown (9), while assuring statistical safety (8) if one abides by the proper social codes.

The u-1 not only functions as a pseudo-outlaw space for indulging perversions and kinks, but also as a space to contain forms of “typical” (219) “quaint” (64) politics, such as what Chan calls “(vulgar) identity politics,” and explicit “war talk” or criticism of Tethys’ government and its inter-galactic policies. Countless condescending references are made in the novel about the political investments of the u-1’s citizens (known as the “political crazies” (218)) and about their methods of self-identifying through essentialized signifiers, such as when they reference their “origins.” For instance, Bron is able to identify his temporary workplace assistant Miriamne as a u-1 dweller first through her overt criticism of the government and society (“Everyone in a position of authority is hysterical, and everyone else is pretending to be asleep” she says (46)) and secondly, by her national and ethnic self-identification (“my Mother was from Earth—Kenya actually” (48)). In response to her statements Bron thinks Miriamne is “Typical u-1...always talking about where they come from, where their families started” (48). This kind of “situated embodiment [that] draws attention to the visible markers of social difference” such as what Miriamne (incidentally, a black lesbian) proffers is a form of “vulgar identity politics”

because such acknowledgments “contradict the abstract form of citizenship” that Triton intends to engender through its tolerance of difference (Chan 190).¹³⁰

Unlike Miriamne, Bron lives in the licensed sector of the city in a “one-gender, non-specified co-op [in which] people tend to be a lot less political-minded” (27). Bron’s apolitical stance is likely due to the lack of explicit gender and sexual politics one would expect in a “non-specified” (meaning, specified as no particular sexual inclination) co-op. And, crucially, in Tethys one is privileged to maintain an apolitical stance because the licensed sector and the unlicensed sector are politically segregated. For example, while anti-government propaganda abounds in the u-l, when Bron picks up a particularly excoriating flier that has blown into the licensed sector proclaiming “THESE THINGS ARE HAPPENING IN YOUR CITY!!!” he is forced by an “e-girl” (an ersatz policeman who is, incidentally, a man) to relinquish it (60-62). Although the e-girl proclaims he “doesn’t care” if Bron reads the flier, Bron is forbidden from “leaving it around in [his] commons” as the e-girl has been instructed to get such propaganda “cleaned up off all publically licensed property” (62), and made available only in the u-l. However, much to the annoyance of the licensed sector’s blasé citizens, such containment does not always work. At one point as “political crazies” distribute leaflets in the licensed sector a man says, with contempt, “Really...you’d think they could confine that sort of thing to the unlicensed sector. I mean, that’s why we’ve got it” (242).

In addition to its dearth of transgressive spaces, there remain very few “outlaw” identities in Tethys because all imagined difference has been accounted for and provided for via unlimited

¹³⁰ Chan points to several sources that discuss the concept of the “embodied subject and the abstract citizen” including Karl Marx’s “On The Jewish Question,” Slavoj Žižek’s “Formal Democracy and its Discontents,” and Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (190).

choice.¹³¹ As a character in the novel explains “I’ve always thought the division that we use out here of humanity into forty or fifty basic sexes, falling loosely into nine categories, four homophilic...five heterophilic...I mean, when you have forty or fifty sexes, and twice as many religions...you’re bound to have...a pretty pleasant place to live, at least on that level” (99). Interestingly, despite the novel’s representation of the lack of transgressive spaces and identities, many (in fact most critics) of *Trouble on Triton* are laudatory of Tethys’ social structure due to their understanding of its epistemological troubling of identity markers such as gender, sex, and race.¹³² For example, Chan argues, “Rather than offering a utopian coordinate by which we might want to navigate on route to liberation, *Triton* creates a heterotopian space that disrupts our epistemologies of identity. Yes, this is liberating in a clearly political way; however *Triton* seems to me more about the disruption itself and less about what might result from that disruption” (194). And Pearson, echoing Chan, notes that the novel “engages in a form of cultural critique that is dependent on a heterotopian dismantling of the apparent naturalness of the social ordering predominant at the time it was written (and not that much changed today)” (464). Such troubling of epistemology is a project I share an investment in, as evidenced by this dissertation.

However I differ from these critics’ acclamatory assessment of the novel’s social structure in order to stress how crucial it is to note that Tethys is not merely interested in dismantling the “naturalness” of an archaic social order but is committed to *disciplining* social identifiers such as gender, sex, and race through tolerance and the commodification of difference. In other words, The Federation is committed to recognizing and *regulating* difference and excess,

¹³¹ Citing Stewart Hall Ferguson notes, “The commodification of difference produces...’new subjectivities, new genders, new ethnicities, new regions, and new communities” (Hall as qt. in Ferguson, “Administering Sexuality” 161).

¹³² For example, see Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* and Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*.

particularly into spatial configurations such as the “licensed” and “unlicensed” sectors and the co-ops and communes its citizens live in.

Bron expresses frustration with Tethys’ structure of tolerant containment that delimits desires. He describes the phenomenon as such,

After work, you can always drop into the place where the eighteen-year-old boys who happen to be into...red-hot needles on the second floor, ice-cold ones on the third—have all gotten together in a mutually beneficial alliance where you and they, and your Labrador retriever, if she’s what it takes to get you off, can all meet one another on a footing of cooperation, mutual benefit, and respect...And if you’re just not satisfied with the amount or quality of eighteen-year-old boys that week, you can make an appointment to have your preferences switched. And while you are at it, if you find your own body distasteful, you can have it regenerated, dyed green or heliotrope, padded on here, slimmed down there...And if you’re just too jaded for any of it, you can turn to the solace of religion and let your body mortify any way it wants while you concentrate on whatever your idea of Higher Things happens to be, in the sure knowledge that when you’re tired of that, there’s a diagnostic computer waiting with soup and a snifter in the wings to put you back together...it was all so healthy and accepting and wholesome and elegant you wanted to vomit...I mean, after awhile you *want* to be the only one—same way, some form, somehow...Just to do something really outrageous (100, 102, emphasis in original).

Considering that, as Lacan argues, desire is lack, what erotic possibilities exist (such as the unspeakable practices of relation Sula imagines on her deathbed) if all erotic possibilities have already been imagined and are provided for vis-à-vis government sanctioned transactions? As one critic states, “Bron’s [desperate] efforts at adapting to Triton’s normative regime narrativize the psychic struggles that would emerge from such plurisexualization” (Miller Jr. 46).

Ferguson reminds us “The will to institutionality names the processes by which sexuality becomes claimed by administrative realms and protocols” and asks, “What contortions does sexuality, in particular, suffer while passing through institutional realms?” (“Administering Sexuality” 165, 158). Considering administrative forces “adapt to modes of difference by attempting to normalize them” (“Administering Sexuality” 165), differences in *Trouble on Triton*

become meaningless beyond their value to bureaucratic institutions, as does transgression as a tactic of productive imagining, inventing, or experimenting. The normalizing of difference removes its erotic potential and the marginalization necessary to produce the unspeakable. As I argued in the previous chapter, kink, eroticization, and perversion are gestural actions that can arguably function as ways to explore issues of race, desire, and power outside of policed, coded, allowable utterances. Therefore when such spaces of excess are legally sanctioned or co-opted into dominant state-sanctioned economies and then commodified—such as is evident with the u—l—gestural possibility becomes increasingly codified and neutered. One may win “rights” that lead to “freedom” but these rights and freedoms are approved by institutional tolerance, mandated by their administrative bureaucracies, and regulated into mediocrity.

Additionally, as we see in our current moment, and as Ferguson argues, difference is subject to economies of power that continually manipulate and systematize the rights and social recognition of marginalized groups for political agendas often outside of such citizens' interests or aims.¹³³ Thus within Triton's institutionalizing social context there is no such thing as evasion, rupture, or possibility. Bron notes, “Suppose you *do* find out something [about the government's intergalactic political affairs]...what could you *do* with it? Run shrieking through the streets of Tethys, rending your flesh and rubbing ashes in the wounds? I'm sure there's a sect that's already into that already. We simply live in what the sociologists call a politically low-volatile society” (126, emphasis in original). Tethys “was all perfect” Bron observes, “beautiful, without a crack or a seam. Any blow you struck was absorbed and became one with the structure” (103).

Part IV: Bron as Unspeakable Subject

¹³³ For example, refer to Ferguson's discussion of the University of California's “limited domestic partner benefits” in his essay “Administering Sexuality; or, The Will to Institutionalality” (163).

What should be clear at this point is that Tethys represents a spatial economy in which tolerance is extremely regimented through structures of spacial containment. However what remains to be discussed is how such orderliness and routine, as well as limitless accessibility to all manner of perversions, kinks, and choices (as judicially sanctioned by the u-l's lawlessness), produce Bron's psychological woe. It is possible to analyze Bron's ironic psychic oppression that dramatically affects his (and later, after his sexual reassignment surgery, her) intimate relationships and equilibrium, as a *direct product* of Triton's tolerance for and commodification of difference. After all, it is the awareness of the u-l's artifice that contributes to producing an acute sense of claustrophobia for Bron, an ironically self-assessed "reasonably happy man" (1).¹³⁴ This claustrophobia (at one point, a character even refers to the u-l as "claustric" (75)) in the midst of "the good life" can again be read as commentary on excessive privilege endemic to advanced capitalist societies with an overabundance of choice, access, and "fulfillment." As Berlant's critique of "the good life" suggests, such social structuring actually works in the service of "wearing out the subject" (*Cruel Optimism* 28) and as Delany states in "The Second *Science-Fiction Studies* Interview," "the 'good life' simply cannot be mapped out wholly within the range traditionally prescribed as 'the political'" (331).

I find it useful to discuss Bron's psychology through Delany's conceptualizing of the unspeakable as an issue of generic conventions ("On The Unspeakable" 62). We can perhaps understand Bron's claustrophobia as a result of his struggle to abide by the oppressive "unofficial laws" (8) of social decorum and expectations inherent to both the licensed sector and to the simulated hedonism of the u-l. In other words, Bron's alienation is a result of his struggle to meet the pressing rhetorical considerations of his social contexts. Bron exists in a state of perpetual

¹³⁴ This is ironic because Bron is, of course, wildly, yet for the bulk of the narrative, unconsciously unhappy.

dissatisfaction and later unhappiness because he cannot fit in anywhere, despite the endless options available to him and despite his co-op that caters specifically to his predilections.

Regardless of the fact that he *thinks* he is unusual, Bron is merely “a type like the rest” of Triton’s citizens (121), “stunningly ordinary” (227) and deeply implicated in an unalterable system that, through its commodification of difference, provides “the good life” for all types. And Bron “hated being a type” (5). “Types” in *Trouble on Triton* are a manifestation of “a new kind of normativity that understands radical difference, that views all subjects as equivalent, and that seeks to describe...subject behavior in all its multiplicity” (Miller Jr. 45). Attempting to be transgressive Bron tells his friend Lawrence “I rather pride myself on doing things contrary to what *everyone* else does” to which Lawrence assures him “My dear young man...*everyone* is a type” and to be contrarian “is a type too” (5-6, emphasis in original).¹³⁵ Lawrence tells Bron, “The true mark of social intelligence is how unusual we can make our particular type for the particular type we are when we are put under particular pressure” (5). Here, Lawrence attests to the productivity of transgression to explore, not transcend (because, again, transgression cannot stand outside of the social) subjective and external boundaries.

But how “unusual” can types make themselves? Bron, like all citizens of Triton, is incapable of having spontaneous and/or transgressive experiences outside of regulated, pre-determined social economies and their attendant codes. Even his repetitive, nagging moments of “discomfort and alienation,” bore him (57). This is likely because he expects they are responses typical to his “type” and his means of expression are either criticized for being cliché (his love interest the Spike tells him, frowning, on one of their dates “you should be able to think of something more original to say” (183)) or he stops himself mid-sentence or mid-thought aware

¹³⁵ Chan notes the novel is obsessed with “typology—the identification of different social groupings based on affiliation, in turn aligned along individual desires” (187).

of the triteness of his utterances.¹³⁶ Thus Bron is alienated from himself because he is, essentially, disallowed from having a spontaneous existence or identity, from having a sense of individualism.

But how could he? On Tethys Bron has never experienced anything beyond regulated social economies and their codes of decorum and expectation that both reassure him and make him exceedingly uncomfortable (49). While there is “a code of politeness almost universal outside the u-1, that, once [Bron] had realized...existed, he found immensely reassuring” (49) one can read Bron’s creeping feelings of alienation as not only stemming from his uncomfortable awareness of the artifice of Tethys’ laws and lawlessness and their intrinsic modes of social decorum but also from his inability to *refuse* to abide by such codes. And because of this social conditioning, when he is tortured on Earth during a brief trip with his roommate Sam (a diplomat for Tethys’ government), he “found himself trying to obey” his torturers (137) and obeying Sam’s injunction to keep quiet about his experience (140).

Bron’s adherence to social custom for social custom’s sake despite the discomfort, unhappiness, and depression (181) it brings him comes to a head on Earth when he encounters the Spike and her performing arts troupe in Outer Mongolia. He takes the Spike on an ostentatious date, where, although there are a multitude of choices in each context they find themselves in (the transport, the restaurant, etc.), convention and social codes dictate *what* to choose and how to choose it. Despite his longings to “do something really outrageous” (102) Bron abides by planetary convention vaguely guessed at from his days as a Martian prostitute, as “anything else consigned you to that category of velvet contempt for those who did things Not Done” (161). In striving to abide by an unfamiliar set of social customs Bron is even more

¹³⁶ Delany, ever the post-structuralist, loves to play with language. In the novel, communication in and of itself is constantly referred to as “meaningful...? Meaningless...? (198).

egregious on Earth and his affair with the Spike ends poorly. When Bron returns to Triton he receives a letter from the Spike communicating to him that she never wants to see or speak to him again.

In the Spike's letter she states that while Bron clearly "adheres to some kind of code of good manners, proper behavior, or the right thing to do" he is "emotionally lazy." She then asks, "What's the difference between [emotionally lazy] and emotionally injured? Emotionally crippled? Emotionally atrophied?" (192-193). The Spike tells Bron "you are incapable of implementing the only valid reason that any such code ever came about: to put people at ease, to make them feel better, to promote social communion...[besides] your version of the code was ten years out of date" (192). In other words, the Spike tells Bron that, in his adherence to a code "ten years out of date" without consideration for or reverence for *why* such codes exist, he has, in fact, become someone personifying things Not Done. His adherence is archaic and he lacks the appropriate "rhetorical considerations." Thus Bron comes to embody the unspeakable.

It is ironic that Bron feels such a tremendous sense of unease in the midst of the highly stylized, conventional date, which again, reminds him of his Martian days. He acknowledges several times that the date's aesthetics and affective modes of relating are "his territory" (181). However, his friend Lawrence tells him his "sense of personal tact [is]...a disaster zone" (232). Which brings me to the point that although his society is extremely rigid in its tolerance, Bron is often ironically *too* rigid¹³⁷ in trying to circumnavigate the social worlds he finds himself in and abide by their pressing rhetorical considerations. As Fox notes, (and as the Spike points out in her letter), "[Bron] is more concerned with ego and artificial decorum than he is in relating naturally" ("The Politics of Desire" 46). And Bron is self-conscious of this; at one point he

¹³⁷ Pearson, who does not read Tethys as a rigid, disciplining social world but rather focuses on critiquing Bron suggests, "Bron seeks a stable center within a world whose rhizomatic qualities preclude any center at all" (467) and suggests "It is thus inevitably Bron who seeks the consolation of utopia, not the discomfort of heterotopia" (469).

thinks to himself after a particularly awkward social encounter with Miriamne “his own responses that he should have used as flexible perimeters he has taken as rigid, fixed parameters” (93).

Bron becomes increasingly self-conscious after the Spike’s rejection. Yet although he is deeply upset by it, Bron has no time to indulge his feelings as Triton is attacked in an act of warfare. However her rejection shakes Bron to his core, inspiring him in the aftermath of the war to undergo a male-to-female (MTF) sex-change operation in the u-l to become a woman both physically and psychologically. He does so in a ludicrous attempt to “preserve the [male] species” (232) that, in the wake of the Spike’s rejection he feels is deeply “misunderstood” (212). In other words, having recently decided that his “type” is heroic heterosexual male, Bron decides to self-sacrifice in order to become the object of his desire—a woman submissive to patriarchy. He thinks in becoming a man’s essentialized fantasy of a woman he will be better than other women because he will be tailored to suit men’s needs, such as his own (262-263). He will therefore “insure the survival of the ideological principle of masculinist heterosexism” he seeks to defend (Pearson 461). Of course even his “psychological” reassignment surgery is an absurdly regimented, yet tolerant, re-ordering of his “sexual deployment template” (227) from the commodified “current male plurality configuration” to the commodified “current female plurality configuration” (228). In the u-l one can indeed get any operation one desires (suggesting identity’s biological non-essentialism) but one’s identity, any identity, will be approved and pre-configured by a government institution.

After having taken full advantage of the u-l’s lawlessness and forms of privilege to literally become the “other,” Bron remains achingly unfulfilled and deeply psychically, spiritually, and emotionally adrift. This is because, of course, as Judith Butler has famously

argued, there is no “authentic” gendered consciousness to grasp.¹³⁸ Bron cannot be the essentialized woman he intends. However he stubbornly insists there is essentialized gender, stating platitudes such as “ingenuity comes out of aloneness, that particular male aloneness” (216) and “real manhood...[is] the most important thing society has going for it” (232). Lawrence calls Bron a “logical sadist” seeking a female “logical masochist” (214) and informs him that such patriarchal gender relations (evocative of the 1960s and 70s) are anachronistic. Lawrence states, “Fortunately, your particular perversion today is extremely rare. Oh, I would say maybe one man out of fifty has it—quite amazing, considering that it once was as common as the ability to grow a beard” (214). However Bron clings to “regressive and distorted” (Fox, “The Politics of Desire” 46) essentialized identity politics.¹³⁹ And this makes him unspeakable in a society that yes, capitalizes on identity politics, yet does so through the will to institutionality that renders difference invisible and hidden behind the veneer of tolerance and blindness to diversity.

Bron’s function in the novel is therefore to simultaneously critique the liberal identity politics that, ironically, contribute to reifying identity categories into “instruments of regulatory regimes” both oppressive and liberatory (Butler, “Imitation” 13) *and*, as his unfortunate masculinist ethos reveals, stress the vulgarity of conservative ideologies often reactionary to liberal identity politics. Chan, as well as critics Wendy Gay Pearson, Guy Davidson, and Tom Moylan have all noted¹⁴⁰ that specifically it is Bron’s adherence to patriarchy that makes him, in

¹³⁸ See, for example, Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* and *Undoing Gender*. However, also see Gerald Alva Miller Jr.’s argument that what *Trouble on Triton* ultimately reveals is the extent to which “undoing gender does not necessarily guarantee an experience of freedom” (37).

¹³⁹ Refer to Pearson’s “Born to Be Bron: Destiny and Destinerrance in Samuel R. Delany’s *Trouble on Triton*” and Rogan’s “Alien Sex Acts in Feminist Science Fiction: Heuristic Models for Thinking a Feminist Future of Desire” for in-depth analyses of Bron’s sex-change operation.

¹⁴⁰ See Pearson’s “Born to Be Bron: Destiny and Destinerrance in Samuel R. Delany’s *Trouble on Triton*,” Davidson’s “Sexuality and the Scientific Imaginary in Samuel R. Delany’s *Trouble on Triton*,” Chan’s “(Vulgar)

Delany's term, a social "misfit" experiencing "deep cultural unhappiness" (Steiner, "Trouble on Triton" 95-96). In other words, Bron most clearly comes to embody the unspeakable when he begins to experience archaic gendered desires (tellingly, evocative of the time of the novel's production) outside of the proscribed "orderly, licensed" and "unlicensed" modes of being and expression available to Tethys' citizens. As one critic notes, "Sexual essentialism is not part of the psychic vocabulary of the narratives of this particular moon" (Rogan 449). Ferguson argues, "We might say that the will to institutionality is founded on divisions between legitimacy and illegitimacy" ("Administering Sexuality" 167) to which I would add legibility and illegibility. Bron and his expressions of desire are illegitimate and illegible because they are anachronistic to the proper "rhetorical considerations" of his society, and, after his rant about patriarchy, Lawrence, a feminist homosexual, calls him a "fool" (216).

Tethys' founders thought they had encapsulated all identities, kinks, perversions, and predilections and provided accordingly. As Bron, in his own critique of the good life, bitterly notes, "They make it so easy for you—all you have to do is know what you want" (98-99). Yet Bron, who in many ways is deeply implicated and imbricated in the system, is also a subject that has "fallen through the categorical cracks without having slipped wholly free of the nets of desire" (Rowell, "An Interview With Samuel Delany" 37). Unlike Sula and her surety of self and sexuality, Bron does not, ultimately, know what he wants (or cannot ascertain what he thinks he wants). He merely knows what he does *not* want ("But I don't want to *be* like most women" he laments to his councilor (250, emphasis in original)). Ultimately, Bron realizes, "solace cannot be found in either individuality" (particularly when it is unspeakable) "or the ultimately empty—that is, flattened—categories of social difference" (Chan 190).

Pearson claims Triton “creates a world and a language that, in many ways, [Bron] does not understand and cannot translate” (471). Yet I contend that Bron deeply understands Tethys’ social structure to the point that, being unable to name and locate his desires in a context that makes it so easy for one to do so, he experiences a profoundly alienating existence. Fox notes Bron is a subject “whose difficulties can be rooted in our current malaise, which his own twenty-second century has not resolved but merely overdetermined” (*Conscientious Sorcerers* 472). Thinking about his boss Philip’s commune (a model of Tethys’ tolerant social structure) that he once visited Bron muses,

It was beautiful, whole, harmonious, radiant—it was a family I’d have given my left testicle—hell, both of them, to be a daughter or a son to. What a place to have grown up in, secure that you are loved whatever you do, whatever you are, and with all the knowledge and self-assurance it would give you while you decided what that was. But the great lie those people hold out, whether they’re in a commune or a co-op—and this, I suppose, when all is said and done, is why I hate them—is: Anyone can have it, be a part of it, bask in its radiance, and be one with the radiating element itself...somewhere, someplace it’s waiting for you...if not in a family commune, then in a work commune...if not in a commune, then at a...well, a heterophillic co-op, if not at a heterophillic co-op, then at a homophillic one. Somewhere, in your sector or in mine, in this unit or in that one, there it is: pleasure, community, respect—all you have to do is know the kind, and how much of it, and to what extent you want it. That’s all (104).

Almost crying, he continues

But what happens to those of us who *don’t* know? What happens to those of us who have problems and don’t know *why* we have the problems we do? What happens to the ones of us in whom even the part that wants has lost, through atrophy, all connection with articulate reason? Decide what you like and go get it? Well, what about the ones of us who only know what we *don’t* like? (104, emphasis in original).

Pearson reads Bron as “traumatized by the open-ended demands of life on Triton (474)” that Delany, writing as Steiner, identifies as its “contingent responsibilities” (“Trouble on Triton” 96). I read Bron as traumatized by Triton not due to its supposed open-endedness, but because such

“openness” is the liberal façade of containment in the name of “the good life.” And the contingent responsibilities one finds oneself accountable to in such a society of “concrete and demanding freedom” (Fox, “The Politics of Desire” 45) requires a subject to precisely articulate their desire for the available choices using the proper rhetorical considerations.

Ferguson asks “How did the desire for institutionality become the common denominator for subjects differentiated in terms of gender, race, sexuality, and ideology?” (“Administering Sexuality” 167). Notably, *Trouble on Triton*’s Appendix B is comprised of (fictional) metalogician Ashima Slade’s notes and they are highly useful for considering Ferguson’s question and for understanding Bron’s predicament. They read:

Our society in the Satellites extends to its Earth and Mars emigrants, at the same time that it extends instruction on how to conform, the materials with which to destroy themselves, both physiologically and physically—all under the same label: Freedom. To the extent that they will not conform to our ways, there is a subtle swing: the materials of instruction are pulled further away and the materials of destruction are pushed correspondingly closer (357).

In other words, the will to institutionality is a mechanism producing abstract citizenship in the name of “freedom” that requires a subject to relinquish individuality in order to be legitimate and legible. Otherwise that subject is faced with destruction. Berlant, who notes “‘the good life’ ... for so many [is] a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it” asks, “Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their...dear cost abounds?” (*Cruel Optimism* 27, 2). “Fantasy” she continues “is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world ‘add up to something.’ What happens when those fantasies start to fray—depression, disassociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, or an

incoherent mash?" (*Cruel Optimism* 2).

The fraying of "the good life" fantasy brings us to final page of *Trouble on Triton*. Here, Bron lies in bed, riddled with insomnia and anxiety after a night at a pick-up bar that nearly drives her to emotional collapse with its extensive, restrictive courting rules based on manifestations of desire that are, of course, meant to facilitate rather than paralyze the needs of Tethys' citizens.¹⁴¹ In bed Bron finds herself feeling "terribly empty," waiting for a dawn that she realizes, with sudden understanding of the all-encompassing controlled artifice of her existence and of the crushingly claustrophobic knowledge that "the subjective was held politically inviolable; and hadn't they just killed three out of four, or five out of six to keep it so?" will never come (277). In other words, once Bron takes full advantage of Tethys "lawlessness" to alter her subjectivity she realizes that it is due to such state-sanctioned lawlessness and its attendant endless privileges that the subject is politically sacrosanct, never to be infringed upon, dishonored, or corrupted as a means to ensure Triton's unchecked power. Bron realizes that her "contractual freedom" is a deeply entrenched cycle of containment, assured, quite literally, at the expense of others and at the expense of her own individuality. As a result such privileged life is for Bron suddenly, yet ultimately and completely, paralyzingly unbearable.

It is in the commodification of difference that the subject is severed from its creative drive, erotic marginalization, and gestural, transgressive possibilities. Thus *Trouble on Triton* uses the unspeakable to reveal the paradox of "the good life" that liberatory identity-based movements often seek to manifest. As Berlant and Edelman state, "Often such optimism enacts the hope of successful integration into dominant orders—social, psychic, and political—by anticipating ways of resolving the various contradictions among which we live" (xiv). Yet

¹⁴¹ Bron's friend Pryn explains to her "This is the active side of the bar, i.e. if you want to check out the beauties languishing on *that* side, without being bothered... That side if you want to be approached by someone who's made up their mind from *this* side. And that there is the free-range territory...(256, emphasis in original).

Trouble on Triton offers a pointedly ironic critique of, and acknowledgement of the complex interworking of capitalism's relationship to difference.

In other words, it reveals difference's modes of conspiring with, not antagonistically resisting institutionalization. In fact, one of the most disturbing aspects of the novel is its revelation on the final page that there is no resistance, no liberation possible in advanced capitalist economies that, anticipating such resistance, already mitigate the circumstances that would produce it by providing its citizens an overabundance of the good life and/or subsuming resistance into its structure. And in the face of this Bron laments, "It's so strange, the way we picture the past as a place of injustice, inequity, disease, and confusion, yet still, somehow, things were...simpler. Sometimes I wish we *did* live in the past" (254, emphasis in original), a past, most likely, before identity-based liberation movements.

Trouble on Triton suggests there is no freedom to be won through identity based liberation movements. Furthermore, it exposes the unbearable nature of state-sanctioned tolerance. It reveals that the will to institutionality contains desire as it commodifies difference. Sula's transgressive sexuality and desires allow us to consider alternative modes of being and relating that do not necessarily *have* to be purposefully resistant and antagonistic to a dominant social order in order to be of imaginatively ruptural value. I continue an engagement with this latter concept in the following chapter's analyses of Iceberg Slim's *Pimp: The Story of My Life* (1967) and Octavia Butler's "Bloodchild" (1984).

Chapter Three

Abjection as Pleasure: BDSM Power Dynamics in the Literature of Octavia Butler and Iceberg Slim

“Safety is the fetus of power as well as protection from it, as the uses to which masks and myths are put in Afro-American culture remind us.”

—Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 160

“When postanarchism’s anti-essentialist critique is applied to sexuality, the result is queer. When that critique is applied to power, the result is kinky.”

—Lewis Call, “Structures of Desire” 131

Introduction

Iceberg Slim (the “nom-de-pimp”¹⁴² of Robert Beck) is the godfather of African American street lit and among its most infamous figures. At the time of his death in 1992 he was the best-selling African American author of all time with his seven books having sold over six million copies (Muckley, “Iceberg Slim: Robert Beck” 18). His 1967 semi-autobiographical bildungsroman *Pimp: The Story of My Life* accounted for one million sales and catalyzed the niche market for “black experience” novels.¹⁴³ His work has been exalted by a massive Black readership for decades, largely due to the presumed authenticity of its subject matter (Jackson 181). Yet while Irvine Welsh heralds Slim as “one of the most influential writers of our age” (“Up From the Street”), Slim’s impact on other writers outside of the street lit genre has been underexplored. Studies of Slim’s works are minimal but have been steadily amassing, particularly over the past ten years.¹⁴⁴ However, his work has rarely been put into in-depth

¹⁴² Friedman, “A Tribute to Iceberg Slim.”

¹⁴³ For a history of Holloway House (Slim’s publisher) and the “black experience” novel refer to Justin Gifford’s article “‘Harvard in Hell’: Holloway House Publishing Company, *Players Magazine*, and the Invention of Black Mass-Market Erotica.”

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Bonnie Andreyev’s “Whose Mean Streets?: Donald Goines, Iceberg Slim, and the Black Noir Aesthetic” and Dennis L. Winston’s “(Re)writing the ‘Bad Nigger’ Hero in Robert Beck’s *Pimp*” in the edited anthology *Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape*, Gifford’s *Pimping Fictions African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing*, Jonathan Munby’s *Under a Bad Sign: Criminal Self-Representation in African-American Popular Culture*, Kinohi Nishikawa’s dissertation *Reading the Street: Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines, and the Rise of Black Pulp Fiction*, Candice Love Jackson’s “The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck,

intertextual conversation with that of his African American contemporaries to discover what tropes echo within, through, and across texts.

In this chapter I read *Pimp* as a literary predecessor to Octavia Butler's 1984 Hugo and Nebula Award winning science fiction short story "Bloodchild." Situating "Bloodchild" within the context of African American street lit reveals to what extent its themes are reminiscent of masculinist texts such as *Pimp* and other 50s-80s black crime fiction written by Chester Himes, Donald Goines, Joseph Nazel, and Odie Hawkins. This pairing therefore contextualizes Butler's work in ways additional to the frameworks, such as black feminism, neo-slavery, or dystopianism that it is dominantly read through.¹⁴⁵ Situating *Pimp* as a progenitor of canonical work such as Butler's reveals how the former is not only literary in its own right, but is a cultural predecessor to critically respected African American literature produced decades later and seemingly unrelated. Positioning such ostensibly discordant texts together provides a vision of an alternate teleology of the archive of African American literature.

Pimp and "Bloodchild" are genre fiction that make critical contributions to representations of eroticized power exchange, largely through re-appropriating the master|slave dynamic. Both texts suggest that females have considerable power to not only render men subordinate, but abject. And by embracing their *own* abjection as sites of pleasure and agency, females are often able to dominate males because the males underestimate the extent of the females' kinkiness—

Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the African American Novel," Victoria A. Elmwood's "'They Can't Take That Away From Me': Gendered Nationalism and Textual Sovereignty in the Autobiographies of Iceberg Slim and Malcolm X," Beth Coleman's "Pimp Notes on Autonomy," LaMonda Horton-Stallings "I'm Goin Pimp Whores!": The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative," Peter Muckley's book-length study of Beck *Iceberg Slim: The Life as Art*, Delia Konzett's "Prison, Perversion, and Pimps: The White Tempress in The Autobiography of Malcolm X and Iceberg Slim's *Pimp*," Matthew Cleveland's dissertation *The Substrates of Transgression: A Žižekian Account of Four Iceberg Slim Novellas*, Muckley's "Iceberg Slim: Robert Beck—A True Essay at a BioCriticism of an Ex-Outlaw Artist," and D.B. Graham's "Negative Glamor: The Pimp Hero in the Fiction of Iceberg Slim."

¹⁴⁵ See, for example, Madhu Dubey's "Octavia Butler's Novels of Enslavement," Alys Wienbaum's "The Afterlife of Slavery," Marc Steinberg's "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative," Angelyn Mitchell's "Not Enough of the Past: Feminist Revisions of Slavery in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*," and Hoda Zaki's "Utopia, Dystopia, and Ideology in the Science Fiction of Octavia Butler."

and that of their own. The male characters fail to master Control (of external and internal forces) in the face of the pleasure they experience in an asymmetrical power dynamic that subordinates them to “dangerous” females. I do not read this depiction of female power as a representation of the psychoanalytic archetype of the “phallic mother” intent on castrating men. Rather, continuing themes hinted at in the previous chapters, I read *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” as representing a BDSM (bondage/discipline [B/D], dominance/submission [D/S], sadomasochism [S/M]) power dynamic informed by critic Lewis Call’s theory of “postanarchist kink.”¹⁴⁶

Call’s concept of “postanarchism” is influenced by Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s philosophies of power.¹⁴⁷ Call states, “For me, postanarchism refers to a form of contemporary anarchist theory which draws extensively upon postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy in order to push anarchism beyond its traditional boundaries [i.e. critiques of statism and capitalism]” and into critiques of power and subjectivity (“Structures” 131). Call’s “kink theory”¹⁴⁸ refers to “the theoretical discourse surrounding the consensual exchange of erotic power” (“Sounds” 6).¹⁴⁹ He states “kink has the potential to add flexible, fluid power relations to the fluid identity structures which poststructuralism has identified” (“Structures” 135).

To understand kink theory as “postanarchist” is to understand that BDSM play can function as “sexual anarchism”—a tactic of transgression that disrupts “conventional forms of sexual identity” (Call, “Structures” 131), in addition to other identifiers such as race, gender, and class.

¹⁴⁶ Call claims postanarchist kink theory developed alongside queer theory in the 1980s, articulated and advocated by theorists such as Foucault. See Call’s “Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany.”

¹⁴⁷ See Call’s book *Postmodern Anarchism* for his theory of postanarchism and his discussion of Nietzsche and Foucault.

¹⁴⁸ Refer to Call’s “‘Sounds Like Kinky Business to Me’: Subtextual and Textual Representations of Erotic Power in the Buffyverse” for his first published articulation of the term “kink theory.” Notably, Call reads Butler’s work through a BDSM framework in his essay “Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany.”

¹⁴⁹ For feminist analyses of what Call is referring to as “kink theory” refer to Gayl Rubin’s “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Pat Califia’s *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, and Carol Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger* anthology.

Considering that “S&M is fundamentally an enactment of a power relation,” (Basu, *Commerce* 155), BDSM can be used to contend with anxieties of Control and subjectivity—which is why I refer to the texts’ characters as operating within a BDSM power dynamic. Postanarchist kink theory reveals that a BDSM power dynamic promises (or threatens) the subject with disintegration of his/her “contained” sex and gender identities.¹⁵⁰ Because identities are so fluid, for the protagonists of *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” power—its attainment and retention—is privileged above all else.¹⁵¹

Despite the important critiques both *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” reveal about power, desire, subordination, domination, abjection, and pleasure, the former remains largely under-acknowledged within African American literary studies while the latter is widely anthologized, but not, largely, for those reasons. Critic Justin Gifford notes, “One reason that [Iceberg Slim] is overlooked is because his work is often misread as unselfconsciously capitulating to white norms of power” (*Pimping* 44). Gifford instead argues, “black style [in *Pimp*] is both a self-conscious adoption of hegemonic power and a form of tactical resistance against systematic racial oppression” (*Pimping* 45). However in Gifford’s estimation we again see a linkage between respectability politics and liberatory politics, in which “systematic racial oppression” is rendered as “[white] hegemonic power” that blacks must both “self-consciously adopt” and “tactically resist.” In both Gifford’s assessment and the critique of “unselfconscious capitulation” that he is responsive to, we see a nearsightedness in which critics are more interested in a white/black antagonistic power dynamic responsive to a white hegemony than they are in critically

¹⁵⁰ Refer to Leo Bersani’s *A Future for Astyanax* for his argument that *jouissance* and other forms of sexual arousal can “disintegrate the constructed self” (302).

¹⁵¹ Basu notes, “Race, class, gender, and sexuality have been historically sedimented with certain significations of power, and while the effort to divest these categories of these significations may seem plausible, it is misguided in its presumption that it can eradicate power differentials from the categories of difference in general” (*Commerce* 23).

considering the concept of power *itself* beyond that racialized framework.¹⁵² Call firmly asserts “kink sees power not as a problem but as a possibility” (“Structures” 136). Rather than “unselfconsciously capitulating,” can *Pimp* and “Bloodchild’s” characters be understood to be “acknowledge[ing] power differentials and deploy[ing] them, even in exaggerated ways, in a program of attraction and seduction” (Basu, *Commerce* 23)?

As a picaresque bildungsroman, *Pimp* tells the story of Slim’s entrée into Chicago’s sordid underworld in the aftermath of The Great Depression and his rise to pimping notoriety on the backs of women he incessantly tries to outmaneuver. Constantly haunted by his mentor’s insight, “A pimp is really a whore who’s reversed the game on whores” (*Pimp* 198), Slim exists in a state of feverish anxiety about the fluidity of identity and power despite what his cold pimp exterior suggests. He is driven to “pimp or die” (*Pimp* 78), thus the text’s inherent drama represents cycles of power—how Slim gains it, largely through his psychosexual, violent exploitation of women, and how he repeatedly loses it, generally at the hands of these same women who use their power to render him subordinate and/or abject.

Much like Slim’s world of pimps and prostitutes, “Bloodchild” imagines a society in which two species, Terrans (humans) and Tlic (large, centipede-like creatures), depend on each other for survival through BDSM power negotiation. Tlic protect Terrans, savagely hunted outside of their Tlic-constructed Preserve, under the pretenses of affective kinship ties reminiscent of the familial logic of the pimp’s “stable” (a group of prostitutes “belonging” to one pimp). In exchange for their protection, male Terrans are “implanted” (impregnated) by the female Tlic for the continuation of the latter’s species, much like prostitutes, “protected” as family in the stable, are exploited for the economic survival of the pimp. The implantation of

¹⁵² Refer to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* in which he states “We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes,’ it ‘represses,’ it censors,’ it ‘abstracts,’ it ‘masks,’ it ‘conceals.’” In fact, power produces” (194).

male Terrans and their subsequent “births” are gruesomely represented in scenes of interspecies sexualized violence and/or violent sex similar to the conflation of sex and violence in *Pimp*. Like *Pimp*, “Bloodchild” is a bildungsroman of a young boy’s journey toward developing sexual and psychological maturity. The dramatic narrative arc of “Bloodchild” culminates in an interspecies conception scene, which, although Butler does not explicitly refer to it as such, can be read as a sex scene. In this climactic scene Gan, the Terran protagonist, is not only rendered psychosexually subordinate to T’Gatoi (the female Tlic antagonist/ambiguous protagonist), but, because he functions as her host animal/sex object, physiologically subordinate as well.

Street Lit and the Paraliterary

The term “street lit” is a recent term for what was in the 1970s called the “black experience novel.” Today the genre is also referred to as ghetto fiction, urban fiction, and hip-hop and/or “street life” fiction. Street lit refers not only to the postwar pulp fiction written by African American criminals and prisoners, but to the proliferation of contemporary, self-published mass-market paperbacks about hip hop, hustling, and “the game.” Although it is changing, a massive oversight on the part of critics of African American cultural production has been, for too long, ignoring street lit. This is ironic considering that the genre comprises the most popular and commercially successful African American literature of the 20th and 21st centuries (Gifford, *Pimping* 2). Such texts have long been relegated to the paraliterary realm where they are largely precluded from critical engagement.

In his 1996 essay “Politics of Paraliterary Criticism” Samuel R. Delany defines “paraliterary” and “paraliterature” (the former Rosalind Krauss’s term, the latter Fredric Jameson’s)¹⁵³ as “specifically those written genres traditionally excluded by the limited, value-bound meaning of ‘literature’ and ‘literary’” (236). In defining what constitutes “literature” and “literary,” critics often use arbitrary differentiations of “craft vs. art” or “highbrow vs. lowbrow” as a reason to not engage paraliterature, even well after postmodernism revealed such value judgments to be obsolete. Paraliterature is marginalized literature, and, as such, is the ideal venue to host representations of BDSM—some of the most marginalized sexual practices. Paraliterature is little critically engaged precisely because it is the natural home of the unspeakable. Indeed Danyel Smith, former editor in chief of *Vibe* and *Vibe Vixen*, argues that it is due to the unspeakable that many African American writers, particularly writers of “Black literary fiction” are perturbed by street lit. She states “Street-lit authors *put it all out there*—the stuff many African Americans spend their lives trying to get past, move away from, or talk about only amongst themselves...the actual or psychological proximity to crime, drugs, and drug dealers; the family and/or friends in the prison system; the boldly less-than-conventional sex; the Ebonics and the profanity” (189, emphasis in the original). And LaMonda Horton-Stallings argues “The failure of Black literary critics to fully comprehend a text from and about the ghetto native becomes very much an issue of politics” (“I’m Goin” 181).

Delany explains that political genre valuation such as what Smith and Horton-Stallings describe is meant to “protect against the serious consideration as art of *any* texts from any of the paraliterary genres, SF, comics, pornography, mysteries, westerns...” (“Politics” 236).

Considering an African American history of respectability politics and uplift we can surmise

¹⁵³ See Krauss’s “Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary” and Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

why paraliterature and its unspeakable subject matter is considered threatening. However Delany argues for a practice of paraliterary criticism. And he stipulates that in order to develop one “It is the system that tries to preserve such power relations [of genre valuation] *and* their attendant power exclusions that must be dismantled if [paraliterary criticism] is ever to see success” (“Politics” 226).

The paraliterary status of street lit has contributed to its “othering” within the African American literary tradition (Gifford, *Pimping* 10). Gifford points out that street lit is “a body of work that has been actively repressed in the canon-building project of the past four decades...black crime fiction has been a shadow companion to the well received works” of critically acclaimed African American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison, among others (*Pimping* 7). Consider how differently critics and readers might engage the literature of such canonical authors if their work could be understood as conversing with the “shadow books”¹⁵⁴ of their paraliterary companions. This chapter’s reading of *Pimp* builds upon the burgeoning critical work of scholars such as Gifford, Horton-Stallings, and Candice Love Jackson¹⁵⁵ and those represented in Keenan Norris’s 2013 anthology *Street Lit: Representing the Urban Landscape* in advancing the literary merit of *Pimp* and other African American street lit texts. Robert Beck himself articulates the artistic merit of *Pimp* when he states “For every principle that I used in ‘Pimp’ there’s a literary name,”¹⁵⁶ and yet his focus on the formal literary elements of *Pimp* excludes myriad interventions into discourses of pleasure, power, race, sex, and gender that the text provides. To read black crime fiction as the predecessor to canonical

¹⁵⁴ Refer to Kevin Young’s *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* for his discussion of “shadow books” which he theorizes as, among other things, “a book that may haunt the very books we have in our hands” (11).

¹⁵⁵ See Gifford’s *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing*, Horton-Stallings’ *Word Hustle: Critical Essays on the Work of Donald Goines and “I’m Goin Pimp Whores!”: The Goines Factor and the Theory of a Hip-Hop Neo-Slave Narrative*, and Jackson’s “The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the African American Novel.”

¹⁵⁶ Moore, “The Inside Story of Black Pimps.”

African American literature such as “Bloodchild” is paramount, for as Gifford states “If we are truly invested in American and African American literary traditions and their larger relationships to cultural politics, popular movements, and social change, then black crime fiction presents us with a unique opportunity to *redraw the very boundaries* of what counts as the American canon and even cultural knowledge” (*Pimping* 7, emphasis mine). As Horton-Stallings argues, “If Black literary and cultural critics can rescue Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* and Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* from the abyss of Black literary texts, then surely someone should be doing...an intense study on the work of Donald Goines [and] Iceberg Slim (“I’m Goin” 177).”¹⁵⁷

It is in paraliterary texts such as *Pimp* and “Bloodchild”—street lit/pornography and SF/horror, respectively—that, again, the unspeakable historically finds its realm of representation and traffics in language affiliated with abjection, which explains attempts to censor, pathologize, and/or ignore paraliterature. Delany reminds us “One index of the power of artistic representation is that representation is nearly always what the real enemies of art have in their sights” (Freedman 201). Envisioning a reimagined African American literary archive that practices aggregation without containment requires that scholars of the field take up paraliterature with critical rigor and read the unspeakable therein. As chapter one’s analysis of the paraliterary *Hogg* argues, pleasure, often unspeakable in its transgressive manifestations, can complicate clear-cut narratives of liberation, and/or liberatory projects. Most crucially, *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” include representations that trouble the idea that pleasure experienced through subjection and/or abjection can necessarily, or solely, be attributed to an abusive past or pathology, or that such pleasure is a form of psychological over-compensation for deeply internalized oppression.

¹⁵⁷ Horton-Stallings goes on to state, “For those detractors who think that may be too much praise or not an applicable comparison, please remember that it wasn’t too long ago that the work of Hopkins and Harper was relegated to ‘silly women’s sentimental romance fiction’ not worth the time to analyze” (“I’m Goin” 177).

Part I: From “The Matrix of Domination” to Kink Theory

Slim’s blatant misogyny, intrinsic to *Pimp*, cannot be overlooked. Gifford claims, “...the power of the pimp depends on the expansion of ideologies of victimization of women” (*Pimping* 10). Beth Coleman agrees, stating, “what is played out for the pimp, at the expense of the women, is the reassertion of right” (72). It cannot be overstated to what extent street lit traffics in unspeakable depictions of explicit sex, violence, drug use, and other forms of “depravity” as conventions of the genre. Masculinist texts such as *Pimp* can be difficult to engage considering these representations. And it is the explicit nature of these texts that account for critical wariness, as one often reads such explicitness as representative of female oppression.

Critic Tricia Rose declares as much, stating in *The Hip Hop Wars* “pimp ideology and its expression in popular culture are fundamentally exploitative to women” (168). Rose’s critique suggests that to analyze female pleasure as functioning in/under patriarchal ideologies such as pimping (as this chapter attempts to do), is to confuse “participation in an industry that reinforces male sexual fantasy and power” for “sexual freedom” (77). Gifford argues *Pimp*’s prostitutes’ “claiming of [their] sexual agency in the face of white racism is the very logic that contributes to [their] exploitation” (*Pimping* 63). In other words, Gifford reads *Pimp*’s prostitutes who “consent to their own condition of oppression” as complicit (*Pimping* 63). Although Gifford notes that these prostitutes recognize that they have “a certain amount of power as the embodiment of a taboo” he is quick to state that such experience of power is only “a compensatory psychological rationalization” (*Pimping* 63). In his critical analysis of African American transgression, critic

Darieck Scott also explicitly refuses to engage black female sexuality in relation to abjection.¹⁵⁸ He suggests acknowledging female protagonists' relationship to abject sexual practices would be to potentially demonstrate the defeats abjection produces (*Extravagant* 20). In other words, Scott finds a discussion of black female sexuality and transgressive pleasure to remain dangerously unspeakable in a way that precludes it from functioning in a viable political manner.¹⁵⁹ Such critiques echo Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the "controlling images of black women"¹⁶⁰ (a function of the matrix of domination)—a theory that continues to influence critics who attempt to analyze representations of black female sexuality within systems of structural oppression.

Because Gifford is largely invested in exploring the text's representational paradox of "liberation and containment" he traces Slim's attempts to gain agency through the "exploitative gender dynamics of the black crime novel" that manifest as machismo and misogynistic abuse (*Pimping* 10, 12). Gifford understands Slim to be oppressing black women to combat white racism and thereby gain "freedom."¹⁶¹ He understands Slim's "pimp masculinity" to be a "compensatory identity...staged as a defense against dangerous women" (*Pimping* 56-57). And Gifford claims these "women [in *Pimp*] are not individually distinguished from one another but rather are an undifferentiated threat that must be renounced or contained" (*Pimping* 57).

While it is true that "dangerous women" abound in *Pimp* and Slim does construct his pimp identity as a mechanism to control such women, the narrative simultaneously allows for the

¹⁵⁸ Refer to Scott's book *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*.

¹⁵⁹ On the contrary, black male transgression as articulated through abjection is a form of "Black Power" for Scott. (*Extravagant* 23).

¹⁶⁰ Hill Collins argues controlling images, such as "stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas," have been used by society and the media since slavery to "justify black women's oppression" (*Black Feminist Thought* 69).

¹⁶¹ This interpretation brings to mind Eldridge Cleaver's serial rape of black women as practice for raping white women in a gesture of racial revenge/liberation. Refer to Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. However Cleaver's Black Power stance of "black macho=liberation" was critiqued by black feminist scholars such as Michelle Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.

representation of such women's individual sexual agency. *Pimp*'s opening line, "Her name was Maude and she Georgied¹⁶² me around 1921" (1) establishes a sexualized asymmetrical power dynamic between the then three-year-old Slim and his much older babysitter who uses him for cunnilingus.¹⁶³ That the text opens with a specific memory of a particular female engaging in sexual exploitation challenges Gifford's assessment that all "dangerous women" in *Pimp* are undifferentiated. The text's opening scene between Maude and Slim reveals to what extent Slim understands all the women in his life as *individualistic* sexual agents that in turn often render him submissive and/or abject and force him to complexly negotiate sex, power, pleasure, desire, domination, submission, and control,¹⁶⁴ as I later discuss.

Collins' matrix of domination theory holds crucial theoretical and material importance. However refusing and/or failing to consider black female agency and pleasure within it often unintentionally pathologizes figures of the underclass, such as sex workers, by interpreting any articulation of pleasure offered by these women to be pathological denial or over-compensation for their circumstances.¹⁶⁵ In analyzing misogynistic representations, many critics, such as Gifford, often shy away from critical engagement with women's individualism, agency, and pleasure in the face of (and sometimes as a result of) misogyny and sexualized violence.

However contemporary black feminist critics have been calling for recognition of black female agency and pleasure in the face of the matrix of domination for at least the past two decades. For example, eight years before Rose's critique of the exploitation of women, hip-hop feminist Joan Morgan dared to query "How come no one ever admits that part of the reason

¹⁶² Slim defines "Georgie" as the act of being sexually taken advantage of, without receiving money (*Pimp* 300).

¹⁶³ Ironically, Slim notes Maude had a reputation as a "devout Holy Roller" in an off-handed critique of the supposedly inviolable containment of sexual propriety that serves to mask the unspeakable (1).

¹⁶⁴ Irvine Welsh notes "Slim admitted that one reason he stopped pimping and became a writer was his fear of being exploited by younger prostitutes" ("Up From the Street").

¹⁶⁵ Refer to Mireille Miller-Young's "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography" and Jennifer C. Nash's *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* for such critiques.

women love hip-hop—as sexist as it is—is ‘cuz all that in-yo-face testosterone makes our nipples hard’ (58)? Recognizing pleasure in/under patriarchy, such as Morgan does, is influential to a recent generation of black sex-positive feminist scholars such as Horton-Stallings, Mireille Miller-Young, Treva B. Lindsey, Kaila Story, Jennifer C. Nash, and Ariane Cruz. These critics explore the intersections of black female pleasure and “exploitative” pornography, sex work, and other forms of explicit, sexualized cultural productions that represent black women as highly sexual.¹⁶⁶

Although pleasure can be critiqued as a utopic or liberatory trope at best, or a delusion or over-compensation at worst, it bears a particularly weighty relationship to African American history and literature considering, as Saidiya Hartman argues, historically in the terrorist economy of slavery black pleasure was understood as merely an extension of the master’s pleasure.¹⁶⁷ And during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries black pleasure was delimited by the politics of respectability and is continually censored in respectability’s wake. Evelyn Hammonds notes, “The restrictive, repressive, and dangerous aspects of black female sexuality have been emphasized by black feminist writers while pleasure, exploration, and agency have gone under-analyzed” (385). And Hortense Spillers famously stated, “black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their verb*” (“Interstices” 74, emphasis in original).

To privilege an analysis of pleasure is not to suggest that in laying claim to it subjects transcend structures of social oppression and are liberated. Rather, an analysis of pleasure gives

¹⁶⁶ See, for instance, Horton-Stallings *Mutha’ is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture*, Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*, and the 2013 anthology *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* co-edited by Miller-Young. Additionally, refer to Lindsey’s “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture” and Miller-Young’s “Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography” and “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in The New Hip-Hop Pornography.”

¹⁶⁷ Refer to Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*.

critical attention to the unspeakable—to what has been erased, denied, devalued, and censored—and forces us to continually contend with *why*. As critics we can recognize structural oppressions, such as the matrix of domination, while also asking: Can explicit depictions of sex and violence that exploit women be read in ways additional to patriarchal oppression? Can forms of patriarchal oppression, exploitation, and objectification be pleasurable for women? Do women derive pleasure from participating in the construction of their own “controlling images”? Must “explicit” necessarily be conflated with “exploitation”? Does exploitation of women render a text off-limits to critical considerations that seek to analyze what, in addition to misogyny, can be read therein? These, and other similar questions problematize the dominant ways of striving for liberation from the matrix of domination that has historically been the motivating intention of much black feminist work.

Part II: Abjection as Pleasure/Analytic

The psychosexual dimensions of anti-black racism, in which whites dominate, commodify, and abuse black bodies as a means to achieve sexual satisfaction, has been acknowledged and explored, explicitly or implicitly, by black writers, intellectuals, and critics from Ida B. Wells and Malcolm X to Gayl Jones, Saidiya Hartman, and Vincent Woodard, among others.¹⁶⁸ And black male sexual satisfaction inherent to performing as the racialized, sexualized object of anti-black racism has been explored by writers from Samuel R. Delany and Gary Fisher to critics

¹⁶⁸ See, for example, Wells’ analysis of the psychosexual elements of lynching in *Southern Horrors* and *The Red Record*, X’s critique of white johns in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Jones’ neoslave narrative *Corregidora*, Hartman’s critical study of slavery in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, and Woodard’s reading of human consumption and homoeroticism in US chattel slavery in his text *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism Within US Slave Culture*.

such as Robert Reid-Pharr and Darieck Scott.¹⁶⁹ BDSM and BDSM power dynamics, explicitly or implicitly, are tropes that have informed much African American literature for centuries.

Coleman states, “What one finds in the legacy of African-American letters is an ongoing fascination with the structure of mastery” (79) and Basu notes “From the middle through the late nineteenth century...the devices, instruments, and methods of punishment [of corporal discipline] were available to American and European readers, refracted by the literary form of the slave narrative and other discourses” (*Commerce* 32). BDSM power dynamics inform slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, as well as paraliterature that re-appropriates the master|slave dynamic, often through representations of erotic play-slavery (as I also discuss in the following chapter). Play-slavery is just one of the manifestations of consensual erotic power exchange that Call identifies (“Structures” 132). He states, “S/M eroticizes the class relations which are such a fundamental part of chattel slavery” (“Structures” 144).

It bears reminding, however, that ever since S/M was rendered a perversion (along with fetishism and homosexuality) by Krafft-Ebing in 1890 the stigma has remained. Masochism in particular continues to be classified as a mental disorder under the designation “Sexual Masochism Disorder” in the 2013 American Psychological Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. Thus BDSM and BDSM power dynamics, despite their presence in African American literature from slave narratives to present-day street lit, have been rendered largely critically unspeakable not only due to the “perversity” of S/M, but due to the eroticization of traumatic history. In fact, other than Basu’s 2012 book *The Commerce of Peoples: Sodomasochism and African American Literature*, and aside from the fact

¹⁶⁹ Refer to Delany’s novel *The Mad Man* and the collected works of Gary Fisher *Gary in Your Pocket*, Reid-Pharr’s collection of essays *Black Gay Man*, and Scott’s critical study of black male abjection *Extravagant Abjection* for in-depth explorations of this complex idea.

that several African Americanists use a S/M analytical framework,¹⁷⁰ there have been no other book-length analyses in African American literary studies that take sadomasochism in African American literature as their sole object of analysis (Basu, *Commerce* 18). Likewise, considerations of race and ethnicity are “inadequately addressed” within studies of sadomasochism (Langdridge and Barker 5).

However, ultimately at its core “S/M is always a racialized practice” (Freeman 59). As Basu argues “The resemblances between the practice of S&M and slavery are legion and cannot be glossed over” (*Commerce* 39).¹⁷¹ To iterate this, he reminds us of two crucial aspects of sadomasochism. First, “The reality of power in S&M is enacted in many ways, but it is conveyed most dramatically in the administration and reception of pain. Its centrality means that the acceptance of pain, even minimally, is a condition of possibility for domination and submission” (21). And secondly, “Sadomasochistic practice as it has emerged in the late twentieth century begins in the eighteenth century” (4), concurrent with American chattel slavery. Both slavery and S/M traffic in economies of pleasure founded on economies of pain. Thus “The most compelling demonstration that the power exercised in sadomasochistic performance is, in fact, real [as opposed to merely “play,” or “aesthetics”] is its historicity. We cannot miss the fact that the conventions, the mannerisms, the equipment used in S&M belong in the past, in the regime of punishment...[and] While the practice of dominant-submissive desire is not a return to the violence of the past, the memory of the past does inform it” (Basu, *Commerce* 23).

¹⁷⁰ Four books that immediately come to mind for their use of a S/M framework through which to interpret African American cultural productions are Reid-Pharr’s *Conjugal Union: The Body, The House, and The Black American*, Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection*, Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, and Amber Jamilla Musser’s *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*.

¹⁷¹ Refer to Basu’s chapter “Slave Narratives and Sadomasochism” in *The Commerce of Peoples* (pp. 31-50) for an in-depth historical and literary discussion of these resemblances.

Control, particularly represented through BDSM power dynamics, is the primary trope that informs both *Pimp* and “Bloodchild.” Representations of erotic play-slavery allow both texts to re-appropriate the master|slave dynamic as their characters negotiate Control. Erotic play-slavery allows its practitioners to perform real-world power relationships in a manner that can provide them with agency, even if that agency is “reproducing a peculiarly limited mode of bondage” (Coleman 73). Through play-slavery subjects “subvert, pervert, and make overt the erotic subtext of power and authority” (Highleyman). It bears stating that to read texts through a BDSM power dynamic framework requires one to be conscious of the temptation to succumb to the “encrypted utopia” of BDSM. While I do argue that BDSM play can disrupt the containment of subjectivity, I am careful not to suggest that in doing so the subject is *liberated*. In reading *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” through a BDSM power dynamic I am not interested in an encrypted utopia but in how, and why, the concealing/revealing of the pleasure inherent to subordination and, at times, abjection, informs both texts.

In *Pimp*, Slim’s older, wiser narrative voice details a formative moment in his nascent career as a young con when he witnesses the pleasure of abjection first hand. Slim recollects how his young self watches a white, married couple hire a black hustler named “Party Time” to have aggressive, racially-charged sex with the wife while the husband watches and directs the action. The scenario can be read as a sexualized manifestation of Eric Lott’s central argument in *Love and Theft* that “dominative [white male] tendencies [to commodify black bodies] coexist with or indeed depend on a self-conscious attraction to black men” (50).¹⁷² Peering unseen through a window Slim sees the husband “breathing hard” and exclaiming, “All right now, Boy, stab it into her, hurt her, punish her, crucify her, good Boy! Good Boy!” (16). Slim thinks “The broad

¹⁷² See also Mailer’s essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” for an articulation of eroticized black/white male relations.

looked so fragile and helpless to my naïve eyes that I felt a pang of pity pulse inside me as she moaned and whimpered in *painful pleasure* beneath the black demon savagely pile driving between the jerking white legs jack-knifed, imprisoned behind the sweating, hunching black shoulders” (16, emphasis mine).

In this scene the husband is clearly aroused by manipulating the sexual actions of the black man’s body as a surrogate. In doing so, both men together are able to cause the wife “painful pleasure” as Party Time “hurts” her, “stabbing” her with his erection at the husband’s request. To describe Party Time’s thrusts as “stabs” is to weaponize the black penis and racialize black men as criminals, a stereotype already well established by the white-constructed “black Buck” rapist myth of the post-Reconstruction South. Here Party Time performs that racialized, hypersexual stereotype that he was hired and paid to do. Lott reminds us, “Black performance itself, first of all, [is] precisely ‘performative,’ a cultural invention...and for better or worse it [is] often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world” (39).

As an act of physical and verbal violence Party Time’s performance is highly racialized. He “savagely pile drives” the taboo sex object of “fragile,” “helpless” white womanhood. In this scene Party Time is seemingly enjoying capitulating to white [male and female] expectations of blackness, repeating over and over the misogynistic phrase “bitch” as he breaths in the wife’s face “Beautiful Bitch, is it good? Beautiful Bitch, is it good”? (16). Critic Louis Chude-Sokei stresses “the possibility that a white commitment to the play as the thing itself—to a one-on-one correspondence between signifier and signified, mask and face—[can] be exploited by blacks fully aware of the joke and empowered by that awareness” (71). Party Time’s performance is both a means of “getting along” in a racist society and a manner of deriving pleasure from performing, for profit, the stereotypes that keep society differentiated through race, gender, and

sex ideologies. And whether or not the wife is committed to “the play as the thing itself” and unaware of Party Time’s performativity, the fact that we are told she moans and whimpers in “painful pleasure” suggests that she is interpreted as being aroused by the physical and verbal degradation that temporarily “imprisons” her into particular abject sexual, racial, and gendered roles.

Although the husband is using Party Time’s body as a surrogate and therefore conferring it with the power to induce his wife’s experience of *jouissance*,¹⁷³ he is simultaneously aroused by the way he delimits that power. He racializes Party Time not only by hypersexualizing him but also by infantilizing and animalizing him through the use of the racist epithets “Boy” and “Good Boy!” the latter a familiar command for a dog. The husband is also aroused by the manner in which he himself is rendered abject as the cuckold in a scenario that he has orchestrated. Lott suggests that in such racially charged circumstances one must read “a relatively transparent white male attraction to and repulsion from the black penis, for which the preoccupation with miscegenation serves as a kind of shorthand. These two concerns—a jealous guarding of the prized white female body and a fascination with black male sexual potency that either precedes or follows it” (Lott 57) again reiterate white male attraction to black masculinity underlying white supremacist logic. In other words, the husband derives pleasure from performing, and directing the performance of overtly racist, sexualized stereotypes that harken to white supremacy’s greatest fear/fantasy of black men savagely ravaging white women.

Likewise, Slim’s gaze understands the wife to be aroused by the fact that her husband is witnessing and directing the actions that render her abject. She is a “sinner” in

¹⁷³ Again, as I explained in the Intro, in this chapter I use Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* that seeks the splitting of the subject through the excessive sexual pleasure/pain that can come with abjection.

need of “punishment” and “crucifixion” for deriving pleasure from committing adultery, having interracial sex, and, by extension, engaging in bestiality with a “black demon”/dog. She is also rendered abject by the fact that she is “imprisoned” under the body of Party Time as he repeatedly demands confirmation of her sexual satisfaction from such depravity. However, as with all interpretations of the actors in this scene, the reader can only infer the wife’s pleasure through Slim’s narrative perspective. And the fact that the narrative assumes that the reader *should* infer the wife’s pleasure within (what many find to be) a misogynistic scenario is a hallmark of the street lit genre’s unspeakable content.

After witnessing this scene of transgressive sex Slim sits on the front steps of the hotel hoping to catch a “close up of the freaks” as they make their way out to the street (17). And yet he is let down as they are “disappointingly normal. Just a clean cut white couple having a parting chat with a grinning, black Negro” (17). Here, Party Time’s face signifies the face of minstrelsy, suggesting he is, most definitely, “fully aware of the joke” (Chude-Sokei 71). Slim’s surprise reveals his (at the time) “naïve” (16) misunderstanding of the tactic of transgression. He thinks transgressive actions, such as the sex he witnessed, are capable of obliterating boundaries and transcending contained sex, race, and gender roles. Slim’s confusion highlights the question underlying the functioning of the unspeakable: “How can one give a voice|space to the *abject* and how can one (re)inject it into a culture that has always already excluded it” (Berressem 31)?

However the abject, while excluded, is not “outside” the social. Delany crucially reminds us that, even in his transgressive explorations, he never lets himself “pretend...that [he has] somehow transcended the social” (Rowell, “An Interview with

Samuel R. Delany” 41). And Julia Kristeva argues, “the abject is above all ambiguity” (236) suggesting transgression *complicates*, not transcends, differentiation between inside and outside, public and private, and unspeakable and everyday, as Delany also notes in “On the Unspeakable” (141). Thus Slim’s disappointment stems from his failure to understand that

“abjects are always already contained fully within the realm of representation|differentiation precisely because they are always already the result of the threat to break it up. In fact abjection, as a ‘primal sublimation,’ is the very strategy to deal with that threat...the abject...is always already the result of the cultural operation of abjection” (Berressem 27).

Because young Slim does not understand the tactic of transgression he does not comprehend, in the moment of his witnessing, that the tactic, as enacted by the couple and Party Time, is not about obliteration and transcendence. At the time he is unaware that the three subjects have presumably entered the “private” space of the hotel room in order to engage the tactic—to gain pleasure and exercise agency through transgressive sex play that depends on the erotically violent exploitation of contained race, sex, and gender roles (something I also discuss in the following chapter). The fact that “the freaks” are able to transition from performing the unspeakable only to easily (and purposefully) slip on their socially constrained “normal,” “everyday” public faces reveals both the structure of social division that keeps the everyday|unspeakable divided and interrelated, as well as the fungibility of identity, accessible through the tactic of transgression.

Critic Hanjo Berressem notes, “the abject ensemble of...singular *abjects* poses a terrifying ‘threat to identity’” (32). The husband, the wife, and Party Time are fully aware that they, as singular abjects, are performing racialized, sexualized stereotypes at all times (though they may think each other to be understanding “the play as the thing

itself”). And they are aware that the containment of social division serves as a *prerequisite* to their sexual pleasure in both “private” and “public” realms.¹⁷⁴ This erotic engagement with containment that at first confuses Slim, but later informs his pimping is the tactic of transgression at work. Through it the subject(s) (in this instance, the couple and Party Time) evade “the monotheistic reverence of a single form” (“freak” or “normal”) and instead welcome “the pantheistic and irreverent joys of variable singularities” (Basu, *Commerce* 3). Through the tactic of transgression, multiple sexualized, gendered, and racialized identities, while rooted in containment, are adopted and executed differently depending upon social context. The three “freaks” explore roles that meet their individual and/or collective desires through performing, consciously and unconsciously, many forms of containment and postanarchist kink that challenge containment. Berressem states, “The politically subversive gesture” of the unspeakable then, for Delany, “lies in making the unspeakable and the speakable eventual, local and thus mobile, in order to allow for the development of scenarios in which specific social geographies create specific unspeakabilities” (35).

Although Slim witnesses this scene of transgression at a young age, it is only through the mentorship of Sweet Jones (the novel’s representation of one of Chicago’s most infamous black pimps) that he comes to *critically understand* that abjection can be, for some, the ultimate turn on—a concept that later proves central in his bids for Control. To “turn him out” as a pimp Sweet gives Slim the rundown of the “rules of the game,” explaining to him the contours of what he refers to as the “pimp book.” The book, “written in the skulls of proud slick Niggers freed from slavery” is one most pimps “ain’t even heard about” (176). Sweet’s pimp book is a shadow

¹⁷⁴ Refer to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* for his famous analysis of the role of discipline in sexuality.

book,¹⁷⁵ much like *Pimp* itself is within the African American literary canon. The pimp book, Sweet explains, is one that cannot, and will not, be found in “the square-Nigger or white history books” (176).

Sweet’s analysis of the pimp book provides economic, sexual, and historical counter-narratives that offer key critiques of structures of racialized, sexualized oppression. For instance, he mocks “Black whores [that] con themselves the only reason [the white man] sniffs his way to ‘em is white broads ain’t got what it takes to please him” (177). Although Sweet acknowledges whites’ racialized sexual desire stating “...if it wasn’t for that frantic army of white tricks, Nigger pimps would starve to death” (177), he challenges the stereotype about *why* white men are so eager to have sex with black women, and it is not because “white broads ain’t got what it takes” (177).

As a counter-narrative, Sweet reveals that white sexual insatiability for black bodies is really about a white, male drive toward abjection. Sweet states white men have sex with black women (and, presumably, black men) because wallowing in the belief that sex with black bodies is the lowest form of abjection *turns these white men on* (177, emphasis mine). Sweet explains

The silly sick bastard [the white man] is like a whore that needs and loves punishment...As great as he thinks he is, he can’t keep his beak and swipe [penis] outta the stink of a black ass. He wallows and stains himself. *The poor freak’s joy is in his suffering.* The chump believes he’s done something dirty to himself. He slips back into his white world. He goes on conning himself he’s God and Niggers are wild filthy animals he has to keep in the stockades (177-178, emphasis mine).

¹⁷⁵ In fact, the title of the chapter in which Sweet shares his knowledge of the “pimp book” is called “The Unwritten Book.” “The unwritten shadow book” is the first of three types of shadow books Young identifies and analyzes in *The Grey Album*.

Here, Sweet's critique of white male drive toward abjection represents the ease in which one can transgress and then "slip back into [the] white world" to portray roles dictated by social differentiation, just as the "freaks" seamlessly transition to "normal." Yet, in Sweet's analysis, it is clear that racialization not only functions as a form of racist containment that renders white men "God" and black men "filthy animals," but also as a form of "pathological...fetishist behavior" (Coleman 76). In other words, "the overcompensation and overinvestment that historically characterize[s] slavery" (Coleman 76) is meant to mask unspeakable white *jouissance*. *Pimp* repeatedly critiques how white sexual fulfillment is accessed through transgressive play with racialized forms of containment. And, knowing to what extent whites fetishize blackness, "Pimps, with the help of popular culture, have made a fetish of their business" (Coleman 70).

In her study of what she calls the "hip hop narrative" produced by writers such as Slim and fellow Holloway House author Donald Goines, Horton-Stallings argues that reflected in such texts is a "Black underclass culture [that] contains a different set of politics and a variety of contradictions as far as gender, sexuality, and race are concerned" ("I'm Goin" 178). Abjection is embraced by the pimps, prostitutes, and hustlers in *Pimp* as it not only illuminates critiques such as Sweet's analysis of the psychosexual dynamics that structure oppressive race, sex, and gender relations in the United States, but it allows, too, for a critique of black middle-class ideologies that attempt to shame black people on the margins of respectability. For instance a pimp at Sweet's party, while receiving public oral sex, raises a glass in a "toast" that derides "square bitches" (i.e. those that abide by the politics of sexual propriety and, by extension, heteronormativity). He recites

*Before I'd touch a square bitch's slit
I'd suck a thousand clappy pricks and swim through*

liquid shit.
They got green puke between their rotten toes and snot
runs from their funky noses.
I hope all square bitches become syphilitic wrecks.
I hope they fall through their own ass-holes and
break their mother-fucking necks (147).

The African American oral tradition of toasting,¹⁷⁶ centuries old provides the speaker the public opportunity to repeat and improvise myths of outlaw exploits, such as those of the Stagger Lee figure lauded above. Toasts are not merely forms of entertainment and community camaraderie. Rather, they serve as forms of critique for the underclass whose voices are often silenced or denigrated by those striving for liberation. As is evidenced by the toast, pimps “exploit perversion and violence [forms of abjection], terms that already resonate in the precinct of ‘black.’ The pimp, by mastering himself, is thus free to exploit exploitation” (Coleman 80). Indeed, Sweet warns Slim “Square-ass Niggers will try to put shame inside you” for pimping, but urges him to “pimp by the rules of that pimp book those noble studs wrote a hundred years ago” (178).

Coleman refers to the pimp as “that famously abject thing” (71). To reiterate Berressem’s analysis of abjection, abjects are always already contained fully within the realm of differentiation (i.e. made the “outlaw”) precisely because they are *produced* by the threat to containment’s stability (27). *Pimp* represents the unspeakable pleasure inherent to abjection and reveals how performing as an abject allows for a critical analysis of abjection’s relationship to containment. Thus the value of the “pimp book,” and of *Pimp* itself, is that they are unspeakable texts that allow for cultural analyses of the complex interrelations between gender, sex, race, power, and abjection disallowed by

¹⁷⁶ For an in-depth analysis of African American oral traditions refer to Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*.

forms of epistemological containment such as “the square-Nigger or white history books” that delimit what can, and cannot, be publically articulated. And they function as privileged artifacts of outlaw solidarity that allow the outlaw, while he/she is not “outside” the square world, to critically analyze it from his/her position on its margins.

Part III: Eroticized Play-Slavery with “Dangerous” Females

Slim’s self-confessed “naivety” in the scene of transgressive sex that he witnesses as a young hustler is important because thereafter he never again expresses “pity” in response to what he initially understood as “fragile” and “helpless” womanhood (16). Instead, throughout the narrative he comes to an astute understanding of the complex performativity of race, sex, and gender roles and learns to manipulate his own and that of others. That he lacks empathy for women, particularly those that are brutalized at his or others’ hands, is without question misogynistic. Yet there is something egalitarian in his refusal to understand the female gender in stereotypical terms such as “fragile” or “helpless.”

There are many female characters in *Pimp* whose choice to work as prostitutes cannot be explained *merely* with familiar narratives of abuse, childhood trauma, or codependency.¹⁷⁷ Although such narratives accompany the backstory of several of Slim’s prostitutes, these same women are often represented as taking pleasure in being prostitutes. *Pimp*’s character Chris is an example of a woman who expresses her sexual agency in ways that complicate matrix of domination narratives. Specifically, Slim is able to seduce Chris, one of his eventual “bottom

¹⁷⁷ One of the first writers to analyze the psychological aspects of prostitution was Havelock Ellis and he derived such explanations. He was motivated to do so as he was unable to accept economic motivation as an explanation for why women chose to be prostitutes. Refer to Elias et al.’s *Prostitution* for a comprehensive history of the “world’s oldest profession.”

women,”¹⁷⁸ by reminding her of the *pleasure* she takes in it. Because Slim “knew [Chris] was a freak” he is able to whisper to her that she is still a member of the “whore game” and recognize that the “thrill in her voice” is a response from “the whore...alive and thrashing inside her” (162, 161). In her research on black female sex workers Miller-Young notes, “women are motivated by...a sense of recognition for their erotic embodiment and sexual talents” (225). Thus when Chris initially rhetorically questions why she is drawn to Slim he responds, “Don’t ask yourself stupid questions. You can’t escape that freak, desperate spark. You know baby, that awful sweet electricity that makes a farm boy kiss a ewe. That same power that howls a hot torn cat in the alley” (163). Slim is telling Chris that she cannot deny the power of embodying her own unspeakable eroticism. She cannot deny the pleasure inherent to performing the “awful” abject role of a woman who enjoys transgressive sex. And he erotically likens such pleasure is similar to other thrilling perversities. Slim tells Chris that to attempt to question why she continually seeks out transgressive pleasure is, essentially, a “stupid,” fruitless endeavor of epistemological containment (reminiscent of Hogg’s critique of rationality).

In analyzing the female characters of *Pimp* Gifford, like many critics using a radical feminist lens to read African American literature, is mainly concerned with the controlling images of black women that, in the case of *Pimp*, “perpetuate a mythology of women as ‘bitches’ and ‘whores’ who are complicit in keeping black men down”(Pimping 58). However such a reading, and such an over-determined focus on controlling images, forecloses a critical consideration of black women’s agency and pleasure in embodying those controlling images and/or in participating in their construction.¹⁷⁹ Some female characters in *Pimp* are represented as not only

¹⁷⁸ *Pimp*’s glossary defines a “bottom woman” as a “pimp’s main woman, his foundation” (299).

¹⁷⁹ Refer to Nash’s *The Black Body in Ecstasy* for her extensive overview of the 1980s feminist “sex wars” that intensely debated such issues.

taking pleasure in being a prostitute but doing so because the role is synonymous to the black female stereotypes of sexual promiscuity—the Jezebel. By portraying Jezebel and Sapphire stereotypes, these women perform a type of minstrelsy. And such depictions of black female sexual agency performed through the construction and embodiment of such archetypes challenge the critical framework of “controlling images” of black women that can, ultimately, deny black female agency.

For instance, at one point Slim’s first prostitute Phyllis reveals to him that although she hates servicing “white tricks” who “paw” and “slobber” all over her, she “gets a thrill with them” by being a “black Nigger bitch, taking their scratch” as they moan and groan and lick “between a black whore’s thighs” (158). Here Phyllis is getting pleasure out of profiting from performing the Jezebel stereotype—one of many “black whores in Hell” that have something “between their legs” that “those cold ass [white] broads in Heaven ain’t got” (158). Although in explaining the “pimp book” to Slim Sweet debunked the myth of black hypersexuality underlying white desire for black bodies, it is a mythic stereotype that motivates Phyllis as she embodies it and puts it to work. As she grounds her agency in her self-referential identity as a “black and low” prostitute, Phyllis imagines herself to be co-producer, maintainer, and, ultimately, profiteer from the stereotype’s continual reproduction (158). “Black sex workers’ illicit erotic moral economy” (Miller Young, “Hypersexuality” 229) can bring prostitutes, such as Phyllis, self-proclaimed sexual and psychological satisfaction. The black female prostitutes in *Pimp*, while oppressed within the matrix of domination, also claim ownership of and pleasure in their abjection. In doing so, their actions critique the denial of their erotic autonomy within liberatory frameworks such as radical feminism.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Tellingly, in her study on black female sex workers, Miller-Young finds “the informants in this study feel further alienated by feminist scholars that talk about them, but not to them, and who see them as colluding with misogynists

In addition to such transgressive role-playing, throughout *Pimp* black female agency is, at times, expressed through “freakiness.” Take, for example, the character Pepper who Georgies Slim. Pepper is a “freaky” “bitch” [ex]“whore” (42-43) who effectively manipulates her various controlling images with pleasure and finesse.¹⁸¹ Pepper is the dominant in their BDSM power dynamic. As Slim states, he “wasn’t in her league” (43). Pepper psychosexually entraps Slim like “a yellow cat hypnotizing a bird” (42). Describing her tactics of patient, concentrated seduction Slim states, “She sat there motionless, her green eyes smoky, as she stared at me through the mirror” (42). Slim is excited by her “raw sensuality” that she administers like a drug as she gives him “a full dose of those hot green eyes” that “sign [their] deal” (42).

Slim soon realizes Pepper is a “freak bitch” (43) during sex play. She “cajoled and persuaded [him] to do everything in the sexual book, and a number of things not even listed” during their “circus love” sessions (43). In *Pimp*’s glossary Slim defines “circus love” as “to run the gamut of sexual perversion” (299). Thus the sex play between Slim and Pepper is unspeakable, much like Sweet’s pimp book, as both function in a realm beyond dominantly shared cultural, sexual knowledge. Slim describes his and Pepper’s exploration of violent BDSM sex by stating that Pepper “nibbled and sucked hundreds of tingling bruises on every square inch of my body” (43). He also reveals their practice of urolagnia, revealing, “It took me a week to get the stench of her piss out of my hair” (43). In this latter example Slim perhaps understands Pepper to have marked him as her primary sexual object, even if she only did so to “take her revenge” on him for the fierce way in which “she hated men” (43). But Slim takes pleasure in this idea that Pepper is embodying controlling images as she sexually degrades him.

rather than carving out a vital space for black women to see themselves as desirable and desiring subjects” (“Hypersexuality” 231).

¹⁸¹ During Slim’s trial Pepper appears looking like “a prospect for a convent...stripped of paint and gee-gaws”; in other words, as a straight, respectable woman (55) which is, of course, another mask.

Because he has yet to achieve masculine maturity and pimp identity, Slim does not fully comprehend the power dynamics of his sexual relationship with Pepper. He felt there was sexual reciprocity between them, stating “I was flipping Pepper with the techniques she had taught me. I knew all the buttons to push for her, and she burned hotter than ever for her little puppy...Fair exchange, as the old saw goes, is never robbery” (43). But does Pepper “burn” for Slim because he is such a great lover and therefore virile (a necessity for his developing ethos), or does her pleasure derive from the fact that she has turned him out and created a sex slave (“little puppy”) for herself, willing and eager to please her with the techniques of her own design? While Slim interprets their sexual transactions as “fair exchange” he is, in fact, performing in the ways Pepper wants him to perform, when she wants him to perform for her. And he is devastated when he learns he is not the “only stud she freaks off with,” having believed “like a sucker” that he was “the whole show in her love life” (49).

In “Bloodchild,” Gan, like Slim, ultimately needs to believe that he is the “dangerous” female’s most valued, desired sexual partner so as to feel pleasure at being abjectly sexually possessed. “Bloodchild”’s sex scene occurs after a passage of gruesome, eroticized violence in which T’Gatoi, in front of Gan, performs an emergency “birthing” procedure on a man named Bram Lomas. Lomas is N’Tlic, meaning the grubs Lomas’ Tlic has impregnated him with have hatched and are attempting to eat their way out of his body. T’Gatoi slices Lomas’ stomach open with her claw (“she opened him”) rendering his body vulnerable, feminized, and subordinate to her control (2486). She removes the grubs and embeds them in the host body of another animal that Gan, complicit in this situation, shot. Safe in the host animal’s body, the grubs will grow into future Tlic. This scene of mutilation/salvation is represented as a catalyst for Gan’s loss of

innocence and heightened anxiety as he comes to terms with his pre-determined, imminent role as T'Gatoi's host animal/sex object. However the mutilation/salvation scene *also* serves as a form of BDSM foreplay in which Gan and T'Gatoi negotiate their psychosexual mutual desire/need for one another through a seductive, and ambiguous, dance of coercion/consent best articulated in Gan's declaration, "There is risk, Gatoi, in dealing with a partner" (2493).

Delineating the desire inherent to various forms of submission is difficult in both *Pimp* and "Bloodchild" because it is often ambiguously cathected to anxiety, fear, or survival. For example, once Slim realizes the full extent to which Pepper has Georgied him his machismo requires that he react adversely. The scene is worth quoting at length for its representation of Slim's pleasure as the violently subordinated subject within an asymmetrical power dynamic. He states:

I reached down and slapped [Pepper] hard against the side of her face. It sounded like a pistol shot. On impact a thrill shot through me. I should have slugged her with a baseball bat.

The bitch uncoiled from that bed like a striking yellow cobra, hooked her arms around my waist and sank her razor sharp teeth into my navel.

The shock paralyzed me. I fell across my back on the bed moaning in pain. I could feel blood rolling from the wound down toward my crotch, but I couldn't speak. I couldn't move.

Pepper was sure a strange twisted broad. She was breathing hard now, but not in rage. The violence, the blood, had turned her on.

She was gently caressing me as she licked, with a feathery tongue, the oozing wound on my belly. She had never been so tenderly efficient as she took me on a beautiful 'trip around the Universe.'

The funny thing was, the throbbing awful pain somehow became a part of me, melted into the joy of the feathery tongue, the thrill of the thing Pepper was doing to me.

I guess Freud was right. If it thrills you to give pain, you can get your jollies taking it (44-45).

Slim feels the need to differentiate and contain his and Pepper's respective power roles through misogynist abuse precisely because he must hide his pleasure at being made Pepper's abject subordinate. He administers violence to Pepper to control her and force her to suffer for the manner in which she has so effectively rendered him thus. However Pepper's freaky actions

undermine Slim's intentions to sediment his dominance through violence. Much to his surprise the violence he commits against her "turns her on," as does the wound she inflicts on his body. And she uses her arousal to ultimately "twist" the scenario to her advantage by administering physical violence conflated with sexual pleasure to Slim's body to further subordinate him through *jouissance*. Indeed he relinquishes to her, vulnerable from her bite and her performance of fellatio, and he finds himself paralyzed in his experience of *jouissance*—comingled pain, joy, and thrilling sexual arousal. He realizes, as "the awful pain became a part of [him]," that he not only enjoys performing as the dominant sadist "thrilled" to "give pain," but also as the subordinate masochist getting his "jollies taking it." In his essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood" James Baldwin argues, "Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they...cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires" (828). Slim's attempt to subordinate Pepper fails because he underestimates the extent of her kinkiness, and the extent of his own, in which seduction and abjection produce each other.¹⁸²

A similar horrific/erotic realization of female kinkiness occurs in "Bloodchild." As T'Gatoi performs the birthing procedure on Lomas she repeatedly licks his blood, both from her claw and from his opened belly, to slow the bleeding (much like Pepper licks "with a feathery tongue" Slim's "oozing wound"). Watching T'Gatoi ingest the bodily waste of Lomas horrifies Gan who, profoundly conscious of his complicity in the suffering of another Terran thinks, "I felt as though I were helping her torture him, helping her consume him" (2487). He thinks, "The whole procedure was wrong, alien. I wouldn't have thought anything about her could seem alien to me," and yet he also finds himself thinking, perversely, "Did she like the taste?" (2488). T'Gatoi's

¹⁸² See Katherine Bond-Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom: Beautiful Shame* for a sustained argument regarding "how we might think about the crossing of signs in the context of debasement—and think about debasement in the context of seduction" (3).

actions fascinate Gan as he realizes, first, that T’Gatoi is profoundly “other” and second, that he could, potentially, find himself in a similar predicament as Lomas. He could find himself at the mercy of T’Gatoi’s “alien” manipulation of his body as she simultaneously injures, consumes, and soothes him with “tender efficiency” in an act of eroticized violence (as Pepper does to Slim). Gan vomits not only due to what he witnesses but also because of his knowledge that T’Gatoi is capable, and willing, of consuming a Terran body including, possibly, his own. He experiences a fascinated revulsion at his *willingness* to consent to being the sex object/host animal of such a creature. He realizes that he is not “safe” in his dealings with T’Gatoi (2490-2491).

Gan suspects that T’Gatoi’s implantation of him was always already set to occur that evening. He thinks to himself “Why else had I been given a whole egg to eat...why else had my mother kept looking at me as if I were going away from her...did T’Gatoi imagine I hadn’t known”? (2493). Gan knows their negotiation is both a façade and a necessary component of the performance of BDSM power dynamics. As Call reminds us “In a typical BDSM relationship, the dominant desires the desire of the submissive. The submissive’s desire frequently structures negotiations and determines the shape and extent of the scene. By endorsing and emphasizing the desire of the submissive, BDSM promotes a high level of equality between the participants” (“Structures” 133).

T’Gatoi is able to manipulate Gan into being her host animal/sex object by constructing a sense of reciprocity between them that turns on the idea of “consent.” Prior to implanting Gan she reminds him “I have done what you demanded. I have asked you [if I can implant you]!” and, later, “You were the one making choices tonight Gan, I made mine long ago,” suggesting that the choice to submit to T’Gatoi’s need/desires was in Gan’s hands (2493). Although aware of the asymmetrical power dynamic he finds himself subordinate to, he manipulates T’Gatoi into

asking for his consent (“Ask me, Gatoi”) of which he then grants in a performance of “demanding” dominance (“Do it to me”) (2492, 2491). For Gan, requesting his abjection (“Do it to me”) that T’Gatoi then grants him provides him proof of his desirability and value as her host animal/sex object. Explicitly requesting his abjection confers him with agency and the access to the promise/threat of postanarchist kink’s dissolution of subjectivity. Basu states, “The exorbitant performance of a dominant subject and submissive object suggests the...performative terms of subject-object positions” (*Commerce* 13).

Indeed, both Gan and T’Gatoi derive erotic pleasure and agency through manipulating the fluidity of gender, sex, and power roles. Gan reflects, “I undressed and lay down beside her. I knew what to do...I felt the familiar sting, narcotic, mildly pleasant. Then the sting of her ovipositor. The puncture was painless, easy. So easy going in. She undulated slowly against me, her muscles forcing the egg from her body into mine...I held onto her...feeling oddly ashamed” (2493). For Gan the process was “so easy” and yet shameful, and shameful in its ease. In the negotiation scene Gan ultimately performs as the dominant partner so as to justify the abject pleasure/shame he later feels as T’Gatoi’s subordinate during their act of procreation/sex. And yet because T’Gatoi *asked* Gan and because he *chose* to be her host animal/sex object (as opposed to letting her implant his sister Xuan Hoa) Gan can, and does, own his overwhelmingly ambiguous feelings of pleasurable subordination to T’Gatoi’s degrading manipulation of his body even while (and perhaps because) he loses claims to Control. Considering Lacan’s famous formulation “man’s desire is the desire of the Other”¹⁸³ it is clear that Gan consents to T’Gatoi hoping that her choosing him signifies her desire for him. Repeatedly he asks her prior to procreation/sex, as well as during, “Do you care?” “Do you care that it’s me?” (2493).

¹⁸³ Refer to Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (38).

Unlike *Pimp*'s representation of Slim's psychological fallout from his relationship with Pepper (a "dangerous woman" for whom violence is tantamount to "freaky" enjoyment thereby rendering Slim powerless to enact Control), the reader does not see the repercussions of Gan's decision to be T'Gatoi's host animal/sex object. This is because "Bloodchild"'s narrative immediately ends after the procreation/sex scene. In the scene's wake T'Gatoi promises she will never leave Gan and she pledges, in the final sentence of the story, to "take care of him" as a lover would (2494). As this chapter and dissertation more broadly argues, there may not always be psychological repercussions to transgressive sex. Within BDSM power dynamics, "When the 'submissive sees the pleasure he can give [the dominant], he 'wants to give [the dominant] more.' He 'wants to become a function' of the dominant's pleasure, and he feels 'grateful and needed.' At the same time, the 'dominant protects the sub' in the performance of S&M, and he is 'secure in his knowledge [that] he is looked after by his mistress'" (Lorelei 55 and Varrin 117, 165 as quoted in Basu, *Commerce* 163). "Bloodchild" may depict abject sex to represent mutual, unspeakable pleasure in spite of, or perhaps as a result of, asymmetrical power dynamics. Delany writes "The power involved in desire is so great that when caught in an actual rhetorical manifestation of desire—a particular sex act, say—it is sometimes all but impossible to untangle the complex webs of power that shoot through it from various directions, the power relations that are the act and that constitute it ("The Rhetoric of Sex" 20).

Like those critics that decline to interpret black female sexuality outside of the matrix of domination, critic Alys Weinbaum refuses to recognize Gan's agency in "Bloodchild" as anything more than a choice of what historian Stephanie Smallwood calls "commodified freedom."¹⁸⁴ Weinbaum rationalizes Gan's desire for T'Gatoi as over-compensation for his

¹⁸⁴ Refer to Smallwood, "Commodified Freedom:" Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic."

circumstances (64). Critic Wendy Brown considers such compensation to be a gesture of “liberal consent”¹⁸⁵ which occurs when subordinate parties with little to no power submit begrudgingly, with apathy, or with indifference to powerful entities (163). Brown thus considers liberal consent to function as “a response to power...but not a mode of enacting or sharing in power” (163). These critics argue that the subordinate subject possesses no agency in conditions of asymmetrical power. They also maintain that no erotic pleasure is available in such conditions.

While necessarily critiquing structural oppression, critical readings such as these unintentionally take away subjects’ power and agency by delimiting a subject’s choice as virtually non-existent. And, ultimately, such critical readings foreclose a consideration of pleasure and what might be gained through asymmetrical power dynamics, including those interactions that defile. Weinbaum argues that Gan merely “accommodates” the power dynamics that structure his relation to T’Gatoi, writing “...it is only by quelling insight and awareness...that Gan is able to choose to become a surrogate” (64, 63). She claims that Gan effectively, necessarily (she argues) “obscures the fact of his subjection” (64-65) in order to choose it from a place of deep denial.

However Gan’s choice can be read as *embracing* his subjection precisely *because* it proves to be the central node of his pleasure and agency. Scott urges us to consider “*how* or *why* that relationship [of asymmetrical power dynamics] is so hyperendowed with eroticism” so as to consider what “uses other than the reiteration of oppressive power dynamics” such dynamics might offer (*Extravagant* 157, emphasis in original). And in subjecting himself to T’Gatoi, Gan experiences the thing Slim fights so hard against—postanarchist kink’s disturbance of contained sex and gender identities. Within kink theory and BDSM practice more generally, subordinate and dominant subjects are not understood in static power roles or, for that matter, hard gendered

¹⁸⁵ See Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*.

terms. In *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” categories of identitarian difference (such as “male” and “female,” “dominant” and “subordinate”) are malleable and, as in the S/M community, the “polarities between positions are more negotiable” (Basu, *Commerce* 24). In kink theory “Sadomasochistic practice is a challenge to the inviolability of the subject and the increasingly restrictive modes of intersubjective relations (Basu, *Commerce* 7).”

In “Structures of Desire” Call argues that Butler’s work “endorses erotic power exchange, including forms which seem to replicate the structures of slavery” (132). Indeed, “Bloodchild” is often read as evocative of American chattel slavery. Although the characters are ambiguously raced, when read in this manner, the story is understood to represent a black/white paradigm of racial capitalism and bioslavery in order to analyze the power dynamics at play (Weinbaum). However Butler states in her “Afterword,” “It amazes me that some people have seen ‘Bloodchild’ as a story of slavery. It isn’t. It’s a number of other things though. On one level, it’s a love story between two very different beings” (30). In response to Butler’s assessment of her own story, Wienbaum reads this statement of mutuality “against the grain,” effectively dismissing Butler’s reading by warning that the story must absolutely be read as illustrating “the afterlife of slavery” (13). What both Butler and Weinbaum do not imagine in either of their critiques is that love, erotic entanglement, and slavery do not necessarily have to be positioned as mutually exclusive, as Call’s postanarchist kink reading of Butler’s *Patternist* series argues¹⁸⁶ and as I explore in chapter four’s reading of Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.

Weinbaum does acknowledge that “Bloodchild” has, and can be read through a sadomasochistic framework. She suggests that the story could effectively be read as an S/M story about a slave who nurtures his desire for “unfreedom” (64). However she is quick to state that to

¹⁸⁶ See Call’s “Structures of Desire: Postanarchist Kink in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany.”

consider as much is “tricky, uncomfortable business” and ultimately chooses to not read the text in such a manner (64). Such quick critical dismissal of the “tricky” and “uncomfortable” (i.e. unspeakable) is reminiscent of critic Jeffrey Allen Tucker’s hesitancy and ultimate refusal to engage with *Hogg* (16). This is likely because, for such critics, reading particular transgressive texts or reading transgression in texts will not (they seem to argue) produce emergent resistance strategies (the primary goal of liberatory critical frameworks).

Call however maintains that postanarchist kink theory can help us to understand how contexts of BDSM play, such as the sex scene in “Bloodchild,” represent a form of equality that “may sometimes lie hidden behind the apparent inequality generated by the BDSM roles themselves (“Structures” 133). And he reiterates that the confusion around the issue “may motivate many moral critiques of kink” (“Structures” 133). Likewise Basu suggests objections to sadomasochism “are predicated on the assumption that affective relations of the past in a regime of punishment (slavery, feudalism, colonialism) must be expunged” (*Commerce* 25). Yet “Sadomasochist performance assumes that this past not only cannot be entirely extinguished but also that it may be desirable as a usable past” (*Commerce* 25).

Coleman argues, “the slave economy in America produced the American pimp” and “the pimp,” she writes, “is a student of power” (68, 72). Slim’s BDSM power dynamic with his whores traffics explicitly in tropes of eroticized slavery that take race as a “prosthetic marker” of power differentials.¹⁸⁷ Trying to save himself from being rendered the subordinate, particularly through sex, Slim thinks, “Fast, I got to find out the secrets of pimping. I don’t want to be a half-ass gigolo lover like the white pimps. I really want to control the whole whore. I want to be the boss of her life, even her thoughts. I got to con them that Lincoln never freed the slaves” (87).

¹⁸⁷ See Basu’s *The Commerce of People: Sadomasochism and African American Literature* for an in-depth analysis of the use of race in the performance of S/M in African American Literature.

Here, “The freedom/slavery reversal is crucial: the black pimp, escaping from bondage, becomes the slave-owner” (Graham 13). Slim has to convince his whores that slavery is a continuation of the “natural state” of black women in the United States—an idea that clearly resonates with the “controlling images” theory.¹⁸⁸ This strategy often backfires as Slim’s whores, in many instances, betray him and even attempt to kill him out of resentment. However it also, at times, works.

The woman Slim treats most like a slave (and who most takes on the role) is his first whore, Phyllis. Because in my analysis of *Pimp* I am invested in tracing female agency in asymmetrical power dynamics, it is important to note that at the bar where they meet, it is *Phyllis* who propositions Slim. This initial meeting first reveals Phyllis’s pleasure in abjection. Slim seduces her into being his whore by both wearing the façade of pimp dominance and by speaking to her in a manner dictated by that façade that renders her abject and, consequently, turns her on.

Early in their initial conversation, in response to Phyllis’s assertion “I ain’t no bitch. I’m a mother-fucking lady,” Slim states

You stinking black Bitch, you’re a fake. There’s no such thing as a lady in our world. You either got to be a bitch or a faggot in drag. Now Bitch, which is it? Bitch, I’m not a gentleman, I’m a pimp. I’ll kick your funky ass. You gave me first lick. Bitch you’re creaming to eat me up. I’m not a come freak, you are. I’m a freak to scratch” (63).

Here Slim calls Phyllis a “fake,” accusing her of trying to lay claim to a gender role (“lady”) excluded from “their [under]world” and historically disallowed to black women.¹⁸⁹ And for Slim to reject the mantle of “gentleman” is to firmly state his class standing in the underworld. In Middle English the title “gentleman” denoted a man of noble birth. Later uses suggested a man

¹⁸⁸ Indeed, this form of black male dominance over black females has been analyzed and challenged by many black feminist scholars, but notable texts include Michelle Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* and bell hooks’s *Ain’t I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*.

¹⁸⁹ See Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* for a discussion of the history of 19th century racialized gendering of black women and “white ladies.”

born and bred of a good family.¹⁹⁰ Because Slim is negotiating with Phyllis in a specific field of power, he aligns himself, through his class, with her delimited gender by stating that he is not a “gentleman” but rather a “pimp” suggesting that she, by proxy, is a “whore.” He thus asserts his dominance by claiming pimp status and threatening her with physical violence common to the pimp/whore dynamic. To subordinate her, he delimits her sexual identity options to the abject “bitch” or “faggot.” Lastly, he labels her a “come freak,” an accusation largely understood to be degrading, considering to what extent one is abject in consuming the bodily waste of another human being (as analyzed in chapter one’s reading of *Hogg*).

Despite, or because of these degrading sexual and gendered accusations, however, Slim’s “blast had moved [Phyllis]” (63). He states, “I could see those sexy dancers [eyes] were hot as hell there in the midnight. She was trying to conceal from me the *freakish pain-loving bitch inside her*” (63, emphasis mine). Reading through a matrix of domination framework, readers and critics could argue that Slim’s interpretation of Phyllis’s reaction is overwritten by his masculinist narrative point of view. However Irvine Welsh, who was deeply influenced by Slim, offers a counter-point to this, noting “In [Slim’s] works, the hookers are seldom simply victims of the pimps but more often fellow ghetto strugglers with the same grifter sensibility” (“Up From the Street”).

Although Phyllis thinks she can Georgie Slim and thereby evade his attempts to con her into becoming his whore, she is evidently aroused by the way he constructs himself as a pimp through rendering her his subordinate “bitch.” Her words and actions corroborate Slim’s assessment that she is excited by the BDSM power dynamics inherent to their transaction. She

¹⁹⁰ However, historically, pimps have adopted the “gentleman” moniker in interesting ways. See for example the photojournalistic exposé *Gentleman of Leisure: A Year in the Life of a Pimp* and A. S. Jackson’s Holloway House-published autobiography (largely capitalizing on the format and success of *Pimp*) *Gentleman Pimp: The Autobiography of Andrew Stonewall Jackson*.

leaves the bar with Slim, whispering to him “You cold-blooded sweet mother-fucker, I go for you. Let’s go to my pad and rap” (64). Because she is stirred by the manner in which he speaks to her and by the connotations of his words that render her abject, she invites him to her place to have sex. Once in Phyllis’s bedroom, abject foreplay disintegrates into what can clearly be read as abusive play-slavery as Slim turns her out. The scene in fact turns both subjects out, as Slim becomes a pimp precisely as Phyllis becomes his whore. In her bedroom Slim beats Phyllis for trying to Georgie him. This turning out scene is one of asymmetrical power exchange because Slim’s will is fortified at the violent suppression of Phyllis’s.

However, like the paradigmatic “dangerous woman” Pepper, Phyllis arguably experiences *jouissance* through sexualized violence. This suggests that the scene could in fact be one of “edgeplay.” Edgeplay is a form of particularly transgressive BDSM play that falls in the “‘gray area between ‘enough’ and ‘too much,’ between consent and nonconsent’” (Easton and Liszt 23-24 as quoted in Basu, *Commerce* 170). After being beaten into compliance Phyllis looks upon Slim with “fear and strange passion” and whispers, “You got a whore Blood. Please don’t kick me any more. I’m your little dog. I’ll do anything you say. I love you, Pretty Daddy” (67). It is difficult to discern whether her “strange passion” is evocative of pleasure and/or desire because it is so intertwined with fear, pain, and survival instinct. She claims a subordinate role as a “whore” and a “little dog” that will do anything Slim requests, suggesting her words and actions are a survival strategy she employs in the moment to save herself from further physical abuse.

Yet immediately after this proclamation she retaliates, flipping her subordinate role for a dominant one. The narrative reads, “Her talons stabbed into the back of [Slim’s] neck as she tried to suck [his] tongue from its root” (67). Like Slim, Phyllis lays claim to another’s body through sexualized violence, “stabbing” into the back of his neck with predatory talons, and kissing him

with such aggression as if to extricate his tongue. Thus, while it is difficult to determine her pleasure and desire, it seems that it is Phyllis's *jouissance* that prompts her to perform as an erotic agent of sadism as she negotiates with Slim their newly formed relationship of play-slavery. Phyllis's *jouissance* allows her to more fully express the "freakish pain-loving" (and pain-giving) "bitch" inside her as she explores the fluidity of roles in their BDSM power dynamic.

Whoever has the dominance in Slim and Phyllis's dynamic is the subject possessing Control, thus Slim does everything he can to convince Phyllis of her subordinate stature. However despite Slim's violent efforts to contain his subjectivity, Phyllis can often be read as the dominant subject as she constantly renders Slim subordinate. He is, for a large part of the narrative, completely dependent on her for his economic survival, as she is, for some time, his only whore. He purportedly beats her so that she will work harder and earn him more money and a larger stable, but he ultimately does so because he cannot bear the shame of being dependent on a whore that refuses to fully perform what he believes should be her contained submissive role to his contained dominant one (174).

Slim feels the need to outwardly portray the pimp/whore dynamic as a stable, contained structure precisely because he fears the porous nature of containment and the threat of fragmentation. He understands and fears that within their dynamic Phyllis knows it is neither stable nor contained. And Slim knows that power is not delimited by gender in the underworld, as Sweet's succinct assessment "a pimp is really a whore who's reversed the game on whores" (198) makes plain. Haunted by Sweet's words, Slim understands deeply to what extent identities are malleable and power dynamics can flip, evidenced by the constant anxiety underlying his attempts at stability and control in response to Phyllis's performances as one who gets pleasure

in abjection. Phyllis's actions are always complicated by the fact that she engages BDSM with Slim as a form of survival and yet is, at times, evidently aroused by the eroticized asymmetrical power relations that render her abject. And Slim repeatedly beats Phyllis because he understands to what extent whores use BDSM performances to render a pimp vulnerable. He realizes that he must Control the flow of power, otherwise "he is like the prostitute's customer, a deceived fool who mistakes the counterfeit for the real" (Graham 11).

Thus the radical potential of BDSM is that, due to the fluidity of roles being performed at any given time, power takes precedence over contained identities. As Gayl Rubin states "class, race, and gender neither determine nor correspond to the roles adopted for S/M play...[rather] the social power individuals bring...affects their ability to negotiate within it" ("The Leather Menace" 224). Fearful of this, Slim learns to consistently project a cold pimp facade as the stable, dominant subject in the pimp/whore dynamic in order to control his fear of postanarchist kink's promise/threat of disintegrated subjectivity. And maintaining the pimp façade allows Slim to suppress the pleasure he experienced as Pepper's subordinate, the shame he felt as Maude's, and the fear of becoming Phyllis's.

Slim forcefully contains his sexuality to master Control. He lives by the pimps' advice in prison, to "back up from them fabulous pussys...[and] make like you don't have a swipe. You gotta keep your mind on the scratch" (65). They teach Slim to "Stay cold and brutal. Cop your scratch first. Don't let 'em Georgie you. They'll laugh at you. They'll cut you loose like a trick after they've flim-flammed you. Your scratch cop is the only way to put a hook in their stinking asses" (65). The pimps in prison echo Sweet's sentiment that pimps and whores are interchangeable power roles that can be easily flipped depending on the context. Thus throughout the narrative Slim has to remember, "the sexy part of pimping is not the sex, but the control"

(Coleman 72). He cannot risk sexual vulnerability because of its intimate connection to power within the BDSM dynamic.

As Coleman's essay "Pimp Notes on Autonomy" makes clear, pimp identity is dominantly read as an expression of agency. However she is also quick to note that pimp identity is not synonymous to liberation. She states, "The serious limitation on pimp theory as a liberation ideology is that it must reproduce the structure [of mastery] from which it hails" (80). On the other hand, because he primarily reads through the liberatory tradition in which so much African American literature is framed, Gifford interprets "pimp poetics" as "...an ethos of coolness [and] a pathway of freedom" (55). He seems disappointed to have to eventually surmise that "pimp poetics ultimately fails to provide Iceberg Slim an escape from the many economic, spacial, and racial forms of containment he faces" (46). Yet is "escape" the ultimate question the text poses?¹⁹¹ When reading transgressive texts such as *Pimp* and "Bloodchild," it is problematic to read for "escape," "transcendence" and "freedom," considering that the unspeakable is largely informing the texts as an analytic of engagement, not of escape.

"Bloodchild" can be understood as a text that uses the unspeakable as a mode of engagement through Basu's assessment that "Sadomasochism is a rigorously corporeal regime, but it is of course also a mental exercise, and perhaps most importantly an imaginative enterprise... at the level of affect" (*Commerce* 4). In other words "Bloodchild" is about the corporeality of *jouissance* and the affective relations shared between participants in a BDSM power dynamic. If escape is the desired outcome, as it is for Slim who seeks to escape his pleasure at being the subordinate abject, then the unspeakable reveals to what extent escape is not possible and to what

¹⁹¹ See D.B. Graham's "Negative Glamour" in which he claims that "the pimp cannot become the transcendent black hero" (14) compared to Dennis L. Winston's "(Re)Writing the 'Bad Nigger' Hero in Robert Beck's *Pimp*" in which Winston claims the pimp is a hero due to his "ability to transcend the ruthlessness and redeem [himself] as [a] bringer of new, more productive forms of resistance" (51).

extent “the pimp can never be more than a ‘gutter god’”¹⁹²—that famously abject thing. Indeed *Pimp* is a “spectacular failure” in which, as Gifford argues, Slim undercuts the pimp archetype by revealing his inability to control women to the point that they would generate for him his own freedom (62).

BDSM power dynamics are not necessarily liberatory. Rather, they are often claims to Control. Yes, this is all “tricky, uncomfortable business” (Weinbaum 64), but as Coleman reminds us “Pimp theory understands that one cannot refuse representation” (79). Delany too reminds us, power relations *inform* representation. He states

“...juxtapositions, suggestions, and interpretations *precede* representation--and are, what, finally create it (and not the other way around)--it doesn't matter if the rest of us now and again forget; though certainly the artist has an easier time and can communicate about a wider range of material and subject matter if more people understand the actual inchoate process. Not only do those elements allow representation to be, they also allow the experimental in art to exist” (“Dark Reflections” 204).

Regarding the representations of everyday|unspeakable BDSM power dynamics Basu stresses “Sadomasochism is not limited to the private sphere of sexual practice but pervades the public realm of the social and the political economy of everyday life...[and] the discursive formation of S&M has emerged to fill a general discursive absence” (*Commerce* 18, 172). And he states, “whips and boots and other devices from the inexhaustible repertoire of S&M are not the only means of prostheticization. They include posture, gesture, style, attitude, temperament, and so on. They also include ideas, often ideas that are regulated, manipulated, rejected, tabooed” (*Commerce* 168). Regardless of whether or not critics engage literary representations of BDSM power dynamics, such power dynamics *inform* much artistic representation and are in need of continual discursive space that demand new values of paraliterary critique to engage.

¹⁹² Robert Beck, “Rapping About the Pimp Game” 57.

Kink theory presents an alternative to the matrix of domination framework in that it allows the critic to read situations that *seem* like contexts of commodified freedom or liberal consent as inherently playing with the dynamic *fluidity* of power. However to differentiate kink theory from liberal consent Call is careful to note that *desire* (lacking from liberal consent) is necessary, which thereby “guarantees the ethical content of erotic power exchange” (“Structures” 133). Pointedly, in kink theory desire is what separates modes of submission from one another—it separates the submission one enjoys from the submission one does not enjoy.

It is important to note that in kink theory the word “exchange” suggests reciprocity. Yet, as these readings of *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” should inspire us to question, is reciprocity a necessary component needed for a subject to claim desire? With its strict code of reciprocity ethics, is kink theory, as Call conceives of it, adequate to engage transgressive sexual representations or is this what a further theorizing of BDSM power dynamics can offer us, particularly if divested of liberatory tendencies? At the very least, texts such as *Pimp* and “Bloodchild” provide a problematizing of the differentiation of sex acts (“pleasure” *or* “pain” for example) often used to rationalize and contain abjection into over-determined narratives of abuse, trauma, and/or internalized oppression. Such narratives are often mobilized as the *only* explanation for why a subject would choose to participate in “unhealthy” sexual scenarios. Because, as Kristeva states, abjection is an expression of ambiguity, subjects in states of *jouissance* are disturbingly undifferentiated. And such gendered, sexual, and racial undifferentiating is the goal of the tactic of transgression seen at work in these narratives.

Chapter Four

Embracing Shame in Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* and Hal Bennett's *Lord of Dark Places*

“We should challenge both the overdeterminacy of race vis-à-vis social relations among blacks themselves and conceptions of the black community as harmonious and monolithic...The totalizing tendency of race precludes recognition and acknowledgement of intragroup social relations as relations of power.”

—Evelyn Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History” 273-274

“Salvation becomes the most insidious posture of all, because it flings us into the jaws of bondage and terror while it blinds us to the monster’s teeth.”

—Hal Bennett, *Lord of Dark Places* 249

Introduction:

In the previous chapter I analyzed subjects in Iceberg Slim’s *Pimp* and Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild” that were made to contend with their respective relationships to abjection as sites of pleasurable pain as they negotiated for power and Control. I particularly considered the ways Slim fought for a sense of stable subjectivity so as to obscure his inclination toward abjection/subordination at the hands of “dangerous” females, whereas Gan embraced the fluidity of power roles. In other words, I was particularly compelled by the manner in which Slim sought to control his shame, whereas Gan incorporated his as a central node of his pleasure. In this chapter I consider subjects that, like Gan, embody abjection, but here I am not interested in pleasure. More so, like Darieck Scott, I am interested in “blackness as/in abjection...[as] a way of working with the legacy of [familial] history” (*Extravagant* 166).

This chapter offers a reading of Gayl Jones’ canonical first novel *Corregidora* (1975) as a gateway to open a critical discussion of Hal Bennett’s *Lord of Dark Places* (1970), a marginalized if not buried literary work, out of print until 1997, that in many ways shares important themes with Jones’ revered text. Both novels represent familial histories of incest. And both portray African American subjects and communities contending with the material and

psychic weight of centuries of interracial oppression, including the trauma of slavery. But the novels also represent structures of intraracial oppression, including the burden of operating within the oppression/liberation binary, or, as I refer to it throughout the chapter, the trauma/resistance binary. The binary is perhaps best articulated by Saidiya Hartman's assessment that "The longstanding and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint" (115). In other words, maintaining a connection to trauma and oppression is a necessity to liberatory projects because freedom cannot be imagined without it. *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* represent black subjects who, caught in these structures of oppression, experience complex relationships to sex and reproduction that manifest in eroticized, emotional, psychic, and physical violence, often transmitted through the family structure. A predominant theme of *Corregidora* is the matrilineal transmission of sexualized violence and trauma in the name of resistance. Likewise, a theme of *Lord of Dark Places* is the transmission of patrilineal sexualized violence and trauma in the name of salvation.

As they contend with these structures of oppression I read the novels' protagonists as performing two tactics of transgression engaged in queer theory and queer of color critique—the drive to failure, and the embrace of shame.¹⁹³ In this chapter I am first concerned with how the protagonists' respective families construct the trauma/resistance binary that they seek to interpolate the protagonists into, and how the protagonists' drives to gendered and sexual failure allow them to critique that reproductive transference. Crucial to my analysis of the protagonists' drives to failure is the fact that both Ursa Corregidora and *Lord of Places*' Joe Market refuse to

¹⁹³ For studies of the former refer to, among other texts, Leo Bersani's *Homos*, Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, and Heather Love's *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. For the latter refer to Bersani's *Is the Rectum a Grave and Other Essays*, Katherine Bond-Stockton's *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where 'Black' Meets 'Queer'*, Patricia Holland's *The Erotic Life of Racism*, José Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Robert Reid-Pharr's *Black Gay Man: Essays*, Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*, Eve Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* and Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life*.

reproduce suffering through the generations. Ursa loses her ability to reproduce by falling down the stairs (either purposefully or on accident)¹⁹⁴ and Joe commits infanticide. This sabotaging of reproduction is significant considering that, in the novels, specific racialized forms of trauma are perpetually recapitulated thru/on the bodies of children. The sabotaging of reproduction is the primary way that I argue that Ursa and Joe drive to gendered and sexual failure so as to cease reproducing their respective familial paradigms.

Again, as I did in chapter two, I use concepts advanced by queer theorists such as Lee Edelman and J. Jack Halberstam to, in this case, read the protagonists' drives to failure. Edelman's critique of "reproductive futurism" (2) which allows us to see how "the fantasy subtending the image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought"¹⁹⁵ encourages us to consider how the protagonists' sabotaging of reproduction is a gesture meant to critique the racialized politics that contour their subjectivities. "Futurism" or futurity is a troublesome concept for Edelman as he understands it to be "mere repetition and just as lethal as the past" (31), an assessment that certainly holds true for these novels. Halberstam's theory of the "queer art of failure" allows us to analyze what purpose "the darker territories of failure associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming" serve in these novels (*Queer Art* 23). I read the protagonists' drives to failure as meta-critiques of liberatory strategies such as salvation, resistance, love, coupledness, collectivity, futurity, sex, and reproduction prevalent at the time of the novels' production in the late 60s/early 70s. As Scott notes about Delany's work, particularly *The Mad Man*, and as we can observe about *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places*, "here the erotic and sexual are not

¹⁹⁴ In *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*, Christina Sharpe also reads this moment as one of ambiguity.

¹⁹⁵ Edelman states, "In its coercive universalization, the image of the Child...serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse—by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future" (11, emphasis in original).

liberating as some hoped they might prove to be in the midst of the Sexual Revolution, though they are of course political in their work in and with human relationships” (*Extravagant* 208).

Secondly, I am interested in shame. As I stated, by engaging abjection (a state intimately tied to shame) in this chapter I am not so much interested in pleasure as I was in chapters one and three, but rather in shame as a product of the protagonists’ drives to failure. I am interested in what the act of “embracing shame” (Bond Stockton 9) accomplishes in these texts. The protagonists’ embrace of shame can be understood as transgressive performances of the unspeakable—those “dangerous... lines of communication, fields of interest, and exchanges of power” (Delany, “Sword and Sorcery” 136-137) that have predominantly been the focus of analysis throughout this dissertation. However, whereas critic Kathryn Bond Stockton understands the act of embracing shame to be “valuable, generative, and beautiful” (22) (as indeed it can be, as both she and Darieck Scott have argued),¹⁹⁶ I read it in these novels as critiquing the unspeakable’s potential liberatory politics. In other words, if one suspects that the unspeakable and the tactics of transgression that it manifests through are ultimately alternative liberatory gestures, these novels reveal to what extent, as Delany states, there is no “fixed and locable point of transgression” that obliterates structures of oppression (“On the Unspeakable” 61) and leads to freedom.

The unspeakable in these texts reveals the impossible emphasis on “redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and reclamation”¹⁹⁷ in an absurdly racist world. Crucially, while the protagonists try to upset the trauma/resistance binary by employing tactics of transgression such as the drive to failure and the embrace of shame, I contend their respective embracing of shame inextricably connects them to their familial legacies of trauma regardless of their rejection and

¹⁹⁶ See Bond-Stockton’s *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame* and Scott’s *Extravagant Abjection*.

¹⁹⁷ Refer to Halberstam’s article “The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies.”

critique of it. Thus, their tactics of transgression ironically work to shore up the trauma/resistance binary and ultimately perpetuate its logic. Ultimately, I suggest that *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* can be read as meta-texts that reveal the extent to which the trauma/resistance binary is over-determined to the point that it is epistemologically claustrophobic.

Corregidora narrates a tale of trauma transmitted matrilineally and located on and through the bodies of black women. The narrative recalls the shared history of four generations of Corregidora women. The two eldest generations, Gram and Great Gram, were chattel prostitutes in a Brazilian brothel. Gram and Correy (Gram's daughter) are the slave master and brothel owner Old Man Corregidora's offspring, thus the women share a history of incest resultant from rape. The three elder generations of Corregidora women obsessively verbally reiterate their trauma to one another and to the fourth generation, Correy's daughter Ursa, as a means to "bear witness" to the travesties committed against them by Old Man Corregidora and made possible by slavery's structures of sexualized violence. They urge one another to "make generations" as an act of resistance to the dominant narrative of history that tries to erase their trauma. And "they obey completely the compulsion, and the forbid each other and their daughters to ask the questions that might begin to alter the repetition" (Sharpe 56).

Yet Ursa, who undergoes a hysterectomy as a result of her fall, is unable to reproduce. The bulk of the narrative portrays Ursa's psychosexual complications in having to contend not only with a horrific historical legacy that she cannot/chooses not to resist in her family's predetermined manner, but with the psychic, emotional, and epistemological pressure enacted on her by her ancestors that both produces the racialized black female subject and forever attaches her to a history of trauma for legibility. As Christina Sharpe states, "Ursa is charged not only with the telling but also with the living of the impossible instruction to stigmatize her body in

ways that selectively mimic an unknown initiating trauma but only in the ways that *they* (the women) *need* to bear witness—to reinscribe the original inscription (39, emphasis in original).

Lord of Dark Places is largely critically unacknowledged with the notable exceptions of Ronald Walcott's study in 1974 and Darryl Dickson-Carr's brief analysis almost 30 years later.¹⁹⁸ The novel is likely unfamiliar to most readers, thus it deserves a more in-depth summary here. *Lord of Dark Places*, like Delany's *Hogg*, is a pornotopia; "the place where all can become (apocalyptically) sexual...where every relationship is potentially sexualized before it starts" (Delany, "The Thomas L. Long Interview 133). Joe Market's preacher/pimp/con artist father Titus accidentally kills Joe's mother Ramona with overly vigorous sexual activity. In the wake of Ramona's death Titus repeatedly molests Joe, at this point only twelve years old, and pimps him out as a religious icon in his bogus religion *The Church of the Naked Child*. Titus preaches transgression, however it is a form of transgression bred of the trauma/resistance binary and thus tied to salvation. As the church's title suggests, Joe exposes himself to the crowds that gather to witness the spectacle and he later becomes a prostitute to service them. These experiences bring Joe sexual and egotistical pleasure, but not happiness (75).

As a young man Joe has two particularly traumatic sexual experiences with white people. A gang of white boys in the Deep South threaten to rape him, and a white girl in New Orleans forces him to have sex with her through a fence by threatening to turn him over to the police on rape charges if he refuses. While these experiences terrify Joe, surviving them also makes him cavalier and he develops a sense of superiority, partly a result of enduring the horrors of racist sexual violence, and partly resultant from performing as a religious icon in his father's church.

¹⁹⁸ Walcott states "*Lord of Dark Places* is a fine and in many ways an extraordinary satirical novel, a *tour de force* alive with moral intelligence and a knowing, sensuous awareness of the dark, fluid underside of American experience... At once blackest comedy, savage indictment, and lyric celebration, a strange, disturbing testament" (37-38). Refer also to Dickson-Carr's brief discussion of the text in *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel*.

Disturbed by/jealous of Joe's sexual prowess and reckless sexual confidence Titus, who has been taught by his father (a victim of lynching) that submitting oneself or another to death is the ultimate salvation, embodies the role of savior and redeemer and turns Joe in to the police. However it is ultimately Titus who is punished, as he is raped and likely murdered by them.

Joe escapes and moves to New Jersey where for the next five years he works as a prostitute pimped out by his friend PeeWee. Joe primarily services gay men.¹⁹⁹ Eventually an undercover cop named Tony Brenzo sent to arrest Joe sends him to school rather than prison. At school Joe meets his future wife Odessa; they marry and he gets a job as a laundry deliveryman. For a time they live a heteronormative life, as Joe is driven to fail his father's concept of transgressive black subjectivity tied to salvation. Joe pressures Odessa to get pregnant, despite her disinclination to bring a child into the chaotic world of the 1960s, and, once she is carrying their child Joe enlists in the army and is sent to fight in Vietnam. Vietnam proves to be a crucial turning point for Joe that shatters his belief in love, intimacy, nation, and futurity. His experiences there drive him to gendered and sexual failure to not only reject heteronormativity but to take his father's concept of transgressive black subjectivity and push it further, beyond the realm of the performative, and into the realm of an all encompassing embodiment of abjection.²⁰⁰ He begins to increasingly wear the mask of the hypersexual black male.

This point in the novel provides a crucial turning point in the reader's relationship to Joe as well in that, once he comes to consciousness about the conflated structures of American race, sex and violence, he must thereafter be held responsible for his actions. In other words, he can no longer be understood as an innocent victim of sexual abuse and structures of racism, but as a

¹⁹⁹ As I read it, the novel is very much about Joe's queerness and his vicious homophobia. I briefly discuss this later when I analyze his embrace of shame, but it ultimately deserves its own sustained study.

²⁰⁰ Bennett has stated his novels are about, what he claims, "the black American's obsession with filth" ("Newman 358), a dubious assertion, but one that motivates his work and his worldview nonetheless. "I think we feel unclean and impure and unworthy and inferior" he states (Newman 359).

conscious actor perpetrating sexual abuse, murder, misogyny, homophobic violence, and self-constructed racist myths of hypersexual black masculinity. Upon returning home Joe follows his father's example and adopts a posture of transgressive savior and redeemer by suffocating his newborn child to death. He does so as an act of salvation to save the child from what Joe perceives to be the horrors of living as a black man in America, as well as from the patrilineal cycle of sexual abuse that Joe knows he will likely continue to enact upon his son (suggested by the fact that he fellates him before he murders him). However, rather than admitting his act of infanticide, he allows Odessa to think the child got tangled in the sheets and to bear the guilt of what she perceives to be her maternal negligence in leaving the child alone. Thereafter Joe becomes celibate for an extended period of time and grows increasingly disconnected from Odessa, from himself, and from his community, as he is deeply intent upon containing his guilt and knows to what extent sex makes him vulnerable.

One night Joe's elderly white neighbor, Mary, reveals to him that she knows he killed his child. She blackmails him into performing oral sex on her, and, while the act sickens Joe, again surviving a dangerous sexual encounter with a white person reinvigorates Joe's sense of exceptionalism, as does the fact that no one in his life will judge him for his increasingly erratic behavior. The lack of judgment and punishment he receives exacerbates his desire to further embody the stereotype of the hypersexual and increasingly violent black male so as to ascertain punishment through his transgressions. Fully enrobed in the mask, Joe embraces his shame to violently violate and destroy multiple people in his life, thereby forcing judgment and punishment, and leading to his eventual execution in prison.

Critic Louis Chude-Sokei suggests that the darkness of *Lord of Dark Places* comes from the fact that, even with the understanding Joe possesses about American structures of racism, he

chooses the mask of abjection fully and thereby fulfills America's grotesque racist fantasy of blackness.²⁰¹ In his study of black abjection Scott is careful to claim that blackness is *not only* produced as a result of traumatizing violence and historical defeat. But he *is* unswerving in his belief that abjection is an unavoidable and inescapable aspect of blackness and is echoed and repeated by history and by the practice of collective habitual perceptions (*Extravagant* 5). Thus, "the fantasies envisioned" in transgressive African American narratives such as Scott argues about Delany's *The Mad Man* and I argue about *Lord of Dark Places* "attempt to address and exploit the shame and outrage arising from...racialized abjection" (Scott, *Extravagant* 208, emphasis mine). And in embracing the stereotype fully, Joe seeks and achieves his own death.

Yet, crucial to recognize, this is Joe's *choice*, and an unspeakable one at that for, as critic Robert Reid-Pharr notes, "The great crime of [an abject black male character] is that he comes to embrace fully the contradiction that is his life; he recognizes that no matter how refined his intellect, when he enters a room perversion (and the inevitable attraction to that perversion) enters with him. In doing so, however, in accepting the conditions of his existence...he chooses" (*Once You Go Black* 32). However Joe's embrace of abjection represents choice and agency, the very nature of his performance suggests there is no anti-racist liberatory gesture possible in the world of *Lord of Dark Places*. There is only total self-annihilation, which Joe accomplishes through his embrace of shame and black abjection that ultimately connects him back to his familial legacies of abuse.

And a novel of transgression *Lord of Dark Places* is in many ways darkly satirical and hostile to liberatory frameworks of anti-racist social justice work and black innocence. In his

²⁰¹ As there is a dearth of published critical work on the novel, much of my analysis of *Lord of Dark Places* comes directly from and/or was inspired by Chude-Sokei's lectures in his Spring 2014 seminar "Race, Sex, and Transgression in Contemporary Black Literature" at the University of Washington, and the subsequent class-wide discussions of the text.

interview “An Evening With Hal Bennett” Bennett states, “What I'm trying to do is be a counterpoise to James Baldwin. He is trying to be a conscience. I'm trying to undo the sense of being a conscience (365). By representing Joe as one of the most vicious stereotypes of black men that presumes black male subjectivity is equated with the mythologized black penis and, further, that black men find their sole value in society through it, the novel forces the reader to contend with his/her own stereotypes of black masculinity and black male sexuality and the cultural capital those stereotypes produce. Joe's last name “Market” is no coincidence.

If, as this dissertation explores, sex, violence, and racism are the languages of American culture, novels such as *Hogg* (as I discussed in chapter one) and *Lord of Dark Places* force us to contend with our complicity in constructing the discourse. When we realize, as Chude-Sokei suggests, that we cannot critique *Lord of Dark Places* for phallocentrism (as many critics have critiqued the masculinist literature of the 50s-70s and the concurrent black nationalist movements)²⁰² because that is the point of the novel, we have to ask, why is this its central conceit? What critiques are offered by such an over-determination? What unspeakable questions does it allow us to ask? Like I contend about *Corregidora*, Chude-Sokei contends that at its heart *Lord of Dark Places* is about raising the difficult questions of black complicity in perpetuating black stereotypes and myths,²⁰³ and, I would add, reproducing epistemological binaries that

²⁰² See for example Michelle Wallace's famous critique of black machismo in *Black Macho* in which she states, “Out of [the black man's] sense of urgency came a struggle called the Black Movement, which was nothing more nor less than the black man's struggle to attain his presumably lost 'manhood.' And so America had tightened the noose, although it did not know it yet; by controlling what the black man's notion of what a black man was supposed to be, it would successfully control the very goals of his struggle for 'freedom' (32).” She continues, stating, “the black man had forgotten who he was. He had come to believe that his universe was really as the whites had defined it. The most important thing was no longer the welfare of his family, of his people, but of white racism. White racism is the white man's problem. Not the black man's...but the contemporary black man no longer exists for his people or even for himself. He has made himself a living testament to the white man's failures (79).”

²⁰³ Likewise, Reid-Pharr contends that “the shock of Gary Fisher,” a black, gay writer who died before his works (largely detailing fantasies of abjection) were published posthumously by Duke University Press, is his revelation that “the black is not inculpable, that she is as much perpetrator as victim” (*Black Gay Man* 139). And the myth perpetrated “insists upon the necessity of the (abusive) white, the master, in all projects of black self-definition

tether trauma to resistance. Both texts are about the psychic, philosophical, and epistemic power of black communities to generate their own myths and consume and reproduce them,²⁰⁴ thus, as Chude-Sokei suggests, novels such as these raise the at times troublesome but important question of black responsibility within contexts of oppression.²⁰⁵ Reid-Pharr states “[black peoples’] difficulty, indeed some would say our shame, is that we have negotiated this terrain [of American racialization] so very well. Once you go black, you never go back” (*Once You Go Black* 32). Thus, as Halberstam argues, “In order to inhabit the bleak territory of failure we sometimes have to write and acknowledge dark histories, histories within which the subject collaborates with rather than always opposes oppressive regimes and dominant ideology” (*Queer Art* 23).

Part I: Intra-racial Pressure and the Trauma/Resistance Binary

Corregidora begins in 1947 when Ursa is 25. She has just fallen down the stairs of a blues club she was singing at, or, alternately her husband Mutt pushed her down (4). Although Ursa was struggling to get free of Mutt who was gripping her around her waist, it is left ambiguous who ultimately initiates the act of falling, ambiguity being a transgressive narrative hallmark of Jones’ first two novels as I discussed in chapter one. The text simply reads, “That was when I fell” (4). If we understand Ursa to have been pushed (as the novel intimates and as Ursa expressly iterates at times in her fantasy/dream sequences (90)) then it was due to Mutt’s

(*Black Gay Man* 142). Refer also to Sharron Patricia Holland’s *The Erotic Life of Racism* for her analyses of “the practice of racial being and erotic choice.”

²⁰⁴ In his study of Bennett’s work Walcott suggests Bennett “was on his way to elaborating the American racial trauma into...a very private—yet accessible and historically illuminating—mythology able to penetrate the root strategies and disabling consequences of two other examples of myth-as-history—race and sex” (37).

²⁰⁵ Refer to Reid-Pharr’s *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* for his analysis of Baldwin, Ellison, and Wright as three Black American intellectual writers refuting the notion of black innocence and insisting upon black peoples’ modernity and responsibility.

jealousy of the sexuality Ursa exudes on stage as a blue singer but (he claims) denies him in the intimacy of their bedroom. If we understand Ursa to have fallen (also suggested when Ursa thinks to herself “Is it more his fault than mine? Naw” (41)) it was an accident, or perhaps a manifestation of Ursa’s drive to failure,²⁰⁶ which I will explore in greater detail later in the chapter. What is crucial to note is that as a result of falling down the stairs Ursa has a hysterectomy, loses the ability to reproduce, and thereafter experiences a sense of sexual numbness.

This accident occurs on the first page of the novel, suggesting to what extent *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* (as I later explore) graphically represent the psychosexual fallout in an individual’s psyche resulting from histories of physical brutality, sexual abuse, and psychic pressure. And it is particularly significant that Ursa’s psychosexual struggles are tied to issues of reproduction. To “bear witness,” the Corregidora women not only force one another to repeatedly listen to each other’s memories in an erotically affective manner (as I later discuss), but they urge one another to reproduce, to “make generations.” Edelman argues “The Child...is...an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism” (21). In other words, both acts, listening and reproducing, are meant to make legible the Corregidora women’s collective subjectivity. Ursa’s ancestors obsessively “bear witness” as a mode of resistance to slavery’s structure of violence that, in ceasing to understand them as subjects, strives to erase them. “Bearing witness” and “making generations” are thus modes of acknowledgement.

It cannot be overstated to what extent black women’s bodies, specifically their ability to reproduce other bodies, are considered by the Corregidora women to always already be

²⁰⁶ In her analysis of *Corregidora* Sharpe suggests if we read Ursa to have fallen it was likely because she is “desirous of a means to end reproduction” (30).

understood as objects of resistance. Black women's bodies provide the material "evidence" necessary to testify against the sins of slavery and incest.²⁰⁷ Ultimately inherent in this reproductive futurism is, as Christian Sharpe argues, a desire to transform the original scene of subjection into reclamation of power (56). Great Gram tells the then five-year-old Ursa, "I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up" (14). For the *Corregidora* women, this reproductive futurism functions as a form of historical archiving that bears witness to historical atrocities and to the erasing of those subjugated therein.

The women state "*We got to burn out what they put in our mind, like you burn out a wound. Except we got to keep what we need to bear witness*" (72, emphasis in original). The radical statement "We got to burn out what they put in our mind, like you burn out a wound" resonates with the anti-colonial impetus behind identity based liberation movements that were organizing, at the time of *Corregidora*'s production in the 1970s, for the development of ethnic studies departments in higher education that advocated for such forms of consciousness raising. "Burning" encourages one to rid one's mind of the lies implanted by the colonizer to make room for a truth inherent to the lived experience of the colonized. The *Corregidora* women privilege reproduction because it works as an archive of lived/living history that counters the subject's perpetual erasure in dominant narratives.

However to be legible, the novel's racialized female subject must always be tied to a traumatic embodied relationship to history. In the racialized female subject's determination to never forget the historical atrocities the oppressors attempted to erase when "they burned all the documents" (72), her form of resistance keeps trauma at the center of cultural memory.

²⁰⁷ See, for instance, Sally Robinson's assertion that *Corregidora* is about "the reduction of black female subjectivity to an essence located in the body and subject to a biological determinism" (150).

Therefore, as Saidiya Hartman makes clear, what is produced is the trauma/resistance binary that fails to imagine one without the other. Ursa describes the cycle of conflated trauma/resistance in one long, run-on sentence stating,

My great-grandma told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were suppose to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget (9).

Is “bearing witness” a form of speaking the unspeakable for the Corregidora women that, again, if we consider Morrison’s suggestion in her lecture “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” helps disperse the burden of its knowledge to a wider audience (149)? Perhaps so. But this passage reveals how, in its obsessive drive to utterance, “bearing witness” can produce trauma (as I discussed in chapter one’s reading of *Eva’s Man*) rather than un-burden the speaker and the listener. After all, the breathless grammar of this passage effectively conveys the hysteria²⁰⁸ of trauma’s repetition.

More specifically, the passage reveals Ursa’s trauma at being caught in the clutches of familial pressure and expectation that, as Sharpe suggests (39) essentially require her to subjugate herself to a particular racialized legibility in the name of collectivity and resistance. In considering her impoverished psyche Ursa at one point thinks her inner life is comprised of “always their memories, but never my own” (100). And, in addition to being encouraged to think of herself as specifically Corregidora’s slave, evidenced when Great Gram makes it clear that “[Old Man Corregidora] would’ve fucked you and your mama if y’all had been there” (172), Ursa is raised to think of herself as similar to all black female slaves. At one point Mutts shares with Ursa his personal ancestral history of American chattel slavery but stresses to her,

²⁰⁸ Refer to Sharpe’s chapter “Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Reading the ‘Days That Were Pages of Hysteria’” in *Monstrous Intimacies* for an astute analysis of the theme of hysteria in the novel.

“Whichever way you look at it, we ain’t them” (151). However Ursa remains silent, thinking “I didn’t answer that, because the way I’d been brought up, it was almost as if I was” (151).²⁰⁹

When describing herself Ursa articulates her subjectivity thusly: “I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. *I was made to touch my past at an early age.* I found it on my mother’s tiddies. In her milk” (77, emphasis mine). Here Ursa identifies herself as a traumatized subject (“I have tears for eyes”) made to nurse her traumatic past out of her mother’s breasts.

Specifically the phrase “I was *made* to touch my past” suggests both the forced familiarity and its subsequent shaping of a traumatizing relationship in response to that past. To affiliate herself with a horrific past at a vulnerable age was not of Ursa’s choosing. Furthermore Ursa found her past (a history of racialized subjugation) in the most intimate of places, on her mother’s breasts, in her milk. The location of historical residue here suggests that on one hand, Ursa’s mother Correy is a marked subject. As the novel suggests Correy, like all the Corregidora women, is the collective black female racialized subject marked by the cycle of historical trauma and violence. Such a reading illuminates the damages of violence to generations of people affected by it.²¹⁰

However, we might also read Correy as the force that is making Ursa touch her past at an early age as she is, literally, feeding a subjugated identity to her daughter. Halberstam notes there are “mother-daughter dynamic[s] [that] ironically resemble patriarchal systems...that...cast the mother as the place of history, tradition, and memory and the daughter as the inheritor of a static system which she must either accept without changing or reject completely” (*Queer Art* 125).

Thus we can read Correy as committing a form of violence in interpolating her daughter into a

²⁰⁹ One thinks here of Franz Fanon’s famous discussion of racialization in *Black Skin, White Masks* in which being interpolated into racialization produces for him a sense of feeling “responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors” and feeling “battered down” by the weight of it (112).

²¹⁰ See, for instance, Ashraf Rushdy’s *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*, which contains such a reading.

lineage of trauma that she intends for her to continue, matrilineally. This is an example of what Sharpe calls “monstrous intimacies.”²¹¹

Sharpe argues that in reproducing trauma, even as a mode of resistance, these women bind themselves and each other to the master. She states, “For the Corregidora women to reproduce is to reproduce (enough) Corregidora...each Corregidora woman finds her womb still in the service of the (former) master/father, and as such their desires and the price of their survival are caught up by Corregidora and his desire” (41, 45). Sharpe’s reading of the novel reveals the interpellation of the master’s desire in the enslaved consciousness, best demonstrated through the demands of the formerly enslaved on their descendants to perpetually bear witness through reproducing children. In urging each woman to “make generations” they replicate Old Man Corregidora’s “genital fantasies” (Jones, *Corregidora* 59) considering that a female slave’s value was largely as an instrument of reproduction (of both bodies and commerce). Great Gram makes the connection between female slave sexuality and commerce clear when she states “He [Old Man Corregidora] said my pussy bring gold” (125). In one of her hallucinatory episodes, in which the many voices of Ursa’s real and imagined past and present crowd her mind, she engages in dialogue with someone unbeknownst to the reader and thinks,

“Procreation. That could also be the slave-breeder’s way of thinking.”
 “But it’s not.”
 “No. And you can’t.”
 “Not anymore, no” (22).

Although Ursa denies it in this moment, the demand of reproductive futurism, although framed by her ancestors as a mode of resistance, can also be read as a racialized, sexualized form of violence (“the slave-breeders way of thinking”) suggested by the narrative’s uncomfortable

²¹¹ Refer to Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* for her analysis of monstrous intimacies in *Corregidora*.

conflation of women's sexual and reproductive capacities in the context of slavery with these same capacities in a framework of resistance.

Additionally, the Corregidora women's demand on one another to bear witness perpetually reproduces the sexual trauma enacted by the slave master on the bodies of the enslaved. For example early in the narrative Ursa recollects an uncomfortably intimate moment shared with Great Gram. She recalls:

Great Gram sat in the rocker. I was on her lap. She told the same story over and over again. She had her hands around my waist, and I had my back to her. While she talked, I'd stare down at her hands. She would fold them and then unfold them. *She didn't need her hands around me to keep me in her lap*, and sometimes I'd see the sweat in her palms.... It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory, were somehow more than the memory...Once when she was talking, *she started rubbing my thighs with her hands*, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. The she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again" (11, emphasis mine).

In obsessively telling Ursa "the same story over and over" of their collective trauma, Great Gram "reckon[s] with a post-slavery desire (working itself out on Ursa's body)" (Sharpe 51). She constrains Ursa physically on her lap ("she had her hands around my waist...she didn't need her hands around me...she...held my waist again") while she unconsciously rubs Ursa's thighs in a (the narrative suggests) sexually inappropriate manner. The scene is "inappropriate" considering that once Great Gram realizes what she is doing she "caught herself" and "stopped." It is as if telling Ursa of her own sexual debasement at the hands of her slave master inspires Great Gram to unconsciously enact the very same thing on the body of her great-grandchild.

To make it more evident that this scene is meant to be read as one of uncomfortable intimacy, Jones strategically reuses the same imagery over 50 pages later in an awkwardly tense sexual scene between Ursa and Tad (her lover after Mutt). The scene reads,

“Y’all women sho act funny at wedding time,” he said. He was excited with drink. He sat down and *held me around the waist* and kissed me. I’d been sitting stiffly but relaxed and returned the kiss. He squeezed my breasts.

“That hurt?”

“Naw.”

“It hurts some women.”

“It doesn’t hurt me,” I said.

I sat there, *letting him hold me around the waist*. I was saying nothing” (68, emphasis mine).

Here, as she did as a child, Ursa consents to another character’s containment of her physical person. She sat there “letting” Tad “hold [her] around the waist.” But she says nothing. Ursa’s famous refrain “I said nothing” is “a space marked by the unspoken word...[that] inhere[s] in what the text withholds (and thereby reveals)” (Sharpe 59). The liberatory strategies of “bearing witness” and heterosexual coupledness that *should* negate the familial/historical trauma of slavery are “perverted” by the way in which their structures of relation are intimately tied to psychosexual transmissions of trauma.

In addition to its psychosexual complications, reproductive futurism functions as a form of epistemological containment. By forcing their traumatic memories of slavery upon Correy and Ursa, Great Gram and Gram crowd out/overwhelm the younger women’s personal memories and individualized subjectivities. At one point Ursa notes that while her mother Correy “passed...down the monstrous [memories]...she wouldn’t give me her own terrible ones” (101). Ursa and Correy’s individual memories become subsumed under the weight of the collective Corregidora women’s trauma and the trauma becomes the defining story of the women.

It is not until much later in the novel that Correy shares her personal life story with Ursa. She had reiterated the Corregidora narrative instead thinking it would “be enough” for Ursa to locate her subjectivity within a particular racialized history of trauma (111). Ursa thinks, “Corregidora was easier than what she wouldn’t tell me” and notes that Correy “*was closed up*

like a fist. It was her very own memory, not theirs, her very own real and terrible and lonely and dark memory" (102, 101, emphasis in original). Correy constructed her own tragedy in her life (just as Ursa, in falling down the stairs, possibly did too) through her failed relationship with Ursa's father, Martin. And she did so arguably as a means to have a different story in addition to that of the collective Corregidora women's trauma. Thus Correy, "closed up like a fist," guards that tragedy, that memory.

Yet, even in her production of an autonomous memory Correy cannot claim full responsibility for its creation, as Old Man Corregidora's psychic influence is too great. Once Correy eventually opens up to Ursa to discuss her private memory of using Martin to get pregnant, much to his resentment, she tells her "Corregidora was responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened that part of my life never would have happened" (111). Correy talks at length about how she was, in essence, possessed by reproductive futurism, telling Ursa "It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl...It was like my whole body knew. Just knew what it wanted, and I kept going back" to Martin's house (114). After giving birth to Ursa, Correy refuses intimacy with men. Ursa notes, "*She wouldn't give them anything else. Nothing*" (101, emphasis in original).

Yet despite the personal anguish her failed affair with Martin causes her, Correy maintains her belief in reproductive futurism's political gesture. Ursa notes, "*And still she told me what I should do, that I should make generations*" (101, emphasis in original). We can perhaps understand Ursa as purposefully falling down the stairs so as to frustrate the obsessive will to reproduction that seems to move through the Corregidora women despite their understanding of reproductive futurism's possessiveness that takes over their bodies, their intellectual knowledge of the cruel capabilities of men, and the potential failures of heterosexual

relationships. Halberstam suggests “Radical forms of passivity” (such as the act of allowing oneself to fall down the stairs) “and masochism step out of the easy model of a transfer of femininity from mother to daughter and actually seek to destroy the mother-daughter bond altogether” (*Queer Art* 131).

Ursa notes that in establishing the mother-daughter bond through their obsessive reiteration of trauma the Corregidora women transmogrify into one undifferentiated Corregidora woman. Ursa observes this phenomenon when listening to her mother speak. She notices “Mama kept talking until it wasn’t her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn’t Mama now, she was Great Gram talking...It was as if [Mama] 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” (124, 129). The Corregidora narrative becomes second nature to the women’s sense of selfhood even though it deprives them of an individualized sense of self. For example when Tad asks Ursa what she wants she responds automatically, despite her hysterectomy, by stating “What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations” (22). Later in the same scene Ursa is haunted by Gram’s words, “*The important thing is to make generations*” (22, emphasis in original). I read Ursa’s inability to reproduce, and her psychosexual fallout, as central to the novel’s critique of the incessant pressure to “bear witness” to trauma in the name of resistance. It is her drive to failure that makes Ursa “the antithesis of the self that is demanded by [her family’s legacy of] colonialism” (Halberstam, *Queer Art* 131).

In *Lord of Dark Places* the trauma/resistance binary’s production of a legible racialized subject is told through religious allegory. Whereas the black church has historically been a site of

political collectivity and activism that delimits expressions of sexuality and pleasure in the name of uplift, the novel imagines black religion as an act of Christian contravention that conceives of salvation as tied to myriad sexual transgressions, including incest. The first line of the novel's Prologue matter-of-factly reveals that Titus Market's parents, Madame Eudora and Roosevelt (founders of a black religion called The Church of Stephen Martyr) were related to one another; Roosevelt was Madame Eudora's nephew. Thus Titus is born of incest. And, notably, incest is normalized in the world of novel. As the narrator states "Incest is hardly a scandalous affair" (23).

Titus' parents preached that capitulation to trauma is akin to salvation. Madame Eudora stressed "niggers ought to stay in their place, and die like dogs" (12) thereby promising, among other things, "freedom from pain" (11). Roosevelt "had achieved something of the status of a wise man by telling white people what a dumb, low-down, no-good nigger he was" and stresses to the white people in the town "I'd expect you all to deal with me the way you're supposed to" (12). In other words, he tells the white people he expects them to lynch him. Roosevelt's "pretense of virtue" (the capitulation to racism that black people have to perform "in order to keep from being destroyed" (213)) effectively engenders his own murder. Subsequently he *is* lynched, an action Titus witnesses and is traumatized by. The narrator stresses Titus "was determined that no son of his would die like his father had died. He'd do anything to keep that from happening to a son of his" (13).

Titus' religion is named *The Church of the Naked Child* in honor of Joe and later, when Joe is older, *The Church of the Naked Disciple*. The narrator describes Titus' motivation as such,

Titus saw what he thought was the failure of the Christian church to meet the real needs of the black man. He thought the Negro was highly illogical in choosing a

first-class religion while he was still subject to second-class citizenship...Titus saw the true religion of the black man best expressed in the offshoots from Christianity, such as his mother's church and the one he himself intended to found (24).

Specifically by embracing transgression through his religion Titus seeks to challenge the pretense of virtue in which black people "pray," "reason" "beg" "accommodate" and continually interact with white people to no avail (62). For example, in one of his sermons he states,

"Inside the climate of America, then, is there any salvation for the black man? Certainly there is none for him in the Christian church. And there is none for him in the Bible. So, if no provision has been made for us to save our souls, we are perfectly free to seek salvation any way we can. My way always has been to be as *contrary* to everything as I can be. When the Bible says black, I say white. When it says good, I say evil. When it says, *Behold, Jehovah is a God of Light*, I say, *Behold, He is the Lord of dark places, for his children gnash their teeth and cry unto Him and are not heard*" (63, emphasis is original).

Titus embraces transgression based on a belief that the racialized subject is oppressed ("still subject to second-class citizenship") and must always seek salvation "any way" he/she can. Thus he imagines transgression as another form of resistance; making it a form of transgression that Delany warns is "a return to orthodoxy" ("The Thomas L. Long Interview" 136).

Indeed as a preacher "more often than not, [Titus] talked about redemption" (27). And like *Corregidora's* vision of resistance, Titus' vision of salvation is imagined/enacted through the sexualization and racialization of a black body. Titus, who "had read about cults that worshipped the tail [penis] of a man...decided to make that and the naked male black body central parts of his religious symbolism" (24). His religion's primary conceit is (specifically black) phallocentrism, unsurprising given the time of the novel's publication in 1970 in which phallocentrism largely *was* considered the best chance of redemption for a black man in a white man's world (recall Eldridge Cleaver's statement that "the black man's penis was the monkey

wrench in the white man's perfect Machine" (*Soul on Ice* 164)). Hal Bennett himself states, "I don't see any other way that a black man can save himself except through his penis, in one form or another" (Newman 368).²¹²

Titus preaches a reversal of Christianity through indulgence ("Always give in when you're tempted" he says, "That way, you'll never have problems with your conscience" (30)), and the sexual objectification of children. He profits from child pornography that begins with Joe's physical exposure and eventually leads to his prostitution with Titus asking for a much higher donation from "the faithful" "for touching Joe or bedding down with him" (30). He thinks to himself that his religion's use of the naked black male body "might be an important first step toward undoing some of the *white-man* evil of Christianity" (25, emphasis in original). In other words, interpolating his young son into hypersexuality is imagined as an act of resistance, as are Great Gram's, Gram's, and Correy's similar actions toward each other and toward Ursa. And Titus thinks he "was very pleased about the way he had steered Joe through the crucial years to manhood" (30).

Through his religion Titus constructs an alternative structure of morality that relies on Joe's sexuality for its articulation of resistance to the "white-man's" Christianity. In his preaching and pimping practices Titus encourages the myth of the hypersexual black male and Joe continually embodies it, coming to believe that his subjectivity is comprised solely of his sexuality (at one point he thinks "He was the Peter inside his pants" (46)). Similar to Franklin Hargus' actions in *Hogg*, Titus' tactic of transgression aims to construct an alternate ethics of

²¹² Scott argues, "the black [male] body, in the various racist discourses that make the notion of blackness intelligible, is first and always corporeality itself: the black man *is* his body, is *the* body, is the excess of meaning associated with the body, above all the sexuality of the body" (*Extravagant* 142). Dickson-Carr, on the other hand, reads *Lord of Dark Places* as counter to the Black Nationalist sentiment of the late 60s and early 70s. He states the novel "disregard[s] the era's nationalistic image of manhood via characters that defy easy sexual categorization" (137).

“right” and “wrong,” “normal” and “abnormal,” and provide a political critique of the pretense of virtue. And indeed, Titus’ tactic of transgression *does* succeed in blurring moral and ethical lines, as Joe’s thoughts reveal. He thinks,

After Titus had told him that Ramona was dead, Titus had sucked his dick. He had liked it all right, but he didn’t think he’d do that to a son of his, not as a habit, because it does something to a child’s mind, like wearing down the edges between the sexes so that sometimes it’s hard to distinguish between a man’s mouth or a woman’s pussy or just a random hole bored somewhere in a fence or a wall, and the dick gets hard indiscriminately as soon as the eye makes out the contours of a hole (145).

Here Joe describes the transgressive sexual practice of incest as fulfilling Delany’s commitment to eroticizing difference and maintaining marginality in the name of evading such structures of containment that delineate sex into those categories of “good” and “bad” sex.²¹³ In other words, it is through transgression that Joe is able to experience “the wearing down of edges” that seek to contain sexuality. And it is through transgression that Joe increasingly is unable to distinguish between “normal” sexual objects (“a woman’s pussy”) and “abnormal” sexual objects (“a man’s mouth,” “a hole...in a fence or wall”). In other words, he ceases to ascribe a hierarchy of value to sexual objects.

However unlike *Hogg’s* postanarchist kinky celebration of such “wearing down of edges,” *Lord of Dark Places* represents Joe as experiencing a complex series of affective responses toward his father’s use of his body and later, as an adult, he determines he does not want to subject his child to the same actions. Despite the fact that Joe, at times, explicitly expresses his enjoyment of their incestuous relationship (for example he thinks “He didn’t mind Titus sucking him off every once in a while; in fact, he enjoyed it” (45)), the novel ultimately suggests that Titus’ use of Joe’s body is something we are meant to question the ethics of. At one point Titus

²¹³ Refer to Gayl Rubin’s hierarchy of “good” and “bad” sex in “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.”

admits to himself that he murdered his wife “so that he could work with Joe alone before the boy got too old to be trained” but he then quickly states, “He wasn’t going to admit that. He was never going to admit that” (61), suggesting that, to some extent, we are meant to consider their sexual relationship shameful, as there are aspects of it that Titus suppresses.

In over-valuing Joe’s sexuality as the source of his legibility as a subject and as the key to salvation (as the Corregidora women do to Ursa), Titus succeeds in giving Joe a superiority complex (45-46). For instance, after a gang of white boys in the Deep South accost Joe and Titus Joe says, “if them white boys got too tough, all I had to do was take off my clothes. They would’ve stopped then” (37). As suggested by this statement and others like it, Joe has come to believe sex is equivalent to liberation. However, Titus also delimits Joe’s phallogentric power by constantly reminding him of his vulnerability as a racialized subject perpetually tied to trauma and oppression. Titus responds, “You think so? Well, you’ve got another think coming boy... Why, them white boys would’ve *fucked* you if you’d taken off your clothes” (37, emphasis in original). Titus thinks Joe is “a fool caught inside his own lie” (41) and, while he was primarily responsible for constructing the myth of Joe’s hypersexuality, he refuses to let Joe forget that he is, always and forever, a racialized subject tied to past traumas and ever prevalent future traumas. He refuses to let Joe forget that the myth of black male hypersexuality can only ever function in the work of collective resistance and salvation,²¹⁴ such as Titus’ religion, and never in the service of independent or individual acts of attempted agency such as what Joe naively proposes, yet proposes nonetheless.

Titus, convinced Joe had fallen into the “trap of confusing reality with what *seems* to be reality” (in other words, that Joe is unable to see the performative contours of the mask he wears)

²¹⁴ Refer to Eldridge Cleaver’s essay “The Primeval Mitosis” in *Soul on Ice* for his psychosexual analysis of race in which he states “Race fears are weapons in the struggle between the Omnipotent Administrator [white men] and the Supermasculine Menial [black men] for control of sexual sovereignty” (190).

decides to “save” Joe by killing him (41). He tips the cops off to one of their religious gatherings, convinced that when the cops witness Joe naked on the platform they will likely lynch him. And, although he is clearly endangering Joe by putting him in the way of physical, emotional, and psychological danger, he convinces himself that he is “trying to save Joe” (61) with an ultimate act of “love” (62).²¹⁵ When the police do arrive, however, Titus is the one that is raped and likely killed. Yet he conceives of himself as a messianic figure to the end, one whose acts of abuse were always in the service of resistance and salvation. He thinks, “*I have fought the good fight...In his own way. Ass-backwards and sometimes very ugly and evil. But still a fight. And he had destroyed his religion and saved his son...I have sacrificed myself for others so that they might live*” (66, emphasis in original).

Part II: “Yeah, and Where’s the Next Generation?” The Drive to Failure

Ursa drives herself toward failure through her inability to/refusal to fulfill reproductive futurism’s demands. By opening *Corregidora* with Ursa’s reproductive inabilities it is immediately established that she cannot perform resistance in the manner the *Corregidora* women demand of her. She cannot/chooses not to “make generations” to “bear witness” to the specific historical/familial trauma that contours her and her ancestors’ identity. If we read Ursa as purposefully falling down the stairs, we can understand her drive to failure as a means to cease reiterating generational trauma. And we can read it as Ursa’s attempt to locate her subjectivity

²¹⁵ This “perverse” showing of affection by endangering or harming family members and/or loved ones is a theme that runs throughout the novel, articulated much later in the narrative when Joe thinks, “Degradation and perversion is our only mode of love” (217).

outside of the clutches of the racialized trauma/resistance paradigm her family seeks to interpolate her in.²¹⁶

In her inability to “make generations” Ursa negates the cycle of trauma that fulfills the master’s “genital fantasies” (59). As Roderick A. Ferguson notes “Negation not only points to the conditions of exploitation. It denotes the circumstances for critique and alternatives as well” (*Aberrations* 136-137). Notably Ursa comes to embrace her inability to reproduce as it opens a critical space for considering reproduction’s implications for her specific familial history and her role in producing that history. In the wake of her surgery Ursa thinks, “I *am* different now...I have everything they have, except the generations. I can’t make generations. And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby *had* come—what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?” (60, emphasis in original). Halberstam notes “modes of unbeing and unbecoming,” such as Ursa’s inability to reproduce, “propose a different relation to knowledge” (*Queer Art* 23). Ursa’s questioning suggests that negation and/or ambivalence²¹⁷ can be methods in the drive to failure. Ursa recognizes that her barrenness makes her “different” than the other *Corregidora* women in that it provides her a way to mitigate the inter-generational sexualized, racialized violence that they transmit to one another. She questions her potential collusion in it (“Would I have been like *her*, or *them*?” and “Would I have kept it up?”) but instead, negates it. Edelman notes, “whatever refuses this mandate...[of] the collective

²¹⁶ Basu reads *Corregidora* as an explicit rejection of subjectivity in general. He argues the novel “explore[s] the possibility of the object...[rather than] claiming an empowered subjectivity, [Ursa] explore[s] precisely the practices of the object...[and] the desire of the object is not that it be made its subject, but that it maintain its objectivity” (*Commerce* 128-129).

²¹⁷ In her study of “the paradox of respectability” (in which she briefly touches on *Corregidora* as a novel that explores “the violence of respectability politics” (7)), Susana Morris understands ambivalence as working in black women’s fiction “not [as] hesitancy or indecision but [as] a set of seeming contradictions—a strong sense of duty and, simultaneously, an active harboring of resentment toward duty” (4). She continues, “Black women writers [including Jones] configure ambivalence in a variety of ways, perhaps most notably through portraying family relationships marked by intense notions of duty, honor, and respect coupled with thinly veiled enmity, indifference, estrangement, repression, and even outright domination and/or violence” (9-10).

reproduction of the Child must appear as a threat not only to the organization of a given social order but also, and far more ominously, to social order as such, insofar as it threatens the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends” (11).

Ursa’s lack of embodied connection to the *ur*-trauma of direct contact with Old Man Corregidora causes a rupture in the Corregidora social order, as it is an intimacy fostered by shared memories of “feeling” and more personally “knowing” the trauma (102). In addition to her inability to reproduce, because Old Man Corregidora is not Ursa’s father (as he is for Correy and Gram), or Ursa’s sexual abuser (as he was for Gram and Great Gram) Ursa is already different than the other women and thereby threatening to their established collective subjectivity. Ursa remembers Great Gram telling her “seems like [Old Man Corregidora] raised me fucking me” (172), but Ursa cannot relate to this directly, although Old Man Corregidora manifests himself in her dreams and other men in the narrative are conflated with his psychic presence, as I later discuss. Although Ursa identifies herself as a traumatized subject (“I have tears for eyes” (77)) she also attempts to challenge that trauma by asserting her identity in opposition to Corregidora and to the other Corregidora women stating “But look at me though, I am not Corregidora’s daughter. Look at me, I am not Corregidora’s daughter” (103).

However the drive to failure, as much as it is a critically productive stance in the novel and a way in which Ursa articulates a distinct subjectivity, also aggravates Ursa’s feelings of anxiety. In addition to feeling at once bound to, and yet apart from her family, she is also anxious about her lack of sexual arousal that she experiences in her relationship with Tad. Jeffy, the teenage lesbian character that serves to embody Ursa’s anxieties about non-normative sexuality plainly articulates Ursa’s fear when she states, “I heard Mama talking about women like that [who can’t have sex]. Mess up their minds and then fuck up their pussy” (38). This worries Ursa

because it reminds her of something her friend May Alice told her when they were young, “One you had it in you, it seems like you have to keep having it in you...You got to have it in you, or you go crazy” (138). The Corregidora women transmit what Sharpe calls their “hysteria” through sex, through reproduction. And transforming their hysteria assures it is not an individual, alienating experience. However, because Ursa cannot reproduce, and because she is sexually numb she worries that she will be forced to contend with the Corregidora hysteria with no sexual or reproductive outlet. At one point she thinks, “That old man still howls inside me...[I’m] Afraid of what I’ll come to” (46, 90).

Ursa’s outlet, then, is singing the blues at nightclubs. Singing is how she constructs her subjectivity and expresses affect. As Hazel Carby states “Within black culture the figure of the female blues singer has been...used to meditate upon conventional and unconventional sexuality...Women blues singers often appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of sexual experience; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction of sexual subjects” (“It Jus Be’s” 474). Singing the blues is something Ursa “has to do” (3). It is how she “bears witness,” thinking “It was if I’d wanted [my audience] to see what he’d done, hear it. All those blues feelings” (50).²¹⁸ And singing is another way in which Ursa drives to failure in that it challenges both the gendered and sexual demands placed on her by her ancestors and her husband, Mutt. And again, her drive to failure is bolstered by her negation and ambivalence as she states, “I don’t care what people think anyway. I never have” (25).²¹⁹ As Angela Davis argues in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, black female blues singers

²¹⁸ As is so often the case, the “he” can refer to either Mutt or Old Man Corregidora, an important conflation that I discuss later in the chapter.

²¹⁹ Such ambivalent sentiment is partly why Ursa often gets read in conjunction with her fictional African American female peers Janie Crawford, from Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Toni Morrison’s Sula, women that are likewise unconcerned about their respective society’s gendered and sexual demands on women.

“affirm[ed] women’s right as individuals to conduct themselves however they wish—however idiosyncratic their behavior might seem and regardless of the possible consequences” (31).

Singing does not “bear witness” in the ways Ursa’s ancestors intend. Ursa states, “They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sang back in return” (103). Singing threatens her mother’s and husband’s delimiting of her gender and sexual identities as, respectively, passive daughter and submissive wife. Ursa’s blues singing is in defiance to the wishes of her mother Correy who, influenced by respectability politics tells her “songs are devils. It’s your own destruction you’re singing. The voice is a devil” (53). Clearly Correy makes a distinction between what she believes is her family’s vocal act of resistance (telling “the same story over and over again” (11)) and Ursa’s act of vocal “destruction.” Ursa’s use of her voice is “evil” and “destructive” because it is publically sexual. And although the elder Corregidora women’s vocalizing of trauma is also sexualized, Ursa’s voice is sexualized in a manner that Correy does not recognize as resistant or liberatory. Carby explains “women blues singers occupied a privileged space; they had broken out of the boundaries of the home and taken their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere” (“It Jus Be’s” 481). And this is threatening to Correy. As if to contain Ursa’s sexuality to the private sphere Correy at one point comes into a bar where Ursa is singing and publically embarrasses her by forcefully removing her from the premises (146).

Ursa’s singing is also antithetical to Mutt’s desires as it threatens his masculine claims to dominance (3), particularly over his wife’s sexuality. Because he is jealous of Ursa’s public expression of sexuality he shames her in a manner that reiterates her ancestral affiliation with enslaved prostitution. He cruelly states

“Shit, I’m tired of hearing about Corregidora’s women.
Why do you have to remember that old bastard anyway?”
I said nothing.
“You one of them,” he said.

“What?”

“If you wasn’t one of them you wouldn’t like them mens watching after you” (154).

Mutt uses Ursa’s troubled relationship to her past to psychosexually “pressure [her] into giving up the job” (156). Like Correy’s forceful removal of Ursa from the bar, Mutt threatens to make a scene by pantomiming a slavery auction block when Ursa is on stage. He tells Ursa, “That’s what I’m gon do...One a y’all wont to bid for her? Piece a ass for sale. I got me a piece a ass for sale” (159). Both Correy and Mutt try to shame Ursa for her autonomous expression of sensuality and sexuality, voice and agency that she finds through driving to fail their respective containment of her gendered and sexual roles.

In *Lord of Dark Places* Joe both deeply values his sexuality and sexual prowess and resents others’ over-valuation of and desire for it. At times throughout the novel he is disgusted with himself for capitalizing on his sexuality, and sickened by the power he has to control others with it, as I later discuss. After five years as a prostitute in New Jersey Joe feels the need to drive to fail his father’s worldview that transgression is tantamount to salvation. He resents the fact that profiting from his sexuality is “the only thing he knew how to do” (33). The narrative reads, “one day, Joe woke up and decided to cut his dick off, he was just that disgusted with himself. Man! He’d been here in the North for *five years*, and he hadn’t done a damn thing but fuck and get sucked!” (75). Prostituting himself, as he has been taught to do by his father, makes him think of himself as a “prisoner” consumed with “the desperate feeling that he was somehow doomed to grow old and die without ever having lived at all” (77).

When he meets Tony, the undercover cop who pressures Joe to go to school, he treats Joe as an intelligent, capable human being with more to offer than just his body. It makes Joe feel

“shy and embarrassed” because “no white man had ever talked to him like that before” (85). Joe enjoys going to school, however he has “terrible dreams in which his dead mother Ramona ridicule[s] him for getting an education” (87). As Joe’s dream, and Correy’s forceful removal of Ursa from the blues club suggest, the racialized subject of the trauma/resistance binary is meant to direct his/her energy in the ways dictated by ancestry. Joe’s deceased mother Ramona stresses to him the burden the racialized subject bears to the collective, reminding him that he is a “black savior” who has “three days to judge all black souls. And to save them” (87). Just as Ursa is singing her own “destruction”(53), Joe needs to stop “fucking around in school” (87), an autonomous act that does little, his mother suggests, to serve the collective needs of racialized subjects tied to histories of trauma and oppression in need of “saving.” There are several key moments in the narrative where Joe dreams “very clearly of his mother laughing at him, [and] of his father’s wet, devouring mouth” (137). These dreams generally occur when Joe is attempting to locate an identity for himself in ways additional to that of the transgressive black savior, such as when he attends school or when he enlists in the army.

The heteronormativity and patriotism that Joe adopts in driving to fail his father’s paradigm of transgression later becomes the second paradigm Joe drives himself to fail when he realizes, after his experiences in Vietnam, that such stances are expressions of “their world, their law, their morality...meaning the white man’s” (255, ellipsis in original). Prior to Vietnam Joe had thought of America fondly, as “a woman he could love, a large and beautiful white woman” (89). However once in Vietnam, especially after killing a Viet Cong and witnessing a black lieutenant die after being castrated by stray gunfire Joe “didn’t know whether he still loved the white bitch [America] or not. He certainly didn’t think she was beautiful anymore, and he stayed high all the time” (128). Eventually he thinks, “America was two-timing them all. Like a woman

would, like a dirty white bitch, that's what he thought of America now...and the fact that he had killed that Viet Cong marked an important turning point in his life, he knew that. For one thing, it had changed his whole attitude toward America from naïve love to solid suspicion" (131, 133).

Vietnam inspired Joe to believe that heteronormativity and patriotism are fruitless liberatory endeavors for black people in the 1960s. He thinks,

black people are freaks...Locked up inside the church called America, singing in high-pitched voices, singing in gratitude for the fact that we have been castrated *for purple mountain's majesties above the fruited plain*; balls buried beneath the White House or shot off in Vietnam and Memphis and niggers keep on saying I love America I do I do and get their balls shot off or chopped off...and keep right on having babies with more balls to be shot off or chopped off while somebody stands around in the background singing in high sissy voices *America! America! God shed his grace on thee!* (147, emphasis in original)

In this passage Joe comes to the realization that regardless of his attempts at middle-class normality and gestures of national belonging he is essentialized as a "freak" in a racist society. He is emasculated in "the church called America" that capitalizes on black people's "inevitability of love" (147) to perpetually subjugate them with the promise of freedom. He realizes "we [black people] have been castrated *for purple mountain's majesties above the fruited plain*;" in other words, he comes to consciousness of how America's national identity is constructed through the subjugation of black people. And he realizes that heteronormativity is "a statist ideology that operates by installing pro-procreative prejudice as the form through which desiring subjects assume a stake in a future that always pertains, in the end, to the *state*, not to *them* (Edleman 53, emphasis in original). As Bennett states in an interview, "we are supposed to reproduce—and that's all we're supposed to do, to reproduce. Anything else that comes along—love and companionship and brotherhood and all that—these are extras imposed upon us by

society. And because they are things imposed upon us by society, they can easily be corrupted for reasons that are political or economic or religious” (Newman 367).

In the same interview Bennett states “I think the black writer ought to examine very carefully the possibility that we have been altered by American society to the extent that we yearn for a destruction within our own sense of our black lack of worth” (Newman 364). It is once Joe discovers his own “lack of worth” that he begins his drive to sexual and gendered failure in earnest. The first thing he does once he returns to America is have sex with a “queer” that he picks up in Newark’s Penn Station (138) because “he wasn’t in that big a hurry to get home to misery” (141). He has escapist fantasies about returning home and catching Odessa cheating on him. He thinks “Maybe he’d sneak up on Odessa fucking some other nigger.... somebody he could put the blame for that baby Christopher on. He’d pat that nigger on the ass, he’d say, ‘Man, you *keep* her, I don’t want the responsibility of no wife and no baby, not now, not after what I’ve been through” (140, emphasis in original).

Returning to his neighborhood he experiences a sense of displacement and disconnection, thinking,

The backyards between him and his home farther up Decatur Street seemed like some kind of jumbled and tangled abyss between what he was now and what he had been before...Before, he had been very high and hung up on life...He hadn’t been bullshitting Tony Brenzo last year when he’d talked about making a future for his son; and he had gone to the Army with the picture in his head of himself forging a future for him and Odessa and their son.

But that had all been before he’d actually joined the Army, before Vietnam, before the lieutenant died and sent some dead thing creeping from his own fingers, to ferment and fester in Joe’s belly. He could feel it there now, like a stillborn child sending the canker of its death throughout the living body, a dead but somehow growing fetus waiting for some other definitive act of death so that it could be born again and die again at the same time (142).

Not only does Joe describe the fundamental changes he has undergone psychologically as a result of PTSD and shattering cynicism, he also describes the lieutenant's death he witnessed as a contagion impregnating Joe with a drive to failure, with an impetus to replicate death.²²⁰

As Joe drives himself to failure that critiques the heteronormative lifestyle he had been living prior to Vietnam, he re-embraces his father's philosophy of transgressive black subjectivity in which one behaves "*contrary to everything*" (62, emphasis in original). He enters his house through the back door as "the front way reminded him of the old way, and had to be undone" (143). Once inside, he embodies his father's role of savior and redeemer and, like Titus had attempted to do to him, kills his son, Christopher, to save him. The scene, which I quote only in part, reads,

He had a stone throbbing hard on now he couldn't help it...and he was higher and more disgusted now than he'd ever been in his life he'd given them a son for somebody to cut his balls out man now he understood why he hadn't liked the baby in the first place he was going to cover its head up now hide it now so that nobody not even Odessa would know it had been born and come with their scissors or knives, so, bending over he pulled the cover up from Christopher's dick...and sucked it once or twice and then when the boy stirred and acted like he was going to open his eyes and look at the fucked-up world *look at him* Joe pulled the blue blanket over Christopher's head and held it there...he was saving his baby *You never going to know horror like I know horror* from all the horror and evil, it does exist in life he knew that now, of this life, he certainly wasn't *killing* the baby that was for sure because this black baby born in dark places was already dead when he was born...Nearly screaming now, he felt himself caught up in the crushing hand of God. And inside all that pure clean and purifying agony, he felt the tiniest of tiny bones snap inside his head like a brittle silver twig, a delicate kind of ornament to adorn memory *I'm not going to get involved with anybody else ever again* he thought screaming inside his own head *because it hurts too much* silently...(147-148, emphasis in original).

Infanticide is Joe's ultimate drive to failure. Reid-Pharr notes "the ability to break with the strictures of society may require that one become not strictly an outsider, as it were, but also

²²⁰ Refer to Edelman's book *No Future* for an analysis of the death drive as the motivating force behind the challenge to reproductive futurity.

a monster, a destroyer, the very beast that one's society most fears" (*Once You Go Black* 32).

The scene reveals, through its formal structure of breathless run-on sentences, the extent to which Joe is traumatized both by his newfound consciousness of American racism and violence and by his own unspeakable act of destruction. In killing Christopher Joe refutes the liberatory promise of reproductive futurity as he now knows, as Edelman argues, futurity is an ideology that people are subjugated by (*No Future* 53). Joe thinks "he certainly wasn't *killing* the baby" but rather, he presumes, saving it. He thinks, "*Christopher baby, you ought to thank your Daddy, sweetheart. Just look what he saved you from. Vietnam. Castration. Electrocutation. Assassination in Memphis...And saved from the indignity of being black in a white world, of white boys on southern twilight roads, and white men lynching niggers...I saved you from all that, Christopher. Ain't you glad?*" (192, emphasis in original).

Yet in his drive to failure Joe is overcome with shame. Experiencing unspeakable arousal at death (unspeakable because it is inappropriate to the conventions of the context), Joe feels "more disgusted...than he'd ever been in his life." He suffocates Christopher at the very moment when he is about to "*look at him,*" the italics here emphasizing Joe's horror at being acknowledged for his unspeakable actions by the sole person that can bear witness. Joe's actions "snap" something inside of him, driving him to fail intimacy and adopt anti-social negativity, thinking, "*I'm not going to get involved with anybody else ever again.*" After murdering his son, Joe spends the night with the "queer" he picked up at Penn Station, only to return home the following day and enact an elaborate homecoming charade, letting Odessa publically take the blame for their son's death and embody the guilt. To punish her Joe beats her and has brutal sex with her. But "After a while, when it seemed to be safe to do so without arousing suspicion, he stopped fucking Odessa and everybody else" as "all he wanted to do was...be left alone" (153).

He thinks, “he was honestly glad the baby was dead. For one thing, it meant he’d never be able to do to Christopher what his own father had done to him. Also, it gave him a good excuse for not fucking anybody. He’d been fucking even before he was twelve years old” (154). For the most part from this point forward Joe avoids sexual intimacy with Odessa, as he knows to what extent it makes him vulnerable. He thinks, “he had to get away from her. He halfway hoped that the police would catch him and lock him up so that he would never again be in danger of revealing his whole self to her” (197). His ensuing embrace of shame is in the service of initiating the punishment he seeks.

Part III: Embracing Shame

In *Corregidora* Ursa’s shame is at least twofold. First, it is tied to her sense of failure/drive toward failure as a Corregidora woman unable/unwilling to reproduce her familial legacy. Considering to what extent the novel’s racialized black female subject is expected to witness, remember, and testify to perpetual trauma through reproduction Ursa is a failed racialized subject because she has lost her ability to perpetuate the trauma/resistance binary meant to serve as the primary source of her subjectivity. Considering her shame she thinks to herself “What’s bothering me? Great Gram, because I can’t make generations. I remember everything you told me, Great Gram and Gram” (41). The psychic pressure of Great Gram’s gendered and sexual expectations upon her bothers Ursa because she is unable to fulfill the demands of their historical burden.

Second, in addition to her inability to reproduce, which suggests a gendered and sexual failure, a familial failure, and a failure to history and the liberatory itself, Ursa’s sexuality causes

her to feel shame. She suspects herself, as a descendent of Old Man Corregidora's incestuous practices, of possessing an innate "evil" (Joe suspects himself of innate evilness as well). Ursa's memories morph into an amalgamation of real and imagined thoughts/conversations between herself and un-identified subjects about her sexuality and its attendant shame:

*I bet you were fucking before I was born.
 Before you was thought.
 "Ursa, what makes your hair so long?"
 "I got evil in me."
 Corregidora's evil.
 Ole man, he just kept rolling...(42).*

The "evil" Ursa claims to possess can be read as both her feelings toward her mixed blood (her long hair is a result of "Corregidora's evil"; his Portuguese genes) and an anxiety, manifested in (possibly Jeffy's) accusation of hypersexuality "*I bet you were fucking before I was born*" about her family's sexual history and its implications for her. Great Gram explains to Ursa that her multiple rapes occurred within an impossible context. She tells her, "*There were two alternatives, you either took one or you didn't. And if you didn't you had to suffer the consequences of not taking it*" (67, emphasis in original). And while this is true, in his analysis of *Corregidora* critic Biman Basu notes "In the context of slavery as a regime of punishment and in an economy of sadistic desire, the text...represents love/desire as part of the power relation between master and slave" (*Commerce* 126).

Indeed, both Martin and Mutt recognize the unspeakable conflation of hate and love/desire in Great Gram and Gram's relationship to their master/rapist/father. Mutt and Martin criticize the Corregidora women's vehement rejection of Old Man Corregidora because they understand the women to simultaneously be expressing desire for him. In essence, they implicitly accuse the Corregidora women of eroticizing their hate and fetishizing their shame. Correy tells Ursa,

“I think what really made [Gram and Great Gram] dislike Martin was because he had the nerve to ask them what I never had the nerve to ask.”

“What was that?”

“How much was hate for Corregidora and how much was love” (131).

Sharpe states “Whatever Great Gram feels in relation to Corregidora that gets read as desire is part of the nexus of reasons why she cannot/does not kill him off” (51). And Naomi Morgenstern argues, “the scandal of *Corregidora* is it’s staging of possibility that an enslaved woman might desire her enslaver” (134). This is a “scandal” not only because it is an expression of an unspeakable practice of relation, but, as bell hooks states “the difficulty we have in moving towards some kind of liberatory vision” is “whether the law of sadomasochistic master/slave relationships is, finally, infinitely more sexual, more pleasurable, and more erotic than freedom and decolonization” (*Facts of Blackness* 182). And with this in mind Reid-Pharr argues, “The image of master embracing slave is reiterated as often and as forcefully as it is precisely because it speaks just as readily to the matter of interracial longing and sexual desire as it does to the question of economic and social repression...once one acknowledges the erotic component of this, our most sacred myth of origin, it becomes infinitely more difficult to delineate how, when, why, and where power makes itself known” (*Once You Go Black* 167).

Like Martin and Mutt, Ursa dares to consider such unspeakable practices of relation thinking, “*Sometimes I wonder about their desire, you know. Grandmama’s and Great Gram’s. Corregidora was theirs more than [Mama’s], Mama could only know, but they could feel. They were with him. What did they feel? You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them*” (102, emphasis in original).

“*Corregidora was theirs more than [Mama’s]*” suggests to what extent the two elder Corregidora women express a sense of possession over their trauma and over the man that abused them. And although Ursa, like Correy (although less so) can only know and not feel, her

psychic connection to Old Man Corregidora is so great that at one point Mutt accuses Ursa of being “Corregidora’s woman” rather than his, stating angrily, “*Ain’t even took my name. You Corregidora’s, ain’t you? Ain’t even took my name. You ain’t my woman*” (61, emphasis in original). At another point Mutt asks her, “*Are you mine, Ursa, or theirs?*” (45, emphasis in original), suggesting not just that she belongs, psychically, to Old Man Corregidora, but that the three generations of Corregidora women act as extended embodiments of his power to render intimacy between Ursa and Mutt nearly impossible.²²¹

Ursa’s lack of intimacy with Mutt and, later, with Tad, contributes to her shame. In another real/imagined conversation between Ursa and who we can presume to be Mutt the narrative reads:

“*What bothers you?*”
 “*It bothers me because I can’t make generations.*”
 “*What bothers you?*”
 “*It bothers me because I can’t.*”
 “*What bothers you, Ursa?*”
 “*It bothers me because I can’t fuck.*”
 “*What bothers you, Ursa?*”
 “*It bothers me because I can’t feel anything*” (90).

Basu argues, “The central concern of [*Corregidora*] is Ursa’s struggle in this object position” of “passivity and subordination” (*Commerce* 127) to her circumstances. And in addition to her inability to reproduce, because Ursa is unable to feel aroused during sexual intercourse she feels like she lacks gendered and sexual value as a man’s potential mate. In the wake of her surgery Tad asks her “What do you feel?” and Ursa responds,

“As if part of my life’s already marked out for me—the barren part.”
 “You can’t expect a woman to take something like that easy.”

²²¹ The Corregidora women have a long history of anti-black racism in their family. Old Man Corregidora tells Gram “Don’t let no black man fool with you, do you hear? I don’t want nothing black fucking with my pussy” (127). And at one point Gram, channeling Old Man Corregidora, repeatedly calls Correy’s husband Martin a “black bastard” and tells him “you ain’t had no right messing with my girl” (130).

“What about the man?”

“You mean Mutt? You don’t intend to go back to him, do you?”

“No, I mean any other man” (6).

Due to her barrenness and her loss of an idealized form of womanhood/performance of gender, Ursa is concerned that she will be unable to provide “any other man” with anything of value. The novel reiterates this anxiety of degendering. Characters often refer to feeling like less than a woman or accusing other women of being less than women (115, 136, 177). But, as Halberstam notes, there is a “theoretical and imaginative space that is ‘not woman’ or that can be occupied only by unbecoming woman” (*Queer Art* 125).

As stated, that imaginative space for Ursa is singing the blues. Despite her anxieties about her inability to reproduce and feel sexual arousal, Ursa takes great comfort in the fact that “They didn’t say [the accident] did anything to my throat” (44). The fact that she expresses this relief reveals to what extent she feared the opposite may have been the case, as her singing voice provides her with her primary sense of autonomous subjectivity. It also reveals to what extent she conflates her throat/mouth/voice with her sexuality, which becomes clear in the end of the novel when she expresses her sexuality and her capacity for sexualized violence by fellating and threatening to orally castrate Mutt. The two acts, her singing and her performance of fellatio, are both described as simultaneously compelling and dangerous, tender and brutal. At one point a character says to Ursa “You got a hard kind of voice...like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath. Strong but gentle too. The kind of voice that can hurt you. I can’t explain it, Hurt you and make you still want to listen” (96). Likewise, Ursa’s performance of fellatio is described as “a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain” as she reiterates to Mutt “I could kill you” (184).

Basu argues “One of the greatest contributions of black women’s narrative reconstructions of slavery is the clarification they offer of the relations between power, violence, and desire...one of the significant achievements of these narratives is that they demonstrate ‘with unflinching conviction that desire cannot be evacuated of power relations’” (*Commerce* 132). Furthermore he suggests that in “Disentangling the reproductive imperative from her matrilineage, Ursa has to negotiate the power relation, originally inscribed in the relation between master and slave, which traverses the terrain of pleasure” (*Commerce* 126). Like *Pimp* and “Bloodchild,” *Corregidora* utilizes BDSM power dynamics to negotiate unspeakable racial and sexual issues such as the eroticized conflation of hate and love/desire, and pleasure and pain. Considering her sexual relationship with Mutt Ursa thinks to herself, “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” (50-51).

The “him” referenced here is Mutt, and yet in the larger context of the narrative the “him” with whom Ursa shares sadomasochistic sexual pleasure can also be read as Old Man Corregidora. Ursa’s acknowledgement of “pleasure mixed with pain” echoes her prior observation of “hate and desire” simultaneously informing her ancestor’s relationship to Old Man Corregidora (102). And crucially, Mutt is confused for Old Man Corregidora countless times throughout the novel. For example, in the wake of Ursa’s surgery when she tells Tad “What my mama always told me is Ursa, you got to make generations. Something I’ve always grown up with” Tad responds “I guess you hate him then, don’t you” (10). Here Tad means Mutt. He is assuming that Ursa must hate Mutt for destroying her reproductive capabilities (as Tad believes Mutt pushed Ursa down the stairs). And yet curiously Ursa responds, “I don’t even know the bastard” (10). Even though Ursa knows Tad “hadn’t meant the old man [Corregidora]”

she responds as if he had (10). Mutt and Old Man Corregidora are confused for one another because Ursa's past, present and imagined memories/experiences are conflated.

The novel's conflation of history and time is important in that the fellatio scene can be, and has been read as a performance of eroticized play-slavery that echoes an earlier power dynamic between Great Gram and Old Man Corregidora.²²² At one point Gram reveals to Ursa that Great Gram "stayed there [on the plantation] with him [Old Man Corregidora] even after [slavery] ended, until she did something that made him want to kill her" (79). It is not until the end of the novel "In a split second of hate and love" (184) when Ursa is fellating Mutt and considering the power she has to potentially dismember him and how vulnerable he is in such a position that she realizes *this* is what Great Gram must have done to Old Man Corregidora to "make him hate her so bad he want to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next" (173). Ursa thinks to herself, "I knew what it was...A moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness, a moment that stops before it breaks the skin" (184). Crucially Sharpe notes "whatever *sexual* desire Ursa can no longer feel, neither desire itself nor her own urge to sexualized violence has been eradicated" (51, emphasis in original).

In his essay "Structures of Desire" Lewis Call discusses how Delany's *Nevèrjon* series represents how acts of homoeroticism and sadomasochism can allow characters to work through the "crippling legacies of chattel slavery" (132). Likewise, Scott suggests that there is pleasure to be gained from fantasy-driven affiliation with violated ancestors (*Extravagant* 12) that can take place through therapeutic re-enactment, such as what Delany's *Nevèrjon* series and *The Mad Man*

²²² For example, see Basu's chapter "Perverting Heterosexuality: The Competent Practice of the Object in Selina, Sula, Ursa" in *The Commerce of People*.

represent.²²³ But “working through” sounds like recovery work, like another name for liberation, which, again, suggests the utopian promise of BDSM that I discussed in the previous chapter. As Ursa and Mutt perform the roles of master and slave in this scene it is unclear if they are, in fact, “working through” the crippling legacies of slavery that seek to contain Ursa into specific gendered, sexual, and racialized roles, or rather, if they are embracing their shame as racialized subjects interpolated in violent histories that, the novel suggests, always already contour their subjectivities, in order to discover what practices of relation can be expressed.²²⁴ As Basu notes, “the genuflected body embodies a history of the affective relations between bodies” (*Commerce* 27) including, and in addition to, slavery’s crippling legacies. Perhaps, rather than “working through” its legacies, Ursa and Mutt are “locat[ing] desire precisely in this topography of power and...articula[ting] an erotics in which the movement of desire is traced through a terrain of power” (Basu, *Commerce* 125). Scott notes, “arousal is not suppressed but stoked by this history [of racialization and trauma]” and “working *with* that terrible history immerses you *in* it rather than necessarily through it—which is to potentially effect...an evolution...but not a recovery” (*Extravagant* 217, emphasis in original).

I read Ursa’s embrace of shame in this scene in two ways. First, I read her performance of violent, sexualized play-slavery as a critique against the Corregidora women’s over-

²²³ Scott, paraphrasing Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, stresses that pleasure in such contexts of racialized abjection must be understood with a different set of referents and meanings (*Extravagant* 28). In other words, he stresses that we cannot assume an intimate knowledge of what the enslaved felt, and we should treat terms such as pleasure and desire conditionally. However he also notes, “There is a risk...that in being scrupulous about the *difference* the practices and conditions of slavery make for putative universalities such as pleasure and desire, we begin to conclude that what is different about this pleasure, desire, and so on is that it is virtually nonexistent” (*Extravagant* 156, emphasis in original). Scott maintains a commitment to the literary imagination stating, “we *can* name our reimagination...as pleasure (just as we could name it as pain or anything else)” (*Extravagant* 165). Refer to *Extravagant Abjection* for Scott’s reading of erotic play-slavery in Delany’s *The Mad Man*.

²²⁴ Bond Stockton suggests one practice of relation that such a scene could represent is what she calls “social holdings.” She states “These social actions (these self-debasements) do not create harmonious communities of like-minded blacks...They create, instead, a kind of social solitude of people who are set, in some deep measure, apart from each other—but in an apartness they create together and in which they are held (sometimes sexually by a lover, sometimes mentally in someone else’s mind)” (27).

determination that “bearing witness” must always take the form of biological reproduction. In other words, by performing an act of transgressive sex (transgressive in that this specific sex act allows Ursa to explore her own sexual boundaries, as evidenced by Mutt’s surprise when he states, “you never would suck it. I didn’t think you would do this for me” (184)) Ursa critiques the delimitation of her gender and sexuality that urges her to “make generations.” She critiques “her mothers’ belief that a black woman’s reproductive capacity must be the ‘center’ of her being” (Robinson 158).

However as Basu notes, “the disfigured body is excised from the past and yet represents it in the present and projects it into the future. It is amputated from the past and yet the past lingers as a mark of desire in the present, as a yearning that it projects into the future” (*Commerce* 27). Thus secondly I read Ursa’s embrace of shame as frustratingly tying her back to her familial paradigm of trauma/resistance. Ursa “bears witness” thru performing as Great Gram, knowing that in order to bring the overlapping narratives of Corregidora’s psychic influence (which has always manifested in and through her relationship with Mutt) full circle, her reunion with Mutt “had to be sexual” (184). Ursa’s feelings toward Mutt in this moment reflect the same “hate and desire” (102) the Corregidora women feel toward Old Man Corregidora. Ursa thinks to herself “I knew that I still hated him” sure that if she were to begin a life with him again “there’d still be demands” (183) from Mutt for Ursa to perform in particular gendered, sexual manners. In weighing her familial/historical legacy Ursa thinks, “How many generations had to bow to his [Old Man Corregidora’s] genital fantasies?” (59). One can read the fellatio scene as Ursa both threatening phallocentrism and bowing to Mutt’s genital fantasy.

Yet Basu warns, “It would be a mistake to read the relationship between Ursa and her matrilineage only in terms of continuity” (*Commerce* 128). Thus it is important to note that while

Ursa's act connects her back to the trauma/resistance binary, she continually questions her place within her family's collective story. In the midst of fellating Mutt she thinks "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...?" (184, emphasis in original). Ursa embraces her shame to further immerse herself in her family's history; to find her place in the circle of racial time that contours her familial legacy. Through an embodied performance of transgressive sexuality Ursa returns to the 19th century²²⁵ to critique reproductive futurism that stresses a futurity not of her own making and, ideally, to impede the cycle of psychic, material, and epistemological abuse enacted on her person by Old Man Corregidora and by her matrilineal ancestors. And in doing so she uses her performance to critique the Corregidora women's *ur*-shame for having primacy over the material reality of her and Correy's subjectivity.

Ursa's embrace of shame is an attempt to derail the cycle of what I have argued can be understood as matrilineal abuse. However, even though she continually questions her interpolation in her familial legacy and seeks to find her own place within it, she is not liberated from being part of that legacy and the damage it causes to her psyche. The much critically analyzed "blues refrain" that closes out the novel iterates, I believe, the challenge of defying trauma's over-determined hold on the racialized subject. Although she denies her affiliation as one of the Corregidora women throughout the novel, for example when she states "I told [Mama] I wasn't no Corregidora" (147), the blues refrain between Mutt and Ursa iterates Ursa's ultimate

²²⁵ Returning to the 19th century to reimagine present possibilities, including those of pleasure in abjection, is a predominant theme in the work of many black women writers and artists including Suzan-Lori Parks, Kara Walker, and Renee Cox.

understanding of her subjectivity as inextricable and indistinguishable from that of her ancestral history. The refrain reads,

“I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you,” he said.
 “Then you don’t want me.”
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
 “Then you don’t want me.”
 “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you.”
 “Then you don’t want me.”
 He shook me till I fell against him crying. “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me
 neither, I said.
 He held me tight (185).

Mutt’s thrice repeated “I don’t want a kind of woman that hurt you” can be read as signifying the three older generations of Corregidora women. In other words, each time he makes reference to an abstract “woman” Mutt is naming Great Gram, Gram, and Correy as the type of woman that he does not want Ursa to emulate. Yet each time Ursa responds “Then you don’t want me.” Ursa is stating that she *is* the same kind of woman that hurt her; she is, in fact, a woman that hurts herself and is capable of hurting others. She is Great Gram, Gram, and her mother Correy and therefore, Mutt will not want her because she too has the capacity to psychosexually manipulate people, as evidenced by the sexually violent power play she just performed.

At the end of the refrain Mutt shakes Ursa until she falls against him, crying, and states “I don’t want a kind of man that’ll hurt me neither.” She is finally able to tell him (and, by extension, Old Man Corregidora) to stop abusing her mentally and emotionally (and, perhaps physically). Mutt holds her tight. As can be the case in BDSM power dynamics Ursa and Mutt have, possibly, “Hurt [one another] into tenderness finally” (*Corregidora* 41). The fact that one can read this ending as an act of what Jones calls “the alternative to brutality, which is tenderness” (Tate, “An Interview with Gayl Jones” 152) is likely why many critics read this scene as one of reconciliation, and the novel as providing a liberatory vision. Sharpe for one states “As always

the sexual encounters in Ursa's present connect her to some sexual encounter either in her own or her foremothers' pasts, and in this she repeats them, exceeds them, and reverses them" (63). And one can read Ursa's statement at the end "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" as her liberatory refusal to engage with abusive men. In other words, Ursa's statement that she does *not* desire abusive men separates her from the other Corregidora women who maintain an ambiguous relationship to the conflation of hate and love/desire. However, I maintain that, like the ending of *Eva's Man*, *Corregidora's* ending is ambiguous. In addition to the above interpretations, the refrain also sediments Ursa's self-identification as a Corregidora woman (something she has denied until the end) who cause "hurt" to themselves and to others. She does not "exceed" and "reverse" this ancestral burden, as Sharpe claims (63). Rather, by embracing her shame, despite the critiques she is able to perform, Ursa ultimately cathects herself to her ancestral legacy of violence and trauma.²²⁶

In *Lord of Dark Places* Joe's shame is multilayered and established early in the narrative. And several of its manifestations, such as the shame he experiences in relation to his arousal when in the presence of death, repeat in different configurations throughout the text (as themes do in Jones' first two novels as well). For instance Joe is filled with self-loathing when, upon learning of his mother's death, he achieves an erection and thinks to himself "*Joe Market, you ain't nothing but a dirty good for nothing black nigger*" (18, emphasis in original). He experiences the same shame when feeling aroused after killing a man in Vietnam (129, 132), when murdering his son (147-148), and at the prison execution of a black Reverend (189). But, as Joe tends to do, he embraces his shame and uses his powerful feelings of abjection to hurt

²²⁶ Janis Harris argues, "In the final scene, Ursa chooses not to hurt Mutt, and yet she will not promise never to hurt him... Ursa lets Mutt embrace her, but refuses to ensure him immunity from pain" (6).

others. For example, when Titus informs Joe of Ramona's death, notices his arousal, and says to him, "Sweetheart, your tail's hard at a time like this?" Joe, confused and ashamed retorts "You ugly black sonofabitch... You killed my Mama" (19) and later beats him with a stick (22).

Joe's shame is also tied to a pivotal experience he has with a white woman who, he claims, "rapes" him by forcing him to have sex with her through a fence while holding the threat of lynching over his head (50-55). In forcing their interaction she calls him "nigger" so many times "it had an almost purifying effect on him. He wasn't Joe Market anymore; he was a nigger, pure and simple. He was her nigger. He belonged to her. She could kill him...because he was black and she was white and that made him hers" (50). Simultaneously aroused, ashamed, and full of hate (55) Joe thinks "He wanted to kill her...She made him feel like a dog and a man at the same time, degraded and glorified, hot and cold with excitement and fear" (50). Scott notes, "Chiefly what is unspeakable...is the sexual or erotic pleasure of the human being in extreme conditions of coercion or nonconsent (*Extravagant Abjection* 155) such as this scene represents.

This traumatic inter-racial sexual experience returns to haunt Joe when his elderly, white neighbor Mary uses her knowledge about his act of infanticide to humiliate him and blackmail him. As she blackmails him she debases him, forcing him to wear "a thin orange negligee" (201). Wearing women's clothing is a particularly loaded symbolic debasement, considering that Joe's grandfather Roosevelt was lynched while wearing one of his wife's nightgowns (13). Mary stresses to Joe how "grotesque" he looks in her nightgown with his genitals exposed (201) and forces him to wear her underwear, to "cover that horrible part...that nasty man part" (201), a statement that both draws erotic attention to, and debases, Joe's sexuality. And Joe "felt ridiculous, sitting curled next to Cheap Mary, dressed in her bloomers and negligée. But he also felt very frightened" (205). Furthermore Mary forces Joe to perform cunnilingus, an act that

debases him to the extent that “He burst into tears” crying “Please don’t make me do it” (207). Yet he succumbs to her. And afterward he thinks, “*Man, that white bitch did me in*” and expresses the need to get “over the shame of it” (209). But he also thinks, “he had faced exposure and overcome it” (209). In other words, in surviving yet another dangerous sexual encounter with a white woman and escaping punishment he embraces his shame and grows increasingly “bold” and “daring,” feelings that facilitate his full embodiment of the myth of the hypersexual black male (209).

Shortly after this scene Joe’s friend PeeWee refers to him as a “stud” (210). Joe thinks, “Stud was the highest compliment you could pay a man...It referred to his courage as well as the size of his dick” (210). The term “stud” also, of course, denotes slave men who served as reproductive breeders for the slave-master. But this is just one more word in the arsenal of negative archetypes that Joe comes to embrace, referring to himself as “a spade, a nigger, a big dick black man” (215) as he internalizes the racialized subjectivity Titus sought to interpolate him in. Joe thinks, “wasn’t he a direct product of discrimination, of Titus Market’s idea that a colored man needed a colored religion, a colored way of life?” (105). Again, Titus’ “colored religion” and “colored way of life” is one of transgression meant to both critique “the pretense of virtue” and provide salvation. Reid-Pharr plainly states “‘blackness’ is as much a fetish object for Black Americans as it is for whites” (*Once You Go Black* 129). And, in embodying the fetish, as Joe does, one can “wound oneself with an insult-trailing tag [“spade, nigger,” etc.]...to ‘out’ the violent side of mainstream, normalized America” (Bond Stockton 31). Joe is fully aware of the fetishized hypersexual mask he wears, and of his collusion in constructing it and reproducing it in his drive to fail the ideologies of “mainstream, normalized America.” He reveals as much to his friend Tony (213-215). However, as the narrative progresses Joe embodies the mask more

and more to the point that it ceases to be performative and becomes his subjectivity, deeply rooted in abjection.

Because he reveals to Tony the extent of the mask's artifice but continues to wear it until he can no longer remove it, Tony is the one character in the novel that makes Joe feel ashamed of himself. Tony sees Joe as more than just a hypersexual black masculine stereotype. In the face of Joe's increasingly erratic behavior he says to him "I'm confused, Joe. I don't know what to make of you when you act like this. I mean...well, shit man!...You've got *responsibility* Joe. You're not only responsible to your wife and your community, you're responsible for their good opinion of you" (211). But Joe, continually driving to fail postures of heteronormativity and embrace shame, refutes Tony's emphasis on respectability reminding him "you're all fucked like I am" (211). Furthermore Joe likely feels ashamed of himself in Tony's presence because they share an emotional and sexual intimacy unlike that which Joe shares with anyone else in the novel. For example, after a physical altercation with Tony Joe thinks, "*We fought to keep from making love. The fight itself had been a kind of perverse love-making...The act of love between two men or between two races, he supposed, would surely shut a final door...let us never love, let us fight to keep from loving*" (216, emphasis in original).

As suggested by his intimacy with Tony, I read Joe as a queer subject. Yet, although he engages in extensive acts of homosexual sex, he is hesitant to acknowledge that side of himself (as it perhaps contributes to his shame) and instead explicitly states his hatred of "queers." Thus I also read Joe as deeply homophobic. When Joe marries Odessa (later revealing to himself "I got married to Odessa just because I thought I was turning queer" (274)) he thinks that "he was a real man after all" and "happy for the first time in his life" (95) as if his entrée into heteronormativity

guarantees his straightness. Here, as in the fight scene with Tony, I read Joe as explicitly articulating his intention to remain closeted.

Joe twists his homosexual inclinations into homophobic acts of violence and the man that suffers most as a result is his friend Lamont. Joe thinks

He didn't especially like Lamont. For one thing, there was something very sissified about him that went against Joe's grain. He certainly didn't have anything against sissies, although they were very different than out and out queers. Joe defined a sissy as an undeclared queer; and he felt somewhat uncomfortable even being with Lamont (112).

Lamont is closeted because his mother, who "wanted [him] to be greater than Jesus Christ and Frederick Douglas combined, a real leader of [his] people, making speeches everywhere" is deeply homophobic (114).²²⁷ He tells Joe "I didn't turn out to be the kind of man [she] wanted me to be...she's disappointed in me, she's ashamed of me...I think she thinks I'm *queer*" (114, emphasis in original). He also reveals, in a "scared whisper" "my mother...is trying to kill me. Or make me commit suicide, which is the same thing" (114).

At one point when Joe is destitute, he uses his knowledge of Lamont's sexuality to manipulate him into performing fellatio on him and then uses Lamont's shame to blackmail him for ten dollars. As he is violently seducing Lamont and forcing him to out himself Joe thinks "*Queer bastard. I knew all the time you were queer...*He felt Lamont had betrayed him, being queer all these years without letting him know. They could have been balling together all these years" (226, emphasis in original). This experience is traumatic for Lamont. He cries and begs Joe not to treat him as queer. He states "I think I'd kill myself if anybody knew, if my mother ever found out" (226). Afterward Joe is

²²⁷ As evidenced by Lamont's character, the novel seems invested in questioning the place of queerness in projects of racial uplift, an aspect of the text deserving of its own sustained study.

“disgusted,” although more likely with himself than with Lamont. As Scott suggests, “the abject is the receiver of humiliation—it is the experience of violence at the core of the self, violence run so rampant that it is, in the moments of its being, what the self is; and violence and fury are that abjection turned outward, visited on others” (*Extravagant* 267). In other words, Joe turns his abjection into a powerful force of humiliation. He locks himself in the bathroom, shunning Lamont. He tells Lamont “I hate you for what you did” (227). As a result, Lamont hangs himself (229).

After Lamont’s death Joe thinks, “he felt a genuine sense of regret that was very close to guilt” (239). However Joe again embraces his shame and turns his sympathy into homophobia thinking “*Lamont was a fucking queer, and queers ain’t human as far as I’m concerned*” (240, emphasis in original). Shame and guilt so heavily weigh on Joe’s psyche that he pushes himself and others, such as Lamont, to points of psychosexual excess to test what judgments might befall him. But little, if any repercussions do come, as Joe lives in a community where “a guy could do pretty much as he pleased and nobody gave a damn” (174). And the characters he does try to push, such as Lamont and Odessa, are so crippled with shame and guilt to the point that they cannot pass judgment on Joe.

As Joe continually embraces his shame throughout the novel he specifically uses his sexuality to contribute to other characters’ abjection. In other words, Joe’s sexuality is the fulcrum on which character such as Lamont and Odessa debase themselves. For example, although Joe refuses to make love to her he sexually teases Odessa until she climaxes, which makes her resent him and herself. One such scene reads,

“It just ain’t fair,” she moaned. Her voice sounded like she might break out into a scream at any minute. “It just ain’t fair the way you turn me into nothing like this. You just playing with me...I *know* you just playing with me. And I still get limp as a dishrag the moment you touch me. You like a drug, Joe,

like some of them drugs people shoot in their arms.” She was very close to screaming now (168).

Joe continues to tease her, kissing her and pressing his body into hers, but the narrative reads “he felt nothing but contempt for her, she was so easy to excite...She threw her head back and gave a muffled groan that reminded him of a dog in agony. There was something about her that always reminded him of a dog...he could not help but feel contempt for her, the way she responded to his least touch” (169). Joe feels disgusted at his wife’s sexual response to him, referring to her as a dog, a sentiment she reiterates when, after she climaxes from this “love play” she says, “ashamed,” “You make me feel like a dog” (169).

In another scene Joe makes Odessa fellate him while he is dirty and covered in another woman’s scent. She says, “I’m your wife, Joe. Don’t make me do something like this without washing first” (194) but he manipulates her into doing so anyway by playing to her guilt over the death of their child (“show me you love me” he tells her (194)). As she fellates him he feels ashamed of himself thinking “*Man, I ain’t shit, making my wife do something like this when she don’t really want to*” but “the feeling of guilt was quickly replaced by a feeling of power and contempt” (194, emphasis in original). In a manifestation of Scott’s theory of abjection turned outward (*Extravagant* 267), Joe projects his shame on Odessa and, in a sexual power play meant to further debase her, he refuses to kiss her after she fellates him stating “You must be kidding, baby. You go brush your teeth and rinse your mouth out, then I’ll kiss you...if I ain’t asleep by then” (195).

Joe’s embrace of shame is most fully depicted in two final scenes similar to *Corregidora*’s final scene in which Ursa’s performance of transgressive sex is the novel’s

definitive representation of shame. In the first scene Joe is at a masquerade party,²²⁸ fitting considering that it is in this scene that Joe “surely shut[s] a final door” (216), embodying the mask to the point that it fully becomes his subjectivity. He engages in a “Triple-S” scene (a three-way) with Tony and their friend China Doll. “Triple-S” is a sexual activity that the three had undergone many times. Previously Joe had avoided the bottom position, as it seemed to him to be “the position of death and femininity” (256), however in this instance Joe takes the bottom position and thereby debases himself.²²⁹ As Bersani notes, “when the sexual act is associated with women but performed by men...[it] has the terrifying appeal of a loss of the ego, of a self-debasement” (“Is the Rectum a Grave?” 25). Performing as the bottom produces for Joe a “double sensation of choking and blindness” that fills him “with an almost overpowering elation” (257). In this bottom position Joe fully embraces his shame and renders himself “extravagantly abject,” to borrow Scott’s phrase, thinking, “*I cannot love. I do not deserve to live*” (257, emphasis in original).

Meanwhile Odessa and her mother arrive at the party, however, although Odessa witnesses Joe in the midst of the Triple-S scene, she refuses to judge him. He thus attempts to force Odessa to hate him and punish him by publicly debasing her to an extent greater than before. The narrative reads, “Fuck a good life. He strutted over to [Odessa] on stiff legs and slapped her full in the face with his open hand...’What do you think of that?’ he asked arrogantly. Odessa’s eyes dampened but she did not cry. ‘I don’t think nothing, Joe’... ‘I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Joe’... ‘Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do’”(266). Notably Joe initiates this

²²⁸ Bennett states a motivating force in his work is the “need to distort in order to see reality” (Newman 368). Here one thinks of Mikhail Bakhtin’s commitment to the grotesque and carnival. Refer to *Rabelais and His World*.

²²⁹ Bond-Stockton is particularly interested in shame’s synonym “debasement” and its affiliation with “physical, material lowering...in reference to the ‘bottom’” (7). See also Scott’s chapters “Notes on Black (Power) Bottoms” and “Porn and the N-Word” in *Extravagant Abjection* for his analysis of “black-bottom/white-top” scenes and their “explicit erotic and sexual appeal, and, most importantly [their] erotic and sexual ways of working with the real histories of conquest, enslavement, domination, and discrimination that the scenes[s] so disturbingly evoke” (223-224).

performance²³⁰ with a specific articulation of negative affect that solidifies his drive to failure—“Fuck a good life.” Joe forces Odessa to smoke hash, fellate him while he verbally assaults her, and have sex with PeeWee, all in front of the party guests. But all the while he does so “with a feeling akin to sorrow” (267). He feels ashamed of himself, as evidenced when he avoids Tony who looks at him “like he was looking at shit” (268). Joe thinks, “*Tony baby it hurts me when you look at me like that Tony stop me baby before I kill somebody I think I’m losing control...Tony stop me, baby, I don’t know what I’m doing...Help me baby I think I’m cracking up*” (268, emphasis in original).

Yet Tony does not stop him and Joe’s embrace of shame increases. Although he orchestrated it, he punishes PeeWee for having sex with Odessa, just as he punished Lamont for consenting to Joe’s transgressive desires. In yet another queer/homophobic act of violence Joe chokes PeeWee with his erection with the intention to kill him (277). As he violently sexually assaults him Joe thinks “*you fucking queer...always been hung up on my dick*” (271). Throughout the narrative Joe is convinced PeeWee is homosexual and makes countless advances toward him, yet PeeWee never capitulates. Therefore one can read the scene (as one can read the scene with Lamont) as Joe forcing himself sexually onto men that he resents, not because they are “queer,” but because they never sexually proposition Joe.²³¹

After these scenes of utter debasement Odessa still refuses to judge Joe and attends to him lovingly (272). And her unconditional love further aggravates Joe’s disgust with her and disgust with himself. He thinks “there was something *immoral* about that kind of love, and he could only feel contempt for it, the same way he’d feel about a whore who could fuck anything

²³⁰ This scene is specifically referred to as a performance countless times; Joe is described as “a performer in a circus arena” (266).

²³¹ Recall Joe’s sentiment that he resents Lamont not so much because he is “queer,” but, rather, because “He felt Lamont had betrayed him, being queer all these years without letting him know. They could have been balling together all these years” (226).

that walked” (273, emphasis in original). Just as he shames Odessa for her sexual responses to him and makes her feel like a dog, he likens her unconditional love for him to the behavior of an undiscerning “whore.” In other words, he is sickened by someone that can love something as base as he considers himself to be. He thinks ““*Honest to God, Odessa, I don’t know why I treat you the way I do...It’s because of something in me...something that’s been in me since I was born,*”” suggesting an innate evil (as Ursa also suspects about herself). The narrative continues, “He wanted to say that, but he couldn’t bear to be so nakedly exposed before Odessa. He couldn’t even bear to look her in the face. Tears seeped through his lids and stained his cheeks” (272, emphasis in original). Odessa stresses to him “Joe, honey, I *love* you! There ain’t nothing you can do I can’t forgive!” (272-273, emphasis in original). But Joe, having fully embraced his shame insists upon his abjection, telling her “I’m no good” (273).

Joe reveals to Odessa all of his transgressions, telling her “there’s nothing *sacred* to me. I can’t think of a thing that I wouldn’t do, or put up with...I smoke pot, I chase other women, I hustle queers...” (273, emphasis in original). But still, Odessa looks at him “with such love shining in her eyes that he had to look away” (273). Finally, fully accepting that “He didn’t *want* her to love him” he reveals to her, and to the other people present including Tony, that he committed infanticide (278). He frames the murder as an act of salvation, stating, with a grin reminiscent of his father’s habit of grinning in inappropriate moments, that he “saved” Christopher (278-279). That Joe comes to embody Titus’ unspeakable mannerisms in this moment of revelation is crucial because it suggests, just as *Corregidora*’s final scene suggests, that the protagonists’ ultimately connect themselves to their familial legacies of trauma and abuse by mimicking their ancestor’s actions. As a result of his revelation Odessa finally reacts as Joe hopes; she beats and nearly castrates him, finally providing him with the “punishment” that

“his whole body cried out for” (279-280). And, finding pleasure in abjection, he experiences “satisfaction under a great mist of pain” (279).

Repercussions only come to Joe as a result of his forceful drive to failure and embrace of shame that stop at nothing until they achieve his complete annihilation. Before Tony takes Joe to jail he allows Joe to attend to something he “has to do” (280). Joe races to Mary’s in a “joyful frenzy” (281) to fulfill the ultimate act of transgression/salvation that he knows will guarantee his execution. He greets Mary telling her, “I’ve come to save you. I’ve come to save the world...I made up my mind...that I was going to kill me a white woman, one day” (283). Suddenly “ashamed” Joe ceases to speak, but Mary urges him to kill her with overly vigorous sex, affirming for him his and Titus’ belief that “sacrifice” is “proof” of “love” (283). He abides by her (their) wish and in doing so again embodies his father who killed Ramona in the same manner. During the act Joe urges Mary to debase him as the young white woman did when he was younger. He says to Mary “call me nigger, you white bitch” which she does with “almost delicious delight (285). Scott notes, “The reporting and building of arousal around the word *nigger* unsettles current reader expectation even of sexual fantasy in such a way as not only to deliver abjection as sexual arousal but...gives us also that history of our ancestors that is our legacy, [it] put[s] us *in it*” (*Extravagant* 253, emphasis in original).

Reid-Pharr, whose work is interested both in choice and in abjection, advances an argument about black, queer writer Gary Fisher that is relevant to our understanding of Joe’s psychology and *Lord of Dark Places*’ critical project more generally. Reid-Pharr notes “Fisher thus insists that within the process of creating (black) identity one necessarily traffics in the rearticulation of the very assumptions...[that] there is no black subjectivity in the absence of the white master, no articulation in the absence of degradation, no way of saying “black” without

hearing “nigger” as its echo” (*Black Gay Man* 137, emphasis in original). In other words, through the unspeakable Joe, (like Fisher and Delany) reveals how being a racial fetish object can be central to a black sense of self and sense of, Scott argues, power, even if that power is merely “ability, the capacity for action and creation” (*Extravagant* 23).²³² It is in this final scene with Mary, described as “an insane dream of redemption” (259), that Joe again affiliates himself with his familial paradigm of transgression/salvation. When she dies Joe feels “that he became, again, his father” (285) and indeed emulates him, as he is killed by the state for his actions.

Notably, however, Joe recognizes in his embrace of shame his capitulation to his familial transference of transgression/salvation and *takes responsibility* for choosing death and orchestrating his own destruction. Like Ursa, Joe is an agent. Perhaps the book’s most powerful critique of liberatory frameworks that presume oppressed subjects’ innocence²³³ is in its representation of Joe’s *complicity* in his own destruction. Reid-Pharr notes “we see an almost desperate attempt to reestablish a quickly disarticulating Black American identity precisely by reworking the tropes of innocence...[yet] we ought never to allow our understandings of black and American traditions to become so precious that we forget to consider seriously the questions of freedom of choice...[and] individual...responsibility (*Once You Go Black* 34). Yes, in his drive to failure and embrace of shame Joe ultimately ties himself to the trauma/resistance binary. But, as Ursa does in her reiteration “Then you don’t want me,” Joe takes ownership over his role in recapitulating that trauma. Joe thinks “*You did this to yourself, Joe Market. Nobody else did it*

²³² Scott argues “it is precisely as object of interpolation that insults such as “nigger” taken on as sexual incitement function; that these are sexually exciting suggests the way they have been internalized, but that they constantly underline the receiver of the insult as object, as receiver, brings attention to the process of interpolation, of power-making-its-object, a recognition it helps fix on some layer of consciousness by repetition...The naming of interpolation, calling it out, that this repetition effects, makes it, like “nigger” itself, amenable to various uses and transformations” (*Extravagant* 255).

²³³ In *Once You Go Black* Reid Pharr, paraphrasing Michelle Wallace, states Normal Mailer’s infamous essay “The White Negro,” though widely criticized, “should not be discounted because it so clearly represents the depth of interest within this country in maintaining the notion of the innocent black” (130).

but you. I know somebody is going to say the white man did it. But you found your own way, Joe, you followed it without faltering” (286, emphasis in original). Joe’s sentiment here is a critique of the oppression/liberation binary that, in its crucial focus on structural inequity and systems of oppression, can nevertheless fail to recognize subject’s acts of agency and responsibility as “sick, desperate, reviling” and unspeakable as these acts can sometimes be (*Lord of Dark Places* 286).

In my analyses of *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* I have attempted to suggest to what extent these novels represent and critique the trauma/resistance binary that can overdetermine the racialized subject’s identity. And I have also analyzed the ways in which the novels contest the 1960s and 1970s privileging of sex and futurity bound to reproduction as liberatory gestures. Both *Corregidora* and *Lord of Dark Places* represent sexualized violence and violent sexuality, eroticized play-slavery, and intimate engagements with the grotesque, all of which contribute to a reading of the novels as transgressive. In the words of Halberstam, these novels “invite us to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming [unspeakable] conduct” (*Queer Art* 145). In refusing reproductive futurism, in refusing to reproduce trauma and resistance through the generations, the novel’s protagonists instead subsume the wound to the point that there is no recovery; there is no liberation possible. What is possible, as their drives to failure and embrace of shame reveal, is the recognition that “the only possible freedom is a freedom from the illusion of freedom” (Levine 17). This, ultimately, is what the novels imagine.

Conclusion

At a conference called “Unleashing the Black Erotic” in September 2013, a fellow panelist turned to me after my talk on Morrison’s *Sula* and told me “the unspeakable is unspeakable for a reason.” And while I value her point, Pat Califia reminds us “A desire that cannot be named or described is a desire that cannot be valued [or] acted upon (*Public Sex* 19). To keep the unspeakable silent is to refuse to engage representations of desires that make us uncomfortable. In doing so, we devalue those desires that “lie like a bodily boundary between the everyday and ‘the unspeakable’” (Delany, “On the Unspeakable” 65) and we continually construct social division that censors what it cannot transform. Thus “[t]he only thing that can affect the ‘conflict’ of discourses,” Delany argues, “is some form of education. It may, indeed, be some form of education we have not yet discovered” (Lukin 172).

Today, in pursuit of such personal and social education more and more critics are seeking to discover and speak the unspeakable inherent to African American cultural productions. Conferences such as “Unleashing the Black Erotic” and Princeton’s October 2013 “Black Queer Urbanity” symposium brought together scholars working within the intersections of black studies, feminism, sexuality studies, performance studies, and queer theory to engage provocative conversations that have, for too long, been suppressed. Delany recently sat down with bell hooks for a public conversation about transgression and transgressive sexual practices at The New School. A forthcoming issue of *The Black Scholar* is specifically dedicated to “New Studies in Gender and Black Sexuality.” There is increasing public interest in street lit and in the work of Delany. The documentary *Iceberg Slim: Portrait of a Pimp* was released in 2012 and a forthcoming special issue of *African American Review* called *Delany Lately: Samuel R. Delany and the Art of Paraliterature* will be published in 2015.

As this dissertation has demonstrated, the unspeakable is everywhere in African American literature, manifesting through transgression. Transgression does not always (or necessarily ever) have a moral or need to have an answer or a solution to structures of oppression. Sex does not necessarily lead to truth or freedom. As Delany makes clear, transgression is not about transcending the social; as he states "...I will never be able to effect any meaningful change other than one or another form of terrorism by fooling myself into thinking I can do anything by 'standing outside' some hegemony" (Lukin 171). Rather, transgression in African American literature is a pedagogical tool, encouraging us to read in novel ways and to situate texts together in fresh configurations to see anew the rich body of African American literature, much of which is largely critical buried. And it reminds us to always question why texts are ignored, forgotten, and/or suppressed in any given historical moment. In reading transgression, it is clearly revealed to us just how much we, as critics, are inclined to read in many over-determined manners. It reveals our default inclinations to rationalize, to condemn, to explain away with anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic liberatory intentions that which does not conform to such politics.

If the unspeakable should remain unspoken, as my colleague attested, why speak the unspeakable, why write analyses of it? As Toni Morrison claims "Writing is...an effort of the will to discover" ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 146). In writing this dissertation I have learned the unspeakable offers myriad cultural critiques. By engaging it seriously and thoughtfully, the unspeakable challenges us to reconsider our assumptions that it is a "problem" to be transcended or a collection of excessive representations to be ignored in pursuit of resistance. By "describ[ing] what it is like to bear a 'disqualified' identity" (Love 4), textual representations of the unspeakable invite a multitude of important conversations. The unspeakable provides a meta-critique of critical over-determination and rationality. It challenges

the privileging of identity politics and liberatory frameworks. It troubles our assumptions of victimhood and our understandings of agency. It dares to reframe seemingly abusive and degrading relations as pleasurable interactions. It reveals the anxiety and exhilaration of losing Control and attests to the fragility and eroticism of power dynamics.

Yes, such illuminations often are found in scenes of abjection, of debasement. Yet “Debasement,” Kathryn Bond Stockton argues, “is within us and defines our humanity” (10). As James Baldwin observes “What we really seem to be saying when we speak of the inhuman is that we cannot bear to be confronted with that fathomless baseness shared by all humanity” (“Preservation of Innocence” 594), which is why, arguably, we censor or ignore that which we cannot transform into liberation. In doing so, as Mikhail Bakhtin claims “We have ceased long ago to understand the grotesque canon, or else we grasp it only in its distorted form. The role of historians and theorists of literature and art is to reconstruct this canon in its true sense” (*Rabelais* 29). Through my pairings in these chapters I have attempted to demonstrate a productive disruption to the African American literary canon that ignores many of the texts I have engaged and re-imagine a canon that practices aggregation without containment. Such disruptions are crucial as “...the production of self-reflexive black subjectivity is achieved precisely through the rupture of tradition (or at least what passes for tradition) within Black American narrative” (Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black* 121).

In *Reckless Eyeballing* Ishmael Reed’s character Brashford states, “Chester Himes said: ‘All that matters now is to keep thinking the unthinkable and writing the unprintable and maybe I can break through this motherfucking race barrier that keeps us niggers suffocated.’ And some of us believed that” (26). Again, as I have consistently argued, there is no “breaking through.” But there is perpetual experimentation, there are unswerving challenges to the status quo occurring in

the work of Delany, Jones, Morrison, Slim, Butler, and Bennett, and so many more who think the unthinkable, print the unprintable, write and speak the unspeakable. And in doing so they complicate the suffocating oppression/liberation binary Himes is claimed to have spoken of. For such authors “Afro-American literature is neither a crash course in neighborliness and tolerance, nor an infant to be carried, instructed, or chastised or even whipped like a child, but the serious study of art forms that have much work to do, and which are already legitimized by their own cultural sources and predecessors” (Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 162).

In our engagements with race and sex, “those most basic of subject-positions” (Lorberer 63), Delany urges us, as critics and readers to

Fantasize—and fantasize in modes that allow our most cherished and forbidden inner worlds to peak out (and speak out) here and there. Fantasize. Analyze...It’s scary to talk about your own fantasies—to plumb that part of one’s inner autobiography: the part we return to to initiate masturbation, the part that centers our reveries of anger or tenderness. Bring analysis—rather than blanket acceptance or rank dismissal—to those thoughts, and you’ll find out how the world, dark or light, might figure itself under passion’s stress (Lorberer 63-64).

Through their crucially important work Delany and his contemporaries invite scholars and readers to wrest the unspeakable from its ghetto of critically imposed silence, and speak its many names.

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