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(Un)conventional coupling: Interracial sex and intimacy in contemporary neo-slave narratives

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(UN)CONVENTIONAL COUPLING

Interracial Sex and Intimacy in Contemporary Neo-Slave Narratives

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

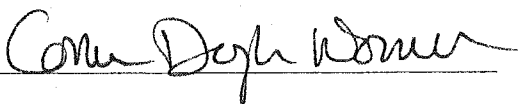
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2005

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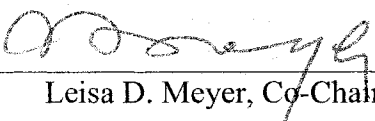
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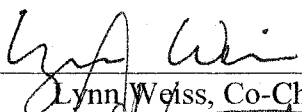


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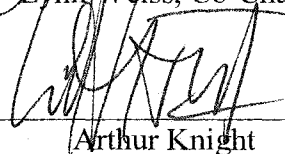
Approved by the Committee, April 2005



Leisa D. Meyer, Co-Chair



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To my parents for their boundless support and faith.
For my husband, Sterling, and my children, Sam, Ansley, and Eliza,
whose love sustained me throughout this process and reminded me daily of
the important things in life.

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ABSTRACT

“(Un)Conventional Coupling” initiates a more expansive critical conversation on the contemporary neo-slave narrative. The dissertation’s central argument is that authors of neo-slave narratives rely on the politicized theme of interracial coupling to both reimagine history and explore the possibility of social transformation. To establish a framework for my particular focus on interracial intimacy, this study extends the boundaries of the genre by adopting Paul Gilroy’s theory of the black Atlantic. This theoretical paradigm serves as a provisional framework for both accommodating and analyzing the complexity of authorship, nationality, and influence within this large body of work.

This dissertation interprets neo-slave narratives’ preoccupation with interracial sex and intimacy as a compelling reason to situate the critical analysis of the genre within a more expansive context. The prevalence of discourses and representations of interracial desire, sexuality, and intimacy within the genre reveals a preoccupation with cross-cultural connection. Additionally, authors of neo-slave narratives rely on black-white coupling to explore the concepts and realities of “race.” Indeed, interracial intimacy provides an effective mechanism for this literature to invigorate a dialogue about “race” and why it still matters in the twenty-first century.

Adopting the term (un)conventional coupling to destabilize racialized ideologies of sexuality and desire, this project reads black-white coupling as a trope that represents a complex and conflicted sense of transracial intimacy in these novels. This study analyzes the representation of transracial intimacy in three different novels: Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose*, David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*, and Valerie Martin’s *Property*. Each chapter demonstrates the different ways in which these authors rely on the trope of black-white coupling to construct the double-edged critique of black Atlantic political culture. First, this trope exposes a hidden history in order to reveal a more comprehensive and nuanced version of slavery and its myriad legacies. Secondly, representations of interracial intimacy allow authors to posit utopian possibilities out of relations of difference by creating a space for transformative acts of social reinvention.

(UN)CONVENTIONAL COUPLING

INTRODUCTION

When Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad put out a call for papers for a session on “Slavery and the Literary Imagination” at the 1987 English Institute, they were surprised by the “lively response” it generated (vii). Their “original desire” was to impel scholars to “pay closer attention to the body of writing known as the slave narrative.” Instead, the rich variety of submissions exceeded the boundaries of McDowell’s and Rampersad’s initial proposal. The unexpected response, as they put it, “helped to redefine our subject for us.” Their “enterprise” shifted from encouraging scholarship on the “classic” slave narrative to facilitating a more complicated dialogue on the “profound impact” slavery has had on “the national literature” (vii).

The edited volume that sprang from this conference continued the critical conversation and stands as a foundational text for the analysis of the genre of the neo-slave narrative. Published in 1989, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* “attempts to recognize something of the breadth and depth of [slavery’s] impact” by attending to the way in which “the work of several writers, both white and black,” contemplates “the meaning of this institution to American life” (vii). In their introduction McDowell and Rampersad express their hope for further exploration and their desire that “the ideas and approaches generated” by the volume will inspire studies of additional texts “so that a more accurate and comprehensive sense of the subject will emerge” (x).

It is tempting to favorably assess the impact of McDowell’s and Rampersad’s inaugural enterprise by comparing it to subsequent panels of the same nature. In 2003, for

instance, the American Literature Association (ALA) organized a session titled “The Neo-Slave Narrative Post-Antebellum/Beyond Chattel” as part of their annual meeting. The title of the panel itself suggests the institutional transformation of this body of fiction. Coined by Bernard Bell in 1987 and adopted by McDowell in her own essay in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, the use of the term “neo-slave narrative” signifies the generic stature of these novels.¹ Indeed, ten years later, the lengthy entry in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* registered the academy’s recognition of this “new literary form” as “a major African-American genre” (Gobel 141). Yet beyond the significance of the session’s title, McDowell and Rampersad might also have felt gratified by the ALA panel’s inclusion of “other texts” and approaches. With papers on Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, Paul Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle*, “Race Vindication,” and the writings of Assata Shakur, this session certainly seemed to move beyond earlier conceptions of the canon.² United by their concerns about the significance of slavery to American life, each of the scholars interpreted work in this genre as having important, if not urgent, contemporary significance.³

Upon closer investigation, however, evaluating the result of the collective call of the editors and contributors to *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* is not so unambiguous. Most obviously, by limiting their focus to African-American cultural

¹ Bell referred to this literature as “neoslave narratives” in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (289).

² The significance of this expanded context signals the functional emphasis of genres. As Frederic Jameson writes in *The Political Unconscious*, “Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (as quoted in McCallum and Olbey 166).

³ The paper by LaMonda Horton-Stallings from Clemson University, for example, is titled “Learning the Ropes, Tricking the Tropes of Classic and Neo-Slave Narratives for Issues of Class and Gender in Paul Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle*.” The paper by Phyllis Burns of Michigan State University focuses on “Race Vindication within the Black Liberation Struggle and Black Literature.” Greg Thomas of Syracuse University titles his paper “Assata Shakur and Our Wretchedness in Consequence of NEO-Slavery.”

production, the 2003 ALA panel did not invite – nor perhaps even envision – a more comprehensive initiative of the genre. Somewhere along the way the “black and white” that shaded the original conception of the genre was erased. In a conference devoted strictly to American literature, the session (sponsored by the African-American Literature and Culture Society) was limited by the venue itself, placing boundaries – whether intentional or not – on how the genre can be understood.

However, the most telling outcome of this panel’s intention cannot be assessed from the program alone. For unlike McDowell’s and Rampersad’s session that produced a spirited and sustained scholarly response, the subsequent ALA panel on the neo-slave narrative quite literally failed to come together. Indeed, instead of creating a space for a collegial and productive exchange of ideas, the session on the neo-slave narrative was cancelled. I am equally tempted to read this event as symptomatic of the state of the field itself. Although numerous scholars are producing work on the subject of the neo-slave narrative, we are not able to bring the fruits of our labor to the (round)table to sustain any sort of meaningful dialogue.

This present study, therefore, is a response to the exciting energy and momentum generated by *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Like the scholars who participated in that collective effort, I endeavor to initiate a more expansive critical conversation on the contemporary cultural production that takes slavery as its subject. While my focus is primarily on fiction by U.S. writers, I nonetheless argue for a more inclusive and adaptable approach to the ever-expanding genre of the neo-slave narrative. Indeed, the composition of the genre itself compels us to reconsider the genre from a more cross-cultural perspective.

Rather than employ the “flood” metaphor of Deborah McDowell to describe the “unstoppable rate” of novels of slavery in the 1980s, I would depict contemporary literary production as a multiplicity of tributaries that coalesce into a powerful current (“Negotiating” 144). I do so to suggest the crosscurrents of influence and the diverse origins, nationalities, and identities of the authors whose work makes up the genre. Writers from England, the West Indies, the United States, Canada, and elsewhere are earning popular recognition for their work. British writer Barry Unsworth, for example, was honored with the 1992 Booker Prize for his novel *Sacred Hunger*. American writer Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* earned her the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. British-Caribbean writer Fred D’Aguiar won the 1994 Whitbread Award and the David Hingham Prize for his first novel, *The Longest Memory*.

Ironically, it was 2003, the same year of the unrealized ALA panel, that proved to be a banner year for writers of neo-slave narratives. Along with garnering the praise of American First Lady Laura Bush on the “Good Morning America” show, Caribbean-born Canadian writer Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* was awarded a number of literary prizes, including the Giller Prize, the Trillium Prize, and Commonwealth Writers Prize Best Book Award (Carroll 64). In that same year, in an upset victory over local favorites, Valerie Martin won Great Britain’s Orange Prize, honoring women writers, for her novel *Property*. And, of course, there is Edward P. Jones who swept through the literary scene in 2003 with his novel *The Known World*, earning himself the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction along with a number of other awards.⁴

⁴ In addition to the Pulitzer, Jones earned the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, the American Library Association Black Caucus First Novelist Book Award, and the National Book Critic Circle’s Award, along with being a National Book Award nominee.

As this short-list of literary prizes and accolades for recent novels of slavery emphasizes, an unfortunate critical disjunction exists between the popular and the scholarly response to contemporary neo-slave narratives. While the interest of a plentitude of book groups and a handful of college course offerings might suggest a movement afoot to study and talk about these books, scholars themselves rarely “converse” with each other on the subject of the neo-slave narrative. Rather, scholarship on neo-slave narratives is fractured and isolated, limited to individual articles and a handful of monographs that rarely attend to the matter of genre. Focused for the most part as they are on a circumscribed body of work by select African-American authors, scholars might briefly reference other studies on the subject, but they rarely engage each other’s work in any substantive way.

I would argue that this continuous stream of novels and other forms of cultural production taking up the subject of slavery demands renewed, sustained, and collective attention.⁵ Indeed, I would add that this very productivity encourages us, as writer Fred D’Aguiar does, to read “slavery as a site for orchestrations of radicalism” (as quoted in Frias, “Building Bridges” 425). Drawing upon and revising a genre “initially defined by its capacity to intervene in actual material struggles for social transformation,” contemporary neo-slave narratives politicize the act of narration (McCallum and Olbey 166). Significantly, as they contest, revise, and problematize “slavery,” writers grapple with the meaning of “freedom,” “justice,” and “equality” in the post-civil rights era.⁶ As such, these narratives represent what James C. Scott would call an “unobtrusive realm of

⁵ Artists, performers, musicians, poets and playwrights also take slavery as their subject. I will touch on the diversity of cultural production in chapter one. See also Keizer 166-7 and Connor, *Imagining Grace*.

⁶ As Hortense J. Spillers argues in her oft-quoted essay from *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, “‘slavery’ is primarily discursive” (“Changing the Letter” 29).

political struggle” (ix). Conceiving neo-slave narratives as part of “an ongoing, collective” project, I argue that work in this genre harbors a desire to provide “the cultural and structural underpinning of more visible political action” (Parrish 97, Scott 183-4).

It might be equally productive, in fact, to read the vitality of this artistic production as a burgeoning social movement. Likewise, in the exercise of its prerogative, it has special impetus to “not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression”; rather, like other progressive social moments, the genre of the neo-slave narrative has the capacity to “generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions” (Kelley 9).⁷ As Robin Kelley argues, “the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place” and “compel us to relive horrors.” Yet through this process, radical art also enables us to “envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling” and, ultimately, “to imagine a new society” (9, 11). Similar to the “renegade” activists and artists Kelley discusses in his recent book *Freedom Dreams*, authors of neo-slave narratives “sometimes create [radical] cultural works that enable communities to envision what’s possible with collective action, personal self-transformation, and will” (7). In the hands of these contemporary writers, slavery becomes a “usable subject” that is more than a discourse of opposition; neo-slave narratives also rely upon the subject of slavery to “construct a politics rooted in desire” (Cox xii, Kelley 6).

To enable my exploration of the significance of the neo-slave narrative genre as an unrealized social movement, I focus on the recurring theme of interracial sex and

⁷ In *The Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy also tacitly suggests assessing neo-slave narrative as a political movement. He writes, “even when these writers are black Americans their work should not be exclusively assimilated to the project of building an ethnically particular or nationalist canon, because the logic of the

intimacy. This approach situates both the revisionist intentions and utopian leanings of the genre within an inclusive, “outward looking” ethos.⁸ Neo-slave narratives disrupt the “impasse” of binary conceptions of difference by using representations of interracial coupling to emphasize the fluid, performative nature of race – as well as other social categories (Friedman 5). Intersecting and interdependent constructions of race and sexuality allow authors to create “relational narratives” of difference “in which the antagonistic struggle between victim and victimizer is significantly complicated” (Friedman 7). Attending to both the complex history and the lingering ambivalence regarding interracial intimacy, constructions of black-white coupling in the neo-slave narrative helps to create “scripts of relational positionality” that do not collapse into “a pluralism that obscures the inequalities of power for different groups in the social order” (Friedman 38).

My title is based on the “working concept” I adopt to refer to the pervasive presence of black-white coupling in novels of slavery (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 206). The term “(un)conventional coupling” establishes representations of transracial desire and intimacy as a politicized literary strategy that offers a “redemptive critique” of “history” while it simultaneously reimagines contemporary social relations (Gilroy 71). The parenthetical “un” is meant to destabilize “received knowledge” about interracial sex and problematize notions of “convention” (Pratt 2). Indeed, as Martha Hodes argues in her introduction to *Sex, Love, Race*, “the multiple voices of transgressors, victims, and authorities ... preclude the crafting of one narrative” (1). As a working concept,

great political movement in which these texts stand and to which they contribute operates at other levels than those marked by national boundaries” (218).

⁸ Werner Sollors argues that the “outward looking character” of a thematic orientation opens up rather than forecloses new possibilities for reading texts (25-6). See also Frias, “Erotics.”

(un)conventional coupling attempts to clear a space for contemporary author's imaginative reconfigurations of these relationships. Following Ann Laura Stoler's logic, I invoke the notion of "working" here to stress this concept as a provisional one that is "subject to review and revision rather than fully formed," one that "invite[s] scrutiny rather than block[s] it."⁹ Working concepts, according to Stoler are those we can "*work with* to track variation in their use and usefulness"; yet they are also terms that "*do work* to destabilize received historical narratives" (*Carnal Knowledge* 206).

Wahneema Lubiano has argued that "Slavery exists as a hold on the imagination," and "the relearning of human attachment is the way in which that hold is loosened" (as quoted in Cox xii). My study applies Lubiano's theory to the complicated subject of interracial desire. Chapter one of this study, "Reassessing the Genre of the Neo-Slave Narrative," traces and redirects the literary history of the contemporary neo-slave narrative. Pulling together disparate sources, chapter one addresses how the loose trajectory of U.S.-centered scholarship tends to delimit the boundaries of the genre. I take as my point of departure the politicized intentions of recent novels of slavery. As Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's scholarship on the neo-slave narrative suggests, a distinctive aspect of the contemporary genre is its emphasis on function over a strict notion of form. Fictional narratives on the subject share an overlapping concern about the lingering impact of slavery's legacies on contemporary life and society (Rushdy, *Neo-Slave* 6-7). The political intentions of the genre are reflected in the novels' revisionist emphasis as well as in the utopian impulse that characterizes this work. By challenging "received knowledge"

⁹ As Stoler writes, "The most important notion of working concepts for colonial studies ... are the ones that are 'working' in the sense that they promote analytic openings and are subject to change" (*Carnal Knowledge* 206).

about the slave past, writers not only reimagine “history,” but also they hold out the possibility for social transformation.

My alternative reading of the genre both builds on and departs from previous scholarship by reconceptualizing the neo-slave narrative as a multiracial, transnational cultural phenomenon. To establish a framework for my particular focus on interracial intimacy, I extend the boundaries of the genre by grounding it in Paul Gilroy’s theory of the black Atlantic. I offer this theoretical paradigm as a provisional framework for both accommodating and analyzing the complexity of authorship, nationality, and influence within this large body of work. I interpret neo-slave narratives’ preoccupation with interracial sex and intimacy as a compelling reason to situate the critical analysis of the genre within this more expansive context. The prevalence of discourses and representations of interracial desire, sexuality, and intimacy within the genre reveals a preoccupation with interethnic history and cross-cultural connection (Rody, *Daughter’s* 13). Additionally, authors of neo-slave narratives rely on black-white coupling to explore the concepts and realities of “race.” Indeed, interracial intimacy provides an effective mechanism for this literature to expose not only the “persistent historical conditioning that has shaped racial identities,” but also the lingering impact of that history. In fact, the reliance on black-white coupling allows contemporary neo-slave narratives to caution “against [the] contemporary haste to end dialogue about race” (Handley 188).

Their attention to intimate relations that cross the color line enable contemporary slave narratives to structure a dialogue about both the perception and the reality of racial difference. Adopting the term (un)conventional coupling to destabilize racialized ideologies of sexuality and desire, I read black-white coupling as a trope that represents a

complex and conflicted sense of transracial intimacy in these novels. This study argues that authors of neo-slave narratives consistently rely on this trope to construct the double-edged critique of black Atlantic political culture. First, this trope exposes an “unspoken” history in order to reveal a more comprehensive and nuanced version of slavery and its myriad legacies. Secondly, representations of interracial intimacy allow authors to posit utopian possibilities out of relations of difference by creating a space for transformative acts of social reinvention (Loury D6). This dual sense of purpose structures my readings of three different novels in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Two, “‘Unspeakable Desire’ Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*,” explores the way in which representations of interracial sex and desire structure the entwined feelings of rage and longing that impel Williams’ fictional return to the subject of slavery. Extending the terms of the narrative reference to “unspeakable desire,” this chapter argues that Williams relies on the trope of (un)conventional coupling to not only revise prevailing notions of power and agency under slavery, but also to imagine a new model for contemporary relations of difference. Read within the context of the feminist movement of the 1970s, chapter two reconsiders the story of *Dessa Rose* as a reflection on the failure of feminism to create a fully integrated women’s movement. Focusing on the growing friendship between a slave and a plantation mistress, my analysis emphasizes how each woman must negotiate and revise conventional notions of interracial desire and sexuality in order to achieve liberation. By exposing and rewriting the terms of “unspeakable desire,” *Dessa Rose* articulates a desire to move contemporary readers to reconsider the possibility of a multicultural sisterhood that could build upon the successes of previous social movements.

Chapter Three, “‘Third Space Otherness’ in David Bradley’s *The Chaneysville Incident*,” addresses the centrality of black-white coupling to the creation of a “functional” past for both Bradley’s characters and readers. The novel constructs (un)conventional coupling as a “third space” that highlights the relational nature of the experiences and ideologies of difference. This objective is mainly achieved through the representation of the romantic partnership between the black protagonist, John Washington, and his white lover, Judith Powell. Their union provides the frame for the story and constitutes the center of the revisionist strategy within the novel. The problems and the possibilities of their relationship establish a framework for critically revisiting history and reassessing its importance to the present and future. Bradley’s construction of black-white coupling allows him to establish connections that give his readers a “different kind of vision” that enables them to see “beyond themselves.” In this way the novel posits a dynamic and potentially transformative relationship between (hi)story and audience in order to suggest that change is possible not only for the characters in the narrative, but also for the reader outside of the text.

Finally, Chapter Four, “Triangulated Racial Desire in Valerie Martin’s *Property*,” contemplates the relational nature of racial desire in Valerie Martin’s *Property*. Triangulating the relationship between the white master and the enslaved black woman by adding in the white mistress, the geometry of erotic relations under slavery in *Property* is convoluted, compelling us to broaden our conception of (un)conventional coupling. Told from the perspective of Manon Gaudet, an embittered “jealous mistress,” *Property* addresses the centrality of women’s desire in relations of power and resistance. By juxtaposing the patriarchal oppression of an elite white woman with the subjugation

of an enslaved black woman, the interracial erotic triangle calls attention to the relational nature of systems of domination. As importantly, the same-sex desire that drives both Manon and her narrative emphasizes the centrality of white women in the very structure of white patriarchy that represses them. The novel's final image, however, begs the reader to contemplate new geometries of race and gender that encourage, rather than prohibit, alliances across boundaries of difference.

Within each of the above novels, writers not only structure an encounter between past and present, but also between their own writing and other texts. Both Sherley Anne Williams and Valerie Martin in their author's notes and acknowledgements make direct reference to the historians and narratives that they draw on – or react to. Similarly, in various interviews David Bradley cites the work of his mother, a local historian, as inspiration for his novel as he acknowledges the years of research that obliquely contributed to *The Chaneyville Incident*. Moreover, the quotes that figure prominently on the covers of each of these novels indicate that writers read and promote each other's work. The line from Alice Walker on the cover of *Dessa Rose*, and the praise from Toni Morrison on *Property*'s book jacket, for example, remind us that “any ‘ethnic’ return to the past is conceived, written, published and received within surprisingly new currents of multiethnic influence and exchange” (*Rody Daughter's* 14).

More nuanced and subtle intertextual ties are also established within the novels themselves. Specifically, representations of interracial sex in Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* not only invite comparison to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, but also to Charles Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*. Similarly, Bradley's reliance on an interracial partnership in *Chaneyville* provides an interesting contrast to the work of

William Faulkner, whom Bradley cites as an inspiration. Finally, the construction of female desire and resistance in *Property* resonates with representations of sexual abuse and erotic subjectivity in Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and are also subtly linked indirectly to the work of Margaret Atwood, to whom the novel is dedicated. In short, the myriad intertextual relationships established by the authors and their novels interpret both fiction and "slavery" as cross-cultural, collective enterprises.

Following the lead of these writers, I hope to initiate a more inclusive and collaborative scholarly approach to the study of neo-slave narratives. My work represents one of I hope many efforts to reinvigorate the scholarly response inspired by McDowell's and Rampersad's call of almost twenty years ago. The failed attempt to bring a panel and an audience together to discuss neo-slave narratives at the 2003 ALA meeting, sadly, is not merely symbolic or coincidental. My own subsequent effort to inspire a panel for the 2004 ALA conference was similarly unsuccessful. According to Keith Byerman, head of the African-American Literature and Culture Society, insufficient interest in neo-slave narratives at the time defeated the initiative. As I wait for a response to my latest ALA panel proposal and to this study, I follow the example of McDowell and Rampersad – indeed of the writers themselves. I put out a call and hope for a similar "lively response" from a new generation of scholars to assist in the work of further refining and redefining the genre of the neo-slave narrative.

CHAPTER I

REASSESSING THE GENRE OF THE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

The neo-slave narrative has come into its own in the American literary establishment since Bernard Bell first identified the (then) budding genre almost twenty years ago in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987). Contemporary authors continue to return to the subject of slavery in their fiction.¹ Moreover, an abundance of articles and papers on individual novels as well as a number of books and dissertations on contemporary fictionalizations of slavery attest to the increasing prominence of this genre within the academy.² This “new literary form” is now regarded as “a major African-American genre” (Gobel 141). Perhaps the clearest sign of the genre’s canonical status is

¹ In my periodization of the genre I loosely follow Ashraf Rushdy in his periodization of the genre. Grounding its evolution in the shift from Civil Rights to the Black Power, Rushdy breaks the history of neo-slave narratives into two distinct periods, modern (pre-1960s) and contemporary (1960s on), with Margaret Washington’s *Jubilee* (1966) marking the transition between the two eras (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 534; see also ch 1. in Rushdy’s *Neo-slave Narratives*).

² While articles and books on the subject will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, recent studies on the contemporary neo-slave narrative include the following: Ashraf Rushdy’s *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu’s *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative* (1999), Stefanie Sievers’ *Liberating Narratives: The Authorization of Black Female Voices in African American Women Writers’ Novels of Slavery* (1999), Venetria K. Patton’s *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women’s Fiction* (2000), George B. Handley’s *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas* (2000), Timothy J. Cox’s *Postmodern Tales of Slavery in the Americas* (2001), Rushdy’s *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001), Angelyn Mitchell’s *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction* (2002), and Arlene Keizer’s *Black Subjects* (2004). While not strictly focused on the genre of the contemporary neo-slave narrative, other recent studies which address the topic in substantive ways include Kimberly Rae Connor’s *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (2000), Caroline Rody’s *The Daughter’s Return: African-American and Caribbean Women’s Fiction of History* (2001), and Jenny Sharpe’s *Ghost of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives* (2003). There are also at least two unpublished dissertations on the subject: A. T. Spaulding’s “Re-Forming the Past: Aesthetics, Politics, and the African American Postmodern Slave Narrative” (1999) and Camilla Elisabeth Dacey-Groth’s “Slaves of Fiction: Coming to

the inclusion of a lengthy entry for the neo-slave narrative in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (1997). Listing thirty-four works of fiction produced since the late 1960s and assigning various categories for a number of different styles and forms, contributor Ashraf H. A. Rushdy makes it clear that we are, as critic Caroline Rody writes, “looking at a genre in full swing, exhibiting an astonishing diversity and range” (“Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” 95).

While from today’s standpoint, the ascendance of the contemporary neo-slave narrative within the academy seems clear, assessing the state of this field of literature is neither uncomplicated nor unproblematic. In fact, given the productivity of both authors and scholars in recent years, the relative paucity of attention to the genre itself, particularly its premises and parameters, is surprising. Moreover, the few studies that do address the genre’s development and analyze its contemporary manifestations in some detail are not necessarily in agreement nor, for that matter, are they even in conversation with one another. The lack of consensus regarding terminology highlights this point. Various scholars have elected to use a range of terms including twentieth-century or contemporary slave narratives (Foster, *Witnessing Slavery* ix-x), the neoslave novel (Davis and Gates xiii), the neoslave narrative (Bell 289), the historical novel of slavery (Carby, “Ideologies” 128), the slavery novel (Rody, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* 96), the new slavery novel (Cox, Introduction), contemporary novels of slavery (McDowell and Rampersad xiii), literature of American slavery (Sollors 244), postslavery literature (Handley 2), and even liberatory narratives (Mitchell xii) to refer to this body of fiction.³

Terms with the American Holocaust Through Representations of Slavery in Post-Civil Rights Fiction and Film” (2001).

³ I use contemporary fictionalizations of slavery and novels of slavery interchangeably with neo-slave narratives for two reasons. First, all three allow for the range and diversity that defines the genre (leaving

This array of terms and the inability to fix one name to the genre suggests the range of differing interpretations and parameters scholars use to discern and define the canon. Thus, in order to establish the context for my own specific concerns and arguments regarding contemporary neo-slave narratives, I must first outline the development of the genre and review in more detail the current critical discussion(s) on this fiction. This will enable me to more effectively establish my own position within this critical conversation.

Foundational Studies

While we can cite Bell's study as a turning point in the recognition of the genre as a new, distinct form, other scholars before him identified the fact that the "slave narrative tradition" extended well beyond the abolition of slavery into the late twentieth century (289).⁴ In her 1979 study *Witnessing Slavery*, for example, Frances Smith Foster locates the continuation of the tradition in late twentieth-century works "consciously modeled after the ante-bellum slave narratives" (ix-x). Foster includes Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) in this category. Yet Foster also alludes to the tradition's more subtle influence on other literary works that might not have strict formal parallels but which nonetheless "incorporate many of the dominant slave narrative characteristics" (x). She cites Richard Wright's

room for other narrative forms including short stories, poetry, and drama). Second, while I am wary of terms that apply the prefix "neo" uncritically, I believe the term "neo-slave narrative" works to convey the crucial point that the impact of slavery extends beyond slavery's official end into the present day. This point will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter.

⁴ A number of scholars define the "slave narrative tradition" more broadly, extending it beyond literary texts to include other cultural practices and forms (see, e.g., Andrews, "Introduction" and *To Tell a Free Story*, Connor, *Imagining Grace*, and Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*). In particular, Kimberly Rae Connor's work exemplifies this direction. Connor, following the lead of William Andrews (who directed a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on the development of the African-American slave narrative), distinguishes the slave narrative tradition as a more holistic approach to reading eighteenth- and nineteenth-

Black Boy (1945), James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952), and Cecil Brown's *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger* (1969) as representative works in this category.⁵

Similarly, two other prominent works, *The Slave's Narrative* (1985), edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and William Andrews' *To Tell a Free Story* (1986), link the slave narrative tradition to more recent literary production. In his introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, Gates dubs this form of fiction the "slave narrative novel" (xxii) and highlights its "revisionary, or signifying relation of intertextuality" to the antebellum slave narrative (xiii). Contributors to the collection, most notably James Olney and Charles H. Nichols, also highlight the connection between the themes, content, and form of the slave narrative and the modern/post-modern African-American novel (Olney 168-70, Nichols 287). Andrews also establishes this trajectory in his book by asserting that the "vitality of the [slave narrative] tradition" is clear in works like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) which adapt the "literary precedents and models" of early black autobiography to suit their creative "needs and purposes" (291).

A brief review of these studies demonstrates that even before Bell's book was published in 1987, scholars were tentatively sketching the contours of an emerging genre. Nevertheless, Bell's 1987 study was groundbreaking in defining the "neoslave narrative" as a distinct entity. His study initiated the new genre into the realm of literary

century slave narratives as not only "the literary and cultural bedrock of much contemporary African-American fiction," but also of other forms of cultural production (*Imagining Grace* 1).

⁵ On the "classic" conventions of the antebellum slave narrative see, for example, Olney's "I Was Born" where he catalogues twelve key characteristics of the slave narrative (152-53). See Foster, "In Respect to Females" and Braxton, "Harriet Jacobs" for challenges to the male-centered analysis that dominates Olney's (and other) early readings of the genre.

study. For the first time, rather than relying upon lists of representative twentieth-century works as evidence of the far-reaching influence of the slave narrative tradition, Bell's study shifted the focus of scholarly analysis from the "classics" to the contemporary forms themselves. Like Foster before him, Bell identifies the beginning of the canon, naming Walker's *Jubilee* as "the first major neoslave narrative" to be followed by Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Reed's *Flight to Canada* (289).

What places these three works in the category of "major neoslave narrative," Bell's analysis suggests, is not simply the shared subject of slavery but also their formal connections to the early slave narratives. Bell briefly defines these novels as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). He references more precisely their formal qualities than Foster and Gates do in their brief references to this fiction. Bell's interpretation of the genre restricts the canon to texts that retain the classic pattern of "resistance and flight" and that attend to the central concerns of the struggle for "freedom, literacy, and fulfillment" (Bell 28-9). Thus, in shifting the focus from classic to modern narratives, Bell adds depth to the discussion on the complex intertextual relationship between the antebellum and modern/postmodern narratives of slavery.

In his more extended discussions of three neo-slave narratives in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, Bell briefly addresses both the similarities and differences between these recent novels and their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precursors.⁶ His analysis stresses the fact that this fiction is related to but is not simply derivative of the "classic" slave narrative. In his discussion of *Jubilee*, for example, Bell

⁶ Foster also briefly lists formal and thematic similarities and differences in her preface to *Witnessing Slavery* (x).

highlights similarities by addressing shared motifs including the quest for freedom and the power of faith. He also notes their similar concerns, citing in particular the issue of authenticity and the focus on black folk culture and history. Finally, Bell emphasizes the didactic nature of the novel. Yet Bell also attends to the ways in which *Jubilee* departs from the traditional slave narrative. He notes in particular that attention to character development over plot and the reliance on an omniscient third person narrator distinguishes Walker's novel from the classic first person formula typically adopted by authors of antebellum slave narratives (289-90). Bell's analysis indicates that the choices Walker made in constructing *Jubilee* were driven by her differing sense of purpose and were shaped by her contemporary situation. Unlike the slave narrators who were determined to bring about the abolition of slavery, Walker's goals were to challenge historical stereotypes of slaves – particularly of black women. She wanted to, in her own words, “to set the record straight where Black people are concerned in terms of the Civil War, of slavery, segregation and Reconstruction” (as quoted in Bell 290).

Similarly, Bell's discussion of the neo-slave narratives by Gaines and Reed suggests that the formal style, structure, motifs, and line of development of both novels – particularly in terms of their intertextual relationship to nineteenth-century slave narratives – are shaped by the purpose of each author. Gaines' Miss Jane Pittman is a character who bridges the sense of pride and social activism of at least two significant periods in American history, the end of slavery and the beginning of the modern civil rights movement. Bell argues that Gaines adopts the “as told to” structure of earlier slave narratives for an important reason. In order to allow Miss Jane to tell her own story while also highlighting the distance between the reader/listener and the storyteller, he relies on

an outside “editor” in the form of a history teacher to record her story. Bell contends that Gaines wanted to use his heroine’s (hi)story to educate the younger generation about the past, especially so that readers could “better understand the values that have sustained black Americans in their historical struggle for freedom and dignity” (295).

Reed, on the other hand, adopts the form of the slave narrative in order to create a parody that debunks myths about slavery and freedom. Through the journey of Raven Quicksill, *Flight to Canada*’s fugitive slave narrator/writer, Bell argues that Reed interweaves “fact with fiction to illustrate that historical truth is as bizarre as imaginative truth” (331). In particular, Reed wants his reader to question what freedom means both in the context of slavery and in the readers’ own lives. Bell’s analysis of these two texts suggests that both authors engage the subject of slavery for specific and preordained reasons. They do so not merely as an attempt to, in Hortense Spillers words, “restore us to the rich ‘thing’ itself before discourse touched it” (“Changing” 29). Rather, through fiction slavery becomes way to “explain what appears to be very rich and recurrent manifestations of neo-enslavement in the very symptoms of discursive production and sociopolitical arrangement that govern our current fictions in the United States” (Bell 33).⁷

Linking the author’s purpose to historical context, Bell’s study is also important for the way it grounds the development and analysis of neo-slave narratives in the particular time in which they were produced. Bell demarcates a distinct historical moment from which this contemporary form evolves by establishing *Jubilee* as the “first major neoslave narrative” (289). Designating *Jubilee* as a “first,” Bell’s study positions

⁷ See Bell 290-95 for his discussion of Gaines and 329-336 for his discussion of Reed.

the contemporary form as a significant departure from what came before it in the slave narrative tradition. Bell situates this break and the origins of the new genre in the historical, political, and social milieu of the late 1960s. He associates the genre's development with the sense of disillusionment that predominated the next two decades. To emphasize the importance of this particular context, Bell cites the lack of real progress achieved in the wake of the Civil Rights movement and the limited success of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs. Additionally, the "economic and moral drain of the war in Vietnam" and the backlash generated by the reign of neo-conservative presidents through the 1980s only contributed to the sense of disappointed expectations. Bell contends that "these and other experiences between 1963 and 1983 influenced the development of modern and post-modern attitudes and conventions by contemporary Afro-American novelists," the authors of neo-slave narratives included (282).

Yet even as Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* introduced the new genre and identified the social circumstances that gave rise to its contemporary form, other scholars were already in the process of building on and revising his definition of the term and, indeed, the genre itself. A product of a session on "Slavery and the Literary Imagination" at the 1987 English Institute, Deborah E. McDowell's and Arnold Rampersad's book of the same name makes this trend quite clear.

The second major study to engage the topic of the neo-slave narrative on its own terms, *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* both embraces and departs from Bell's study in important ways. In contrast to Bell's study, for instance, this edited collection suggests the possibility of scholars shifting away from reading this genre as strictly African-American by highlighting connections to "mainstream" American fiction and the work of

non-black writers. In their introduction, McDowell and Rampersad explicitly connect the slave narrative tradition to “the national literature” by citing its influence on such writers as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and William Styron as well as on twentieth-century African-American writers like Reed and Williams (vii, ix). The editors note the tremendous impact of the slave narrative on American literature as a whole is reflected by the fact that “both white and black [writers], including former slaves” are the subject of articles in their collection on slavery and the literary imagination (vii). By way of example, Hortense Spillers reads Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* against Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Carolyn Karcher, on the other hand, interprets the “miscegenous” alliances in Lydia Maria Child’s *Romance of the Republic* as a “vision of America’s racial destiny” (Karcher 81).

At the same time, Deborah McDowell’s article, “Negotiating between the Tenses: Witnessing Slavery After Freedom – *Dessa Rose*,” complicates the collection’s impulse to read the neo-slave narrative as a “multicultural” genre (144). On the one hand, by placing Walker’s *Jubilee* and Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) along side Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), McDowell suggests that more than skin color, political and philosophical differences distinguish one author’s work from another’s in assessing its place within the emerging canon. Quoting Toni Morrison, McDowell argues that neo-slave narratives need to “put authority back into the hands of the slave” (160). Reiterating the assertion that Williams’ makes in the “Author’s Note” that serves as a preface to *Dessa Rose*, McDowell writes that the “liberties” Styron took when recreating history resulted in an act of “betrayal” and a series of misrepresentations – not a representation of the “truth” – about Nat Turner (145). Building on this point,

McDowell emphasizes her concern with the question of authority within *Dessa Rose*, the novel she focuses on in her essay. She writes,

Implied in the different versions of Dessa's story are a series of questions connected to the network of sociohistorical realities and power asymmetries that influence the manner and matter of representing slavery. Who has been publicly authorized or self-authorized to tell the story? Under what circumstances? What has been acceptably sayable about that story? How have black women been figured in or figured themselves in (146)?

McDowell's queries are even more suggestive when considered within the larger context of defining the emerging genre of the neo-slave narrative. They demonstrate a central concern with race, gender, and authority, specifically with regards to who commands the legitimacy to tell the story of slavery. And, along with her critique of Styron's (il)legitimacy, McDowell's rhetorical questions make her reading of the genre seem open to a degree of flexibility regarding the essential question of authority.

On the other hand, when specifically addressing the contemporary neo-slave narrative, McDowell's article remains consistent with Bell's preemptive work. She too defines the contemporary genre as distinctly "Afro-American," a development within the tradition of the African-American novel and the particular concern of the "black American writer" (McDowell 144). The importance she places on genealogy is clear in the series of questions McDowell poses in the article's opening paragraph regarding the emergence of this "post-sixties phenomenon." McDowell asks, "Why the compulsion to repeat the massive story of slavery in the contemporary African-American novel ... ? What personal need, what expressive function, does re-presenting slavery in narrative

serve the twentieth-century black writer" (144)? McDowell's article, and indeed *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* as a whole, seems to fluctuate between certainty and ambivalence regarding authority and ownership of the right to fictionalize the (hi)story of slavery. While the article and the volume as a whole raise the issues of when and why "it is all right for one writer to take liberties with history and not another" (McDowell 145), the question of authority with regards to writers of neo-slave narratives remains problematic.

Building on Bell's study, the scholars who contribute to *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* also stress the connection between contemporary writers' concerns with slavery and the "particular cultural conditions" in which these novels are produced (Carby, "Ideologies" 128). In her article on *Dessa Rose*, for example, McDowell argues that "the novel negotiates between past and present to reveal, not surprisingly, that they are not at all discrete" (147). As McDowell, Rampersad, Spillers, and Carby all suggest, authors are motivated to write on the subject of slavery in response to "the persistence of social and economic conditions of neo-slavery in black American life" (McDowell and Rampersad xiii). In a variety of ways, the articles in the volume suggest that both ties to and perversions of the formal strategies of earlier slave narratives allow contemporary authors to establish connections between past and present. Departing from Bell's strict emphasis on form and theme, authors in the collection subtly expand the definition of the contemporary genre of the neo-slave narrative by emphasizing as Gates does the "revisionary, or signifying relation of intertextuality" within these novels in their attempts to "witness slavery" after the fact.⁸ *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*

⁸ See especially Carby, "Ideologies" 125, McDowell, "Negotiating" 144, Spillers, "Changing" 30-2.

thereby develops the initially established canon and adds the following novels to the category of “major neoslave narratives” instituted by Bell: Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* (1979), Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979), David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981), Charles Johnson’s *The Oxherding Tale* (1982), Sherley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

At the same time, extending Bell’s concept of how the author’s purpose influences both the form and the function of the contemporary neo-slave narrative, McDowell’s article in particular contributes a new element to the developing definition of the genre. Her analysis points to both the complexity and flexibility of this form by arguing (albeit in a footnote) for more nuanced criteria. In McDowell’s view we should include “those recent novels by black Americans which do not focus exclusively on slavery or use it as a significant point of departure” but which do “stage characters’ necessary confrontation with some story about slavery” (162). As examples McDowell cites Gayl Jones’ *Corregidora* (1975) and Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983). Like Foster before her, McDowell’s interpretation implies the need to include fiction that has more subtle ties to the slave narrative tradition. McDowell’s aside indicates that in constructing the canon, our attention should move beyond novels with obvious formal parallels to earlier slave texts to novels whose narrative strategies, themes, and concerns appropriate and revise both the text of the antebellum slave narrative as well as the discourse of slavery itself. While McDowell does not pursue her point in detail, her article and the collection as a whole contribute significantly to the evolving framework of the genre.

Aside from *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, no extended studies of neo-slave narratives were published during the decade between Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* and the publication of Rushdy's *Oxford Companion* entry in 1997. This in no way implies that neo-slave narratives did not receive sustained attention from the late 1980s through the late 1990s. During this period countless articles on individual works were published in a wide variety of journals and books. Between 1987 and 1997, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* alone inspired at least sixty-six articles.⁹ Yet in these articles as well as in the larger body of scholarship on other neo-slave narratives, very few scholars engage the subject genre itself. Even fewer analyze the individual work(s) they focus on within the context of the emerging form of the neo-slave narrative.¹⁰ Rather, most of the articles address a wide variety of subjects and theoretical concerns that lead them away from questions of genre. The few studies that do engage genre usually rely on a quick reference to Bell's term and brief definition of the "neoslave narrative." In some cases they reference key quotations from Spillers' and McDowell's essays, for epigraphs and openings. In other words, few contemporary scholars engage the issue of genre critically as an interpretive strategy.

In mapping the development of the neo-slave narrative, however, this most recent and diverse collection of articles is important for what it reflects about two major trends in scholarship on the genre, both of which continue to shape the way contemporary fictionalizations of slavery are studied today. For the most part, scholars tend to read

⁹ This figure is based on a database search on InfoTrac's electronic database. When cross-checked against a second database, FirstSearch, some articles did not appear in both sources, suggesting that this figure is most likely higher than I estimate here.

¹⁰ One key exception to this is Klaus Ensslen's 1993 article "The Renaissance of the Slave Narrative," which is one of the few articles/studies that engages and assesses "the recent fictionalizations of the slave narrative" as a genre (623).

fictions of slavery within the context of the African-American historical novel or black feminist fiction (or a combination of both). Endless theoretical and interpretive strategies that are employed within each of these categories, including postmodern readings of historical fiction, discussions of pan-African themes within particular novels, post-structuralist studies of discourse, and feminist analyses of representations of motherhood and womanhood. While this kind of work has made important contributions to the study of particular novels of slavery and their relationship to other traditions and genres, it has contributed very little to our understanding of the developing genre of the neo-slave narrative itself. The attention of these individual studies does not stray from the novels already deemed canonical in the foundational scholarship by Bell, McDowell, Carby and others in the *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* collection. As a whole, this body of scholarship seems to accept uncritically that it is a distinct African-American form and therefore limits its attention to the fiction that most obviously recreates and revises the classic slave narrative (particularly *Beloved*, *Dessa Rose*, *Oxherding Tale*, and Johnson's 1990 novel, *Middle Passage*). Questions regarding authority and expanding the canon remain unexplored in the articles produced between 1987 and 1997.¹¹

Recent Developments

Ashraf Rushdy's work on the contemporary neo-slave narrative, therefore, represents a major step in the development of both genre and canon construction. In this regard, Rushdy has done the most to generate attention to and (re)define the genre.¹² As a

¹¹ See, for example, Ensslen's "The Renaissance of the Slave Narrative," Griffin, "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery" (1996), Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1995), and Rushdy, "Reading Black, White, and Gray in 1968: The Origins of the Contemporary Narrativity of Slavery" (1996).

¹² The majority of Rushdy's individual articles on neo-slave narratives (see works cited) have been incorporated into his two books on the subject.

contributor to *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Rushdy revises the term “neo-slave narrative.” As an author, he writes the genre’s first full-length study, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), as well as a number of individual articles and a second monograph on the subject. Indeed, as I suggest in the opening paragraph of this chapter, Rushdy’s long entry on the “neo-slave narrative” (the name a derivative of Bell’s term) can be seen as a milestone, a sign, in the words of one reviewer, of its arrival as a “major” genre (Gobel 141).

In particular, Rushdy’s *Oxford Companion* entry is important because it develops the definition of the genre and expands existing parameters of what might be considered canonical within it. Rushdy’s definition builds on the earlier concepts of the neo-slave narrative (established by Bell and the contributors to *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*) in four crucial areas: (1) periodization, (2) form and content, (3) function, and (4) authority and authorization. First, Rushdy breaks the genre into two periods. “Modern” encompasses the period from Reconstruction to 1966. “Contemporary” refers to fiction published after 1966. Rushdy argues that this historical break is marked by the appearance of Walker’s *Jubilee* which “was published at precisely the moment when the civil rights movement gave way to the Black Power movement.” He also argues that the “convergence of a series of events from this period inaugurated the new era in American fiction about slavery” (534). Not only the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but also the rise of New Left social history provided “African Americans with an emergent sense of subjective empowerment that aided the novelists in creating new representations of slavery” (534). In the *Oxford Companion* entry and in even more depth in his book, *Neo-slave Narratives*, Rushdy builds substantially on the work of Bell, *et. al* regarding

the extent to which political and social conditions of the late sixties and early seventies created the “logic” of this literary form.¹³

Additionally, Rushdy develops and refines ideas of form and content in the definition of the genre and its canon. Rather than perpetuating Bell’s strict adherence to form and theme, Rushdy conceptualizes the subject of slavery and authorial intention more openly. Thus, in his entry Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives rather loosely as “modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of New World slavery” (533). While admitting that novels differ widely in how slaves and slavery figure into their plots, Rushdy explains that neo-slave narratives’ “major unifying feature is that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences” (533). Rushdy’s flexibility allows for the gamut of fiction (including short stories, drama, science fiction, and historical novels) that takes slavery as its subject. This move expands the canon in a way rarely considered by other scholars up to this point in time.¹⁴

Rushdy offers four tentative categories with which to organize contemporary neo-slave narratives. First are historical novels of slavery which might be set during or just after the period of slavery (for example, Chase-Riboud’s *Sally Hemings* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*) or which trace slavery’s continued impact through subsequent historical periods (Alex Haley’s *Roots*). Second are “palimpsest narratives” where “a contemporary African American subject describes modern social relations that are

¹³ See especially the first chapter of *Neo-slave Narratives*.

¹⁴ There are of course some exceptions. Kimberly Rae Connor, as mentioned earlier, includes the visual arts, drama, and music in the extended slave narrative tradition (see, e.g., “*To Disembark: The Slave Narrative Tradition*,” and *Imagining Grace*). There are also a handful of other scholars who have published articles that read short stories, poetry, and plays within the tradition of the classic slave narrative and/or the genre of the contemporary neo-slave narrative. See, for example, Boan, “Call-and-Response,” Carlisle, “Reading the Scars,” and Lester, “Not My Mother.”

directly conditioned or affected by an incident, event, or narrative from the time of slavery” (535). Two examples are Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988). Third are “genealogical narratives” – like Haley’s *Roots* and J. California Cooper’s *Family* (1991) – that “trace a family line through the contours of a broadly defined African American experience, representing slavery as one of the determinant experiences of that familial passage” (535). The fourth and final category he discusses is the imitative slave narrative that “loosely” follows the form and first-person narration of the original slave narrative (for example, Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* and Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*).

Rushdy notes, however, that his four categories represent only a first, tentative step toward discerning and organizing patterns within a complex and still-evolving genre. Indeed, his process of categorization begins to implode as he cross-references categories and creates various subcategories. Rushdy explains some further organizational strategies: “These four [main] lists could all be expanded by cataloguing additional works within the given divisions, and the lists themselves could be further divided by including short stories written about slavery” as well as fantastic and experimental fiction, and “novels written by people of African descent living (but not born) in the United States” (535). As examples of work in this last category, Rushdy cites Mayrse Condé’s *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986) and Fred D’Aguiar’s *The Longest Memory* (1994). In essence, Rushdy provides an open-ended conception of the genre. He concludes with ideas for extending its contours, leaving room for other scholars to join in the task of mapping the terrain of the neo-slave narrative.

Rushdy's attempt to categorize this literary form demonstrates that variety and diversity mark not only the content and context of these novels, but also the form of this fiction. He ably explains that neo-slave narratives are literary hybrids with intertextual ties to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives as well as many other literary forms and genres.¹⁵ While some contemporary narratives borrow the same first person, autobiographical form of the original narratives, others are more formally inventive, shifting voices and employing a variety of narrative techniques in order to tell their complex stories. Although Rushdy's definition makes clear that form is a critical component within the contemporary genre, he shifts away from a strict emphasis on form to a consideration of function. One critic's observation regarding *Neo-Slave Narratives* also holds true for Rushdy's *Oxford Companion* entry. Rushdy's goal, writes the critic, "is not to study the specific and singular dialogue between [contemporary neo-slave narratives] and [the original] slave narratives as much as to mark and place this specific form in its own multivocal cultural moment" (Gardner 543).

Thus, the third contribution of Rushdy's *Oxford Companion* entry is its consideration of canonicity. While previous scholarship highlighted formal ties to antebellum precursors, Rushdy insists upon yoking works in this genre together by function not form.¹⁶ Fiction in this genre shares the desire to re-imagine slavery in order to reconsider its meaning in the past and its significance to the present and future.

Rushdy's entry suggests that the neo-slave narrative is, as A. T. Spaulding has argued, "a

¹⁵ See also Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives* (Ch. 1), Mitchell (6-15), and Spaulding (10-11, 19-30).

¹⁶ In fact, in a review of his longer study, *Neo-slave Narratives*, reviewer Lindon Barrett writes that Rushdy pays only "limited attention . . . to the relations between neoslave narratives and the formalities of the nineteenth-century 'originals.'" Instead, Barrett notes that Rushdy highlights the "distinctly different issues of critique" within the contemporary novels and applauds Rushdy for "secur[ing] neoslave narratives their own intellectual ground" (889).

political act of narration” (5). By addressing issues of representation and appropriation, and by exploring the relationship between cultural production and the (re)construction of race and racial identities, this new fiction of slavery encourages readers to contemplate the ways the past (particularly slavery) has a lingering impact on contemporary life and society (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 6-7).

Finally, in his Oxford entry Rushdy revisits the question of authority that was raised a decade earlier by the footnote in McDowell’s article in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. While Rushdy pioneers the inclusion of work by non-American writers (as long as they have at least temporarily resided in the U.S.), his caveat regarding African descent maintains the status quo regarding racial qualifications for determining who, to paraphrase McDowell, is authorized to tell the story of slavery. The question of authority – particularly with regards to race – remains unchallenged.

Although Rushdy’s longer study, *Neo-slave Narratives*, does not extend to non-black authors the authority to write the story of slavery, it does build upon other significant issues raised in his *Oxford Companion*. In particular, Rushdy explicates the relationship between form and function, insisting that the two are symbiotic. “[R]ather than a facile formalism in which form is considered a product of aesthetic imperatives, we need to consider how . . . form is not extrinsic to historical understanding, but rather constitutive of it” (228). Considerations of formal ties and strict thematic parallels to original slave narratives give way to a sharper focus on how these recent novels explore the subject of slavery to engage issues and problems in contemporary culture. Within this analytical framework, Rushdy demonstrates “that Neo-slave narratives ‘talk back’ to much, much more than just slave narratives” (Gardner 542).

Indeed, Rushdy argues convincingly that these novels are most concerned with how the “past” of slavery continues to shape present concepts of race. Rushdy’s detailed analysis of the genre’s specific “moment of origin” helps support this point. He argues that this contemporary fiction was influenced by three key historical events: the “shift from civil rights to the Black Power movement, the evolution from consensus to New Left social history in the historiography of slavery, and the development of a Black Power intellectual presence in the dialogue over Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner*” (4-5). To illustrate the validity of his contextualization, Rushdy provides a detailed study of four “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3). Thus, he limits his attention to *Flight to Canada*, *Dessa Rose*, *Oxherding Tale*, and *Middle Passage* (3). Rather than offering a comprehensive reading of the genre as a whole, Rushdy analyzes the different ways his chosen works “engage in an extended dialogue with their own moment of origin in the late sixties and early seventies” in order to demonstrate the “social logic” of this new literary form (5). Shifting the focus of analysis to studying neo-slave narratives “on their own intellectual ground,” Rushdy’s approach, as Lindon Barrett observes, “challenges centrally so many of the terms on which neoslave narratives are generally approached” (889). In particular, his emphasis on function charts new territory for contemporary scholarship on the genre.

Rushdy’s scholarship should have signaled a new direction for neo-slave narrative studies. Regrettably, the “direct scholarly response” that at least one critic predicted after the publication of *Neo-slave Narratives* has yet to arrive. Indeed, recent scholarship produced since the text’s arrival in 1999 has tended to reaffirm the status quo established

by Bernard Bell and the contributors to *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Moreover, little debate or even dialogue is being generated among scholars working on this genre. The cancellation of a panel on the neo-slave narrative at the 2003 American Literature Association conference also seems symptomatic of the current state of the field: Plenty of scholars are writing on the subject, but we are either unwilling or unable to come together to discuss the genre itself.

The lack of critical debate on the genre is also apparent in the thirteen book length studies published between 1999 and 2003 that analyze neo-slave narratives (regardless of nomenclature).¹⁷ Only five of these recent studies even mention Rushdy's contributions to the field. This number includes *Remembering Generations* (2001), Rushdy's second study on the subject, which only briefly alludes to his own *Oxford Companion* entry in a footnote and does not address other studies of neo-slave narratives.¹⁸ Three studies, Timothy J. Cox's *Postmodern Tales of Slavery* (2001), Jenny Sharpe's *Ghost of Slavery: A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (2003) and a doctoral dissertation by A. T. Spaulding, "Re-Forming the Past: Aesthetics, Politics, and the African American Postmodern Slave Narrative" (1999), rely on Rushdy's entry to define the genre. The fifth study, Angelyn Mitchell's *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002) simply lists Rushdy's study alongside other recent publications in order to distinguish her approach from a handful of studies

¹⁷ These studies will be addressed in the pages that follow. For a list, see fn 1 on this chapter's opening page. The figure does not include Rushdy's *Neo-slave Narratives* already discussed above.

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that while *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction* (2001) focuses on three neo-slave narratives, once again Rushdy does not undertake a comprehensive analysis of the genre. Indeed, neither the term nor the concept of genre (aside from the brief footnote) is addressed at all in this study. Rather, Rushdy focuses specifically on three "palimpsest narratives" (a category of neo-slave narrative he defines in his *Oxford Companion* entry) that reveal the way in which slavery continues to haunt not only contemporary life, but also – and particularly – the African American family (5).

published as her own book went to press. Even the above books do not fully engage Rushdy's work; and with the exception of Mitchell, they do not address other scholarship on the subject, particularly with regards to how the genre should be defined and understood.

In fact, the majority of these recent studies on the neo-slave narrative do not move beyond the status quo established in the scholarship of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, as Angelyn Mitchell notes in her book, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (2002), they "stay within the same generic ground of Bell's *neoslave narrative*" (151). The majority of the studies published since 1999 focus on female-authored novels, for the most part reading them within the context of black feminist theory. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu's *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative* (1999) and Venetria K. Patton's *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction* (2000) explore representations of enslaved women. Both studies consider issues of mothering and motherhood in female-authored antebellum slave narratives, as well as in postbellum novels and contemporary neo-slave narratives written by African American women. Stefanie Sievers also looks specifically at African American women writers' return to slavery in her book *Liberating Narratives: The Authorization of Black Female Voices in African American Women Writers' Novels of Slavery* (1999). She interprets more broadly the ways in which contemporary novelists rewrite concepts of femininity and womanhood in order to achieve a sense of liberation from the past. Like Rushdy, all of these authors emphasize the way these novels function for the contemporary reader.

Similarly, Angelyn Mitchell wishes to “engender a liberatory effect on the reader”

(6). Her text *The Freedom to Remember* focuses on African- American women writers’ efforts to shift away from a focus on victimization and toward a focus on freedom and agency. More than any other scholar of contemporary work by African-American women novelists, Mitchell stresses the importance of function. She actively distinguishes her approach from Bell, Rushdy, and others just mentioned (3).¹⁹ One of the only scholars to directly engage previous studies on neo-slave narratives, Mitchell asserts that her study is unique in the way that it shifts the focus from bondage to freedom. As she explains,

While Bell’s term suggests that contemporary writers are inventing fictional slave narratives that revisit the historical period of slavery in much the same spirit as historical novels describe past lives, there is a more appropriate term for the cultural productions that interest me *liberatory narratives*. I define the liberatory narrative as a contemporary novel that engages the historical period of chattel slavery in order to provide new models of liberation by problematizing the concept of freedom (4-5).

Mitchell’s new terminology highlights the importance of function to this contemporary form. According to her definition, liberatory narratives reveal “the unspeakable – indeed, the unacknowledged – residuals of slavery in the context of Black womanhood as it illuminates the enduring effects of our racist and sexist American history in today’s society” (xii). While intertextuality surely does inform these newer narratives, Mitchell argues that it is their specific twentieth-century concerns that make them “liberatory” (4).

¹⁹ See Mitchell n2 (151-52).

Dubbing “liberatory narratives” a “new genre” distinct from neo-slave narratives, Mitchell does set herself apart while she charts a new direction for the field (xii); yet, even her astute analysis does not move beyond Rushdy’s in forging new ground for the genre. Instead, Mitchell’s analysis of “liberatory narratives” merely places new constraints on the genre. First, Mitchell limits her attention to novels by African-American women. While she mentions in a footnote that “[s]everal black women writers of the diaspora have also engaged slavery,” she volunteers no explanation for why she fails to include texts by non-American writers in this sub-genre. Similarly, Mitchell acknowledges novels by African-American men but declares that they do not fit into her paradigm; her only explanation is that she does “not find the narratives by Black men to be liberatory in the way [she has] defined the genre” (5). Moreover, the novels she dubs “liberatory” must fit a strict criteria of narrative form. They are all set in nineteenth-century America and chronicle the first-person account of a formerly enslaved woman’s experiences of freedom (4). In short, like the other recent work that Mitchell criticizes, her own study does not move beyond the new “generic ground” established by Rushdy; rather, it maintains the status quo established by the foundational studies.

New Directions

Fortunately, some recent scholarship does suggest important new directions for work in the area of literature of slavery. Taken together, this scholarship provides a model for a more inclusive approach to the study of neo-slave narratives. The first group of studies takes a comparative approach to contemporary novels of slavery. In *Postslavery Literatures in the Americas* (2000), George B. Handley uses the term “postslavery novels” “to emphasize the ideological thrust of those works of literature

that, although written after the demise of slavery, return to slavery's past in a genealogical exploration of its deep, historical roots in order to understand its relationship to the present" (3). Citing "family history" as the "thematic and structural *sine qua non* of postslavery narrative," Handley sketches a "postnational" study of slavery by incorporating texts from across the Americas (3). The majority of his study focuses on a comparative analysis of Cuban and U.S. authored texts published between 1880 and 1962. The final chapter of his book compares more recent work by three women writers, Jean Rhys, Rosario Ferré, and Toni Morrison. Handley astutely argues that by analyzing postslavery writing in a comparative context, this literature "can serve as a check against claims to unique or exceptional national status" and provide a broader perspective on the lived experience of race and racism (189).

Similarly, in *Postmodern Tales of Slavery* (2001), Timothy Cox approaches "new slavery novels" from a transnational perspective. Emphasizing this literature's postmodern elements, Cox poses the over-arching questions "of whether, and how, certain texts from the Americas over the past several decades constitute a contemporary memory of the enslaved people of African descent" (xvii). Cox adopts a thematic approach to the subject, focusing on postmodern irony, the Middle Passage, and the trope of running away as part of an effort to tease out the particular literary features of the contemporary genre. While Handley and Cox concentrate their analysis on work by writers of color, both include work written by others as well. As Cox writes,

Because slavery was a shared, multicultural experience, the project of remembrance and addressing ambivalence in identities of all Americans along the color spectrum must be no less inclusive if it is to surmount racist

predicates. . . . Until the dominant groups understand and work through whatever notions of exclusivity they reserve for themselves, and come to terms with how slavery and its aftermaths have functioned for centuries in ways that narrow their humanity as well as that of people of color, the reality of salubrious cultural encounter between people of African descent in their various American contexts will not be achieved (4).

The third comparative study by Arlene R. Keizer also exhibits an interest in a more expansive approach. In the conclusion to *Black Subjects* (2004), Keizer points not only to the contributions of white writers, but also to the work a variety of poets, dramatists, and visual artists whose work “reaches far beyond the boundaries of this study” (167). Keizer leaves the task of investigating this line of study to subsequent work on the genre. The majority of *Black Subjects* is devoted to studying the work of contemporary African American and Afro-Caribbean writers. Keizer analyzes how work by these authors “theorize about the nature and the formation of black subjects, under the slave system and in the present, by utilizing slave characters and the condition of slavery as focal points” (1). The book is organized around a few select theories on subject formation including psychoanalysis, Althusserian interpellation, performance theory, and postmodernism (2). Like the comparative studies just mentioned above, *Black Subjects* adds compelling new ways to approach and (re)define the genre.

While not interested in genre, nor in the field of neo-slave narratives *per se*, a second group of studies also helps to establish a more expansive frame in which to analyze the genre. These studies focus on novels and other cultural forms that, in Kimberly Rae Connor’s words, “use slavery as a symbolic vehicle by which to discuss

broader issues of identity and liberation” (*Imagining Grace* 43). The first two books, Caroline Rody’s *The Daughter’s Return: African-American and Caribbean Women’s Fiction of History* (2001), and Sharpe’s *Ghosts of Slavery* (2003), extend the terrain of the genre to include work by diasporic Caribbean writers. Like her recent predecessors, Rody focuses her attention on women’s writing. Concentrating on the significance of mother-daughter relations within this body of fiction, Rody argues that these relationships are tropes for the representation of a female-centered history (7). Like the comparative work noted above, Rody’s scholarship departs from a strictly U.S.-centered conceptualization of the genre, directing our attention to writers from outside the U.S. as well as to women writers not generally included in the mainstream’s definition of “black literature.”²⁰ Rody also draws on film and poetry in her discussion of the return to the subject of slavery, suggesting the need to extend the formal terrain of the genre. Moreover, like Handley, Rody places work by white writer Jean Rhys into the canon of the “slavery novel,” ignoring racial parameters established by previous scholarship on the genre (23). This move underscores Rody’s adherence to the methodology also espoused by Cox and Handley, which reads cultural production within “a heritage of interracial contact and hybridization” (11). Rody’s inclusive approach is also clear in her attention to the theme of crosscultural relationships between women (12). Rody contends that “inter-ethnic encounter plots” reflect contemporary authors’ interest in inscribing an “aesthetic of hybridity” that significantly revises entrenched notions of cultural, ethnic, racial, or national purity (13). This trend, she suggests, represents an outward-looking ethos that privileges connections across divisions and difference within this fiction.

²⁰ See Carole Boyce Davies, “Black Women Writing Worlds” on the pitfalls of U.S.-centered scholarship and a U.S.-centered literary marketplace.

Like Rody, Jenny Sharpe extends the parameters of the genre in her book *Ghosts of Slavery* by focusing on recent work by British and Caribbean writers. Sharpe includes fiction by both women and men of the diaspora whose work has received very little scholarly attention. Her list includes Fred D'Aguiar, David Dabydeen, Beryl Gilroy, Caryl Phillips, and Michelle Cliff.²¹ Only the last two have been the subject of any sustained study. Sharpe places contemporary neo-slave narratives along side other “unconventional” eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sources (proslavery literature, court documents, (ex)slave songs, storytelling, and travel writing) in order to reconstruct a more complex picture of the everyday lives of female slaves (xxvi). Sharpe’s analyses of contemporary neo-slave narratives help her develop a more nuanced theory of resistance and agency, particularly for enslaved women, by calling attention to “the negotiated practices” that existed under slavery (87, xvi). Sharpe does not focus her analysis on the genre of the neo-slave narrative; instead, she relies on this contemporary form to explore the ways in which the lost and forgotten history of slavery still “haunts” contemporary society (xi-xii). By drawing from a wider diasporic group of authors, Sharpe reinvigorates our understanding of slavery and resistance; and like Rody, Sharpe suggests new ways to conceptualize the genre.

Kimberly Rae Connor, although not strictly focused on the genre of the contemporary neo-slave narrative, follows in the footsteps of the previously mentioned scholars. Connor’s scholarship pushes us to view the genre more inclusively in two specific ways. First, in *Imagining Grace: Liberating Theologies in the Slave Narrative Tradition* (2000) Connor reminds us that the complex influence of slave narratives

²¹ There are a handful of articles on the ways writers from the Caribbean, Britain, and Canada are revisiting slavery. These are also part of the recent trend toward extending the boundaries of the genre. See, e.g.,

extends beyond written texts to other forms of cultural production including theater, film, dance, visual arts, and music. While in the book's introduction Connor lists a panoply of artistic production that highlights the "astonishing breadth" of the slave narrative tradition (10-11), the focus of Connor's study is on the work of a handful of contemporary artists, including performer Anna Deveare Smith, writer Earnest Gaines, visual artist Glenn Ligon, and jazz musician Charles Haden. Connor interprets the significance of their work within the slave narrative tradition by emphasizing the link between the power of the imagination and the possibility for social change (5). Through her formulation of what she calls a "secular liberation theology" Connor demonstrates how contemporary art forms express a theological perspective on freedom and function and serve as tools of liberation for both the oppressed and those outside of the experience of oppression (51).

Connor's conception of art as potentially transformative leads to the second way *Imagining Grace* actively revises our understanding of the genre of the neo-slave narrative. Recalling that this narrative tradition has been devoted to exposing slavery and racism to its readers/audience, thereby raising the public's awareness of social problems while advancing the cause of social justice, Connor emphasizes the importance of function within this complex and ever-evolving genre (2, 5). The goal of the slave narrative tradition, she maintains, has been to push people to make an "imaginative leap" so that "differences can be bridged – not obliterated but crossed over – to produce a renewal of identification with another and a reenvisioning of oneself" (16). This process of crossing over does not simply position the role of non-black readers as audience within the slave narrative tradition, it also includes them as producers. Because they are

Frias, "Building Bridges Back to the Past," McCallum and Olbey, "Written in the Scars."

members of the dominant culture who must also participate in the liberatory process, Connor argues that the presence of white artists is a crucial part of the contemporary manifestation of the slave narrative tradition.²²

Thus, *Imagining Grace* establishes a more inclusive context for the liberation aesthetic that is essential to the slave narrative tradition. In her work Connor advances the concept that, as reviewer Christopher C. Freeburg writes, “people without noticeable slave ancestry can also be deeply committed to the imaginative transformation found in slave narratives and to reenvisioning social change through aesthetics” (639). This effort to include non-black writers and artists is also central to her recent article, “More Heat than Light: The Legacy of John Brown as Portrayed in *Cloudsplitter*” in which Connor reads Russell Banks’ novel on Brown as a “white slave narrative” (24). Emphasizing Banks’ construction of a white voice that “amplif[ies] concerns similar to those explored in slave narratives,” Connor’s analysis places this novel within an extended slave narrative tradition (25).

Interest in the work of non-black artists also informs Ashraf Rushdy’s most recent book on neo-slave narratives, *Remembering Generations*. In the book’s conclusion, Rushdy addresses what he considers a new trend in the literature of slavery written during the last two decades. This trend centers around writers of European descent who write, as he puts it, “with a sensitivity and awareness that [has been] applauded by scholars and critics of African descent” (133).²³ Rushdy explores what he regards as the most

²² In a personal correspondence Connor explains that “if performed to its functional capacity, the slave narrative tradition works towards its own extinction and that can only happen if it opens the liberation impulse to include those in the dominant culture who, whether we admit it or not, need to participate for liberation to take effect” (Connor, “Re: The Slave Narrative Tradition” par. 2).

²³ In the conclusion to her doctoral dissertation, “Slaves of Fiction: Coming to Terms with the American Holocaust through Representations of Slavery in Post-Civil Rights Fiction and Film” (2001), Camilla E. Dacey-Groth poses an interesting rhetorical question: “where are the ‘slave holder narratives?’” While

surprising aspect of this new turn of events, “cultural workers” who “trace their family history not to the slaves but to the slaveholders from whom they are descended . . . in order to assume some kind of responsibility for the history from which their families profited” (133). This move marks a departure from Rushdy’s black-only reading of neo-slave narratives. The bulk of *Remembering Generations* does focus on the ways African-American novels of the 1970s make connections between the history and legacy of slavery and the social and political problems existing in the moment of their production. However, by concluding with a discussion of Macky Alston’s 1997 documentary “Family Name” and Edward Ball’s 1998 book *Slaves in the Family*, Rushdy acknowledges that white authors and artists have also made valuable contributions to the contemporary discourse on slavery. Rushdy contends that their work provides a new perspective on the “culture of secrecy” and the anxiety surrounding the history of slavery (155-56). Indeed, his analysis of Ball in particular suggests that sympathetic non-black writers and artists add another dimension to the political project undertaken by the neo-slave narrative. Like the black-authored novels he examines in the opening chapters, white-authored work strives to “reach some kind of resolution about the possibilities for the future in light of [America’s slaveholding] past” (156). While the focus and emphasis of *Remembering Generations* is quite different from *Imagining Grace*, Rushdy’s discussion of white-authored forms resonates with the argument made by Connor and the other comparative

Rushdy’s *Remembering Generations* establishes the fact that Dacey-Groth overlooked a new development in literature of slavery, her dissertation does raise a provocative point regarding the place of what she provisionally dubs “neo-slaveholder narratives” within the canon. Dacey-Groth believes that like the recent work by non-Jewish Germans on the Holocaust, novels of slavery by white writers might encourage non-black Americans to “deal with the legacy of slavery” and provide a means by which to bridge the racial divide (172-73).

studies noted above about the importance of non-black artists in the contemporary manifestation of the slave narrative tradition.

Rethinking "Genre"

I concur with the course that the above studies suggest for future scholarly consideration of the genre and offer some refinements of my own. By bringing these disparate conversations into play and building upon their arguments, I aim to enact a shift in how contemporary neo-slave narratives are defined, studied, and understood. My study is a provisional step toward a more inclusive approach to the genre that responds to the range and diversity of contemporary cultural production on slavery. Like my immediate predecessors, I also read the contemporary neo-slave narrative as a much more open, dynamic genre than even Rushdy's *Oxford Companion* entry proposes. While I briefly address form, I concentrate my effort on revising the conceptions of authority and function. I believe, like Rushdy, that function (not form) defines the genre, that certain texts stand in relation to each other because of their overlapping concerns regarding the history of slavery and the possibility of social transformation. Using this analytic framework, I hope to provide a more nuanced understanding of the cultural work that these texts perform.

To accomplish this more inclusive approach to the neo-slave narrative, we must first let go of a limited conception of form in order to conceive of a more flexible notion of the genre itself. Because authors make use of diverse literary forms to return to the subject of slavery, it seems overly restrictive to consider only novels consciously patterned on the classic narratives. Drama, short fiction, and poetry, as well as scientific and experimental fiction, are all part of this expansive literary genre. Just as literary

forms have multiplied to accommodate narratives of slavery, so too have the strategies writers and artists employ to establish a “signifying relationship of intertextuality” (in Gates’s words) to antebellum narratives (*The Slave’s Narrative* xiii). While some fiction adopts the classic structure of nineteenth-century narratives, most contemporary cultural productions establish more subtle connections to the slave narrative tradition. The variety in approach is easily apparent in Rushdy’s lists and subdivisions in his *Oxford Companion* entry. By the same token, the range of this fiction is also what makes the task of categorizing neo-slave narratives so challenging. Like Kim Connor, I believe that we need to reassess the literary genre of the neo-slave narrative within the context of the larger slave narrative tradition. We will want to pay more attention to other cultural forms – including music, film, dance, and the visual arts – that, to paraphrase Rushdy, depict the experience or the effects of racial slavery as having lasting cultural meaning and social consequences (“Neo-Slave Narrative” 533).

Moreover, it is time to reexamine assumptions about authority and authorship of neo-slave narratives. A quick look at the recent wave of literary awards (or nominations) makes clear that the genre exceeds the bounds of a particular race, nationality, or gender. As I discuss in this study’s introduction, a remarkable collection of contemporary writers, black and white, American and non-American, have recently received accolades for their novels of slavery.²⁴ Thus, the assumption that neo-slave narratives are strictly “black” texts that make up a distinctive African-American genre is obsolete.²⁵

²⁴ The most recent award-winning fiction includes Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*, Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World*, and Valerie Martin’s *Property* (see introduction for a more detailed discussion and a more extensive list of prize-winning novels).

²⁵ While I cite studies above that stand as exceptions to the generally held assumption that the neo-slave narrative is a strictly “black” literary genre, most studies do not entertain the thought of including work by non-black writers. Aside from William Styron’s *Confessions of Nat Turner*, scholars have overlooked fiction by white authors (for example, British writer Barry Unsworth’s Booker Prize winning novel, *Sacred*

I would argue, along with others, that work by a wide range of “black,” white, and biracial authors from the Caribbean, Canada, Great Britain, and the U.S. has already called into question this exclusive identification. The variety of authorship in today’s literary marketplace supports writer Fred D’Aguiar’s conviction that slavery and the “black experience” should not be considered “the sole preserve of black artists” (as cited in Frias, “Building Bridges” 425).²⁶ Moreover, the “crisscrossing routes” of these writers exemplify a process of intercultural exchange that contradicts notions of cultural purity underlying the majority of the scholarship on the genre (Gilroy 6). American-born writers have studied in London; Caribbean-born writers have grown up in the U.K., eventually to teach in the U.S., for example.²⁷ Not only do writers of different ethnicities and nationalities write neo-slave narratives, but also, they read each other’s work (along with antebellum narratives) as they engage in the process of reimagining the history of slavery. British-Caribbean writer Fred D’Aguiar, for example, answers the question “why revisit slavery” by citing a line from Gaines’ *Miss Jane Pitman* (Frias, “Building Bridges” 419). Similarly, Jamaican-American writer Michelle Cliff – like a number of other writers from across the globe – cites Toni Morrison as a major influence (Sharpe xii).

Rody’s research alone reinforces the significance of this intercultural aesthetic influence. She points to the publishing industry’s (not unproblematic) practice of using

Hunger, and American writer Susan Straight’s *I’ve Been in Sorrow’s Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots*). Moreover, most studies also assume the genre to be strictly “American.” However, recent scholarship has begun to breakdown this presumption. The work of Cox, Handley, Keizer, Rody, and Sharpe, along with a handful of individual articles, establishes the urgent need to reconsider the importance of national boundaries to our study of the genre (see, e.g., Frias, “Building Bridges Back to the Past,” and McCallum and Olbey).

²⁶ See also Cox 17, Handley ch. 5, and Rody’s conclusion to *Daughter’s* on this point.

²⁷ Here I am specifically thinking of David Bradley who earned an MA from the University of London, and Caryl Phillips who emigrated to the UK from the West Indies when he was a boy, attended Oxford University, and now teaches at NYU. Similarly, Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica, was educated in Britain and the US, and has been a long-time US resident.

blurbs by a heterogeneous collection of “ethnic” women writers to market the work of other “multiethnic” women writers. We must therefore keep in mind that, as Rody observes, “any ‘ethnic’ return to the past is conceived, written, published and received within surprisingly new currents of multiethnic influence and exchange” (*Daughter’s* 14). Thus, while nationality and race are important categories of analysis for scholarship on neo-slave narratives, they should not be used as exclusive criteria for delimiting the genre.

To support a broader conception of authority as it applies to the neo-slave narrative, I situate the genre within a larger context. That context extends beyond the strictly U.S.-centered historicism and theory of previous critics as they have mapped the contours of the genre.²⁸ Following the work of Paul Gilroy I (re)locate neo-slave narratives within the “expressive counterculture” of the black Atlantic, the “intercultural and transnational formation” set into motion (but not solely defined by) the modern slave trade (*Black Atlantic* 3, 38).²⁹ Like their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary neo-slave narratives reflect the hybridity and mobility of the black Atlantic world. While the mixed-race, multi-national origins and history of the antebellum slave narrative have been a matter of scholarly record and inquiry for decades, the hybrid roots/“routes” of the neo-slave narrative have largely been overlooked.³⁰ Shifting the

²⁸ See, e.g., Rushdy, Beaulieu, Christian, and Ensslen. There are exceptions to this approach. In addition to the books discussed above, two notable articles, one by Sally Keenan and the other by Mary Jane Suero Elliott, eschew this US-centered focus, and rely instead on postcolonial theory and an international framework of analysis.

²⁹ Gail Low (among a handful of other scholars) uses Gilroy’s work to analyze specific novels of slavery, namely Caryl Phillips’s *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*.

³⁰ As Dwight McBride argues in his book *Impossible Witnesses*, “the national boundaries so often adhered to in studies of [abolitionist] literature are actually quite permeable despite the nationalisms that seem to characterize the period. That is, the abolitionists constituted a new kind of transatlantic identity, drawing what they needed from a variety of sources from around the world” (25). On the hybrid history of the literature of slavery see Andrews, *To Tell* and “Inter(racial)textuality,” and Sekora, “Black Message/White

terrain of the genre from U.S. turf to the Atlantic's "web of diaspora identities and concerns" (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 218) forces scholars to consider the complexity of authorship and influence within this large body of work.³¹

This shift to a black Atlantic context also complicates what Rushdy calls the "social logic" of the literary form of the neo-slave narrative (*Neo-slave* 3).³² Influenced by the origins and form of the original slave narrative as well as by the more recent social conditions in which they emerge(d), neo-slave narratives are both "history-laden" and "present-minded" (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 228).³³ Drawing upon and revising a genre "initially defined by its capacity to intervene in actual material struggles for social transformation," fictions of slavery politicize the act of narration (McCallum and Olbey 166).³⁴ Neo-slave narratives interrupt and challenge mainstream assumptions about slavery. They structure the "return to slavery as both the historical cause of and meaningful analogy for the inequities and injustices of their own time" (Rushdy, *Remembering* 6).

Envelope." On the "hybrid" roots of literature of slavery and American literature more generally see Fishkin, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,'" and Robbins, "Gendering the History of the Antislavery Narrative." See also Charles Heglar's book on the pitfalls of a narrow conception of genre within studies of early slave narratives.

³¹ My use of "diaspora" follows Brent Hayes Edwards who, building on Earl Lewis's conception of a history of "overlapping diasporas," argues for an "anti-abstractionist" reading of the term. This perspective privileges the significance of "difference not only internally (the ways transnational black groupings are fractured by nation, class, gender, sexuality, and language) but also externally . . . [within] a complex past of forced migrations and racialization" (*The Practice of Diaspora* 12-13).

³² Rushdy grounds the social logic of neo-slave narrative in "its origins in the social, intellectual, and racial formations of the sixties, its cultural politics as these texts intervene in debates over the significance of race, and its literary politics as these texts make statements on engagements between texts and between mainstream and minority traditions" (*Neo-slave Narratives* 3). While Rushdy does briefly link the political and cultural events in the U.S. to "world historical political movements" of the sixties, his analytical framework is strictly based on U.S. history (7).

³³ See Rushdy's opening chapter of *Neo-slave Narratives* for a more extended discussion of this point. See also Cox and Handley.

³⁴ On the postmodern impulses of the genre see also Cox, Mitchell (12), and Spaulding. Nancy Peterson's study of women writers' historical "counternarratives" is also relevant to this point.

Even though “African-American” texts make up the bulk of fiction on slavery, work in this genre is produced within and is a refraction of a history (and world) of “overlapping diasporas” (Edwards 12). Accordingly, we need to reconsider the U.S.-centered context from which the social logic of the genre has been theorized. While modern/post-modern fictions of slavery might share similar concerns over issues of representation, cultural appropriation, and social and individual identity (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 228), approaches to and creative representations of these topics are affected and differentiated by what Brent Hayes Edwards refers to as the internal (divisions of nationality, class, gender, sexuality, and language within “transnational black groupings”) and external (a “complex past of forced migrations and racialization”) dimensions of diaspora (12-13). Thus, as Gilroy argues, neo-slave narratives “should not be exclusively assimilated to the project of building an ethnically particular or nationalist cultural canon, because the logic of the great political movement in which these texts stand” (*Black Atlantic* 218).

Gilroy’s conception of black Atlantic political culture provides a useful analytical framework for (re)assessing the social logic and broader political projects of the neo-slave narrative. A black Atlantic paradigm emphasizes rather than overlooks the hybrid roots/routes of the genre (18). A modern political and cultural formation marked by the “desire to transcend both the structures of ethnicity and national particularity” (19), the black Atlantic provides a foundation from which to “reexamine the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory” (16). This perspective privileges fusion and movement (“even temporary experiences of exile, relocation, and displacement”) in order to emphasize the dynamic, cross-cultural nature of black political

ideologies, as well as the “restless, recombinant,” and relentlessly “affirmative” dimensions of black Atlantic political culture (18, 31). Within a black Atlantic framework we can be attentive to, but not limited by, the particulars of race and place.

To reassess the political projects undertaken by the neo-slave narrative, I rely on a methodology conceived out of the dialectic that structures black Atlantic cultural production. Like other aspects of this expressive counterculture, neo-slave narratives pose a vision of “the world as it is against the world as the racially subordinated would like it to be” (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 36). The tensions between these two views delineate the functional intentions and political aspirations of the neo-slave narrative. Through the first impulse, neo-slave narratives expose the world as it is/has been and engage in what Gilroy calls the “politics of fulfillment.” This perspective “demands that bourgeois civil society live up to the promises of its own rhetoric” and “creates a medium in which demands for goals like non-racialised justice . . . can be expressed” (37). The oppositional view of the politics of fulfillment recognizes that the goals of social justice have not been met, that liberation is not yet at hand. As historian Robin D. G. Kelley succinctly puts it in his most recent book, *Freedom Dreams*, “we are not yet completely free” (xi). To convey this point, neo-slave narratives mobilize the discourse of slavery in order to construct a “redemptive critique of the present” (Gilroy, *Black Atlantic* 71).³⁵ Neo-slave narratives represent a form of historiographic metafiction that, as Lawrence Hogue observes, critically revisits “history” as a subjective construct and “problematizes the

³⁵While this is a topic for another study, it is important to note that the genre of the neo-slave narrative has much in common with the projects of critical race theory and postcolonial studies. Most obviously, all three consider the fact that “the dismantling of colonial governments and officially segregated social institutions has not dismantled the racialization of colonial and segregated societies” (Schur 457). See also Peggy Pascoe’s article “Miscegenation Law” where she argues that the “color blindness” of (what she terms) “modernist racial ideology” is not the “nonideological end of racism,” but rather another conception of race that “can be turned to the service of oppression” (467).

past's values, contents, conventions, and aesthetic forms" (442). Like other works of postcolonial fiction, contemporary neo-slave narratives revisit and revise the "text" of slavery. They do so in the hope of finding ways "of leaving it behind, of coping with its terrors, and creating conditions ripe for that 'after' state" (J. White 2).

Fictions of slavery are indeed haunted as much by the past as by the hope for a liberated future.³⁶ Re-envisioning a transformed world from the perspective of marginalized communities, contemporary fictions of slavery also enact a "politics of transfiguration." Gilroy explains the ways in which this consciousness "emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors" (*Black Atlantic* 37, 39). This orientation within some fictions of slavery speaks to the genre's utopian aspirations. Thus, neo-slave narratives do not simply identify past and lingering inequities and oppressions. They also imagine ways to subvert such effects and, to paraphrase Franz Fanon, to "recast" a new reality (White 3).³⁷

I propose that within the context of a black Atlantic framework the recurring theme of black-white coupling in neo-slave narratives is a significant marker of intentionality.³⁸ The interest in interracial sex is evident in most contemporary fictions of slavery.³⁹ Most commonly understood as romantic, marital, or sexual unions (forced,

³⁶ Both Rushdy (*Remembering Generations*) and Sharpe (*Ghosts of Slavery*) structure their studies of this fiction around this point.

³⁷ See Carby, "On the Threshold" for an interesting study on turn-of-the-century black feminists' understanding of the links between imperialism and internal colonialism.

³⁸ Note that my use of racial terms like "black," "white," and "interracial" ("intra-racial") assumes that race is socially constructed, a "cultural fiction" (Lemire 4). Yet my focus on interracial sex and intimacies also emphasizes that "race" (and its myriad categories) has a real effect and is, as George Lipsitz argues, "a social fact" with obvious social consequences (qtd. in Lemire 177).

³⁹ Critic Klaus Ensslen raised the question of why many authors seem to rely on "male-female partnerships (sometimes transcending the racial barrier)" in recent fictionalizations of slavery in his 1993 article, "The Renaissance of the Slave Narrative" (623). And while Rody does raise this point briefly in relation to her

coerced, consensual, or something in between) that cross the color line, the wide variations on this theme beg for a more flexible and historically informed conception of sexuality and desire. Following the work of Siobhan Somerville and Eve Sedgwick, I use “sexuality” to denote “a historically and culturally contingent category of identity” in this study (Somerville 6). Informed by Sedgwick’s work and other queer studies, Somerville cogently explains how “‘sexuality’ means much more than sexual practice per se”:

“One’s sexual identity, while at times linked to one’s sexual activities, more often describes a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the culture’s mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one’s response to that interpellation” (6).⁴⁰ Similarly, following Sedgwick’s pioneering work in *Between Men*, my use of “desire” interprets the term more broadly as an “affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, that shapes an important relationship” (2). Yet like Sedgwick’s study, my own work conveys the fact that desire cannot be divorced from sexuality in this configuration.

I draw on these and other studies of sexuality to analyze the recurring theme of interracial coupling in the genre. Like the cross-ethnic female alliances that Caroline Rody observes in *The Daughter’s Return*, black-white coupling reveals a preoccupation with interethnic history and cross-cultural connections within contemporary neo-slave

focus on cross-cultural female alliances, Ensslen’s question remains largely unexplored (*Daughter’s* 87). Although there is very little discussion of interracial sex/unions in the scholarship on the genre, at least three articles do focus on black women’s sexuality in neo-slave narratives (Griffin, “Textual Healing,” Christian, “‘Somebody Forgot to Tell Somebody Something,’” and Rushdy, “‘Relate Sexual to Historical’”).

⁴⁰ Particularly relevant here is Sedgwick’s argument about the need to deconstruct and move beyond binary thinking about sexuality/sexual choice. As she writes, “sexuality extends along so many dimensions that aren’t well described in terms of the gender of object-choice at all” (*Epistemology* 35).

narratives (12-13). Indeed, its presence in the majority of U.S.-authored novels challenges the boundaries that have heretofore circumscribed the genre. The very preoccupation with interracial sex and intimacy speaks to the necessity of situating our analysis of the genre within a larger context. The texts themselves emphasize the racial and cultural hybridity that marks the black Atlantic world. This more thematic approach to the neo-slave narrative cuts across the divisions (particularly of nationality, gender, ethnicity, and race) that previous scholars have erected as they have outlined the parameters of the genre. The “outward looking character” of a thematic orientation opens up rather than forecloses new possibilities for reading these texts (Sollors 25-6). It invites the exploration and mining other texts and cultural forms while also permitting a range of representations and interpretations of relationships that cross the color line.

In contemporary neo-slave narratives, black-white coupling rises to the level of a literary trope inasmuch as it serves as the measure of a complex sense of transracial intimacy that reflects the double-edged critique of black Atlantic political culture. On the one hand, this trope exposes a hidden and silenced history in order to construct a more comprehensive vision of both the past and present. On the other hand, representations of black-white coupling posit utopian possibilities for the world (as it could be) by creating a space for innovative and transformative acts of social reinvention.⁴¹

This bilateral approach seems particularly necessary for authors and texts that critically assess racial thinking and experience in the U.S. As writer John Edgar Wideman suggests, the U.S.’s refusal to recognize its “Creole identity” and multi-

⁴¹ Randall Kennedy argues, in fact, that “those persons most welcoming of interracial marriage (and other intimate interracial associations) are also those who have most determinedly embraced racial justice, a healthy respect for individualistic pluralism, and a belief in the essential oneness of humanity” (“Interracial Intimacy” 109).

layered, indeterminate culture leaves it clinging to “either/or, reductive categories of race” (*My Soul* ii). Intent on exposing and exploring the complex history of interracial intimacy, neo-slave narratives serve as counterparts to the work of historians like Gary B. Nash who advocates “[u]ncovering the shrouded past of mestizo America” as part of strategy to create “commonality out of diversity” (“Hidden History” 26). As Nash’s scholarship makes clear, “there is nothing new about crossing racial boundaries; what is new is the frequency of border crossings and boundary hoppings and the refusal to bow to the thorn-filled American concept, perhaps unknown outside the United States, that each person has a race but only one” (25-6).

Concerned with exposing America’s “hidden mestizo history,” the theme of black-white coupling is central to the revisionist strategy that is at the heart of the politics of fulfillment in the neo-slave narrative. Authors of neo-slave narratives rely on black-white coupling to explore the very concepts and realities of “race” as they apply to the past and the present. In fact, attention the history of interracial sex allows authors to “chart the shifting production and construction of racial categories in American history, indeed of the concept of ‘race’ itself” (Hodes, “Introduction” 1). For, as Martha Hodes points out in her introduction *Sex, Love, Race*, “it is partly as a result of the taboos against boundary crossing that [racial] categories are invented” (1). Regarded by some historians as the “ultimate form of racial contact,” representations of interracial sex brings bodies, lives, and cultures together across racial lines, allowing authors to test conceptions of race and explore (or subvert) the boundaries of difference (Kinney 27).⁴² Indeed, the

⁴² See also Robert Young, *Colonial Desire* and Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*.

recurrence of the trope of (un)conventional coupling highlights “the inextricability of constructions of race and sexuality” (Somerville 176).

Most obviously, representations of interracial unions serve as correctives to the (mis)representations of a mainstream historiographic tradition that has excluded or obscured the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities. In the nineteenth-century, the rape and sexual abuse of black women by white men was one of slavery’s most taboo topics, what anti-slavery activist Lydia Maria Child dubbed “the forbidden subject of slavery.”⁴³ Indeed, as Werner Sollors’s book *Neither White Nor Black Yet Both* (1997) indicates, the subject of “miscegenation” more generally has “run against various taboos” in public discourse and cultural production throughout history (5).⁴⁴ Despite restrictions and opposition, however, Sollors’ research reveals that “more literary works about ‘forbidden couples’ and their descendants have been written, published, read, and debated that is usually assumed” (Sollors 8). Yet, as Sollors points out, the subject of interracial sex has been marginalized in literary studies.

Similarly, historians have noted the lack of attention to this theme in historical scholarship. Gary Nash, for example, has written that cross-racial and cross-cultural marriage and liaisons “represent a powerful theme in American history that has been largely hidden” (16). Nash points out that despite the fact that “people of many kinds, in every era and in every region of this country, have found loopholes in the ruling system of racial division and classification,” historical scholarship has largely ignored this multiracial

⁴³ Lydia Maria Child was the first person to publicly address the sexual coercion of female slaves by white masters, what she called “the forbidden subject of slavery,” in her 1833 *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (Yellin xxxiii, 259n54). See also Sharon Block’s article and Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* on the “discourse of seduction” that provided a “coverstory” for this abuse (81).

⁴⁴ Sollors quickly sketches a history of censorship of interracial relationships in literature and film, beginning in 1475 and ending with a 1991 decree by the estate of Margaret Mitchell that instructed

past. Nash reads “[t]he silence in our history books on the topic of multiraciality” as an indication of “the antimiscegenist attitudes supported by the law” (16).

This silence is particularly clear in what Nell Irvin Painter describes as the “lacunae” in historians’ work on slavery (127). In her 1991 article ““Southern Dishonor,”” Catherine Clinton reinforces Painter’s assessment. “Despite the explosion of work” on slavery since the 1960s, Clinton remarks, “both the sexual dynamics of slavery and the racial dynamic of sexuality remain relatively unexplored” (53). Over the past decade, however, a number of historians including Sharon Block, Saidiya Hartman, Helene Lecaudey, and Deborah Gray White, have been probing the “less attractive and deeply buried aspects of slave society” in order to provide a “more complete accounting” of the experience and “costs” of slavery (Painter 127, 146).⁴⁵

Like the work of these historians, contemporary fiction of slavery privileges the hidden or missing stories of history, including taboo subjects like interracial rape and sexuality, in order to unlock our understanding of the past. These unexplored stories, reimaged in neo-slave narratives, generate what George Lipsitz calls “countermemory,” a process that “forces [the] revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past” (*Time Passages* 213).⁴⁶ The trope of black-white coupling is essential to this process because it allows writers to examine the myriad ways discourses of interracial desire and sexuality inform the social meaning of race, both in the past and the present. Like historian Ronald Takaki, authors of these neo-slave narratives situate “the

Alexandra Ripley, author of *Scarlett* (the sequel to *Gone With the Wind*), not to include “miscegenation or graphic sex” (as cited by Sollors 5).

⁴⁵ For other work that exemplifies this trajectory, see also Brown, *Goodwives*, and Hodes’s collected volume *Sex, Love, Race*.

⁴⁶ Author Sherley Anne Williams has referred to neo-slave narratives as “liberation narratives,” signaling the revisionist and political intention of this fiction (“The Lion’s History” 249).

forbidden crossing of color lines” at “the heart of race matters” (Moran n.p.).⁴⁷ These texts link the reinterpretations of the slave past to a reevaluation of slavery’s legacy and its continuing impact on the present.

In this regard, literature of slavery does not merely recreate “history” for history’s sake; rather, contemporary neo-slave narratives imagine a *useable* past.⁴⁸ Some scholars have even framed the functional nature of the neo-slave narrative as a healing process that eases the psychological pain caused by the history and legacy of slavery, particularly for black readers.⁴⁹ Yet, as Kim Connor argues, these texts also have the potential to affect readers “who may not experience oppression in the same mode but, once awakened, may be willing partners in liberation” (*Imagining* 51). This goal invokes the antebellum roots of the slave narrative tradition when narrators attempted to create empathetic, politically engaged readers out of a “distanced, uncommitted” (white) audience (Andrews, *To Tell* 137). The creation of a triangulated relationship between author, narrative, and audience, allows writers of neo-slave narratives to make “room for the reader to feel and talk back to the text” (D’Aguair as quoted in Frias, “Building Bridges” 423). The transformative power of the imagination to create “a space for provisional identities to emerge” is at full play in these texts (Connor, *Imagining* 6).

This very conception of a useable past emphasizes the utopian impulse of the

⁴⁷ Takaki’s quote is taken from the book jacket cover of Moran’s book, *Interracial Intimacy*.

⁴⁸ Here I am alluding to the following statement by Myrse Condé: “[F]or a black person, history is a challenge because a black person is supposed not to have any history except the colonial one. . . . For a black person . . . from the diaspora . . . it is a challenge . . . to find out exactly what was there before. It is not history for the sake of history. It is searching for one’s self, searching for one’s identity, searching for one’s origins in order to understand oneself” (Condé 203-4). See also Cox, Handley, Keizer, Rushdy (*Neo-slave Narratives*), and Zamora on this point.

⁴⁹ See Frias, “Building Bridges” (442-45), Jackson, “A Healing Film,” Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery,” Lidinsky, “Prophesying Bodies,” Mitchell (6, 160), Morrison, “The Site of Memory” (91), Neely, “Interview” (181-81), and Vrettos, “Curative Domains.” See also Painter (146).

genre. Like Robin Kelley who, following his mother's example, views the world through his "third eye" and sees "life as possibility," neo-slave narratives suggest that "change is possible" and that "the map to a new world is in the imagination" (2). By the same token, creative representations of black-white coupling demonstrate how the political intentions of the genre extend beyond recovery and revision towards the transformation of society. The recovery – or reinvention – of interracial intimacy provides a creative space for the literary imagination to envision a bridge across difference and entrenched categories, ideas, and meanings of race, and makes possible the construction of "new identities through creative acts of social reinvention" (Loury D6).

The title of my study, "(Un)Conventional Coupling," highlights the deployment of black-white coupling as a politicized literary strategy that both reimagines history and reinvents contemporary social identities.⁵⁰ I adopt the term to refer to interracial sex and intimacy in order to destabilize what postcolonial studies scholars have dubbed "received knowledge" (Pratt 2) about sex and desire across the color line. Indeed, following recent historical scholarship on slavery (and its aftereffects), as well as work in the areas of postcolonial studies and the history of sexuality (particularly queer theory), the parenthetical "un" in this phrase calls the whole notion of "convention" into question.⁵¹

⁵⁰ In part my title signifies on Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993) which examines the subversive ways in which the marriage plot was appropriated by early twentieth-century black women writers. Like duCille, I define "coupling" as a complex area of study which, as "a sign of the times, shifts with the times, the place, and the people." Like marriage, interracial coupling "takes on different social and political meanings for different historical subjects at different historical moments" (4). Similar to the marriage plot in the novels duCille investigates, black-white coupling takes on decidedly political purposes in neo-slave narratives.

⁵¹ For (post)colonial studies, see the work of Ann Laura Stoler (*The Education of Desire* and *Carnal Knowledge*). For queer theory that questions convention see, e.g., Sedgwick *Epistemology*, Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," and Nero, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic."

This “un” questions the “Master narratives” of the past and begs us to critique the “process of production of knowledge about the Other” (Williams and Chrisman 5).⁵²

The history of black-white coupling does not reveal a simple shift from intolerance to tolerance, however. Instead, this history is complex, shifting, and ubiquitous. It remains a work in progress.⁵³ The scholarship of North American historians like Kathleen Brown, Thomas E. Buckley, Martha Hodes, and Gary Nash reveals that such relationships – whether coerced or consensual – were not as uncommon as many scholars have chosen to believe, nor were these relationships consistently deemed “unconventional.”⁵⁴ In his study of early nineteenth-century Virginia, for example, historian Thomas E. Buckley, Jr. notes that until recently, the historians have ignored or minimized the incidence of black-white liaisons (particularly those involving white women). Citing the Wright family of Campbell County as an example, Buckley points to a certain “level of openness in interracial sexual relationships and a degree of white acceptance of miscegenation that challenges historical generalizations and stereotypes” of slaveholding society (350).⁵⁵ Yet to be sure, other overlapping factors, particularly class status and regional differences, influenced degrees of tolerance. As Buckley’s article amply illustrates, the notion of convention in relation to subjects like interracial sex and intimacy is reductive.

⁵² As Adam McKible writes, “History is the Master narrative a dominant culture tells about itself. This narrative effaces as much contradiction as it can, destroying certain records, highlighting others, and creating heroes and villains generally convenient to it” (20).

⁵³ Hodes makes this quite clear in “Interconnecting and Diverging Narratives,” the introduction to her recent edited volume, *Sex, Love, Race*.

⁵⁴ See Brown, *Goodwives*, Buckley, “Unfixing Race,” Hodes, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics,” *White Women, Black Men*, and *Sex, Love, and Race*.

⁵⁵ See also Brown, *Goodwives*, Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia*, and Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*.

As importantly, North American historians and postcolonial studies scholars have been interested in probing the intricate power relations enacted by and through relationships that cross the color line. These relations of power, they argue, involve not only individuals at both private and public levels, but also the state and its interests.⁵⁶ For under slavery, as in the “intimate frontiers” of colonial rule, there existed “a social and cultural space where racial classifications were defined and defied, where relations between colonizer and colonized could powerfully confound or confirm the strictures of governance and the categories of rule” (Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties” 2). Stoler’s research, as well as work by Judge A. Leon Higginbotham, Ronald Hyam, bell hooks, Albert Hurtado, Mary Louise Pratt and others, reveals how sexualized concepts of race delineated racial difference while also establishing (or reinforcing) hierarchies of race, gender, and class.⁵⁷ For example, historian Kathleen Brown’s study of colonial Virginia reveals how “White planters’ sexual involvement with female slaves was simultaneously an expression of gender, racial, and class dominance in a society where manual labor, female identity, and dark skin signified subordinate status” (332).

The history of interracial sex also reveals how those persons traditionally thought of as subordinate and oppressed maneuvered within and outside of entrenched social systems to resist and subvert as well as to accommodate both local and state attempts to

⁵⁶ Legal scholar Rachel Moran points out that a “willingness to harness intimate relationships in the service of social good often correlated with repressive regimes” (*Interracial Intimacy* 11). See also Nancy F. Cott’s recent study, *Public Vows* which demonstrates how the institution of marriage functioned as a means by which the state could both confer and withhold privileges of citizenship throughout U.S. history.

⁵⁷ Catherine Clinton, in fact, has argued that we must refine our notion of patriarchy when discussing slave society in order to bring sexuality more prominently into our analyses. She employs the term “penarchy” to define the white male elite’s systematic use of sexual terrorism to control women of all classes and races, as well as men within the subordinate classes. Incorporating class, race, and gender considerations, Clinton’s use of penarchy “emphasizes sexual categories which reflect power relationships and their sexual manifestations” and stresses the fact that “status is sexualized and inextricably linked to power relationships within society” (“With a Whip in His Hand,” 208).

define and delimit their bodies and lives.⁵⁸ Attention to these intimate relationships reveals a more nuanced understanding of accommodation and resistance. In the case of enslaved women, for example, black-white coupling highlights how agency, as Jenny Sharpe points out, “was precariously balanced between acting and being acted upon” (xxv).

Although laws against miscegenation have been abolished, the ideologies that legitimized these legal prohibitions continue to shape the meaning of race and the contours of social relations in contemporary life (Pascoe 487). Indeed, legal scholar Rachel Moran argues that antimiscegenation statutes created “a normative hierarchy of sexual and marital practices” that are still influential today (75).⁵⁹ Thus, taking all of this important recent scholarship into consideration, the parenthetical “un” in my study’s title attempts to clear a space for contemporary author’s imaginative reconfigurations of these relationships. Through the trope of (un)conventional coupling, neo-slave narratives make transracial intimacy an integral part of the process of rendering a more complete and complex understanding of the past.

The manifestations of black-white coupling in contemporary neo-slave narratives are part of a long literary history where interracial intimacy has been a prominent convention in writing from the early “contact zone” through the present day.⁶⁰ Black-

⁵⁸ See Brown, *Goodwives*, Clinton, ““With a Whip,”” Clinton and Gillespie, *The Devil’s Lane*; Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color and Shades of Freedom*; Hodes, *White Women, Black Men*, hooks, “Reflections on Race and Sex,” in *Yearning*.

⁵⁹ See also Adrienne Davis, “Private Law.”

⁶⁰ Colonial discourse scholar Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). Werner Sollors, in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, makes it clear that the representation of black-white coupling in literature and in visual images can be traced back to antiquity (see esp. 8, 27-28, 49-52, 59-61). As I point out here, however, it did not become a common convention in literature involving slavery until after the late fifteenth century.

white coupling was trope for appropriate and officially sanctioned relations of power between “superior” and “inferior” cultures. Since Europe’s first wave of expansion in the late fifteenth century, popular literature – from early “survival literature” (first-person tales of captivities, castaways, mutinies, and shipwrecks) to later forms of travel writing and sentimental fiction – relied on the entwined themes of sex and slavery. According to Mary Louise Pratt, early European survival literature provided a “safe” context “for staging alternative, revitalizing, and taboo configurations of intercultural contact” (86). Relations of power might be temporarily reversed within these stories (for example, a European enslaved by non-Europeans) but only to provide an exciting tale. These texts – told from the point of view of the survivor (the returned European) – inevitably “presupposed the imperially correct outcome: the survivor survived, and sought reintegration into the home society” (Pratt 86). Similarly, in later sentimental writing, “transracial love stories” worked not to disrupt but to secure European supremacy by offering romantic love and sex as a strategy to achieve the “willful submission of the colonized.” Through the “eroticization of the contact zone,” this early literary tradition demonstrates how sexuality was put to the service of defining and reinforcing relations of power (Pratt 86-7).

This early European tradition had a tremendous impact on the American context where the twin themes of sex and slavery became intrinsic to antislavery literature. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler writes, “miscegenation provides an essential motif of virtually all antislavery fiction” (*Touching Liberty* 32). Abolitionist Lydia Maria Child was one of the first writers to take on the theme of black-white coupling in her 1834 short story “Joanna” – a liberal “retelling” of an extremely popular travel narrative by British

mercenary John Gabriel Stedman (Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White* 189, 480n4). When Child condemned the sexual abuse of female slaves by white masters, what she called “the forbidden subject of slavery,” in her *Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), she was shunned by many for daring to openly address such a delicate subject (Yellin xxxiii, 259n54). Yet Child continued to weave this theme in her own writing, however, including “The Quadroons” (1842), “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843), and *Romance of the Republic* (1867). Likewise, she supported other authors, particularly Harriet Jacobs, who took up the “forbidden subject of slavery” (Yellin xxxiii).

Other abolitionists also relied on the theme of black-white coupling as a tool of moral suasion that worked on at least two levels. In some cases this theme suggested that love and family/nation could be created out of mutual affection and attraction that crossed the color line. As in Child’s short story “Joanna” (1834), questions of love, loyalty, and legitimacy are woven into antebellum stories that employed black-white coupling. Yet more often the “forbidden subject” in abolitionist writing exposed the sexual abuse of slave women in order to capture both the attention and consciences of readers and arouse their sense of duty. Slave narrators’ relied on this theme to foreground the violence and brutality of the system. These representations became a convention in slave narratives not simply, as Frances Smith Foster explains, “because such situations did exist, but because the audiences were at once titillated and scandalized by such occurrences” (*Witnessing Slavery* 109-110).

Working to dismantle the system, slave narrators and other abolitionist writers understood that images of sexual abuse and interracial coupling were powerful weapons

in their carefully crafted attack on slavery. Slave narrators were “particularly careful to select incidents and language for maximum persuasive value” (Foster, “Witnessing Slavery” 64). Nonetheless, recent scholarship on antebellum slave narratives suggests that the significance of black-white coupling extends beyond its most obvious function as a rhetorical device that garnered white sympathy and support.⁶¹ In telling their stories, Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Elizabeth Keckley, Louisa Picquet, and Mary Prince, along with Jacobs and others, exposed the complex negotiations of power and resistance under slavery through their constructions of sex and desire across the color line. Slave narratives make clear that sexuality was not only a means for reinforcing the dominance of the master class; they also explore how the (limited) agency of the slave could also work to unsettle oppressor/oppressed paradigms.⁶²

The scene of Aunt Hester’s pillory that opens Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) provides a classic example of the complex eroticization of representations of power relations between master and slave.⁶³ In the narrative’s first chapter, Douglass takes his audience along with him through the “blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery” that marked his own understanding of what “slavery” meant. The “terrible spectacle” he describes highlights the brutal lust of his white master, Captain Anthony, for Douglass’s Aunt Hester (5). Explaining the reasons their master has forbidden his aunt against keeping company with

⁶¹ See, for example, P. Gabrielle Foreman, “Manifest in Signs,” Sanchez-Eppler, *Touching Liberty*, and Sandra Y. Govan, “Forbidden Fruits and Unholy Lusts.”

⁶² See Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery*, for a revised understanding of slave women’s resistance. She uses Michele de Certeau’s theory of “poaching” to help her describe the “ability of people who are relatively disempowered to find a place within the system they are not free to oppose” (xxi).

⁶³ For similar readings of this scene see, e.g., White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman* (preface) and McDowell, “In the First Place” (195-97, 201-8).

Ned Roberts, a slave from a neighboring plantation, Douglass establishes Hester as the object of his master's desire. Hester, Douglass explains, was "a woman of noble form, and graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance among the colored or white women of our neighborhood" (6). Depicting Hester as a desirable woman, as well as the object of Anthony's lust, Douglass leaves little doubt that his master seeks sole sexual access and control over Hester's body.

Douglass's careful depiction of his Aunt Hester's fate intertwines violence with sexuality and places their inextricability at the center of his childhood realization of what it means to be a slave. Found in the company of her lover, Hester is brutally stripped and whipped by Anthony who is fueled by rage and lust. Douglass's description makes clear the act of whipping becomes a sadistic ritual for Anthony enacted upon the naked body of his victim: "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped. . . . He would whip to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin" (5). Further linking this act of violence with sexual release, Douglass's sexualized description of Hester's punishment lays bare the erotic nature of the master's physical abuse. Meant to both shock and titillate the reader, the story of Aunt Hester also reveals the story one woman's resistance. For rather than accept the will of her master, Hester continues to visit her lover, knowing full well the consequences if caught. Thus, through this scene Douglass's text highlights how sexuality can be put to the task of both exercising and resisting power. This story suggests that through her choice of sexual partner, Hester sought and won some degree of freedom (Block 147).

Douglass's brief illustration of this cycle of violation, violence, and resistance that often accompanied interracial liaisons under slavery receives a more sustained and complex treatment in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Indeed, Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues that "the story Jacobs has to tell may well be unique among slave narratives in that it describes slavery primarily in terms of sexual experience" (83-4). The sexual history and terrorization of Linda Brent drives the narrative design. The plot revolves around her master's sexual pursuit and Brent's own attempt to deflect or escape his sexual overtures. Jacobs's narrative constructs Linda Brent's vulnerability to sexual exploitation as both "a marker and a means" of her enslavement (Block 142). As Sharon Block's article "Lines of Color, Sex, and Service" points out, both her master, Dr. Flint, and her "jealous mistress," Mrs. Flint, "played important roles in the . . . sexually abusive relationship" described in the text (Block 150). *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* depicts countless attempts by Linda's master to harass and threaten her into submitting to a sexual relationship with him. As Linda explains in the narrative, her master constantly reminded her that he owned her and swore "by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him" (Jacobs 27). Moreover, through her interactions with Mrs. Flint, the narrative highlights how the mistress in these "sexual triangles" served not as protector, but rather as a contemptuous accomplice in both physical and psychological abuse of enslaved women Block (150). As an object of Mrs. Flint's "constant suspicion and malevolence," her mistress's actions lead Linda to become "fearful for her life" (30, 33). "The mistress," writes Jacobs, "who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings toward her but those of jealousy and rage" (26-27).

Yet Jacobs also depicts how Linda tries to maneuver within the restrictive confines of this triangular relationship. Most obvious to this end is Linda's act of selecting a white lover, Mr. Sands. This decision is represented as both an attempt to disrupt her master's power over her and assume some modicum of control over her own life.⁶⁴ Linda believes that by taking a white lover she would foil Dr. Flint's plans to make her his concubine. Moreover, as Linda explains, "revenge" was part of her motivation in choosing Sands. She remarks, "I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another; and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way" (55). Yet as Sharon Block argues, Jacobs also emphasizes "the choice of sexual partner as a marker of freedom" (147). In the text Linda proclaims that "[t]here is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (55).⁶⁵ Thus, by "lifting the veil from things too terrible to relate," Jacobs's narrative stresses the fact that sex was central to the complex negotiations of power and resistance under slavery.

Representations of sexual vulnerability and victimization were also a powerful part of Jacobs's rhetorical attack on slavery.⁶⁶ Her narrative invokes the ideals of "the cult of true womanhood" (purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity) in order to

⁶⁴ See also Sharpe on the complex negotiations involved in "resistance" (xv).

⁶⁵ Foreman, for one, argues that Jacobs was indeed raped by her master, but that through her textual elisions Jacobs determines "Linda's triumph over Flint [as] sexual" (92; see also 77-84). As Foreman points out, *at least within the narrative itself*, the master "never succeeds in seducing his slave girl" (92).

⁶⁶ Jacobs also includes a number of other stories and references to degraded slave girls/women and at least one young slave man, thereby weaving interracial sex and sexual abuse into the very fabric of slavery itself. With the example of Luke whose master "became prey to the vices growing out of the 'patriarchal institution,'" Jacobs suggests that same-sex abuse was another of slavery's vices (192). When his master becomes bed-ridden, Luke is forced to tend to him day and night. Jacobs, in thinly veiled language, implies that his master forces Luke to perform sexually: "As [the master] lay there on his bed, a mere degraded wreck of manhood, he took into his head the strangest freaks of despotism; and if Luke hesitated to submit to his orders, the constable was immediately sent for. Some of these freaks were of a nature too filthy to be repeated. When I fled from the house of bondage, I left poor Luke still chained to the bedside of this cruel

appeal to her mainly white, middle class female audience in the North (Welter 21). In trying to justify taking Mr. Sands as a lover, for example, Linda explains to her reader that as a slave her “purity” had not “been sheltered” and “protected by law” as theirs had (54). All of Linda’s “prospects” for marriage and a “home shielded by the laws” “had been blighted by slavery.” Appealing to her readers she laments, “I wanted to keep myself pure; and . . . I tried hard to preserve my self-respect,” but slavery frustrated “all my efforts” (54-5). At the same time, Jacobs exposes how the institution of slavery prohibits not only enslaved women, but also white mistresses from living up to these standards. As Linda observes, “this bad institution deadens the moral sense, even in white women” (35).

Establishing sexual vulnerability and abuse as a recurring theme in the representation of slavery, narratives like Douglass’s and Jacobs’s determine black-white coupling as a charged signifier of the corrupt and corrupting system of slavery. Both rely on representations of sexual abuse to convince their readers of the inherent sinfulness of the institution. Yet these narratives also highlight the role of sexuality as a means of resistance. Douglass’s Aunt Hester returns to her lover again and again even though certain punishment awaits her for disobeying Captain Anthony’s decree. Linda Brent purposely chooses a white lover so as to both foil Dr. Flint’s lascivious plans for her, and to exact revenge and cause him pain. Black-white coupling, then, can be understood as part of the complex and shifting power relations represented in these nineteenth-century narratives of slavery.

and disgusting wretch” (192). On same-sex desire, coupling, and/or sexual abuse during slavery see also Painter 96, Spillers, and Nero 403-4.

This literary history also animates authors' reliance on the theme of black-white coupling in contemporary neo-slave narratives. While no longer a tool of moral suasion, this theme remains a complex method of critique as well as a powerful political strategy in contemporary novels of slavery. Like their nineteenth-century precursors, recent fiction relies on the theme of black-white coupling to challenge conventional notions about slavery and, perhaps more urgently, about race and difference. Within the contemporary genre of the neo-slave narrative this theme reveals how, as Rachel Moran argues, "patterns of interracial intimacy have the power to give race meaning" (179). Particularly in the North American context, discourses and representations of interracial desire and sex have been intrinsic to not only the development of racial categories but also the way those categories have been policed (Lemire 3).⁶⁷

Yet interracial relationships also work to disrupt and disorient convenient racial categories by revealing the permeability of the boundaries that have historically worked to "naturalize" and define race.⁶⁸ Cross-racial relationships undermine "the master idea that race is an irreducible marker among diverse peoples – an idea in any case that always has been socially constructed and has no scientific validity" (Nash 25-6). Like mixed-race people, interracial coupling represents what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have called "a crisis of racial meaning" because it signals the fluidity and contingency of racial

⁶⁷ In her recent book *"Miscegenation": Making Race in America*, Elise Lemire persuasively argues that extra-legal texts and images were as (if not more) powerful than miscegenation statutes in working to prohibit interracial coupling. Lemire writes that "the numerous depictions of inter-racial couplings that dotted the Northern cultural landscape did the work of prohibiting inter-marriage by teaching whites that blacks are physically and socially inferior and to thereby treat them accordingly" (2).

⁶⁸ Other authors have made this argument about mixed-race persons because they do not fit into convenient, either/or racial categories. Like Rachel Moran, I am extending this idea in order to apply it to interracial couples/coupling as well. As Moran writes, "The freedom to select our intimates is also the power to define racial difference. Interracial families remain unusual, but even so, they provide a unique opportunity to reconsider whether race is truly an immutable trait beyond our control. These brave new families demonstrate that race is a contingent concept, not a fixed and natural truth" (191).

categories (as qtd. in Moran 157).⁶⁹ Authors of neo-slave narratives rely on this conundrum as they work to reorient readers' conceptions of slavery and race through the trope of black-white coupling. In other words, just as sexuality has been instrumental in the making of race, black-white coupling reveals that it is also crucial to *unmaking* race (Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* 20).⁷⁰

In the chapters that follow I will look at three contemporary neo-slave narratives and explore how each relies on the theme of black-white coupling to challenge received understandings of slavery and difference, and to “dream” of a new society. The tension between what “is” and what “could be” structures each of the novels I analyze in this study. Each novel poses the same question Robin Kelley raises in his book *Freedom Dreams*: “How do we produce a vision that enables us to see beyond our immediate ordeals? How do we transcend bitterness and cynicism and embrace love, hope, and an all-encompassing dream of freedom, especially in these rough times” (x)? *Dessa Rose*, *The Chaneyville Incident*, and *Property* represent only three of the many neo-slave narratives that strive to both revise our understanding of the past in order to reshape our present and, in the words of Langston Hughes, “make our world anew” (as quoted in

⁶⁹ See also Carmen Luke and Vicki Carrington, “Race Matters.” They argue that in the lived experience of interracial relationships there are critical changes which lead to complex, “unpredictable sites and moments of ‘third space’ otherness” (5). Couples’ “identity as subjects and as a social unit” are “renegotiated . . . in spaces they have created outside of the norms of either culture” (22).

⁷⁰ It is interesting to note that prominent sociologist Orlando Patterson cites the lack of exogamy by African Americans (and the lack of intermarriage between blacks and whites specifically) as one of the last barriers to “total integration” (*The Ordeal of Integration* 198). Patterson refers to Edward Laumann’s sociological study of American sexuality where Laumann argues that “The small number of interracial partnerships is part of a larger social process that functions to maintain social ‘distance’ between racial groups since sexual partnerships (and to an even greater extent marriages) often create social bridges between families and groups of acquaintances” (as qtd. in Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* 195-96). While they might disagree with Patterson’s demographic “theory” that “America could solve its ‘racial’ problem overnight . . . if Afro-Americans chose to make a point of marrying out” (*Rituals of Blood* 158), a number of other recent studies support Patterson’s argument that rates of intermarriage could have a significant impact on “undoing” race and racial boundaries (Moran 196). Along with Moran’s *Interracial Intimacy*, see, e.g.,

Kelley and Lewis x). By focusing on the trope of (un)conventional coupling in these novels, I hope to push other scholars to consider new ideas and new directions for the genre of the neo-slave narrative. The return to the subject of slavery extends beyond African-American communities, culture, politics, and history to include both a wider diasporic and more culturally diverse response by both artists and audiences.⁷¹ This trend suggests there is an even broader significance to the impulses, motivations, and forces behind the ever-developing slave narrative tradition.⁷²

Franklin, *What's Love Got to Do With It*, Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies*, Luke and Carrington, "Race Matters," and Yancey and Emerson, "An Analysis of Resistance to Racial Exogamy."

⁷¹ As discussed earlier, the return to the subject of slavery is not restricted to fiction, but also to film, art, and politics. Haile Gerima's work, particularly "Sankofa," as well as Spielberg's "Amistad," and Oprah Winfrey's rendition of Toni Morrison's "Beloved" all stand out in the film category. The work of artists Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Tom Feelings, Renee Stout, and Winnie Owens-Hart is but a short list of contemporary artists who return to the subject of slavery. Slavery also entered a more explicitly political forum in the 1990s and through the present in the continuing debates on reparations and questions regarding the need for a formal apology for slavery (see, e.g., Patterson, "No Apology Could Do Justice" D1 and Williams, "Apologia qa amensia" 10). Finally, contemporary discussions over the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, generated by DNA tests/findings in 1988, brought both slavery and interracial intimacy more prominently into recent public discourse (see Burg and Gorgon Reed).

⁷² This is not to say that capturing the attention of a large white audience on the subject of slavery necessarily signals "progress." Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo* (1957) and the "Falconhurst Series" that followed certainly revisited the slave past (as have other popular plantation novels including most notably, of course, *Gone With the Wind*) and its phenomenal success (the series sold over 30 million copies) reflected more of a conservative trend to reinforce rather than deconstruct stereotypes of race and slavery (see Geist 861-863, 965-966). Many critics have argued the same with regards to the 1977 television success of Alex Haley's *Roots* (see, e.g., Blayney 56-73).

CHAPTER II

UNSPEAKABLE DESIRE IN SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS' *DESSA ROSE*

Sherley Anne Williams traces the inspiration behind her 1986 neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* to two seemingly divergent origins. On the one hand, she seems to have been compelled to write the novel out of a sense of regret. Williams was interested in bringing two very different nineteenth-century southern women together; the first, an enslaved woman who was killed for her role in an uprising, and the second, a plantation mistress who harbored fugitive slaves. Williams discovered two discrete historical references to these women in what was, by 1970's standards, groundbreaking scholarship on slavery by historians Angela Davis and Herbert Aptheker. In the "Author's Note" that opens *Dessa Rose* she recalls, "How sad, I thought then, that these two women never met" (ix). The imaginative connection between these women helps Williams "apprehend that other history" of slavery. Exploring unofficial stories of the past from the perspective of "those previously relegated to the margins of American culture," her "counterhistory" shows "that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expressions" (Peterson 5; Williams, *Dessa Rose* x).

On the other hand, Williams confesses she was also provoked by the "outrage" she felt over "a certain, critically acclaimed novel of the early seventies that travestied the as-told-to memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner" (ix). With this barely disguised reference to William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Williams makes clear that

her novel is, in part, a response to Styron's (mis)representation of slavery. Williams links Styron's *Confessions* to the mainstream literary and historical establishment in order to point out how "literature and writing" have often "betrayed" African-Americans. Her "Author's Note" cites the success and lingering influence of Styron's novel (and other representations like it) as proof that African-Americans "remain at the mercy of literature and writing" (ix).¹ Looking "clear-eyed" at that "history," Williams was inspired to forge her own alternative narrative that draws on both fact and fiction in order to create "a place in the American past" where she "could go and be free" (ix).²

Inspired by both longing and rage, Williams' novel expresses the dual motivation of black Atlantic cultural production. *Dessa Rose* not only engages in a redemptive critique of "history" and historiography, it also imagines new social relations for a transformed future. To represent both the world as it is and the world as it could be, Williams' relies on the trope of (un)conventional coupling. Working from the narrative reference to "unspeakable desire" in *Dessa Rose*, this chapter will address how Sherley Anne Williams appropriates interracial desire not only to revise prevailing notions of power and agency under slavery, but also to imagine a new model for contemporary relations of difference.

Highlighting the inseparability of desire, discourse, and power, the phrase "unspeakable desire" is used most specifically to describe the illicit, coercive sexual relationship between a young male slave and his white mistress (169). The scene in which this phrase appears (which will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter)

¹ For details on the (incomplete) success of Styron's appropriation of "The Confessions of Nat Turner," see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, "Reading Black" 82-87. See also J. Clarke, Joyner, Stone, and Winchell on the controversy over *Confessions*.

² As Mae Henderson writes, by citing the revisionist work of Davis and Aptheker Williams places herself

links the phrase to both the white woman's and enslaved men and women's disparate experiences and expressions of pleasure and power. Linking the body and the word, "unspeakable desire" establishes sexuality and the erotic as part of a larger field of power relations. As Michel Foucault argues in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, discourses of sexuality and specific forms of power are inextricably bound. In the coercive liaison between an enslaved black man and his white female owner, relations of power are structured by racialized concepts of gender and sexuality. The emphasis on "control" and the combination of pleasure and terror that defines their relationship reinforces Ann Laura Stoler's claim that "sexual desires were structured by desires and discourses that were never about sex alone" (*Race and the Education of Desire* 4).³ Along with establishing desire as "a crucial transfer point of power, tangled with racial exclusions in complicated ways," this scene also points to how privilege is structured by hierarchies of gender, race, and class (Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* 190).

Uttered only once in the narrative, the significance of the phrase "unspeakable desire" extends beyond the scene in which it appears. To enable the broader application of this phrase in my analysis of *Dessa Rose*, I adopt Eve Sedgwick's more expansive conception of desire as a potent force that shapes a whole range of social relationships (*Between Men* 2). The desire that is "unspeakable" in *Dessa Rose* is that which goes against the sanctioned discourse of the "public transcript" (Scott x). Discourse, as Foucault reminds us, is not only an "instrument" that transmits, produces, and reinforces

and her protagonist(s) within a "continuum of political insurgency" intent on challenging "received" histories of slavery ("(W)riting" 640).

³ The Honorable A. Leon Higginbotham makes this clear in *Shades of Freedom* which examines "the role of the American legal process in substantiating, perpetuating, and legitimizing the precept of [black] inferiority" (xxv). One of the key precepts Judge Higginbotham outlines involves the construction of interracial sexuality and black sexuality as pernicious. Indeed, Judge Higginbotham asserts that sex became the central symbolic representation of "the inferiority of slaves and the superiority of their masters" (34).

power, it is also “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” that “undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” power (92-3).⁴ Williams’ narrative suggests that “hidden transcripts” of desire and sexuality carry the potential to undermine the intertwined ideologies upon which slavery, patriarchy, and racial exclusions are produced and maintained (Scott x, xi). Within the novel, various manifestations of interracial intimacy allow Williams to reveal and undercut these ideologies. Through its attention to unspeakable desire, *Dessa Rose* becomes “an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* 90).

As it recasts hegemonic representations of interracial sex, the novel constructs a more expansive image of cross-racial desire and intimacy. Similar to Toni Morrison’s “unspeakable things unspoken,” attention to unspeakable desire reveals the text of slavery to have “deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significance” (“Unspeakable” 213). After dedicating the novel to “the children ... who will share in the 21st [century]”, Williams “Author’s Note” insists that the story of *Dessa Rose* holds “some very real applications for today” (Williams as quoted in Sievers 83). Williams’ two sources of inspiration suggest that that the novel should not be read solely as a response to the limited success of the civil rights and black power movements (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 4-6). Rather, *Dessa Rose* should also be read as a reflection on the feminist movement in the 1970s.⁵ Through her novel, Williams reconsiders the story of slavery against the backdrop of (and the backlash against) the social and political

⁴ See also Foucault 98, 100-6, 151-2.

⁵ On this failure, see, e.g., Breines and Wyatt.

aspirations of women activists from the 1960s and 1970s. As this chapter will argue, the story of the relationship between Dessa Rose and Ruth demands that we view the novel not simply as a “counterhistory” that disrupts “official” versions of American history (Peterson 5). Rather, *Dessa Rose* also seeks to find meaning in first-wave feminists’ failure to create a fully integrated women’s movement in the 1970s.⁶ This chapter will suggest that much of the “very real application” this novel has “today” lies in the hope of revitalizing the possibility of a multicultural sisterhood for contemporary readers.

An emphasis on unspeakable desire draws attention to the formal choices Williams made in writing *Dessa Rose*. Rather than reproduce the mechanisms of domination that structure conventional slave narratives (and, as many critics argue, Styron’s *Confessions*), Williams relies on a multivocal structure in *Dessa Rose*. The novel opens with a prologue constructed out of an intimate memory of Dessa and her husband Kaine. Pregnant with her dead husband’s child, Dessa is locked in a cellar awaiting execution for her role in a deadly slave insurrection. The core of the novel is divided into three distinct but interconnected sections that tell the story of Dessa Rose from three very different perspectives (Kekeh 225). Titled “The Darky,” the novel’s first section is told in third person but emphasizes the position of Adam Nehemiah, the white, male writer who interviews Dessa as she awaits the birth of her child (which has staved off her hanging). Nehemiah hopes that by “capturing” Dessa’s story on paper he will be able to complete his “how-to” book on anti-insurgency and slave management.

Before Nehemiah completes his task, however, Dessa escapes from the cellar with the help of her friends and fellow fugitives, Nathan, Cully, and Harker. Dessa’s

⁶ When interviewed in 1995, Combahee activist Demita Frazier commented, “One of the things that has always troubled me is that I wanted to be part of a multicultural feminist organization, and I never felt that

companions take her and her newborn son “Mony” (delivered en route) to Sutton’s Glen, a remote haven for runaway slaves. Also told in third person, the second section, “The Wench,” articulates the perspective of the mistress of Sutton’s Glen, Ruth (“Rufel”) Sutton. Ruth is a white woman who has been abandoned by her husband and lives alone with her young children on her remote, ramshackle Alabama plantation. This section chronicles Dessa’s stay at the Glen, devoting particular attention to the changing relationship between Ruth and the fugitive slaves. Over time, Ruth and the fugitives unite in a money-making scam that involves “selling” the same slaves over and over again in order to finance their plans to settle in free territory out west. Recalling the story of how their scheme plays out, the third section, “The Negress,” is told in Dessa’s own voice. The first-person, past-tense narration signals her physical and psychological progress towards freedom. The novel’s “Epilogue,” Dessa’s brief retrospective on “free” life out West, reinforces Dessa’s control over her own narrative.

In each section of the story the trope of (un)conventional coupling is integral to the struggle over authority that structures Williams’ novel (Sievers 9). Most obviously, the narrative demonstrates how racialized discourses of sexuality and desire were essential to relations of domination and resistance.⁷ The shifting process of narration allows Williams to emphasize racialized discourse while also undercutting racist representations that naturalize and reinforce hierarchies of difference. To free herself both literally and figuratively from white male patriarchal control and the (mis)identification of white women, Dessa must negotiate and undermine conventional notions of interracial

the feminist movement became fully integrated” (as quoted in Breines 1126-7).

⁷ As noted in Chapter 1, both cultural history and legal scholarship on the development of racial ideologies in the United States emphasize how racialized concepts of sexuality contributed to the creation and

desire.⁸ Through this process, the novel engages in the politics of fulfillment, relying on black-white coupling to expose the hidden history and skewed historiography of slavery.

Power and Erotic Subjectivity

To lay the foundation for Dessa's ultimate control over her narrative, Williams uses the prologue to reclaim "the erotic as a foundation for resistance" (Griffin 526). Shaped around Dessa's intimate memories of her life in the quarters, the prologue firmly establishes her female protagonist's consciousness in the mind of the reader. A brief reverie introduces us to the people Dessa loved back home before she was sold away. Her memories recall the sense of community that sustained her before being sold "deep south" by her mistress who mistakenly believed Dessa to be pregnant with the master's child (36). Dessa's reverie conveys "the [continued] warmth of [her loved-ones'] presence" (4). In particular, Dessa's vivid memories of Kaine bring the reader into "the moment" of her reflection: "*Never end! Suddenly, fiercely the wish was upon her. To be always in this moment, her body pressed to his, his warm in the bend of her arm*" (3).

From these opening pages Williams establishes Dessa as a desired and desiring subject. Repeatedly asserting "He chose me" when describing her relationship with Kaine, Dessa herself emphasizes the importance she places on her romantic and sexual autonomy (11-12). It is she and Kaine, not the master, who initiate their union. Dessa makes clear that "Masa ain't had nothing to do wid it" (11). The strength Dessa garners from this knowledge must be assessed in the historical context of plantation slavery where "cultural sexual patterns" were "interrupted and broken, forcing [enslaved blacks]

maintenance of ideologies of difference. See, e.g., Kathleen M. Brown, Sander Gilman, A. Leon Higginbotham, and Elise Lemièrè.

⁸ I draw on the work of Jean Wyatt to frame the concept of (mis)identification (which will be addressed in more detail later in the chapter).

to conform to patterns that would profit the white farmer and plantation owner” (Patricia M. Robinson as quoted in Mitchell 26). Within the restrictions of institutionalized slavery, the ability to choose one’s lover, as Harriet Jacobs articulately suggests in her narrative, is “something akin to freedom.”

The memories of Kaine’s love and desire for her sustain Dessa while she is imprisoned. They provide “a space in her mind to which she can return to temporarily escape her material conditions and surroundings while also claiming her physical self” (Griffin 529). Through the power of memory, Dessa physically re-experiences the power of his love and the sustenance Kaine’s touch provided: “Dessa flowered briefly, fled in dry spasm, gone as suddenly as the dream had come, so lifelike she had felt herself with him.... Even now against closed eyelids, she could see . . . Kaine’s eyes” (4). Drawing on these memories to resist the brutal, dehumanizing conditions of her captivity, Dessa’s erotic subjectivity lends her the resilience she needs to survive. Moreover, as discussed in detail below, her sexual agency ultimately enables Dessa to escape from the cellar, slipping from slavery’s grasp for the second time.⁹ Constructing the erotic as “a resource,” Dessa is able to use this knowledge for self-empowerment (Lorde 49, 53).

Yet even while the novel works to establish Dessa’s sexual autonomy, Williams’ novel makes clear that for black women in particular, the threat of sexual abuse was ever present. The erotic power emphasized in the prologue is tempered by the reality of enslaved women’s vulnerability. While this threat is established in the novel’s first chapter, references to the sexual exploitation of enslaved women pervade the narrative. In

⁹ Reinterpreting Kaine’s attack on the master for breaking his banjo as a sign of black power and agency, Dessa models her resistance on Kaine. Just as master was “able to do what he felt like doing,” Kaine’s actions taught her that “a nigger could, too.” As she puts it, “He had done,” therefore “he was.” Thus, when

the opening pages, for instance, we learn that Dessa was not permitted to work in the “big” house because her mistress, aware of her husband’s proclivity for light-skinned slaves, “don’t ‘low nothing but dark uns up to the House, else ones too old for Masa to be beddin” (10). Addressing the all too common experience of white men sexually abusing black women (to paraphrase Dessa, because they can), Dessa notes later in the narrative, “Not all white mens acted animals towards us, understand, but enough of them did till this is what we always feared with them” (192). Even though she was “spared this in bondage,” Dessa acknowledges that the threat of rape was always present. She recalls, “I had seen the way some white mens looked at me, big belly and all, when I was on that coffle” (192). Without negating or downplaying the pervasiveness of sexual abuse in slavery, the novel shifts away from a narrow focus on sexuality as a locus of victimization. To construct a more expansive conception of black women’s sexuality, the prologue, along with other parts of the narrative, also explores the erotic as a potential site of power and resistance.

In particular, the narrative’s first section emphasizes the way in which Dessa’s sexual agency destabilizes the appropriative strategy of the white amanuensis. By first sharing the scene of intimacy between Dessa and Kaine with the reader, Nehemiah’s narration is pre-empted, his controlling power diffused by Dessa’s voice. The prologue encourages readers to identify with Dessa while also “provid[ing] clues about how to read, or decode” the white-authored emphasis of the novel’s first section (Henderson, “(W)Riting” 641). As Nehemiah works to draw a “confession” from Dessa, this section emphasizes the “betrayal” of dominant literary culture that Williams refers to in her

she acts (“does”) she “is” also. As Elizabeth Meese writes, Dessa is a “revolutionary” precisely because she “interrupt[s] ... the logic of slavery” (141).

author's note. Linking the production of the written word to (white) attempts to master and control enslaved blacks (the ultimate goal of the book *Nehemiah* is researching), the novel implicates literary production as a tool of racial subjugation. The epigraph that opens this section reinforces this insinuation. Linking part of a famous line from Frederick Douglass's narrative -- "You have seen how a man was made a slave..." -- to the novel's first section, Williams' narrative suggests how the "as-told to" format adopted by *Nehemiah* (and other racist white writers, Styron included) contributes to the "making" of slaves.

Dessa Rose establishes the sexual abuse of black woman as integral to what "makes" them slaves. Saidiya Hartman argues, in fact, that "sexual violence [was] crucial to the construction and experience of gender for [enslaved] black women" (229n29). Even though *Dessa* is spared the trauma of rape, she is marked both physically and psychologically by sexualized violence. The scars on *Dessa*'s inner thighs and pubic region are a tangible sign of this abuse. These injuries were not inflicted by order of the master, however, but by her mistress. Convinced that her husband killed *Kaine* over the fact that *Dessa* was pregnant with the master's child, Mrs. Vaughn vows to sell her husband's "slut and his bastid south in worser slavery than they ever thought of" (37). Enraged by *Kaine*'s murder and her mistress's inference, *Dessa* attacks Mrs. Vaughn. This violent act of defiance only heightens the mistress's thirst for vengeance. Before selling her to a trader, the mistress has *Dessa* whipped "from the waist down" -- so as not to "impair her value" -- and locked in sweatbox as part of her punishment (142-3).

The "history writ about her privates" betrays white society's eroticized, objectified view of *Dessa* (14). As her mistress intended, the scars are read as a sign of

Dessa's sexual transgression. Central to the Nehemiah's attempt to "make" a slave out of Dessa is his sexualized (mis)reading of her body. For Nehemiah, the "marks of punishment ... on her rump and the inside of her flanks ... bespoke a history of misconduct" (13). Through the location of Dessa's scars, Williams' novel constructs the "specific abuse of the [enslaved] woman's body as a site of textual production" (Goldman 329n20). Nehemiah reads the "history" inscribed on Dessa's body as evidence of her sexual misbehavior. Like the mistress who ordered Dessa to be "lashed . . . about the hips and legs, branded along the insides of her thighs" (143), Nehemiah sees in her disfigurement a history of "immorality" and "suspicion" (38). Dessa's scars, as Deborah McDowell observes, can be read as a white-authored text bound up in the "enslaving psychosexual myths and fantasies" of the master and in this case, the mistress ("Negotiating" 154).

Moreover, Dessa's body is eroticized by her blackness. Referred to as "the darky," "the wench," and "the slut" by Nehemiah, the misnaming of Dessa suggests how his conception of racial difference is bound up with sexuality.¹⁰ Objectified by the laws and desires of white men, Dessa's dark body is interpreted as a locus of illicit and available sexuality.¹¹ In fact, Hortense Spillers characterizes the figure of "the black female" as "a creature of sex, [although] sexuality touches her nowhere" (as quoted in Goldman 318). The stereotypes that determine the black female body hypersexualized and willing mark her just as effectively and violently as the scars about her privates. Looking at Dessa, Nehemiah imagines the sexual relationships she had with Kaine and

¹⁰ On ideologies of racialized sexuality see especially Sander Gilman.

¹¹ "[L]egally unable to give consent or offer resistance," as Saidiya V. Hartman observes in *Scenes of Subjection*, the slave woman was "presumed to be always willing" (227n6, 81). See also Sharon Block (especially 143) and Deborah Gray White 29 (on the "Jezebel" myth).

her master. He laments that Dessa got attached to the “fool buck” and the foolish master “so young.” A self-proclaimed “expert on recalcitrant negroes,” Nehemiah believes that “[e]ven now, with prudent schooling” Dessa could be properly trained to be a “proper” concubine (17, 68). Despite the fact that his train of thought remains unfinished, the narrative betrays Nehemiah’s sexualized rendition of Dessa’s story. His words suggest that in his “hands” (as opposed to those of her former master/“lover”) Dessa might have become a pliant concubine – most likely for Nehemiah’s own use.

Misreading Desire

As his (mis)reading suggests, Nehemiah’s image of Dessa is shaped by his own unarticulated desire for her. In his attempt to read and write “Odessa,” as he mistakenly calls her, Nehemiah’s determination to capture her on paper becomes inextricably bound with his need to possess Dessa sexually. The pen with which he writes, as Andree-Anne Kekeh has argued, “functions as an obvious phallic symbol; Nehemiah wants literally to lay Dessa down on paper” (221).¹² Indeed, David Bradley contends that rather than recording the story of Dessa’s participation in the slave revolt, the novel’s first section discloses the process of Nehemiah falling in love with her (“On the Lam” 7).¹³

Nehemiah’s attraction to Dessa is unwittingly revealed in his attention to her features, expressions, and body. Early on in his meetings with Dessa, the narrator suggests that “[b]eing closeted with the darky within the small confines of the cellar was an unsettling experience” for Nehemiah (16). His journal entries and reveries connect Nehemiah’s agitation to his desire for Dessa. Various musings betray an admiration for

¹² Kekeh continues, “Adam Nehemiah’s constant holding of this instrument exemplifies simultaneously the domineering power of male writing over other types of discourse or textuality and the sexual oppression of black women slaves” (221).

¹³ Mae Henderson also suggests the significance of the white man’s attraction to and feelings for Dessa in

her face, the color of her skin, and the scent of her body. As he sits with her during one interview, for example, Nehemiah notices that her skin is a “deep lustrous brown” and observes that Dessa’s face is surprisingly expressive (32-4). Similarly, when writing in his journal one evening, Nehemiah reflects on Dessa’s smile and notes to himself that “[h]e had not supposed that the thick-lipped mouth, so sullen and silent in its repose, could smile so . . . freely, even utter small jests.” Recalling this moment, “[h]is own lips curved upward” (38). Similarly, later in the narrative Nehemiah notes how “pleased” he is when Dessa “share[s]” a song with him. The man is so moved he pauses for a moment to “pra[y] briefly for the deliverance of her soul” (49).

As the pause in this interview suggests, Nehemiah is disarmed by his attraction to Dessa. At one point in the narrative, for instance, Nehemiah loses himself in the rhythm of her voice and the scent of her body. Betraying his own desire for her, Nehemiah’s skin prickles as he inhales her smell, “not the rank, feral stink of the cellar, but a pungent, musky odor that reminded him of sun-warmed currants and freshly turned earth” (34). Nehemiah’s continued use of the vinegar-soaked handkerchief to block her scent (even after Dessa begins to bathe regularly) suggests, in fact, that he may be using it as a shield to prevent that tingle of desire from overtaking him once again (53-4). For while Nehemiah regards “slave concubinage” as a necessary “outlet for [white men’s] baser passions,” he firmly believes “that a race could not long prosper that sowed its seed so profligately” (38). Particularly when juxtaposed with Nehemiah’s use of the handkerchief, this passage construes “miscegenation” as a contagion that will weaken the (white) “race.”

her article on “Meditations on History,” the short story upon which Williams’ based *Dessa Rose* (“(W)Riting” 649-50).

In this particular construction of black-white coupling, Williams' narrative establishes interracial desire as a product of Nehemiah's own misreading of Dessa. Nehemiah projects his desire on to Dessa to convince himself that it is Dessa who has made herself sexually available to him. Confident in his power and mastery over his subject, over the course of his interviews Nehemiah comes to imagine that a "special" relationship has developed between them. He comments on her "playfulness," for example, and on the way she smiles when he is near. Such "signs" lead Nehemiah to conclude that Dessa "inclines more toward [him] than in the past" (38). Indeed, by the end of the novel's first section, Nehemiah ardently declares, "I have been the only one to succeed in coaxing her into animated spirits" (71).

Based on his series of misreadings of Dessa, we can surmise that it is she who Nehemiah is thinking about when he contemplates "see[ing] . . . about something to warm [his] bed" on the night he returns from a search for a maroon community (69). In their last encounter before he departs on this journey, Dessa taunts Nehemiah with the question, "You a real white man?" He bristles at her tone when Dessa demands to know what he wants of her. With "his hands brush[ing] at the legs of his trousers," Nehemiah tells Dessa heatedly, "You will learn what I require when I return" (66). By virtue of her escape, Dessa is spared the experience of Nehemiah's "needs." His thinly veiled intentions, however, reinforces the imbrication of sexuality and textuality in Nehemiah's process of capturing Dessa on paper. Nehemiah wants to possess not only Dessa's words, but also her body. His ritual attempts to reconstruct Dessa's story "as though he remembered it word for word" ultimately produce a "fantastical fiction" that is driven by his unspoken desire for her (10, 35).

Far from being a pliant object of Nehemiah's desire, Dessa resists and manipulates his attempts to read and write her. Through their relationship Williams stresses the significance of orality in the struggle over written representation. The "high art" of word-of-mouth storytelling that Williams refers to in her author's note becomes a method of resistance for Dessa (ix). As she is interviewed by Nehemiah, she gives no real answers to his questions (51). Instead, Dessa hopes that by talking with "this white man" she might get him to reveal "something she didn't know" (54).

Dessa's fear and caution reveal her "monotonous" monologues to be an unobtrusive tactic of resistance (36). By talking in circles and "appear[ing] stupid," Dessa's prevents Nehemiah from getting the information he needs for his book. The text he intends to write, after all, will educate slaveholders on the prevention of insurrections. Because the book will ultimately serve as a "stabilizing force within the system of slavery," as Stefanie Sievers points out, Nehemiah's words are quite literally "weapons" (97). Dessa understands the inherent risk she undertakes as she "dare[s] a little" and "plays" at words with him (58). However, in treading this fine line, Dessa is plagued by the fear that in these talks she has "said too much" (54). She constantly worries that she might have "been careless with the white man." She goes over in her mind what she has revealed to reassure herself that she has given nothing away. As she lies awake feeling her kicking baby inside of her, Dessa questions if "[s]he had slipped in asking anything of the white man that did not turn his own questions back upon themselves." "[M]aybe," she reassures herself, "she caught herself in time" (59).

Dessa's artful use of orality is also obvious in Nehemiah's responses to her monologues. Shaking himself from the trance that her storytelling has induced, Nehemiah

curses as he realizes that “[t]he darky had led him back to the same point as the previous session . . .” (34). By leading the white man in circles Dessa attempts to deflect Nehemiah’s efforts to capture her in words. In one journal entry he misinterprets Dessa’s subversive tactics as proof of her ignorance and inferiority:

It is obvious I must speak with her again, perhaps several more times; she answers questions in a roundabout fashion – if indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all. This, to one of my habits, is exasperating to the point of fury. I must constantly remind myself that she is but a darky and a female at that (16).

Dessa resists Nehemiah’s attempt to read and write her because she knows it would erase the self she knows and recognizes. In one of her interviews with the white writer, Dessa watches his “hand propelling the pen across [the] surface” of a white page and wonders how this process would “make him know about her . . . about her life with Kaine” (45). Nehemiah’s capacity to twist her story into a tale that will make others “happy” in their life as slaves convinces Dessa that literary production is merely another means by which whites assume mastery over blacks (40, 47).¹⁴ The double meaning conveyed in the title of Nehemiah’s book – *The Roots of Rebellion in the Slave Population and Some Means of Eradicating Them* – betrays this goal (16). His how-to book on anti-insurgency would simultaneously tell planters how to control their slaves and to destroy the lives of the enslaved. Thus, even though Dessa ultimately gains control of her own story, the epilogue reiterates the risk she undertook in pitting her oral kill against Nehemiah’s written authority. Recalling her experiences she notes, “I never will

¹⁴ Ashraf Rushdy writes that “Reading . . . is more than the perusing of texts; it is equally the ability to

forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands” (260). Her words suggest the culpability of literary representation in the enslaving process.¹⁵ Nehemiah’s hands produce the hegemonic discourse that works to “make” a slave out of Dessa by appropriating her agency to suit the needs of the dominant.

Dessa’s words reveal the sense of the physical violation she associates with Nehemiah’s act of reading. As Mae Henderson points out, after Dessa’s escape Nehemiah devotes himself to “track[ing]” Dessa “in an attempt to establish ownership – that is, the colonization – of her body” (“Speaking in Tongues” 131).¹⁶ Dessa’s description of this process establishes her as an agent in the eroticization of her relationship to Nehemiah: she cannot forget how *she* put *herself* in Nehemiah’s hands. Her narration suggests that she purposely manipulates Nehemiah’s desire as part of a strategy of resistance. Critics have addressed Dessa’s reliance on narrative techniques of “silence, nonacquiescence, evasion, and dissemblance” in her attempt to thwart Nehemiah’s attempt to capture her in words (Henderson, “(W)riting The Work and Working the Rites” 647).¹⁷ Factoring sexuality more centrally into this paradigm of power, however, we must also consider the way in which Dessa appropriates Nehemiah’s eroticized image of her to purposely mislead and evade him.

Just as the numerous references to “tracking” in the novel suggest “that Dessa’s flight becomes a text that she writes and Nehemiah reads,” Dessa’s strategy of

engage with people or to control them.” In the latter “form of reading . . . an individual attempts to master another (“Reading Mammy” 365).

¹⁵ Rushdy, for example, relates the appropriation of the story of Nat Turner by author William Styron to the way in which Dessa’s story becomes “reconstructed” in Nehemiah’s mind and hands (“Reading Mammy” 369).

¹⁶ Rushdy also acknowledges the link between the word in the body in Nehemiah’s attempt to assume mastery over Dessa (“Reading Mammy”). Neither Henderson, Rushdy, nor other critics, however, address the centrality of sexuality in this power relationship.

¹⁷ See also Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues” 131-33.

(mis)leading Nehemiah on can be read as part of a strategy to control her own story (Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues" 131). Having learned on the plantation and the coffle that white men sexually violate slave women, Dessa has a keen understanding that the white man's vision of and power over her is highly eroticized. By exploiting Nehemiah's misreading of her, Dessa makes sexuality part of her strategy of "speakerly" resistance.¹⁸ As the narrator explains, "[t]alking with the white man was a game" for Dessa. "[I]t marked time and she dared a little with him, playing on words, lightly capping, as though he were no more than some darky bent on bandying words with a likely-looking gal" (58-9).

Just as Nehemiah misnames "Odessa" as he tries to capture her in writing, Dessa relies on her oral skill to recast the (un)conventional terms of interracial desire. Through her own "as though," Dessa reclaims her erotic subjectivity.¹⁹ By sexualizing the play of orality, Dessa is able to disrupt Nehemiah's domination (both physical and discursive) over her. Regarding him not as a white "master," but as a "darky," she figuratively reassigns Nehemiah's subjectivity. By doing so, Dessa enacts a shift in power between them. By (mis)leading Nehemiah on, she effectively erases the presumption of white male superiority by treating him "as though" he were "merely" a slave (Williams, "The (Un)Spoken History" n.p.). In fact, Dessa taunts him with the comment, "You a real white man" (65)? Albeit temporary, the success of Dessa's strategy lays the foundation for her eventual escape. By feigning a flirtation with Nehemiah, Dessa purposefully "put [her]self in [Nehemiah's] hands" in order to distract him long enough for her to slip from

¹⁸ Emphasizing the power of oral tradition in African-American history and culture, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines a "speakerly text" as that "in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they are to the telling of the tale" (*Signifying Monkey* 82).

¹⁹ Nehemiah also has an "as though," as noted earlier: "He hadn't caught every word . . . Yet the scene was

his grasp (260). After her escape, in fact, Dessa even jokes with Nathan, Cully, and Harker about “keeping company” with Nehemiah (181).

The effectiveness of Dessa’s strategy is signaled by Nehemiah’s response to her escape. Nehemiah’s obsession with repossessing Dessa is infused with eroticized language and sentiment. At the end of section one he is enraged to discover Dessa missing after he returns from the search for a maroon colony. Nehemiah reacts like a betrayed lover. He takes off after her and stays “out most of the night scouring the countryside for signs of Odessa” (69). In his final journal entry Nehemiah notes that “[t]he smallest clue would have sufficed for me for I should have followed it to its ultimate end” (69). When the search for Dessa is called off because of rain, Sheriff Hughes comments that Nehemiah “acted like one possessed” (72). The conclusion to section one conveys his pledge to recapture Dessa: “But the slut won’t escape me. Sly bitch. Smile at me, pretend – . She won’t escape me” (72). With Nehemiah’s thoughts cut off mid-sentence, these concluding lines emphasize the unspeakable desire at play in this relationship.

Nehemiah cannot reconcile Dessa’s escape with his own eroticization of their relationship. To finish this line of thought would mean raising the possibility that the attachment Nehemiah interpreted between them was not a product of Dessa’s desire, but his own. The novel, in effect, renders his desire unspeakable. Acknowledging his own feelings for and attraction to Dessa would undermine the carefully crafted fiction of white superiority and black inferiority upon which Nehemiah’s text(s) and life are premised. Nehemiah’s first book, *The Masters’ Complete Guide to Dealing with Slaves and Other*

vivid in his mind as he deciphered the darky’s account from his hastily scratched notes as though he remembered it word for word” (10).

Dependents, had earned him a “place in planter society” (17). Nehemiah views his second book on slave insurrections as a means to secure his “entrée [in]to planter society” (18-9). Because Dessa’s testimony is essential to this task, early on in the interview process Nehemiah prays “this darky don’t die before I get my book” (27). Nehemiah’s intentions construe Dessa’s scars mark her body as a “productive site of exploitation” within the economy of slavery (Meese 140).

By escaping Nehemiah’s text, Dessa quite literally threatens his place in that system. Driven by his unspeakable desire for her, Nehemiah becomes obsessed by his need to possess Dessa. By the time he finally does get his hands on her at the end of the novel, it seems that Nehemiah’s eroticized (mis)reading of Dessa has left him, as Keith Williams has observed, “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered” (n.p.). In the third section of the novel, Nehemiah drags Dessa off the street into the local jail, insisting all the while that he “knows her” because he has “got her down here in [his] book” (250). His construction of “knowledge” is infused with sexual innuendo. He tells everyone who will listen about the “Sly bitch” who “pull[ed] the wool” over his eyes (245, 250). Speaking “in a whispery voice” “with his eyes all wide, us[ing] all kinds of motions with his hands,” Nehemiah instructs both Ruth and the local sheriff on “the blackness of the darky heart.” Dessa, he proclaims, “had lusted with the master,” “conjured white mens and laid with all the bucks on the coffle” (250).

His image of her warped by his own obsessive desire, Nehemiah conflates Dessa’s recapture with sexual possession. When he gets Dessa alone he quietly tells her, “Smart gal like you don’t have to end on the gallows...” (245). The eroticized context of his utterance turns this line into a form of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. Nehemiah

seems to be offering up her freedom in exchange for sex. In a whisper he continues, “[I] know you been laid with some buck,” but, “licking his lips,” Nehemiah tells her that he “won’t hold that against [her].” After all, he adds, “Woman like you need . . .” (245). The ellipses underscore Nehemiah’s eroticized view of Dessa and signal his lascivious intentions. Taking in his “wild” appearance and behavior, Dessa associates Nehemiah’s words with the threat of rape. Her narration recalls both a sense of fear and consternation: “This white man – and I’m backing away, you know, and thinking, stuttering; I couldn’t be subject to this, not now, not no more . . .” (245).

Yet underscoring the power of her voice, Dessa’s scream interrupts the scenario of potential rape. Her scream draws the attention of the sheriff and once again Dessa’s oral skill enables her to resist Nehemiah and thwart his intentions. With some distance between them, Dessa is afforded the opportunity to take in his changed appearance. Unable to acknowledge how his own desire for Dessa has (misin)formed his “book,” Nehemiah has become quite literally “undone.” His disheveled appearance reveals that he has been driven mad by his obsession with Dessa. In fact, Dessa herself barely recognizes Nehemiah because he has changed so: “that crumpled suit and stained shirt front, the shadow long his jaw . . .” (252). Dessa reads Nehemiah’s unkempt appearance as evidence that he had become one “crazy white man”: “he was crazy; had to be crazy, walking round with no hose, no collar, his cuffs frayed. . . . See, this had been a precise white man And here he was sitting up here with no hose on his feet” (247). Instead of achieving entry into the best class of planter society, Nehemiah’s appearance reflects his lack of credibility and stature. The sheriff’s exclamation, “Nemi, you out your mind,” reinforces Dessa’s assessment of Nehemiah’s fallen status (254). The use of his shortened

surname in this scene highlights the extent to which the man has been diminished by his obsessive desire for Dessa. Just as Dessa sees a different man in front of her, Nehemiah is unable to (be)hold the woman he claims to know so well. Dessa is not the eroticized, primitive object that Nehemiah imagined, but a more complex and shifting subject that he simply cannot reconcile with his own ideologies of race, class, and gender.

With his system of belief thrown into turmoil (“Science. Research. The mind of the darky...”) and his expertise in the area of slave management undermined, “Nemi” is not longer able to ply his trade in words.²⁰ As Elizabeth Meese writes, “Nemi without Dessa, without the other, cannot function as a speaking subject; he has no language without her to under/write his symbolization” (151). The unreadable pages of Nehemiah’s book scattered across the floor represent “Nehemiah’s inability to capture Dessa in print” and “his failure to secure her recapture” (Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues” 132).²¹ Listening to his wild ranting, Dessa acknowledges her part in his downfall: “Nemi was low; and I was the cause of him being so low” (255).

Thus, by (mis)leading him on, Dessa contributes to Nehemiah’s demise, allowing her escape and enabling her discursive control over her own story. Warding off Nehemiah and the other white men who surround her at the jail, Dessa shouts, “Ware the goods,” turning the terms of sexual abuse back against those who enact it (243). Yet Dessa also recalls how terrified she was by Nehemiah’s demand for her to remove her dress. She knew that the scars on her thighs would provide the “evidence” Nehemiah needed to repossess her (243). However, aware of his fallen status, Dessa uses her words

²⁰ As McDowell writes, Dessa “sabotages Nehemiah’s enterprise,” one that, because of its goal of strengthening the system of slavery, represents a “form of slave trading” (“Negotiating” 149).

²¹ The reaction of the sheriff reinforces Nehemiah’s failures: “Nemi, ain’t nothing but some scribbling on

to “make them see” that Nehemiah is “crazy” (248). Stressing how he had “dragged other girls in here . . . And undressed them” (249). Mislead by her, Nehemiah is unable to read, write, or recapture Dessa. Rather, through these various interventions, Dessa, as Henderson notes, “repudiates male attempts to write and read black female subjectivity” (“Speaking in Tongues” 133).

With Nehemiah’s control figuratively challenged by Dessa’s orality in section one, her narration completes the dismantling of Nehemiah’s authority in the novel’s final chapter (Sievers 111). However, Dessa does not perform this struggle against white male control on her own. Whereas a community of black rebels make possible her first two escapes in section one, it is an interracial coalition of women that secures Dessa’s freedom in the narrative’s final pages. Nemi’s final charge, “You-all in this together . . . womanhood,” underscores the power of this female alliance (255).

While Dessa retains control over this scene, her narration establishes Ruth’s role in particular as essential to this liberation scenario (253-4).²² To get to this crucial point, both Ruth and Dessa undergo a process of (un)learning about the other.²³ As Elizabeth Meese contends, “Each teaches the other what she does not know she does not know she knows about herself and the other woman” (145). After the prologue and the novel’s first section wrest control of Dessa’s story from a white male amanuensis, the narrative development is contingent upon Ruth and Dessa’s ability to forge a relationship of mutuality and respect. The narrative’s attention to the “dynamics of alterity” in their

here Can’t no one read this.” Ruth also highlights this fact by noting “these [pages] is blank, sheriff” (255).

²² See Griffin on the healing qualities of “sensual” (rather than sexual) touch in *Dessa Rose* and other black women’s writing.

²³ Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu frames this process as a series of “reversals” in the text (29-56). See also King 364, Meese 145.

developing friendship emphasizes the significance of their “entangled relationship” to story of Dessa’s liberation (Meese 145, 148).²⁴

In order to relate to each other despite/through difference, Ruth and Dessa must move from conceiving the other in monolithic terms to relating to each other on an individual level (Meese 135). Williams’ novel exposes and rewrites the terms of each woman’s perceptions of the other to enact this transformation. Representations of interracial sex and desire are an integral part of this process. Both Ruth and Dessa must negotiate racialized notion of desire and sexuality as they revise their understanding of each other. By mining the terms of unspeakable desire, the novel “destroys the mechanics of stereotypes” and “(un)writ[es] the historic (re)presentations of race as racism” (Meese 135). As Ruth and Dessa learn to “reverse perspectives” and see things from the standpoint of the other, they are able to form an effective crossracial alliance out of their “everyday knowledge” of each other’s lives (Seyla Behabib as quoted in Wyatt 891; Wyatt 897).²⁵

The emphasis the process of (un)learning creates a “liberating” process not only for the characters, but also for the audience. Readers vicariously experience “a transformative interrogation of received and accepted systems of belief concerning race” (Mitchell 66). Like the focus on Nehemiah’s (mis)reading in section one, the subsequent sections of *Dessa Rose* emphasize the subjective nature of “truth” and representation in order to instruct the audience how to read the novel – as well as other narratives of

²⁴ The blurb on the back cover of the 1987 Berkley Books edition of the novel reinforces this point: “MISS RUFEL. A plantation owner providing refuge for runaway slaves. DESSA ROSE. A pregnant slave condemned to death for an act of rebellion. United by fate, divided by jealousy and hatred, they were two women locked in a battle of freedom, of sisterhood, of friendship, and of love.”

²⁵ For a discussion of feminist “standpoint theory” see Wyatt 890-1.

“history.” As Ashraf Rushdy puts it, “Williams teaches us to read resistantly, to look for the submerged voices in master texts, [and] to examine the cultural apparatus that create hegemonic literary traditions” (*Neo-slave* 166). The novel, as Williams’ suggests elsewhere, stands as her attempt “to balance the representation of the character of institutional oppression” (“Lion’s History” 246). Over the course of what Williams herself refers to as the second half of the narrative, the overlapping voices of Ruth and Dessa create a dialogic paradigm that enables characters and willing readers to relate to others across and through difference (“Lion’s History” 255).

Section two is largely devoted to disclosing Ruth’s perception of Dessa. Similar to section one, the white other’s (mis)reading of Dessa is preempted by her own memories, experiences, and point of view. This strategy conditions the reader to look critically at Ruth’s initial image of Dessa. In stark contrast with section one, however, there is no sharp division between Dessa’s memories and Ruth’s presence in the text. Instead, the opening pages of the second section weave Ruth’s image into Dessa’s reveries. Images of the white woman filter into her consciousness as Dessa awakes from the nurturing memories of a corn husking ceremony. As she falls back into a state of post-partum delirium, Dessa’s mind integrates Ruth’s image into her dreams. “Oh, why this dream so hard? Mammy would have a time trying to explain this dream. A white woman – is that your enemies? ... could be ... could be –” (84). Unable to decipher the dream’s significance, Dessa’s urgency conveys her confusion over how this white woman figures into her new life. Dessa’s attempt to determine the meaning of Ruth’s persistence

in her dreams anticipates the interdependency that structures their relationship in the second half of the narrative.²⁶

The visual emphasis of these moments of lucidity during her postpartum recovery conveys Dessa's understanding of whiteness as a pervasive threat. For Dessa, whiteness stands as an oppressive, violent monolithic power that threatens to consume her and everything that matters in her life. The figure of the white woman represents "everything [Dessa] feared and hated" (182). Stealing glimpses of Ruth, the imagery she associates with the white woman – the shock of her pale skin, "fire[y]" hair, and blood-red mouth ("like an open wound across the milky paleness of her face") – connotes hostility and violence (82, 88, 90). Dessa cannot even begin to contemplate "why the woman let them stay" or why she willingly nursed Dessa's baby. These facts were "too big to think about." The narrator explains, "It went against everything [Dessa] had been taught to think about white women but to inspect that fact too closely was almost to deny her own existence" (123). Because of her own experience, Dessa is incapable of reconciling Ruth's "goodness" with what she knows about white women.²⁷ Aligning Ruth with all the other white people who had mistreated her, Dessa cannot separate her racialized perception of "Rufel" from her own violent understanding and experience of whiteness.

The focus on the visual draws attention to each woman's (mis)reading of the other. For Ruth as well, knowledge of the other is premised on what she sees; racist imagery and ideologies condition her assessment of the fugitives she harbors at Sutton's

²⁶ As a number of critics have argued, their individual liberation is intertwined and premised on their interdependency. Stephanie Sievers, for one, argues that the "intersection of identities" establishes "Ruth's presence in the text" as "a necessary condition of Dessa's becoming 'free' in a psychological sense" (112). Similarly, Nicole R. King maintains that the "dismantling of Dessa's slave identity" is inextricably tied to "the dismantling of Rufel's identity as slave mistress" (364).

²⁷ As Ada tells her later in the novel, Ruth has been "good to us" (175).

Glen (McDowell, "Negotiating" 151-2). For instance, she "associate[s]...Ada with the stock cuts used to illustrate newspaper advertisements of slave sales and runaways" (150). Similarly, in her first encounter with Nathan, Ruth compares his face to the stereotypical characterization of blackness as performed on the minstrel stage. "[E]xpecting to see the bulbous lips and bulging eyes of a burnt-cork minstrel," Ruth is shocked to find herself appreciating his physical appearance and acknowledging that Nathan is "handsome" (132). An amateur artist who spends time sketching "whimsical figures," Ruth "draws" conclusions about "darkies" "as much from her imagination as life" (156).

Like her initial view of Ada and Nathan, Ruth's "knowledge" of Dessa is informed by a racial stereotype, the eroticized image of the black "wench." Studying Dessa closely as she sleeps, Ruth expresses doubts over the "facts" the other fugitives told her about "the wench" (93). Taking in Dessa's slim form and "chocolate" color, Ruth focuses in particular on the claim that Dessa "had been sold south by a cruel master" who had intended to "ruin" her. Ruth rebuffs this charge on the basis of "the girl's ... scarless" back (93). With no obvious signs of abuse, Ruth is able to disregard the story of sexual abuse. As Dessa observes later in the novel, "Miz Lady had to *see* the goods before she would buy the story" (205). Ruth's need for visual proof, Ashraf Rushdy argues, suggests how slavery construed black bodies and black life stories as "commodities for white consumption." Ruth's authority as white mistress places her in a privileged position that

allows her to assume control over the (hi)stories of her slaves: “she owns then, she owns their stories” (*Neo-slave* 158, 153).²⁸

Dessa’s dark skin and (marked) female body consign her to Ruth’s monolithic conception of “the wench.” Ruth sees Dessa as one of a number of indistinct female slaves. She objectifies Dessa by placing her in an indistinguishable class of slave women who claimed to have been subjected to “unspeakable” things by their masters. “[T]o hear Ada tell it,” Ruth scoffs, “every runaway in the world was escaping from a lecherous master” (93). With Dessa’s subjectivity effaced, Ruth is able to elide the actual material conditions of enslaved black women (Wyatt 882).

Attributing desire and sexuality to a reductive notion of “attraction,” Ruth remains willfully blind to the centrality of power and domination in relations between white men and enslaved women. Because she sees “nothing attractive” in black women, Ruth “didn’t believe a word of” the fugitive’s stories of sexual abuse (93). “No white man would do that,” she had insisted to her “Mammy” (whose given name is Dorcas); Ruth then adds “maliciously” under her breath, “unless he tied a sack over her head first” (94). Not even Dorcas’ stinging slap and sharp words dispel Ruth’s disbelief: “Men, . . . men can do things a *lady* can’t even guess at” (94). In response to Ruth’s insistence that “Everyone know men like em half white and whiter,” Dorcas attempts to connect that fact of light-skinned slaves to a history of sexual abuse. “Miz Rufel, Mammy had snapped, ‘Lawd know it must be some way for high yeller to git like that!’” Unable to “concede this [fact] openly” (94), Ruth displaces the rape of slave women with the

²⁸ Ruth’s irritation at not being able to assign Dorcas (“Mammy”) a birthdate (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 152) and Dessa’s baby a name reinforces this argument (*Dessa Rose* 92; 159-60). See also Jean Wyatt for an interesting reading of cross-racial misrecognition using Lacanian categories of analysis.

“ideology of seduction” (Hartman 81).²⁹ Dubbing the inference of rape a “lie,” Ruth privately interprets black women as the culprits of sexual misconduct: “(White man, indeed! [Anabelle and Dessa were] probably run off by the mistress for making up to the master)” (95).

By stressing the word “lady” in her reproach, Dorcas bids Ruth “not to pretend to be able to speak for the slave” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 153). Yet more to the point, the emphasis on “lady” highlights the divergent yet entwined positions of black and white women. Ruth refuses to acknowledge the stories of sexual mistreatment because to do so would violate the familial conception of slavery that structures her cherished memories of “Mammy” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 152). To admit one slave woman could be violated would mean all slave women, including her beloved “Mammy,” could be subject to that such abuse. Ruth must disregard the “darky’s word” in order to “cling” to the system of beliefs that sustain her.

Moreover, if Ruth believed the slaves’ stories of abuse, she would have to consider her own role in the system that “violate[s] a body so” (144). Like Ada’s mistress, a “see-nothing, say-nothing white womens,” Ruth is unwilling to see how her privileged position is related to slave women’s physical vulnerability (189). White women’s passive stance justified a “do-nothing” posture regarding enslaved women’s sexual abuse. Dessa makes this clear later in the novel when she recalls how Ada had begged her mistress to keep Anabelle safe from the master’s sexual advances. In reply,

²⁹ Saidiya Hartman argues that to disguise “the primacy and extremity of violence in the master-slave relations,” a “discourse of seduction” developed in which consent was conflated with coercion, feeling with submission, intimacy with domination, and reciprocity with violence (81). The blame for sexual liaisons between masters and slave women, in other words, was placed squarely on enslaved black women.

her mistress told Ada not to “bring that kind of talk in her house” (189). By enforcing silence, the white mistress could negate the sexual abuse of Annabelle and Ada.

Deeming coercive unions between white men and black women speakable, the novel points to the complicity of white women like Ruth in the sexual abuse of black women. The numerous individual stories and allusions to the sexual violation of black women by white men subtly woven into the fabric of the novel emphasize how silence worked to sanction white men’s access to black women. Ignoring a history that denied the rape of black women, this subtext of vulnerability and abuse demonstrates that sexualized violence was, in historian Catherine Clinton’s words, a “by-product of slavery” (“With a Whip in His Hand” 208).³⁰ Williams’ narrative, like the work of Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Nell Painter, stresses rape as “an integral part of slavery, not an aberration or dysfunction” (Clinton “With a Whip in His Hand” 208). Dessa’s refrain “cause they can,” which reverberates throughout the novel, succinctly establishes the centrality of power in acts of sexual violence.³¹ As Kathleen Brown argues, “White planters’ sexual involvement with female slaves was simultaneously an expression of gender, racial, and class dominance in a society where manual labor, female identity, and dark skin signified subordinate status” (332). Establishing white (male) sexual abuse as a given, Williams’s novel articulates what long been deemed unspeakable in dominant historical literature.³²

³⁰ Clinton reminds us that “[m]any scholars of slavery refuse to recognize the pervasiveness and significance of sexual abuse of slave women. Some deny that rape took place or claim that, if they did, they were either rare or isolated instances” (“With a Whip in His Hand” 207). Even today, she adds, it remains difficult to “convince some historians that the thousands of slave mulattoes were not all the products of mutual consent” (“With a Whip in His Hand” 209).

³¹ When Ruth asks Dessa, for example, why her mistress “used her so,” Dessa responds, “Cause she can” (149). See also 13, 46-7, 56, 220, 254-55.

³² As Catherine Clinton explains, some historians have argued that by articulating the rape and sexual abuse of slave women, historical scholarship re-victimizes these women by painting them as “powerless” and

Williams's subtext of sexual abuse does not sensationalize or foreground the victimization of slave women. Rather, through her construction of the "forbidden subject of slavery," the novel emphasizes black women's resistance even within the restrictions placed upon them under slavery. In this way, the novel works to subvert any facile notions of slave women as either pliant concubines or powerless victims. When Ada determines that she will not be able to save her daughter from her master's advances, for example, she decides to run away with her daughter in order to protect her. Perhaps even more to the point, however, is the example of Linda, who joins Dessa on the coffle. Rather than be subjected to yet another rape, Linda kills the guard who drags her behind a bush. Her deadly act of resistance instigates the bloody rebellion that frees Dessa, Nathan, and Cully. Dessa's memory constructs Linda as a powerful revolutionary when she recalls how "All hell broke loose" when "Linda appeared in the clearing, her dress torn and gaping, the bloody rock still clutched in her manacled hands" (60).

Just as "Mammy's" slap is an attempt to interrupt Ruth's ignorant assumptions, Williams' representation of black women's sexual vulnerability and resistance works to disrupt the hold hegemonic historical narratives have on readers' knowledge of slavery. By revealing this suppressed history, the narrative works to undermine the racist ideologies that shape Ruth's initial image of Dessa. Even after Nathan describes Dessa's violation in detail, Ruth can envision but not fully believe that such violence is enacted upon enslaved women. Instead, she places responsibility for Dessa's sufferings on Dessa herself. To earn such mistreatment, Ruth tells Nathan, "She must have done something

inflicting more "damage to black women's images by dwelling on slave women as victims" ("With a Whip in His Hand" 207). However, a number of scholars (including Hazel Carby, Angela Davis, and bell hooks) join Clinton in arguing that the rape "of African-American women must be placed squarely with in

pretty bad” (145). Indeed, like Nehemiah, Ruth attributes the scars on “the wench’s thighs” as a sign of sexual transgression (144). Not fully believing the scars are there, Ruth quips to Nathan, “I bet she was making up to the master; that’s why the mistress was so cruel” (145).

Ruth’s sexualized image of Dessa is underscored by her angry reaction to what she perceives as Dessa’s impertinent charge that Ruth had no “mammy.” Hurt and incensed by Dessa’s challenge, Ruth declares “venomously,” “Uppity, insolent slut! Ought to be whipped. And if she was mine, I’d do it, too...” (128). Her knee-jerk reaction causes her to invoke the same “grammar of racism” that informs Nehemiah’s process of reading Dessa (Meese 142-3). Relying on stereotypes, these words sexualize Dessa’s offense and threaten physical violence in retaliation. Not simply a “spontaneous outburst[t] of rage,” Ruth’s reaction suggests that mistress’s violent treatment of female slaves were “just as often deliberate measure[s] to reform behavior” (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese as quoted in Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 148). Eroticizing Dessa’s (mis)conduct, Ruth’s response exposes how black (mis)behavior was sexualized to justify the practical necessity of white domination and mastery.

At the same time as it works to expose the institutionalized racism that warps Ruth’s perception of Dessa, Williams’ narrative simultaneously diffuses racial difference as natural and fixed. Ruth’s act of nursing Dessa’s baby reveals this quite clearly. The narrator explains that Ruth “had taken the baby to her bosom almost without thought, to quiet his wailing” (105). In retrospect, Ruth attributes her actions to the same “craziness” that led her to harbor fugitives on her plantation after her husband failed to return. But at

the historical foreground,” so such liaisons will not continue to be characterized as “white men winning over pliant concubines” (“With a Whip in His Hand” 208).

that point in time, Ruth notes, nursing the baby “had seemed to her as natural as tuneless crooning or baby talk” (105). A mother herself, Ruth feels an acute sense of purpose when she sees the bloodied body of the newborn child. Only when “his cries were stilled and she looked down upon the sleek black head, the nut-brown face flattened against the pearly paleness of her breast, had she become conscious of what she was doing” (105). With her attention drawn to the difference in their skin color, Ruth experiences “[a] wave of embarrassment” and guilt. Yet this reaction is fleeting. Once she realizes no one is present to witness her act and she discerns that “[n]o one would ever know,” she resumes feeding Dessa’s baby (105).

Reasoning that “he’s hungry and only a baby,” Ruth’s response suggests the illusion of racial difference (105). In fact, this scene emphasizes the contingency of race as a social category. Racial difference only matters if anyone else is present to witness Ruth’s act. Just as when she nurses her own babies, Ruth is lulled to sleep “by the gentle rhythm” of a nursing child (105). The interruption of this scene by “the startled faces of Ada and Harker” reinvests this moment with a particular social meaning. “By means of the female body and feeling,” as Marta E. Sanchez argues, Ruth “transgresses a white value system” (29). It is the shocked reactions of Ada and Harker that renders the act transgressive.³³ Their response destabilizes the inclination to read Ruth’s act of nursing the baby as simply a “natural” female response. By serving as a “wet nurse for a darky,”

³³ Marta Sanchez argues that Williams purposely lures the reader to essentialize Ruth’s decision to nurse Dessa’s baby within a paradigm of gender “sameness” (emphasizing feminine qualities of empathy and the shared experience of motherhood) in order to more effectively establish the significance of racial difference to the social context in which the act takes place (28-9).

Ruth upsets the conventional power dynamic that placed black female bodies in service to whites under slavery (105).³⁴

Rather than signal her lack of race prejudice, Ruth's ambivalence points to "the social nature of race," how the "meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective and personal practice" (Omi and Winant as quoted in Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 19-20). Moreover, by juxtaposing Ruth's response to the (imagined) reaction of other southern whites, the narrative emphasizes the shifting quality of racial distinction. Whereas Ruth's (white) "neighbors might – *would* – see it" as a violation of nature ("His dark skin might as well be fur"), Ruth redefines what is "natural" (134-5). To ignore a hungry baby, Ruth suggests, would be perverse (98). Still, she realizes that her act "was a little crazy" (98). However, it is only when Ruth considers the reaction of the world outside that she shrinks "from the thought of nursing him, a *pickaninny*" (134).

The reactions of Ada and Harker instill a similar sense of "mortification" in Ruth. Like the imagined perspective of her white neighbors, the response of the fugitive slaves reminds Ruth of the social meaning of her act. Even more powerful, however, is the pleasure Ruth experiences at having "confounded" the slaves' expectations. Ruth notes, "Their consternation had been almost comic. Ada had stuttered and Harker had gaped. In the pause Rufel had recovered her own composure, feeling somehow vindicated in her actions by their very confusion" (105). Signaling the power differential between mistress and slave, the "pause" that allows Ruth to recover connects the pleasure of confounding the slaves with the performance of mastery (Sanchez 29). The sole "Mistress of the

³⁴ In her study of breastfeeding in the antebellum South, Sally McMillen does document cases where white women nursed black infants. Arguing that "Available milk, not race was the criterion," she (rather hastily) concludes, "Sharing maternal nourishment between white women and black infants was one way some southern women rose above racial prejudice" (as quoted in Beaulieu 38).

House,” and the only white person around for miles, Ruth’s color and class allow her to “write” the norms of the plantation (103). For Ruth, their response confers the privileged status that the “undefertial slaves” had heretofore refused to grant her (Sanchez 29). Thus, the encounter between Ruth, Harker, and Ada allows Ruth to reestablish the very “social hierarchy and moral order that [her act of nursing] apparently would violate” (Sanchez 29). The ambiguity of the Ruth’s motivations for breastfeeding “Mony,” as Dessa eventually names her child, is reinforced later in the novel when Ruth “use[s] the baby’s hunger to spite the wench” (139). Although Ruth catches herself and feels ashamed at having temporarily denied the baby sustenance, her actions also betray the pleasure she experiences as a result of having “some real power” to wield over Dessa and the other slaves (138).

In the process of exploring the social contingency of race, the narrative’s representation of Ruth’s act of crossracial breastfeeding undermines divisive notions of racial difference by emphasizing the pragmatism and sentiment that compel Ruth to continue nursing Dessa’s child. The narrator explains, Ruth “was the only nursing woman on the place...and so [she] continued out of necessity to suckle the baby. Whatever care she might have had about the wisdom of her action was soon forgotten in the wonder she felt at the baby” (106). Like her son Timmy, Ruth showed not aversion but fascination and delight in the baby’s skin color:

She herself liked to watch the baby as he nursed, the way he screwed up his face and clenched his fist with effort, the contrast between his mulberry-colored mouth and the pink areola surrounding her nipple, between his caramel-colored fist and the rosy cream of her breast (106).

Yet Ruth's emotional attachment to Moby does not negate the importance of racial difference. As Dessa acknowledges later in the novel, Ruth "did know the difference between black and white; ... But where white peoples look at black and see something ugly, something hateful, she saw color" (183-4).

The "difference" Dessa and the other fugitives sense in Ruth is predicated on the white woman's "willingness to interact with and to learn from the self-emancipated African-Americans" (Mitchell 77-8). Ruth does not, as Michele Wallace observes, have "revolutionary or abolitionist intentions"; rather, "she stumbles accidentally into [a] situation" that necessitates her reliance on fugitive slaves (143). Having been abandoned by her husband and their slaves, and estranged from her own family, Ruth harbors runaway slaves as a means of survival for herself and her young children. Ruth's position of vulnerability enables her openness to change and difference. Williams herself acknowledges that it requires extraordinary circumstances for Ruth to (ideologically) move beyond the confines of the racist social structure that she grew up in. Williams explains:

I wanted [Ruth] to come on as this stereotyped conception of the Southern belle, but now in dire straits as opposed to the very secure circumstances that we usually think of such a character in. Also, I felt that the kind of alliance that I was proposing between a white woman and a slave would most logically come out of necessity rather than some kind of liberal feeling. Where was a Southern woman going to be educated to that kind of liberal feeling in the [antebellum] South? I just happened to believe that people for the most part really try to rise

to whatever circumstances are, that given the need, they can in fact grow and develop (as cited in Sievers 108).

Ruth's circumstances, along with her location on a remote, ramshackle plantation, outside of the purview of white men, "allows the development of a different kind of plantation community" (Harrison 121; Sievers 108).

Isolated both geographically and socially from the world outside Sutton's Glen, Ruth is also emotionally vulnerable. Besides her husband's abandonment, Ruth is still grieving over the death of "Mammy"/Dorcas. Without the "Mammy" whom Ruth regarded as her closest companion and confidante, she is desperately lonely. Moreover, Ruth's safe understanding of herself and her world is thrown into turmoil when Dessa challenges her idealized memories of her cherished "Mammy" (133). While she bristles at Dessa's "insolen[t]" charge that she "don't even know" and "ain't got no 'mammy,'" Ruth is deeply affected by Dessa's words (124-25). She is particularly troubled by the realization of how little she actually knew about Dorcas. The questions Ruth asks herself disclose her increasing anxiety over her memories of their relationship: "Had she a sweetheart? A child" (136)? How old had Mammy been? ... Had she any children" (137)? "Had anyone ever whipped her" (148). Dorcas represents the center of Ruth's most tender experiences and memories of childhood and adolescence. Consequently, these questions rock the foundation of her identity as they force Ruth to wonder if Dorcas "had truly loved her" (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 154).

In seeking the answer to the question "How could you love someone who used you so," Ruth is forced out of her own standpoint and begins to consider the standpoint of others (154). The insight she gains "from adopting the other's ... perspective" makes

Ruth think critically about the system that made a slave out of Dorcas and grants her privilege (Wyatt 890). While it is Dessa who forces Ruth to confront her lack of knowledge about Dorcas, it is Nathan who pushes Ruth to think critically about her relationship to her slave(s). Envious of the laughter and rapport shared by Dessa and the other fugitive slaves at the Glen, Ruth seeks out Nathan's company after their initial chance encounter. As Ruth talks with him about Dorcas and they begin to trade stories, she is drawn to Nathan emotionally and attracted to him physically. Over time, a friendship develops between them. Their easy companionship brings them mutual pleasure: Ruth is happy to listen to Nathan's stories and Nathan is glad to spend time with her. For Ruth, as the narrator explains, "[Nathan's] company came, in large measure, to replace the companionship Rufel had shared with Mammy." At the same time, the narrative emphasizes that this relationship was strikingly different. Ruth "could not see him as she had seen Mammy, almost as an extension of herself" (157). Instead, Ruth's relationship with Nathan helps her leave behind the illusions upon which she had built her understanding of the world around her.

Unlike Dorcas, Nathan does not try to shield Ruth from difficult or painful experiences. Talking with Nathan about her past, Ruth comes to see, as Ann E. Trapasso writes, that "her life has been built upon denial" (226). Ruth eventually discerns that Dorcas kept things from her, abetting Ruth's desire to not see what was happening around her. She is shocked, for instance, when Nathan tells her that her husband was a gambler. Ruth is confused and angry over the fact that Dorcas never shared this information with her. Nathan forces Ruth to consider that Dorcas may have tried to tell her about her husband's gambling problem, but that Ruth might not have been willing to

acknowledge the truth. Indeed, Nathan suggests that neither woman wanted to openly acknowledge this troubling turn of events. “Maybe Dorcas was wrong[,] . . . maybe she should have told you flat out front what she knowed,” Nathan comments, but “You was happy; all that time, least she thought you was happy and that was what yo’all both wanted” (165).

Through her interactions with Dessa and Nathan, Ruth comes to acknowledge that there were aspects to “Mammy” that she had neither seen nor contemplated. Her “comfortable” and “comforting” image of Dorcas undermined by Dessa’s challenge and her own uncertainty, Ruth admits that “Mammy” may indeed have been “spiteful, bitter, secretly rebellious” (158). Her conversations with Nathan impel Ruth to reevaluate her relationship with Dorcas. Ruth begins to contemplate how she might have contributed to “Mammy’s” oppression. Over time, the narrator explains, Ruth comes to feel “personally responsible for Mammy’s pain, personally connected to it, not as the soother of hurt as Mammy had always been for her, but as the source of that pain” (147). The fact that Ruth has trouble conjuring up the image of “Mammy’s” face in her mind suggests that rather than seeing Dorcas merely as “an extension of herself,” Ruth has begun to grant Dorcas agency and subjectivity (157).

Her interactions with Dessa and Nathan lead Ruth to grant the fugitive slaves the authority “to help her recreate Dorcas’s personality so that it is multifaceted and not simply a romanticized extension of her own” (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 157). The questions Ruth grapples with and the new insights she gains about her relationship with Dorcas lead her to look more critically at herself and the world around her. Reevaluating her closest relationships, not only her bond with Dorcas but also with her husband, Ruth reconsiders

the predicament of others, including the fugitive slaves at Sutton's Glen. Ruth wonders, for example, if her protests over the whipping of slaves had actually altered her husband's practices. "Why, she couldn't remember the last time a darky had been whipped at the Glen; certainly she would have heard the screams (*unless Bertie had taken to whipping them in the woods*) or Mammy would have told her -- Wouldn't she" (148)?

The process of reevaluating her relationship with Dorcas causes Ruth to consider her own complicity in the slave system. She finally recognizes herself as an "unseeing" mistress. This knowledge leaves her "in a daze" as she is forced to acknowledge that "[s]he hadn't known" and "had purposefully kept herself from knowing" the two people closest to her, Dorcas and her husband. With this insight, Ruth begins to contemplate "[w]hat else she had refused to see" (166).

This process leads Ruth to confront her present situation. She realizes that if her husband, Bertie, returned home, she would not be able to protect the fugitives. As opposed to Ruth and her children who have come to view them as individuals and as friends, Bertie would see the fugitives simply as "capital" (162). Like her plea to stop the whippings, Ruth's will and words would be ineffectual against those of her husband. Moreover, Ruth's discussions with Nathan lead her to juxtapose her own subjugated status with that of the fugitive slaves. Ruth understands that if Bertie returned, "she would have no more rights than" the people in the quarters (162). Once she begins to perceive social inequalities from the perspective of the fugitives, Ruth's allegiance to the patriarchal tenets of white superiority is undermined. She begins to question and dismiss the essentialist notions of racial difference that (misin)formed her view of the fugitives.

Indeed, discerning their mutual dependence, Ruth initiates a deeper relationship with the community of fugitive slaves at Sutton's Glen. She asks questions about "the people in the quarters" and listens with care and concern as Nathan talks to her about their lives. In the process, Ruth begins to consider what "her relationship to the African Americans can be if they are not her slaves" (Trespaso 226). In particular, her relationship with Nathan and, more indirectly, her interactions with Dessa empower Ruth to view not only others, but also herself differently. In treating Ruth "like a person," Nathan's pointed questions about her husband and her future give Ruth the confidence to take charge of her own destiny. Expressing doubt that "she could be that blind again," Ruth considers Nathan's proposal that she join in their money-making scheme to finance a new life for herself and her children (161). Finding that "she is intrigued despite herself," Ruth dares to contemplate life away from the plantation and apart from her husband. She declares her husband "dead" and begins "imagining" all she would be able to do with the five thousand dollars she would earn by working with the fugitives (166). Moreover, Dessa provides Ruth with an example of how a woman could "make action possible." Acknowledging the "girl's will" and "spunk," Ruth observes with awe that even though Dessa "was nothing but a little old colored gal, ... she had helped to make herself free" (158). Like her interest in the money-making scam, Ruth's grudging admiration indicates that like Dessa, she would like to have a hand in her own liberation.

This newfound confidence and sense of community inspires Ruth to initiate a dialogue with Dessa. Accidentally walking in on Dessa while she is undressed, Ruth is profoundly disturbed by the sight of Dessa's scarred body. The image leaves Ruth weak-kneed and near tears. "[R]egretting what she had seen," Ruth concedes that Dessa "had a

right to hide her scars, her pain” (166-7). Through her reaction Ruth seems to acknowledge the “deeper story” behind Dessa’s scars. Her “impulsive” decision to “reopen the subject” of their misunderstanding about “Mammy” indicates, in fact, that Ruth has come to see Dessa’s story as “one not entirely unrelated to her concern for Mammy” (167, 151). In relating the experiences of the two enslaved women, Ruth concedes Dessa the authority to tell her own story, and to “speak” for Dorcas as well (Rushdy, *Neo-slave* 157).

Demonstrating Ruth’s willingness to learn from and “listen to voices of the fugitive slaves on her plantation,” this scene also signals Ruth’s shift away from relying the visual to read others (Rushdy “Reading Mammy” 386). Embarrassed by the way “she’d tried to argue [Dessa] down about Mammy,” Ruth approaches the subject with care and respect in an attempt to reconcile their differences. She states, “that other day, we wasn’t talking about the same person. Your mammy birthed you, and mines, mines just helped raise me.” With assurance Ruth adds, “But she loved me, ... she loved me, just like yours loved you” (167). While the scene opens with an emphasis on the visual impression made by Dessa’s scarred body, during the process of their exchange Ruth’s focus turns from the visual to the verbal. It is only at the end of their short dialogue when once again Ruth becomes “suddenly conscious of the wench’s half-nakedness.” Signaling her respect for Dessa’s story and feelings, Ruth grants Dessa “privacy” to cover herself and shuts the door (167).

Along with the change in Ruth’s attitude and approach, Dessa’s reply also conveys a tentative respect for the other. Delivered “without anger or regret, Dessa’s short response, “I know that, Mis’ess, ... I know that,” suggests the two women have

reached a *détente* (167). The halting dialogue initiated here indicates that each woman has begun to acknowledge the way in which their individual stories are bound up together (Meese 147). As Ashraf Rushdy argues, by working through their oppositional interpretations of “Mammy,” this scene explores how the two women have begun “working toward a definition of how to read other people in the hope of achieving meaningful dialogue and managing a sense of supportive community” (*Neo-slave* 151).

Unspeakable Desire

However, just when the narrative raises the possibility of an alliance between Ruth and Dessa, Williams introduces the seemingly insurmountable stress of an interracial love affair. In the scene that immediately follows this dialogue, we learn that “Rufel and Nathan made love for the first time later that week” (167). Placed directly after her dialogue with Dessa, this scene underscores the shift in Ruth’s racist assumptions and attitudes. Indeed, having devoted no small amount of attention to Ruth and Nathan’s growing friendship, the novel seems to frame their relationship as a meaningful courtship. The short paragraph that describes their “love-making” begins with a straightforward description of the scene. Nathan “walked into the bedroom without knocking, closed the door behind him, told her to take off her clothes. He spoke with such authority that almost without thought her hand moved to the drawstring at her bosom” (167). This scene depicts Ruth’s response as both “natural” and inevitable by comparing her sexual intimacy with Nathan to her “unthinking” act of nursing Mony. Indeed, after taking Ruth in his arms, the narrator points out that Nathan’s first act is to “nuzzl[e] at her breast” (167). While Nathan clearly orchestrates the scene, the final lines of this paragraph suggest the experience of mutual pleasure: “His tongue left trails of

liquid fire along her flesh. He eased between her thighs, entering that nameless deep, filling that lonely cavern. Will-less, she gathered around him; the day exploded into a thousand nights and endless stars” (168).

Moving from matter-of-fact description to overtly sensual imagery, the narrative might seem poised to romanticize their relationship. However, Williams carefully structures two points of rupture into this moment of intimacy in order to forestall any easy conclusions about their relationship.³⁵ In the first break, the narrator provides a more detailed history of Nathan’s relationship with his former lover and mistress, Miz Lorraine. The narrator’s version of the story is preempted by Nathan’s own account told earlier scene in the narrative. In this subsequent scene, Nathan charms Ruth with the tale of how he “Loved pretty white womens like [her]” “when [he] was slaved.” Nathan’s “audacious spiel” rewrites the coercive terms of his “service” to Miz Lorraine (163). By revealing the terms of unspeakable desire that Nathan leaves out of his version of this story, the narrator’s account deconstructs the particular myths of black male and white female sexuality that might (mis)inform readers’ conception of Nathan and Ruth’s relationship.

Following quite literally on the moment of Ruth’s climax, the narrative’s description of Miz Lorraine and her penchant for slave lovers establishes the specific historical context of their relationship. Purchased by a white woman when he was fifteen years old and forced to become her “bedmate,” Nathan’s experience under slavery invokes the conditions and consequences of sex across the color line in the antebellum

³⁵ Following James Scott, I purposely employ the term “rupture” here to signal the political intentions of this narrative structure/intervention. Scott uses this term to describe an overt (as compared to concealed) act of rebellion by the subordinate (196).

South. Indeed, the narrative moves abruptly from Ruth's experience of sexual pleasure to the description of Nathan's reluctant orgasm to emphasize the significance of their different social positions.

Coining the narrative's reference to "unspeakable desire," the first break in the love scene between Nathan and Ruth details Nathan's sexual initiation by Miz Lorraine. The narrative relies on this phrase in this particular scene to establish the explicit connection between sexuality, discourse, and power. The young Nathan we are introduced to is inexperienced and unwilling. When summoned to "the House" and led up the back stairs to his mistress's bedroom, Nathan is "totally unnerved" (168). Not sure why he has been called to this private space, but fully aware of the codes against his presence in a white woman's bed chamber and the consequences if he is caught in the company of his scantily-clad mistress, Nathan is "[f]rightened half out of his mind" and "totally unable to achieve an erection" (168). Aroused by her slave's fear and empowered by his impotence, Miz Lorraine orders him to her bed where she performs oral sex on the terrified Nathan amid his urgent protests. Seizing control of the phallus, Miz Lorraine appropriates, both literally and figuratively, the conventional masculine role in heterosexual sex. With the scent of sex on her lips, his mistress whispers a warning to the newly initiated Nathan: 'If you ever breathe a word of this to anybody, I'll chop it off' (169).

Williams's construction of unspeakable desire illustrates how slaveholding women, like white men, expressed power sexually. With its attention to Nathan's relationship with Miz Lorraine, the narrative reveals how sexuality was intricately tied to

the mechanisms of subordination in the relationship between slave and slaveholder.³⁶

Domination extends into the bedroom where Miz Lorraine uses her power as a slaveholder to force young black men into sexual liaisons. Moreover, the white mistress manipulates her status to threaten violence so as to insure her slaves' silence. Remaining Miz Lorraine's lover longer than any previous candidate, Nathan successfully uses his silence to defer being "put out to stud," sold off, or suffering an even more severe fate (170).

By emphasizing the controlling desire of the white mistress, this scene simultaneously deconstructs two myths. The first is the image of the sexually aggressive black male that originated during the period of racial slavery but developed into a virulent ideology during and after the period of Reconstruction.³⁷ Nathan's youth, innocence, and reluctance helps to destabilize the racist image of threatening black male sexuality. Yet more forcefully, the emphasis on coercion displaces this myth in order to expose the complex historical context out of which discourses of racialized sexuality and interracial desire emerged. Within the particular "sexual economy" of the antebellum South, Nathan's body is defined as a commodity (Davis, "Private Law" 221-2). His sexuality "purchased" by his white mistress, Nathan has no "say" over how his body can be used.³⁸ If Nathan refuses to submit to his mistress, he can be sold away or tortured. If Nathan

³⁶ As Winthrop Jordan has argued, "dominion over [enslaved] Negroes [extended] to the bed, where the sex act itself served as ritualistic re-enactment of the daily pattern of social dominance" (Jordan 141).

Williams's construction of Miz Lorraine, in fact, invites intertextual comparison with Harriet Jacobs's "jealous mistress" Mrs. Flint where, as Karen Sanchez-Eppler has cogently argued, Jacobs lays bare the erotics of abuse in the relationship between Mrs. Flint and Linda Brent (94).

³⁷ In recent scholarship many historians insist that the "myth of the black rapist" was not created (nor was it necessary) until after emancipation when it became part of strategy to defend/uphold white supremacy (Hodes, "Sex Across the Color Line").

³⁸ For an extended study on the "sexual economy" of the antebellum South, see Adrienne D. Davis, "The Private Law of Race and Sex: An Antebellum Perspective."

speaks about their sexual relationship, his mistress has the power to not merely castrate him, but kill him. Miz Lorraine's promise to "call the laws on him" or "yell rape" if he does not obey her commands, which reminds us that her status as a property-owning woman grants her the power to both sexually (ab)use Nathan's body and to define that (ab)use (*Dessa Rose* 169, 170; Block 143).³⁹ Indeed, the white woman's threats conjure up a long history of juridical and other public discourse maintained white patriarchal power and privilege by stigmatizing black male sexuality and criminalizing the transgression of racial boundaries.⁴⁰

To reinforce the centrality of power in their relationship, the novel establishes Nathan's pleasure as inseparable from the "terror" that he experiences with Miz Lorraine. Nathan is surprised that his mistress's quiet threat ("I'll chop it off") serves to heighten his arousal and intensify his pleasure. "He believed her," the narrator explains, "but the threat didn't deflate him; rather the knowledge that he lay in danger, not only of his member but of his life, sent him plunging up a peak of unspeakable desire" (169). The combination of Nathan's terror and ecstasy recalls Foucault's assertion that "[p]leasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another," instead, "they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement" (98).⁴¹ Well after his escape from Miz Lorraine, Nathan makes the overlapping relationship of pleasure and power clear as he talks to the

³⁹ Addressing the power of the master over female slaves and servants, Sharon Block argues that white men held "the power to define an act" (Block 143). In both relations of dominance, Block proves that "economic mastery created sexual mastery, allowing masters to manipulate forced sexual encounters into a mimicry of consensual ones" (143).

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Brown, *Goodwives* and Higginbotham, *Shades of Freedom*.

⁴¹ Note that my use of "power" is informed by Foucault's definition of power as shifting and variable. According to Foucault, power does not emanate from a central point, rather, it is "the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power . . . [which] are always local and unstable"(92-93).

men in the quarters at Sutton's Glen about his experience with her. Nathan explains that "the terror" itself made sex with white women "so sweet": "If climax, as some men said, was like death, then a nigger died a double death in a white woman's arms. And he had survived it" (171). Nathan's act of "speaking" unspeakable desire ultimately becomes an expression of defiance.

The second myth this scene deconstructs is the image of virtuous white womanhood. Unlike the innocent image of the vulnerable, genteel lady represented, for example, in the figure of Margaret Whitehead in Styron's *Confessions*, Williams represents the white mistress as sexual aggressor. Miz Lorraine is a highly erotic white woman who designates the black male body the object of her desire. Wealthy, headstrong, and shrewd, Miz Lorraine, we are told, fulfills her "wild nature" by taking young "slave lovers" who are either "bought from friends or sent up from her own plantation off the Georgia seacoast" (168). Miz Lorraine, like male slave owners, experiences and expresses power sexually, and her experience of sexual pleasure cannot be separated from her desire for control and domination. Indeed, Miz Lorraine's "desire for control over her own body," as Elizabeth Harrison observes, "results in her using her slave's" (125). In her bedroom, for example, Nathan is not allowed to take the lead in sex; the one time he dares to do so, Miz Lorraine becomes so enraged that she threatens to "yell rape," "to sell him, to have him flayed within an inch of his life" (170). In fact, when Miz Lorraine feels she is losing control over her slave conquests, she "[sells] them off" and initiates a new, younger, more pliant lover (169).

Although Miz Lorraine's choice to fulfill her "wild nature" by having sex with enslaved men is clearly coercive, her desire for black men is not deemed pernicious.⁴² Undeniably, Miz Lorraine herself expresses a patently racist view of black men. While Miz Lorraine would "fuck niggers," she refused to talk to them because to do so, she told Nathan, "was like trying to get monkeys to talk" (169). The narrative, however, does not depict interracial sex or ardent female sexuality as deviant or, as "some of the white men people" put it, "freakish" (170). Rather, Miz Lorraine's sexual drive is deemed "natural," and her choice of lovers is motivated by a combination of desire and practicality. The narrator explains that "[n]ature was strong" in Miz Lorraine and the urgency of her sexual appetite prompted her to call on young slaves like Nathan who were obliged to obey her. Yet in choosing her "belly-warmers from among the lowest of the low," Miz Lorraine was also driven by pragmatism. For, as Nathan comes to understand, "[i]f she had tried to satisfy her sexual needs with white men, even ones outside her own class, she would have no way of ensuring their silence. If a black man boasted, she could have his life" (169-70).

Just as Nathan feared the consequences of their relationship, Miz Lorraine, however independent or wealthy, could not risk the retribution of the white (male) community should they learn of her habits. An elite, white, unwed "lady," Miz Lorraine's proclivity for illicit sex with young black male slaves defies strict southern codes of elite white femininity. While punishment may not have been as severe for her as for Nathan, Miz Lorraine's insistence on strict silence implies that she would also suffer swift

⁴² Public discourse against "amalgamation" (both between and within bodies) runs long and deep in the North American history but is perhaps best suggested in the phrase "abominable mixture" used in legal statutes prohibiting unions between white women and black men. See 1691 Virginia statute as cited in Johnston (172). See also Lemire on the development of public discourse surrounding "miscegenation."

retribution if her secrets were revealed. The urgency behind Miz Lorraine's threat of silence stresses that ideologies of elite white femininity were integral to the maintenance of gender and racial hierarchies (K. Brown 211).

Yet like Nathan, Miz Lorraine's pleasure must be understood within the context of the furtive evasion of white male control. Miz Lorraine's pleasure, according to Foucault, "comes from exercising power" on the one hand, and "having to evade [it], . . . flee from it, fool it, or travesty it" on the other (45). Nathan's mistress disregards "convention" in her private life through her sexual liaisons with black men, as well as in her public life through her independence. In order to exercise sexual as well as economic autonomy within the confines of patriarchal society, Miz Lorraine must retain at least a façade of propriety. Her success can be interpreted as a measure of Miz Lorraine's power. In addition to running her own plantations, Miz Lorraine successfully avoids being "stifled," as she puts it, by "the chains of matrimony" (and pregnancy) until she is almost forty years old (168).⁴³

Through its attention to the relationship between Miz Lorraine and Nathan the novel also suggests the permeability of racial boundaries that discourses of interracial sex established and maintained. Like Kathleen Brown's research, Williams' novel points to the fact that "[l]egal initiatives designed to put sexual regulations to the service of race relations did not meet with full or automatic compliance" (206).⁴⁴ In particular, the

Moreover, as with Styron's depiction of Nat Turner, interracial desire and sex has long been associated with depravity and the pathological (see, e.g. Gilman, Hernton, Mumford, and Tenzer).

⁴³ Ruth raises the question of "babies" in her conversation with Nathan about his "trade" in white women. Nathan's dismissal ("I makes love... not babies") suggests that he and/or Miz Lorraine relied on some form of birth control to avoid pregnancy (164).

⁴⁴ In fact, despite the long history of claims to the contrary, recent historical scholarship reveals a certain degree of tolerance for black-white unions from the early colonial period through the end of racial slavery. Certainly most tolerance was displayed towards white men's relationships (coercive and otherwise) with black women since their illicit affairs were not a social threat nor were they an economic burden (in fact

contention that white women would never willingly become intimately involved with black men has long influenced mainstream discourse on black-white coupling. A number of contemporary historians make clear, however, that even with harsh legal and social proscriptions, relationships between white women and black men were not as uncommon as many would like to believe.⁴⁵ Thus, simply by constructing a relationship between a white woman and a black man, the novel works to unhinge entrenched notions of superiority/inferiority that are embedded in ideologies of racialized sexuality.

Significantly, readers “hear” an abridged and reconstituted version of Nathan’s experience “Lov[ing] pretty white womens” before we read the narrator’s extended version of Miz Lorraine’s coercion. Knowing his mistress “could have his life” if he boasted, Nathan had “talked to no one about what he did” until he was far removed from “the twin goads of fear and desire” (170-1). Once he settles at Sutton’s Glen, however, Nathan “[finds] his voice” and freely articulates his experience of unspeakable desire, telling the story again and again to “the men in the Quarters late at night” (171). Using the story to prove his manhood, Nathan tells his peers “There was ... nothing in the world sweet as that white woman’s pussy” (171).

Linking sex and secrecy, Nathan construes his relationship with Miz Lorraine as a variety of “poaching” that challenges the master’s power (Scott xiii, 190-1).⁴⁶ In “getting

they could prove economically profitable to the master during slavery). However, as historians have revealed, relationships between white women and black men (slave and free) were also tacitly tolerated, though certainly not to the same degree. See Brown, *Goodwives*; and especially Hodes, “Sex Across the Color Line” and *White Women, Black Men*.

⁴⁵In his study of antebellum Virginia, James Hugo Johnston was perhaps one of the few early twentieth-century historians to conclude that “the white women in the slave period, in many cases, succumbed to the same human weaknesses, lusts, and temptations that white men seemed too human to overcome” (250). See also Hodes, “Sex Across the Color Line” 39-40, Johnston, 171, 182, 250-267, Williamson 51-53, Spickard 244-246.

⁴⁶Nathan’s “hidden transcript” revises the terms of his relationship to Miz Lorraine by recognizing how white men would interpret it as a threat to the “material conditions” of slavery (Scott 198). On poaching as a tactic of the oppressed, see also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* 36-7.

something that the white man always kept for himself,” Nathan’s suggests that he derives a sense of power from the secret knowledge that he has thwarted white male control (187). Nathan’s interpretation recognizes how sexualized concepts of gender and race were part of the “basis of patriarchal power” (K. Brown 200).⁴⁷ Indeed, as Kathleen Brown contends, laws and taboos against interracial sex were specifically aimed at controlling the sexuality of white women and restricting the sexual access of black men. Interpreting sex with a white woman as act that transgresses the white male authority, Nathan “walked a little taller, aware of the power hanging secret and heavy between his legs” (171).⁴⁸ While this phallogentric image (most likely in response to Styron’s “emasculat[i]on” of Nat Turner) reinforces the myth of black men’s sexual prowess, it further deconstructs pathological notions of black sexuality by grounding his response in historical terms.⁴⁹

Nathan’s bragging is the story of “backstage talk” that James Scott defines as an unobtrusive realm of struggle (191). Such talk is not a simple “relief valve” that “weaken[s] ‘real’ resistance”; rather, it represents a practical means by which subordinates exert pressure that seeks to “renegotiate power relations” (190). Backstage discourse enables subordinates to “seek privilege” amongst their peers by recasting themselves as heroes and allowing them to take revenge. As importantly, this discourse threatens the dominant material and symbolic order by creating a “breach” that invites the possibility of further (individual and collective) action (191-2, 197). As Scott points out,

⁴⁷See also Brown, *Goodwives* 197-98.

⁴⁸Nathan’s bragging will be discussed in more detail later in the novel to reveal the subversive nature of this “backstage talk” (Scott 190).

⁴⁹More generally, Williams’ attention to the theme of interracial sex and desire in her novel can be linked to her lingering “outrage” at Styron’s *Confessions*. Much of the criticism of his novel centered on Styron’s characterization of Turner as a man driven by his lust for and violent obsession with white women, as well

“A small success is likely to encourage others to venture further, and the process can escalate rapidly” (196). It might be argued, in fact, that by sharing his successful “risk-taking” with others, Nathan’s ritual gossip helps to create the conditions that empower the fugitives to stage their collective challenge to the institution of slavery through Harker’s slave-selling scheme (Scott 196).

Moreover, in the account of his experience that he shares with Ruth, Nathan uses storytelling to figuratively appropriate his commodified body (169). Reconceiving his experience with Miz Lorraine as an apprenticeship in an unconventional “trade,” Nathan views sex as a commodity that gives him greater “value” (163-4, 169). Sex is “Serious business,” Nathan explains to Ruth. “Other people makes carriages and clothes. White mens make labor and . . . lust,” and he “makes love” to white (“cough”) ladies (164). Distinguishing his liaisons with white women from the “lust” of white men (“I makes love . . . not babies”), Nathan alludes to both the sexual and reproductive abuse of black women. As with the stories he tells to the men in the quarters, Nathan’s own abuse is not addressed. However, he does literally and figuratively “cough” at the idealized view of the white southern “lady” as he redefines his own productivity (164). No longer forced to hold his tongue, Nathan’s reinterpretation of his “service” to Miz Lorraine – however partial or facetious – allows him to figuratively reclaim his own body.

Additionally, the success of the scam the fugitives dream up is directly linked to the breach created by Nathan’s bragging. Couched in flirtatious language, Nathan and Ruth’s banter about his practice of “loving white womens” follows on the heels of their discussion about Ruth’s participation in the fugitive’s money-making scheme. Their

as his desire for other black men. William’s characterization of Nathan might be said to rewrite black “manhood” by emphasizing his heterosexual erotic power.

flirtation turns “serious” in their next scene together when Nathan enters Ruth’s bedroom and “ma[kes] love” to her (167). This narrative trajectory points to Nathan’s seduction of Ruth as part of a strategy to gain her alliance. By interrupting the scene of their lovemaking with the history of his coercive relationship with Miz Lorraine, the novel’s structure seems to corroborate this motive. The juxtaposition of the story of Nathan’s coercion with the scene of Ruth’s seduction suggests that the man does more than recast his experience in words. Nathan’s bragging can be seen as part of a larger pattern of dissent in which Nathan appropriates his eroticized body and uses sexual intimacy to make Ruth “willing.” In doing so, Nathan “exploits” the breach created by his unpunished “risk-taking” with Miz Lorraine in order to enable a form of collective action that would have very real material effects on the slave system (Scott 196). Ruth’s participation would capacitate a moneymaking scam that would challenge and undermine “the white owner structure” in the novel (Beaulieu 36).⁵⁰

The reaction of Harker and Cully reinforces securing Ruth’s participation in the scheme as Nathan’s motive. When they hear from Ada that Nathan is “Laying up with Miz Lady” the two declare, “Doggone it . . . I didn’t believe old Nathan’d do it! . . . Miz Lady bound to come in on the deal now” (179)! Dessa’s less enthusiastic comments also lend credence to this goal. She declares to Harker, “This how we going to work our way out West, . . . on our backs” (180)? Additionally, later in the novel, when trying to soothe Dessa’s feelings of betrayal and anger, Harker tells Dessa she “should be proud of [Nathan] for doing something like this.” “Maybe,” he adds, the mistress would not have

⁵⁰ For a further discussion of the symbolic importance of the slave-selling scam, see Beaulieu 35-6, McDowell, “Negotiating” 157-9, Mitchell 82, and Trespasso 277-8.

agreed to be part of the plan “just for the money.” “All we know,” Harker concludes, “is [now] she willing” (203-4).

From this perspective, Nathan’s intimate relationship with Ruth would seem to be a reversal of the terms of unspeakable desire established in his relationship with Miz Lorraine. The opening lines of describing Nathan and Ruth’s first sexual encounter reinforce the idea that Nathan is plying his “trade” in order to seduce Ruth into participating in “the plan.” Nathan’s abrupt and aggressive manner almost parallels his own seduction by Miz Lorraine. The narrator’s matter-of-fact description underscores Nathan’s sense of purpose and authority: “He walked into the bedroom without knocking, closed the door behind him, told her to take her clothes off. He spoke with such authority that almost without thought [Ruth’s] hand moved to the drawstring at her bosom” (167). By initiating and controlling the scene of seduction, Nathan inverts the oppressor/oppressed paradigm enacted in his relationship with Miz Lorraine. The narrative suggests that Nathan reclaims the terms of unspeakable desire in order to undermine slavery’s hold on both him and his peers.

Thus, this first rupture in the scene of Nathan and Ruth’s lovemaking establishes a complex scenario in which readers must assess their intimacy. Through the story of Miz Lorraine, the novel establishes a historical context of interracial sex that displaces received knowledge about erotic relationships between black men and white women. At the same time, by raising suspicions about the motives for their sexual relationship, this structural intervention inhibits the unproblematic romanticization of Ruth and Nathan’s union.

However, Williams's narrative does not allow us to easily explain away the relationship between Nathan and Ruth as politically expedient. The nature of their liaison, in fact, is left quite ambiguous, complicating the narrative's representation of unspeakable desire. Although there is clearly sufficient evidence to read Nathan's seduction of Ruth as ploy to secure her allegiance, there is also evidence to suggest otherwise. For instance, Ruth is clearly leaning toward participating in the scheme well before she sleeps with Nathan. Indeed, her fervent assertion that "Bertie [is] dead" suggests not only this inclination, but also her growing emotional attachment to Nathan (166).

Moreover, Nathan himself never claims frank self-interest as a motive. Rather, when Dessa confronts him about his relationship with Ruth, Nathan will only respond that "feels plenty good" to him and insists he need no better explanation than that (187). The pleasure Nathan's response emphasizes can, of course, be linked to his own experience and expression of power. For, as Nathan tells Dessa, his enjoyment of Ruth cannot be separated from the thrill he gets out of sleeping with a white man's wife (186-7). But in the two brief instances the narrative allows Nathan to speak about his relationship with Ruth, his words suggest that he is not only attracted to her, but also that he also genuinely cares for Ruth. In both scenes, Nathan contrasts his feelings for Ruth with his regard for Dessa. When Dessa charges that he only likes Ruth "cause she white," Nathan links his delight in Ruth's whiteness to his appreciation of the "pretty red color under [Dessa's] skin" and exclaims, "Now what of that" (187). In the second instance Nathan asks Dessa, "why can't I like you and her, too" (224)?

Structurally, the novel also destabilizes any “simplistic conclusions” about Nathan’s motives (Harrison 125).⁵¹ First, the sexual relationship between Ruth and Nathan invites a parallel reading of the initiation of an intimate relationship between Dessa and Harker. Similar to the timing of Nathan’s seduction of Ruth, Harker begins to court Dessa at a point where the fugitives need to convince her to participate in the scam. Before Harker expresses his romantic interest in her, Dessa is adamantly against joining in the scheme. It is only after they become lovers that Dessa changes her mind and elects to participate by serving as Ruth’s “maid” on the journey (206-7). If we extended this parallel construction and link the critical reading of Harker and Dessa’ relationship to Nathan’s liaison with Ruth, we must consider that both their relationships are also based on mutual respect, affection, and attraction. In fact, the similarity between the two couples’ courtships suggests that for both Ruth and Dessa, heterosexual intimacy “help[s] to lay the foundation for [individual] agency” (Griffin 527).⁵²

The second structural element that hampers any simple assessment of Nathan’s motives involves a brief return to the scene of his sexual encounter with Ruth. Significantly, while the first rupture interrupts our view of their act, it does not inhibit their lovemaking. Directly following the story of Miz Lorraine, we return to the scene of their spent passion. Contrasting Nathan’s “eggplant” color to the “pearly glow” of

⁵¹ The exchange in which Ruth confesses that she is considering moving west with the fugitives also suggests Nathan’s emotional bond with Ruth. In fact, he might have initiated this plan since, according to Ruth, it was Nathan who informed her that “other womens have gone west” (238).

⁵² By helping Dessa to see herself as attractive, “desirable and worthy of love,” the novel establishes her romantic relationship with Harker as crucial to Dessa’s sense of self-empowerment. In an intimate moment Harker kisses her scarred thighs and declares that rather than “impair” her, the scars only “increase her value” (Griffin 206). Despite the fact that virtually every article on the *Dessa Rose* emphasizes the importance of Dessa’s relationship with Harker, none of the critical scholarship on this book has addressed the parallel to the relationship between Ruth and Nathan established by the narrative’s structure. It is interesting to note that only Farah Jasmine Griffin has called attention to the problematic impulse of using heterosexual desire to place “value” on Dessa’s scarred body. She suggests that because her “value” is

Ruth's skin, the narrator sketches a scene of intimacy and reciprocal pleasure: "They sweated and rested, his face buried in her bosom, one leg caught between hers. She stroked his back; his fingers played purposefully in matted pubic hair, teasing the slick lips of her vagina. Supine, she waited for him to enter her again" (171). The construction of this moment emphasizes warmth and mutual satisfaction. Indeed, the description of their casually entwined bodies suggests that tenderness and passion can exist "beyond" the restrictions society places on interracial couples.

Indeed, whatever complicated motives lead the two to initiate their sexual relationship, the frequency of Ruth and Nathan's meetings and their palpable need for each other suggest a union that moves beyond desperation on the one hand and a strategy of seduction on the other.⁵³ As the group sets out to enact their scam, for instance, Dessa, seated between the two lovers recalls how she "could feel them *wanting* at each other. Not with they hands, now; they didn't even hardly touch *me*. But it was something between them..." (213). Indeed, having witnessed their courtship and the growing intensity of their affair, we are not, unlike Dessa, all that surprised when Harker suggests that Ruth and Nathan are in love. Once again, the context of Nathan's feelings for Ruth is contrasted to Dessa's experience of intimacy. When Harker asks Dessa, "Would you have gived Kaine up . . . if they had asked you," he implies that the lovers share a level of love and commitment similar to what Dessa experienced with Kaine. Dessa's heart reels as she considers this analogy: "It's like that, he feel like that for her" (204)? The speculation that Nathan and Ruth are in love, however, is left unresolved in the narrative. Despite

premised on Dessa's "ability to evoke desire in a man," this validation is mired in patriarchal conceptions of beauty (531).

⁵³ Ruth's motivations are also suspect given the fact that she alludes to using him for emotional support and material sustenance as she did Dorcas (Harrison 125).

Harker's claim that Nathan "can speak for himself" about his feelings for Ruth, he does not (204).

Aside from the two brief exchanges between Dessa and Nathan discussed above, what little learn we about their union is filtered through the perception of others. Rendering their desire "unspeakable," the shift to Dessa's controlling voice does not allow either of the lovers to characterize their relationship. While Dessa's narration reminds us of the problematic historical discourse that inhibits our understanding of interracial intimacy, it does not thwart their relationship. The lovers continue to meet, despite the disapproval of others in the community. However, any attempt to decipher the intimate nature of their affair becomes quite difficult for once the couple becomes sexually intimate, the narrative shifts into Dessa's control.

The introduction of Dessa's narrative voice marks the second rupture in the novel's representation of Ruth and Nathan's intimacy. Just as they resume their lovemaking, Dessa enters the room and, in shock and anger, chastises Nathan and insults Ruth, calling her "*Miz Ruint*" (172). This moment provides the structural transition to Dessa's voice in the novel's final section. Dessa's enraged response to sex between a black man and a white woman quite literally propels her to "seize discursive control of the narrative" (Henderson "Speaking" 131). But whereas the first rupture establishes the historical conditions that affect interracial desire and intimacy, the second narrative intrusion introduces a working concept of the "personal" to the complex scenario in which readers must assess their intimacy.

Negotiating Interracial Intimacy

Unexplored in critical discussions of the novel, the emphasis on Dessa's personal response to interracial intimacy structures the third section of *Dessa Rose*. This last section is premised on Dessa's negotiation of the conflicts and ambiguities surrounding interracial intimacy. Figuratively invoking the feminist theory "the personal is political," Williams' narrative contemplates both the value and limits of identity politics through the construction of Dessa's narrative voice (Meese 50).⁵⁴ By personalizing Dessa's response to Nathan and Ruth's moment of intimacy, the narrative connects the terms of unspeakable desire to the problematics of cross-racial affiliation. As Dessa comes to terms with Nathan and Ruth's romantic relationship, she moves toward a friendship with Ruth that enables them to form an effective political alliance. This process expands the narrative conception of desire to express a wider range of social relationships rather than merely articulate conditions of sexual or romantic intimacy (Goldman 329n10, Sedgwick, *Between Men* 2).⁵⁵ Contrasting and connecting the terms of sexual and non-sexual intimacy, the novel invests the historical consequences of unspeakable desire with particular contemporary social significance.

Emphasizing the visual, Dessa's reaction to the lovers calls attention to her own Manichean conception of "black" and "white": "I never *seed* such a thing! Nathan – laying cross that white woman – Black as night and so – so *satisfied*" (175). Whereas Ruth's sexual relationship with Nathan symbolizes a shift away from her essentialized

⁵⁴ See also Breines who cites the Combahee River Collective as "one of the first political groups to use the term identity politics" (1116-7). The concept springs from personal experience of oppression. As Combahee activist Barbara Smith explains: "the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (as quoted in Breines 1117).

⁵⁵ See Anne Goldman's use of desire as an expression of subjectivity, "of the individual's entire wants and needs" (Goldman 329n10). See also Meese 52 and Butler, "Desire."

view of others, Dessa's response to their relationship highlights her entrenched notions of whiteness. Despite the tentative truce achieved by Ruth's attempt to bridge their differences over Dorcas, Dessa cannot disassociate Ruth from her understanding of whiteness as dangerous and violent. In fact, Ruth's sexual relationship with Nathan reaffirms Dessa's conception of the "White woman [as] everything [she] feared and hated" (182).

Dessa ties the personal to the political first by emphasizing the danger their relationship posed for not only the lovers, but also the other fugitives at Sutton's Glen. Emphasizing the simultaneous experience of race, class, and gender oppression, Dessa emphasizes the structures of inequality that uphold the "conspiracy of silence" that surrounds interracial intimacy (Stember 106). Dessa explains that talk about their affair was discouraged, even within the quarter (184, 192). However, Dessa makes clear that everyone in the quarters worried about the danger their intimate relationship posed to them all (192-3). Everyone "was uneasy about Nathan," she notes, "man or woman they was uneasy," for they knew that "[w]hite men would kill to keep something like this quiet" (193).

Dessa's assertion confirms that it is not merely the act itself but the discourse surrounding it that white men fear.⁵⁶ A consensual relationship between a married white lady and a fugitive slave undermines the carefully constructed precepts of white male supremacy, black inferiority, and white female vulnerability upon which racial slavery, and ultimately, white supremacy, was based. As with the narrator's depiction of Nathan's relationship with Miz Lorraine, Dessa's reading of Nathan and Ruth's affair

⁵⁶ Recent historical scholarship has made this point as well (see especially the work of Hodes and Brown, cited earlier and in ch. 1).

demonstrates how discursive control is a crucial tool in preserving gender and race hierarchies. Indeed, critical attention to the murder of Emmet Till and Styron's figurative "killing" of Nat Turner's heroic stature underscores the lingering significance of the "coverstories" erected by white men to explain the more complex (hi)story of interracial intimacy.⁵⁷

In particular, Dessa's memory of seeing Nathan "sprawled in [the] whiteness" of Ruth's bed recalls the conditions that have shaped her understanding of whiteness as threatening. Suggesting the power of literary production, Dessa's interpretation of the image of the two lovers links Nathan's dark body to black words on a page (Goldman 322). The black body and literary production become intertwined in Dessa's understanding of white authority, violation, and violence. Dessa recalls the sight of Ruth's red hair and swears it "looked like blood to [her]" (177). The image she conjures up forcefully reestablishes the connection between sexuality, discourse, and power crafted in the first section of the novel. Her own experiences with her mistress and Adam Nehemiah have taught Dessa that racist ideology regards both the black body and the printed word as "marks to be used . . . wiped out" (185).⁵⁸

By emphasizing the unspeakable nature of their affair, Dessa's narration reminds us that however consensual and caring the union of Ruth and Nathan might be, their unequal status dooms their relationship even within the isolated space of Sutton's Glen. "If the master returned home," she observes, "the slave was dead" (181). While Ruth's white privilege would protect her, Nathan had no protection under the law: "Nathan could

⁵⁷ Created by white men, this coverstory emphasizes "the overwhelming desperate longing black men have to sexually violate the bodies of white women" (hooks, *Yearning* 58). On Till see, e.g., Feldstein. On Styron see John Clarke's edited collection.

⁵⁸ Goldman uses the analogy of a used newspaper that is "read and discarded" (322).

die tomorrow cause of this mess. I was mad at him for letting that white woman put him in such risk and I was mad at her for doing it" (181). Ruth's privilege also allows her to idealize their relationship. When, at the end of the novel, she hints at moving west with the fugitives, for instance, Dessa's sharp rebuke reminds both Ruth and the reader that a long-term (public) relationship with Nathan is an impossibility in a land where black people are enslaved and need whites to "stand protection" for them (239, 259). Envisioning an unproblematic future with Nathan, Ruth ignores the specific political conditions that shape her relationship with him.

The novel also ties the personal to the political through the feelings of hurt and rejection that Dessa experiences as a result of Nathan's relationship with Ruth. Dessa's narration problematizes both the notion of interracial "attraction" and the frame of (mutual) desire by linking individual choice to social constructions of beauty and attraction and grounding both in historical terms.⁵⁹ Most clearly, she determines Nathan's notion of "choice" as reductive. While Nathan might want to see them simply as a "couple," others read their interracial romance as a "political statement" (Zimmerman 524).⁶⁰ The reactions of the other fugitives suggest motives that range from personal "taste" to political expediency and revenge.⁶¹ Breaking down along gender lines, these responses signal the "historical hurts" engendered by black men's relationships with

⁵⁹ As Farah Jasmine Griffin points out, nineteenth-century discourses constituted the black body as "unsightly, deformed, [and] diseased." This provided "ideological justification for the enslavement, torture, dismemberment and domination that came to characterize new world slavery" (520).

⁶⁰ This construction of Nathan's view of his relationship with a white woman echoes some of the twentieth-century subjects Zimmerman interviews in his research on interracial romantic relations between Peace Corps workers in the late 1960s and early 1970s (524).

⁶¹ For a more nuanced reading of "taste" and "preference" with regards to interracial dating and romance, see Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies* 27-33.

white women.⁶² While the black men on the Glen “thought Nathan’s rutting up there with a white woman was a fine turnaround . . . after the way white mens was always taking our womens,” the black women, as Dessa notes, “didn’t get as much kick” out of the affair (192). One woman, in fact, thought that “Nathan should’ve raped [Ruth] or at least knocked her round a little” since this is what they had been subject to at the hands of white men (192). The temptation to reverse the terms of black women’s abuse by subjecting white women to the same treatment signals the imbrication of constructions of white womanhood with the sexual abuse of black women.⁶³ Through this discussion Williams’ narrative complicates the concept of “choice” by linking the vulnerability of black women to the privilege of white “ladies.”

Moreover, by wrestling with the notion of “attraction,” Dessa’s narration highlights how racial ideologies shape ideas of beauty and desirability. In a discussion in the quarters between two fugitive slaves, Ned and Janet, for instance, Ned silences Janet’s complaints about the affair between Nathan and Ruth with the charge that nobody would want “an old mule” like her. He remarks, “Yo’ all just jealous cause he not diddling you” (198). Dessa’s reaction to Ned’s comments point to the pain and anger generated by black men choosing white women as lovers: “Was that what they thought of us? Mules. I was so choked I couldn’t speak” (198).

⁶² Ann Trapasso uses the term “historical hurts” to refer to those circumstances that lead to confrontations between black and white women, including “the exploitation of the black mother and white women having sexual relationships with black men” (225). I expand on this definition here to stress the relational nature of black and white womanhood through the gendered interpretations of black-white coupling. On relational nature of black and white womanhood see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race.” On contemporary reverberations see Franklin chs. 1 and 5, Patterson, *Rituals of Blood* ch. 1, Wade-Gayles 87-131, and Ware’s introduction to *Beyond the Pale*.

⁶³ Adam Nehemiah’s friend Miss Janet, for example, is not against “slave concubinage” because of its sanctioned coercion of slave women; rather, she views “the practice was an affront to white womanhood” (38).

Dessa's tumult of emotions suggests how white definitions of femininity affect black women's subjectivity. Recalling how she and the other black women around her had been "used" physically and sexually under slavery, Dessa begins to doubt her own desirability. As she remembers her own attraction to Kaine, she wonders if her husband had "really wanted me to be like Mistress, . . . like Miz Ruint, that doughy skin and slippery hair? Was that what they wanted" (199)? Moreover, by linking her feelings of inadequacy to her inability to nurse her son, Dessa lays bare how Nathan and Ruth's relationship made her feel "less than a woman" (183). Seeing the two lovers together on that bed, Dessa explains, "was like seeing [Ruth] nurse Mony for the first time all over again" (175).

Despite this comparative impulse, Dessa's narration strongly articulates that the issue is not one of sexual competition. She is infuriated by her fellow fugitives' claims that her angry response to Nathan's affair is a sign of her jealousy, and that Dessa's bitterness is motivated by her own romantic interest in Nathan. Dessa explains, "that was all they could think of when it come to a man and a woman: Somebody had to be lusting after somebody else. I had to be wanting Nathan for myself" (203). Rather, Dessa views Nathan's relationship with Ruth as a threat to her "brotherly" bond with Nathan and as divisive to the fugitive's sense of community. In this context, she reads Nathan's choice of lover as a violent betrayal: "The remembrance of them in that bed kept stabbing at my eyes, my heart" (176). Interpreting Ruth's claim on Nathan in terms of ownership and allegiance, their union represents yet another instance when someone Dessa loves is taken away from her by a white person. After seeing Nathan in bed with Ruth, Dessa

recalls “something inside of [her] was screaming, Can’t I have nothing? Can’t I have nothing” (175).

Dessa’s close ties with Nathan and the other men in the quarters are strained by her refusal to apologize to Ruth and join in their slave-selling scam. Dessa tells Harker, “Nathan, Cully, you – all you-all seem to have nothing to say to me don’t have something to do with some white woman or this plan” (205). In this way Dessa’s narration suggests how interracial relationships create stumbling blocks for relationships between black women and men. Even when Harker tells her that she “going to lose friendship [with Nathan] over a white woman” (204), Dessa’s feelings of betrayal will not allow her to accept or condone Nathan’s affair with Ruth.

Dessa vividly links her anger to the threat this relationship poses to her notion of community. Grounded in personal experience and shared struggle, Dessa’s conception of community cannot integrate a white woman into the circle of intimates who have loved and protected her. She notes, “it was like my own flesh had betrayed me. Nathan and Cully, and Harker, too, had risked something for me and I felt bound to them – and them to me – as tight as bloodkin. Miz Ruint wasn’t no part of that knot; the only way she could get in was to loosen it” (188). Contemplating the bond that had developed between her, Cully, Harker, and Nathan in surviving not one but two escapes, Dessa concludes, “I never thought one of them could be so ignorant to do something that hurt me so bad. White woman was everything I feared and hated, and it hurt me that one of them would want to love with her” (182). Devastated by what she interprets as Nathan’s insensitivity and unable to trust anyone white, Dessa resolves not to join in the scheme that would “put [her] freedom in [a] white woman’s hand” (185).

By structuring the narrative development around Dessa's increasing trust in Ruth, the novel interprets the divisiveness of interracial coupling as a red herring for crossracial political activism. Rather than premise community on exclusionary terms of racial affiliation, Dessa comes to imagine a more inclusive "coalitional politics" through her close, personal interaction with Ruth (Meese 50-1, Friedman 40). Having been convinced by Harker to participate in the slave-selling scam, Dessa forms a more intimate connection not only with Ruth, but also with the others who participate. In the process, Dessa, Ruth, and the rest of the fugitives come together in family-like fashion as they enact their daring plan of liberation.⁶⁴ Recalling how Nathan and Ruth rarely even held hands during their trip south, Dessa explains, "after while, we was too close to hold hands, if you know what I mean, too mindful about everybody to show much that was special to one person" (225).

Healing her friendship with Nathan is the first step of Dessa's progress toward relinquishing her monolithic conception of whiteness and moving toward a more inclusive understanding of the politics of personal experience.⁶⁵ After witnessing a slave auction during the course of their journey, both Dessa and Nathan are profoundly disturbed and find comfort in each other's presence. As Nathan says while wiping away his tears, "We been through some times, ain't we" (223)? By acknowledging their shared pain and triumph, this moment not only renews their friendship, it also presses

⁶⁴ Sara Evans argues that the social activism of the 1960s and 1970s tended to subsume the personal within the political. She writes, "Identity politics, in effect, proposed that political communities were conceptualized as familylike. In practice, where differences existed, they were denied or subordinated" (as quoted in Ritterhouse 509). While the political activism of this period proved liberating for some, Jennifer Ritterhouse argues that for others "the conflation of public and private and the denial of difference limited the possibilities for further change" (510).

⁶⁵ As Terry Eagleton argues, "Political struggle cannot be *reduced* to the personal, or vice versa" (as quoted in Meese 51).

Dessa to let go of her anger and take a “risk” on “chance,” on ‘change,’ on new on ‘another” (223). Nathan and Dessa do not reconcile their differences; rather, they tacitly “agree to respect each other’s differences.” This is important to Dessa’s shift toward a politics of identification because it demonstrates that people “can be friends without sharing the same viewpoints” (Harrison 127).

Dessa’s willingness to take a chance on trusting Ruth is also inspired by her recognition of their shared vulnerability as women in a patriarchal society. Just before the slave auction scene, the two women are forced to work together to fight off a drunken planter (Mr. Oscar) who intends to rape Ruth. This event undermines the image of the pampered and protected white women that Dessa has at the novel’s opening: “Was I white, I might would fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head” (9). Reflecting on the danger and fear she shares with Ruth, Dessa begins to leave behind some of her resentment (Harrison 128). She notes, “The white woman was subject to the same ravishment as me.... I will never forget the fear that come on me when Miz Lady called me on Mr. Oscar, *knowing* that she was as helpless in this as I was, that our only protection was ourselves and each others” (220). The sense of empowerment they feel after successfully fending off the white man is also signaled by the secrecy they assign to the incident. In keeping this incident from Harker and Nathan, the two women express a certain amount of faith in the care and protection they provide for each other.

While this incident brings them together and forces Dessa to reevaluate her notions of Ruth and white womanhood, it is the sustained, daily contact and shared goals that helps to inspire both women to want to view each other as friends by the end of the novel. Dessa recalls the stories and laughter they all share and exhibits a growing

closeness to both Ruth and her baby, Clara. This process reflects the understanding of a group of multiracial feminists who stated in 1979, “you simply cannot do political action without personal interaction” (as quoted in Breines 1123). However, it is only through personal connection without sacrificing or subordinating difference that the two women are able to truly see things from the other’s standpoint and build a friendship based mutual respect (Ritterhouse 509). Contemplating Ruth’s offer to be friends, Dessa notes, “This was something I hadn’t thought of in her. And I wanted to believe it. I don’t think I wronged her at first, but the white woman I’d opened my eyes to at the start of the summer wasn’t the one I partnered with on that journey” (240).

It is in Dessa’s final struggle against Adam Nehemiah that the narrative puts their growing relationship to the test. Locked in the cell awaiting Ruth’s arrival, Dessa is not sure how Ruth will respond. Knowing she was on her way, however, helps to calm Dessa. Taking in the change in Nehemiah, noting how he’d become “such a trifling little white man,” Dessa garners strength and hope. “They couldn’t take the word of no white man like that, not against the word of a respectable lady” (247). When Ruth arrives with Clara in her arms, she plays the part of the white “lady” to help Dessa secure her freedom – smiling, fanning herself with her hanky, and batting her eyes at the sheriff (252).

Dessa harbors lingering doubts about Ruth’s sense of allegiance, however, and is not prepared to place her life in anyone hands but her own. To influence Ruth’s support, Dessa seizes control of the action. Even though the two women “just barely knowed how to read each other’s eyes, each other’s smile,” the time they have spent together on their journey enables Dessa to communicate non-verbally with Ruth. First, Dessa reminds Ruth of the money she is carrying under her skirt by looking at the woman while patting

at her waist. Dessa explains, “Whatever she thought about me... that money was real.” Next, Dessa helps Ruth to recognize and manipulate Nehemiah’s fallen status. Following Dessa’s lead, Ruth “looked at him, the suit, the shirt, like she was seeing them for the first time” (252). Pulling the sheriff aside, Ruth tells him about the money Dessa is carrying for her and insists she will not allow them to make a “show” of Dessa “before no man” (253). “[L]ooking at Nemi and sniffing,” Ruth tells the sheriff, “It’s a outrage to shame a good girl on the word of just someone” (253). Pressured by Ruth, the sheriff relents and has an elderly “granny” inspect Dessa for the scars that would identify her as “Nemi’s...gal” (242).

Using money as “insurance” for securing the support of the other women, Dessa quite literally “pays” for her freedom. These transactions both emphasize and rely upon the different positions of each female involved in helping Dessa secure her freedom.⁶⁶ Just as Dessa does not place automatic trust in Ruth, she does not assume the near-blind “granny” Aunt Chloe will help her without some form of incentive. Dessa slips the old woman a coin and constructs her own “coverstory” to disguise her scars. Testifying to the sheriff that Dessa had no scars, the healing touch of Aunt Chloe figuratively erases the “proof” of her (mis)identity.⁶⁷ Similarly, the reassuring touch of baby Clara is also significant. Unsolicited and “free,” the obvious affection Clara exhibits as she reaches for Dessa at the jail sustains Dessa and renews her own sense of confidence as well as her faith in her connection to Ruth. Additionally, Clara’s tiny hands help to dismantle the

⁶⁶ As Deborah McDowell writes, “These women, all three victimized by Southern patriarchy and its racial and sexual politics, find a power within that system by turning it back on itself, by turning assumptions about blacks and women topsy-turvy” (“Negotiating” 159).

⁶⁷ See Griffin on the healing qualities of “sensual” (rather than sexual) touch in *Dessa Rose* and other black women’s writing.

“book” that Nemi has used to “track” Dessa. But it is Ruth in particular who is pivotal in helping Dessa secure her freedom. By playing the lady and identifying with Dessa and her concerns, Ruth is able to form a powerful alliance with Dessa against Nemi. Perhaps more than insurance, Dessa’s act of patting the money belt reminds both Ruth and the reader of their collective effort to secure their freedom. It is fitting, then, that it is Ruth who announces that the pages of Nemi’s book are “blank” (254).

Within this coalition of women, difference is not ignored or subsumed; rather, difference enables the women’s fight against Nehemiah and what he stands for (Ritterhouse 510). As “Nemi” declares, “womanhood” – “You-all in this together” (255). Walking away from the jail, Ruth and Dessa are both “about busting with what [they’d] done.” Unable to embrace each other on the public boardwalk, Dessa hugs Clara. As the two women share their given names with each other, their trust and friendship is affirmed. Grinning at their accomplishment, the two women, like Nathan and Dessa, have reached a level of intimacy and trust where they can be “honest” with each and “disagree” without threatening their relationship. Dessa’s acceptance of Ruth as an individual and a friend is revealed when she notes, “I didn’t hold nothing against her, not ‘mistress,’ not Nathan, not skin” (256). Coming together in struggle reinforces and strengthens the relationship Dessa and Ruth have formed out of their daily interactions.

By the end of the novel, Dessa retains control over her own body and her own (hi)story. As Mae Henderson concludes, “Dessa writes herself into the dominant discourse and, in the process, transforms it” (“Speaking in Tongues” 136). Dessa never forgets Ruth and how centrally she figured into the story of her liberation. Yet by moving directly from the scene of Dessa and Ruth’s newfound friendship to the intimate setting

of the hair-braiding scene that opens the epilogue, the narrative appears to dash the possibility of cross-racial intimacy. Not only does this transition contrast the relationship between Dessa and Ruth with a distinctly black, woman-centered ritual, it also grounds the process of “doing hair” in the material circumstances that denote the difference between “black” and “white” womanhood. Dessa explains that once Ada was free she refused to do anyone’s hair (including her own) because it “put [Ada] too much in mind of how she’d had to dress her mistress’ head” while she was enslaved. Dessa interprets Ada’s rejection of this female ritual as a sign of slavery’s corruptive influence, as evidence that “Slavery had sucked Ada about dry” (258). Conversely, for Dessa braiding represents a physical and emotional connection to women and children of the black community. Both the memories and the act of braiding sustain Dessa and give her “pleasure” (257). Indeed, the narrative links that intimacy of braiding to her emotional and sexual intimacy with Harker to emphasize the importance of physical connection in a land where (white) laws were against “the black” (258).

Yet by weaving memories of Ruth into her epilogue Dessa factors Ruth into her conception of intimate relations. The epilogue’s initial construction of a distinctly intraracial community is fractured by Dessa’s story of the fugitives’ westward journey. Without negating the “hate” and “hurt” that plagued them – even as the fugitives inched toward freedom – Dessa’s memories of Ruth interrupt the binary conception of “black” and “white,” “them” and “us” that structures the beginning of both the novel and the epilogue (259). Dessa’s memories recall how pivotal Ruth was in helping them all secure their freedom. Indeed, it was her “authentication” of their slave status that enabled Ruth to “free” the fugitives and secure passage on the last wagon train out west that spring.

Additionally, Dessa's memories of Ruth and her lingering feelings for her and her children are factored into the stories she repeats over and over again to the children that comprise her extended kin network. Afraid that details might get lost as her mind begins to "wander," she has the children write her account down and "say it back" to ensure her words are taken down as she intends them to be (260). Thus, once recorded, Dessa's narrative will be an inclusive one that chronicles the story of how she freed herself, with a little help from her (black and white) friends.

Recasting Unspeakable Desire

Combining oral testimony with the written text, Dessa provides a model for future generations to follow. Her final comment about Nehemiah makes clear that even in freedom she remains aware of the cost of being misread and misrepresented: "I never will forget Nemi trying to read me, knowing I had put myself in his hands" (260). Instead, Dessa's "speakerly text" clears a space for alternative stories of slavery and for the voices of myriad others who were affected by it, Ruth included. Her narrative keeps a productive tension between the authority of written language and "the elusiveness of orality" (Handley 32). Yet the epilogue simultaneously conveys the difficulty of finding "territory" for Ruth in this more inclusive (hi)story. Having lived with and loved black people, Ruth is unable to "be around slavery without speaking up." Yet slavery and racial oppression dooms the uncertain romance between her and Nathan even as it simmers below the surface of the narrative. Placed in the interstitial location of "Philly-me-York," an imagined "city [that] didn't allow no slaves," Ruth's absence from Dessa's life and community suggests the problem of locating her in the story of Dessa's emancipation (259). Thus, like Williams' "Author's Note," Dessa's epilogue tacitly suggest the need

for new discursive and epistemological formations that will do “justice” to the complex subject of slavery and the African-American experience more generally.⁶⁸ William’s creative process stands as both a challenge and a model for other scholars and writers who attempt to find meaning in the (hi)story of slavery.

By the end of the novel, Williams has recast the terms of “unspeakable desire.” Through the shared political project of the scam and the fruitful alliance between Dessa and Ruth, the novel articulates a new politics of intimacy based on “feminism’s desire to be inclusive” (Meese ix). Particularly through the developing friendship between the two women, the novel (re)inscribes the past with an “aesthetic of hybridity” that structures a “dialogic access to knowledge of the racial other” (Rody, *Daughter’s* 13; Meese 145). This concern with interconnectedness reflects a broader political purpose behind Williams’ neo-slave narrative. While in her essay “The Lion’s History,” she explains that her fictional “liberation narrative” was intended to help “span the gap” between slaves and their descendants, Williams stresses the need to include whites in this process of bridging past and present. Rather than limit the stories of slavery to “personal stories of exclusion and oppression,” Williams writes, narratives need to include perspectives of and on whites as well (“Lion’s History” 248). In the novel’s epilogue, Dessa thinks fondly of Ruth and wonders if she “call[s] her name to Clara.” By developing the story of Dessa’s liberation around her relationship with Ruth and Ruth’s children, Williams imagines a more inclusive process of creating meaning out of the past.

⁶⁸ Linking the critical success of Styron’s novel to the larger processes of literary production in the United States, Williams’ tacit reference to the prejudice that often shapes (and is shaped by) literature suggests that much more is at stake here. Her “Author’s Note” subtly reminds us how, as Toni Morrison writes, “cultural identities are formed and reformed by a nation’s literature” (*Playing* 39). As Morrison has argued elsewhere, “Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of

Yet this meaning has even more poignant contemporary resonance. As Williams explains in a 1986 interview in *Essence* magazine, she included the “controversial” relationship between Nathan and Ruth in the novel for a specific reason. Williams states, “I wanted to see whether there was a basis on which Black women and white women could relate to each other, with respect, despite the fact of interracial liaisons between white women and Black men” (Greene 34). Focusing on the pain of “personal rejection” that this relationship causes for Dessa in particular, this explanation suggests that Williams was motivated as much by contemporary issues as by historical circumstance (Greene 34). Abundantly clear in recent work by a range of scholars and writers, romantic and sexual relationships between black men and white women in particular are not simply “historical hurts,” as Ann Trespasso has argued.⁶⁹ Interracial intimacy also represents a contemporary dilemma that affects present day coalition-building both across and within communities of difference (225).⁷⁰ As scholars like Wini Breines point out, romantic relationships between black men and white women were particularly vexing to the creation of a multicultural sisterhood (118). However, Breines also argues that the larger problem lay in a much more complex story of ignorance and insensitivity about each other’s lives and concerns. It all came down to personal interaction: “Without knowing one another, [feminists] could not make a movement together” (Breines 1123).

By attending to the problematics of unspeakable desire, Williams’ narrative seems intent on displacing the stumbling blocks for interracial alliances to focus instead on

language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested” (“Unspeakable Things” 207).

⁶⁹ See, for example, the work of Randall Kennedy, Orlando Patterson, Bebe Moore Campbell, Maria P. Root, Donna L. Franklin, and Rachel Moran.

⁷⁰ See especially Kennedy, Moran, Patterson, and Root.

“what we can do for each other,” on “mov[ing] from a politics of identity to a politics of identification” (June Jordan and Henry Louis Gates as quoted in Friedman 40). Williams herself suggests this in her introduction to “Meditations on History,” the short story upon which *Dessa Rose* is based. She explains, “I try to elucidate those elements in our lives on which constructive political changes, those that do more than blackwash or femalize the same old power structure, can be built” (“Meditations” 201). In *Dessa Rose* Williams does just that. By reconfiguring representations of interracial sex and intimacy, her novel not only attends to the lingering “wound” of slavery, it also addresses the rifts that continue to divide people of color and feminists in the post-Civil Rights era.

CHAPTER III

“THIRD SPACE OTHERNESS” IN DAVID BRADLEY’S *THE CHANEYSVILLE INCIDENT*¹

It might seem that writing is a self-indulgent, one-sided affair for David Bradley, that he writes only for fun and money. He has been quoted as saying, “I like to do this stuff. . . . And I love people when they buy [my work], give me money, enjoy it” (Blake and Miller 35). Bradley is, he has confessed, his own ideal audience. He has quipped to at least one interviewer, “*Me. Me.* I write things that please me. . . . I do what I do because I’m a selfish, egotistical bastard. I have a hell of a good time making things up, writing stories” (Blake and Miller 34-5).

Yet beneath his characteristically sarcastic demeanor and between the lines of various interviews, Bradley suggests a more complex and compelling motivation behind his desire to write and be read.² In several discussions Bradley has described an interest in establishing a sense of “connectedness” between the story, the writer, and the reader (Bonetti 87). Through this relationship, Bradley strives to elicit a sense of sympathy and identification in order to bridge various categories of difference, particularly race (Blake and Miller 33, Bonetti 87, Personal interview).³ In a 1992 interview with Kay Bonetti, for

¹ On “third-space otherness” see Luke and Carrington and Bhabha, “The Third Space.” This term will be discussed in more detail below.

² See also Bradley, “The Faith.”

³ As Russell Banks has noted, there is a “difference between sympathy and empathy. Empathy tends to only recognize sameness and then appropriate difference as if it were the same. But sympathy is feeling *for* someone who is different” (Connor, “Engaging History”).

instance, Bradley explains that for him, “[t]he point of writing as a black person, or writing a story that has black people in it, is that some white person who’s never seen a black person will say ‘That’s exactly what I would have felt. That’s exactly what I’d have done. I can understand that’” (87).

Emphasizing the agency of the reader, Bradley’s comment points to what Janice Radway calls the “interactive social process” of reading (*Reading* 8). Not unlike recent reader-response criticism, Bradley envisions the text as a space in which the reader can go “outside the self” and temporarily “merge” with the other (Travis 6, 12). With his emphasis on connectedness and his interest in the “radical potential” of the reading process, Bradley clearly is not, as he himself admits, “*entirely* selfish” (Travis 12, Blake and Miller 35). His remarks in a 1984 interview underscore this point. Bradley notes, “I try to believe that if I show somebody something from a perspective that they might not have themselves you give them a different kind of vision . . . and maybe they’ll make new decisions they wouldn’t otherwise make” (Blake and Miller 35).

Bradley’s comment resonates with the work of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha and suggests an idealistic – perhaps even utopian – element suffusing Bradley’s work. Bhabha argues that a textual encounter with difference can take a reader “‘beyond’ [him/herself] in order to return, in a spirit of revision and reconstruction, to the political *conditions* of the present” (*Location* 3). Put another way, Bradley hopes that his writing might change his readers by virtue of an experience with and a sense of connection to/through difference. Bradley conveys to interviewers Susan Blake and James Miller his fascination with the political capacity of both writing and reading when he says: “I can make you sit down and spend hours finding out about somebody you would not invite to

your dining room table. I can make people love winos, and hookers, and they wouldn't have them in their house. Now, I think that's real politics" (35).

Given his interest in establishing connections and effecting the political conditions of the present, it should not be surprising that Bradley chooses to merge the subject of slavery with the topic of interracial intimacy in his second novel, *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981). Indeed, Bradley relies on black-white coupling to establish connections that make possible the "different kind of vision" he wants to inspire in his readers to move them "beyond themselves." Thus, the relationship between the black narrator-historian, John Washington, and his white lover, Judith Powell, provides the frame for the story. For many critics their relationship stands as the "controlling feature" of the novel (Blake and Miller 33).⁴ Pressing the logic of this argument further, I argue that the interracial union is at the heart of what constitutes the very epi-center of the revisionist strategy within *Chaneyville*. Both the problems and the possibilities of the relationship between the black and white lovers establish a framework for critically revisiting the past and reassessing its importance to the present and future.

Indeed, *The Chaneyville Incident* relies heavily upon the trope of (un)conventional coupling to create a "third space" that highlights the relational nature of the experiences and ideologies of difference. Within this context, sites and moments of "third space otherness" make possible the emergence of new understandings of the past and new identifications with difference (Luke and Carrington 5; Bhabha, "The Third Space" 211). To achieve his artistic aim, Bradley takes fictional liberties with conven-

⁴ As Missy Dehn Kubitschek points out, "nearly every commentator has noted [Judith's] importance as a respondent to the call of John's story" (770). See, e.g., Ensslen, "Fictionalizing History" 283, Brigham 304-5, Wilson 104.

tional representations of black-white coupling in the novel. In doing so, he avoids both the historical erasure of these relationships and the literary excess that often marks their representation. Bradley's work in this genre avoids, in his words, "a typically nice commercial plantation tale[']s]" salacious depiction of interracial sex (Watkins 21). Instead, the novel attends to the complexities of interracial coupling in order to emphasize the contingent, unpredictable, and situational nature of racial and cultural identity.

It is from this interstitial perspective that *The Chaneyville Incident* performs the double-edged critique of black Atlantic political culture. Firstly, the relationship between John Washington and Judith Powell both demands and determines the construction of an alternative historical narrative, a useable past that links slavery to a legacy of racialisms that still "matter" in contemporary society. It allows the novel to reshape collective memory by creating a "counterhistory" that is premised on and created out of relations of difference (Peterson 5).⁵ Secondly, *Chaneyville* deliberately draws upon the theme of black-white coupling to posit a dynamic and potentially transformative relationship between (hi)story and audience. The implicit purpose is to suggest that change is possible within the reading community outside of the text as well as within the imaginative space inside the narrative. By reconsidering the value of difference, *The Chaneyville Incident* conceives of a future beyond the "stranglehold that racist hermeneutics has over cultural identity" (J. Jorge Klor de Alva as cited in Nash 27).

Bradley manipulates both form and structure in *The Chaneyville Incident* to emphasize hybridity and difference over purity and sameness. Conventional versions of

⁵ See also Cox on Foucault's concept of "counter-memory" and its application to novels of slavery (10-12).

history are of necessity displaced. The metaphysics of Bradley's writerly process, then, underscores his interest in what Homi Bhabha refers to as the "interstices" of difference. According to Bhabha, "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" creates a space in-between "fixed identifications." Within this creative borderland the writer knowingly "opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*Location 2*, 4).

Bradley situates his novel within the boundaries between fact and fiction. He also problematizes conventional assumptions about the "truth value" of history over fiction. Like other recent "postmodern histories" *Chaneyville* maintains "a productive tension between [its] status as literature and [its] status as history" (Peterson 10-11).⁶ Bradley claims to have "stolen" the initial idea for his novel from his mother. She had discovered an obscure reference to the death of thirteen fugitive slaves while working on a regional history project in the late 1960s (Bonetti 73, Blake and Miller 29, 33).⁷ That subsequently led Bradley to conduct archival research of his own. Yet despite the historical nexus of his tale, Bradley chose not "to make *Chaneyville* entirely historical" (Watkins 21, Blake and Miller 36).

Instead, Bradley purposely obscures the sources of fact and fiction in the process of writing. His intention is to expose the ways in which historical discourse is constructed

⁶ Nancy Peterson uses the term "postmodern histories" to distinguish them from Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction. She argues that postmodern histories are less interested in deconstruction and "question[ing] the assumptions of historiography" and are more interested in "producing counterhistories" that "insist upon their own history-effects" (10). With this term Peterson aims to work "toward a theory of postmodernism that problematizes, but does not deny, historical reference" (11). On postmodern theory and the neo-slave narrative, see also Hogue and Spaulding.

⁷ The story, Bradley recalls, went like this: "On the Lester James farm south of Chaneyville are the graves of thirteen slaves who were coming north on the Underground Railroad. When they were about to be recaptured, rather than return to slavery they asked to be shot. Someone obliged" (Bonetti 73).

and influenced by experience and ideology.⁸ The dynamics of Bradley's method allow him to interrogate the very "facts" he had recorded on note cards by using varying colors to signal different types of historical and fictional detail. Bradley insists that this method enabled him to "us[e] history to confirm the fiction" (Bonetti 78). Likewise, within his text, Bradley positions John Washington to adopt the same creative history-making process. Both actions suggest the vitality of Bradley's intention to destabilize the supremacy of empirical evidence over memory and the imagination. Like Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose*, Bradley's narrative – in the act of its creation – challenges historiography. The traditional notion that history can render a "truth" about the past – particularly the African-American past – with precision and accuracy through documentation and fact becomes problematic (Hogue 441).⁹ Now, in order to arrive at "a conscious, functional, and intentional truth about the past," Bradley and his narrator must take "fictional liberties" with history. Both draw upon fact – not to reconstruct a history that is "true" but to imagine a version of the past that is "possible" (Hogue 441-2, Bonetti 77-78).¹⁰

A Hybrid Text

To envision a more functional past, *The Chaneyville Incident* mimics the creative impulse itself. The text is constructed to reflect a hybrid collection of public and private, as well as regional, national, and international history that connects events of the past to the experiences of those living in the present. The collage-like structure of the novel

⁸ Hogue also makes this point and, citing the work of Linda Hutcheon, argues that the novel stands as an example of postmodern historicism (442).

⁹ See also Wilson 97-100.

¹⁰ In his interview with Kay Bonetti Bradley explains that when constructing the plot he was not concerned with "truth" but with possibilities: "I really wanted this book, in terms of plot, to be *possible* I didn't want it to be true." Bradley adds, however, that "[a]s I did the research it was amazing how often I could find confirmation of what I as a storyteller or novelist knew had to be there" (Bonetti 77-8, emphasis added).

establishes the relational nature of past to present as it appropriates, combines, and juxtaposes fragments of the past and present (Travis 9). Staged in a number of ways – as the narrator’s “lectures” as well as through memory and storytelling – the various intrusions of the past disrupt, enrich, and complicate the present. This fluid structure creates an “in-between” space that encourages associations that “can result in perceptual and conceptual breakthroughs” for both the characters and the reader (Travis 9).¹¹

Chaneyville thereby stands as an example of what Homi Bhabha calls a “borderline work of culture.” In as much that the novel “does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (*Location* 7). By intermingling different moments of past and present, *The Chaneyville Incident* represents history not as unchanging and impartial but as dynamic, subjective, and, above all, functional. Through its representation of what Bhabha refers to as the “projective past,” Bradley’s novel is able to transcend traditional boundaries. It inscribes within its temporal break “a historical narrative of alterity that explores forms of social antagonism and contradiction that are not yet properly represented, political identities in the process of being formed, cultural enunciations in the act of hybridity, in the process of translating and transvaluing cultural difference” (*Location* 252).

The problems and possibilities of the “projective past” are inextricably bound together in the parallel structure of the plot of *The Chaneyville’s Incident*. Two distinct story lines are made to intertwine and illuminate each other. On the one hand, the

¹¹ Similar to my discussion of the collage-like structure of the novel, a number of critics have discussed the relationship between past and present in terms of the Yoruban concept of “syndesis” where each exists in relation to the other. In this system, present moments overlap and add to past moments rather than replace them (Pavlic 168-9, Kubitschek 758, Wilson 103).

narrative charts the progress of John Washington as he tries to unravel the mystery of his elusive ancestral past. Washington, a “hot-stuff historian” who specializes in the history of “atrocities,” is obsessed with establishing the connection between the death of his father and the story of thirteen fugitive slaves (391). Historical recovery becomes a healing process for John who is, as Bradley comments, sick, crazy, and “full of hate and anger” at the beginning of the novel (Bonetti 81, 84; Blake and Miller 29). On the other hand, the narrative charts John’s troubled relationship with Judith Powell, his white lover, in the contemporary and parallel story.

Just as both diverse story lines are impacted by the same problematic American past, both must be resolved concurrently. By 1979 (the year in which the novel is set), as Trudier Harris has observed, a couple like John and Judith should be “free to pursue a relationship across racial and cultural lines”; however, their relationship is still affected by the history that prohibited such intimacy in the past (163). Slavery’s legacies of racism and oppression, in other words, continue to impose limitations on these lovers as well as on their individual conceptions and experiences of “freedom” in the post-Civil Rights era. Thus, the “whodunit” element of the ancestral mystery collides with the romance plot of their contemporary affair, merging two seemingly discrete scenarios that are, in fact, interdeterminant. John Washington’s ability to unravel the haunting mysteries of his familial past depends upon his success in transcending the limits that the past/present has placed on his current relationship with Judith. Narrative resolution, therefore, is interdependent, thus further emphasizing the relational nature of past and present.

Like the structure of *Chaneyville*, the hybrid form of this novel underscores Bradley’s awareness of the interstices of difference. In the early stages of writing, he

realized that conventional narrative forms like the romanticized plantation novel and the traditional historical novel, would not move readers beyond the “overriding myth of American history” (Bonetti 77).¹² “I was *damned* sure I was not going to write *Beulahland*,” Bradley asserted. Nor was he going to dignify “the *Roots* obsession” (Blake and Miller 36). Determined instead to explore what was “left out” of studies of the past in order to better understand history’s relationship to the present, Bradley brought a variety of genres and literary techniques together to create his counterhistory (Bonetti 76).¹³

Elements of the historical novel, the slave narrative, detective fiction, and storytelling, among others, combine to create a hybrid form that insinuates itself into the various layers of past and present. As Paul Gilroy observes in a 1986 review, although *Chaneyville* draws on the slave narrative tradition, it “reads like a historical thriller” (“Making History” 28). Bradley himself has referred to the book as a “detective novel” that “has aspects of the western” (Bonetti 74). Consequently, if genre, according to Hans Robert Jauss, is a “preconstructed horizon of expectations,” the refusal to keep within the bounds of any one particular form indicates Bradley’s intention to reorient the reader’s “trajectory of expectations” (79). The hybrid form of the novel, in short, provides Bradley with a unique revisionist context in which to examine the past. The result of Bradley’s narrative invention is instructional. Its very uniqueness disorients readers, provoking them to make connections between the novel’s alternative version of history and the present. Aspects of storytelling and detective fiction, for instance, draw readers into the intertwined processes of self-discovery and historical-recovery enacted by the novel.

¹² See also Watkins 21.

¹³ Bradley commented to Kay Bonetti, “[i]f you look at almost any study of America, you come to one very simple conclusion. Everything should be fine. But it’s very clear that everything isn’t fine. As a result,

In particular, the form of the detective story insists upon a high degree of readerly interaction. Critic George Dove underscores the interactive nature of the detective genre by describing it as a “‘game’ between author and reader, to determine whether the reader can reach the solution ahead of the detective” (19). In this relationship, as Dove continues, “the reader assumes the role of interested spectator, free to accept or decline the challenges of the story” (19). Additionally, the most basic element of detective fiction, its “blanks” (gaps or moments of indeterminacy within the story) impel the reader to find connections and create meaning out of the text (Dove 7, 55). “Blanks,” therefore, provide an ideal mechanism for Bradley to represent the lost and missing pieces of African-American history. At the same time, the conventions of the detective genre compel characters and readers to make the “leaps” necessary to achieve some sense of “closure” *regardless* of gaps in evidence or missing “clues.” Similarly, the elements of storytelling in Bradley’s novel heighten the participatory role of the reader. Edward Pavlic has described the role of storytelling within *The Chaneyville Incident* as a “syndetic process” that situates the artist, the story, and the audience within an improvisational and “fluid system based on reciprocity” (167). The elements drawn from these two distinct forms help Bradley render “history” subjective, flexible, and functional.¹⁴

Moreover, by relying on oral and written slave narratives for the foundation of the novel, *The Chaneyville Incident* defies conventional approaches to history that tend to

those of us who have some brains are going back and looking at those old theories and saying maybe something was left out” (76).

¹⁴ Bradley may have also included aspects of detective fiction because he believes, like critic and writer Carolyn G. Heilbrun, “that with the momentum of a mystery and the trajectory of a good story with a solution, the author is left free to dabble in a little profound revolutionary thought” (300).

emphasize the experience and concerns of the privileged. Indeed, the slave narrative tradition invokes a legacy of resistance to “master narratives” and favors the perspective of the marginalized or misrepresented. Within *Chaneysville*, the minority perspective is not written off as lost or irrelevant; rather, it is imbricated into the very fabric of the present through the narrative’s intertwined detection and romance plots. The fact that the conventions for both genres gratify readerly expectations for resolution does not deter Bradley in his use of them. Deliberately focusing on intimate relationships that cross racial and cultural lines, *Chaneysville* links contemporary social relations to the history and legacies of slavery in order to complicate and problematize the terms of narrative closure. Bradley’s hybrid form is as functional as the past reimagined within it.

In addition to narrative innovation, *Chaneysville*’s ideological concerns also emphasize difference and hybridity. The final version of the relationship between John and Judith is an obvious case in point. Indeed, the addition of Judith as John’s *white* lover, one of the latest editorial changes, ultimately brings the final draft of the novel together (Blake and Miller 29). In earlier drafts Judith is a black woman, but pragmatics led to Bradley to make John’s lover white. As Bradley explains, “[b]lack men, black women, black people . . . don’t have to explain things to each other. They bring their own [experiences]” (Worrell, Bradley Interview n.p.). Conversely, a white lover gives John a reason to tell his story. Further, Bradley’s writing of a troubled relationship between John and Judith sets up the dilemma that pushes John “to come to terms with all [the problems] he’s been sitting on . . . for years” (Blake and Miller 29). Racial difference, then, is the key to this scenario: John cannot trust or commit to Judith *because* she is a white woman.

Interstitial Perspectives

Bradley's construction of relations of difference, however, does not hinge solely on race.¹⁵ Judith's class and gender contribute to her outsider role to John's experience, as do her ancestral ties to Virginia slaveholders and her expertise as a psychiatrist. Indeed, her many differences demand the protagonist's detailed "lectures" and the subsequent storytelling that are shared indirectly with the reader. Bradley explains, "I knew that John had to have someone to tell this to because I didn't want him just telling it to a reader – there was no point – and there would be no reaction to direct him in the right ways. So, the questions [Judith] asks move him to talk to the topic, and so forth and so on" (Blake and Miller 29). In this regard, Judith plays a key role by propelling the plot and its protagonist onward. As Cathy Brigham observes, Judith "is always present . . . influencing the way in which John sees the world and reconstructs history" (305). Therefore, while Bradley himself might describe Judith's role in the novel as "peripheral" and insist the book is "not about her," he would likely concede that Judith plays an essential role in the resolution of the conflicts John Washington faces (Brigham 304, Wilson 104).

In the final revision of *Chaneysville*, Bradley establishes the relationship between the two lovers ultimately as a dialogic one. To enable both John and Judith to move beyond a divisive conception of difference so that they might understand and learn from "the other," the novel ultimately that emphasizes the connective possibility of difference (Cox 24). Drawing on Michel Bakhtin's work, critic Don Bialostosky describes dialogic interaction as a process of "read[ing] for an opening in the discussion or a provocation to

¹⁵ Bradley himself makes this point in various interviews on the novel including Bonetti 85-8, Blake and Miller, 32-33, Worrell, Bradley Interview n.p.

further discourse.” Such a process, Bialostosky argues, “would not generally reduce others to consistent dialectical counterparts, or dwell on the inconsistencies in the positions, or transcend them in higher synthesis. . . . Instead, dialogic reading would assume the right to represent others in terms they might not have anticipated or acknowledged” (as cited in Kaup and Rosenthal xx). This concept of dialogics, as Monica Kaup and Debra J. Rosenthal note, conveys an “openness to otherness” and conceives of an “unstructured space for pluralistic cross-cultural exchange to take place” (xx). Dialogical theories of cultural interaction resonate with the “lived experience” of many interracial couples and families for whom, as sociologists Carmen Luke and Vicki Carrington have found, individual and communal identity is continually negotiated and renegotiated “in spaces they have created outside of the norms of either culture” (22). By focusing on these sites and moments of “third space otherness,” the novel’s representations of black-white coupling shifts the understanding of difference away from conventional, binary theories of racial and cultural difference (black/white, them/us, inside/outside, margin/center) in order to highlight the dynamic, relational terms that structure both the experiences and the ideologies of difference (Luke and Carrington 5).¹⁶

As the novel progresses, *Chaneyville* works to displace and rework the limits of difference. The result is the reimagining of a useable past that holds the potential to generate new understandings of history and a new sense of connection to both personal and communal identities. Just as the collage structure of the narrative accentuates the in-between time of the projective past, its ideological concerns emphasize what Homi Bhabha calls the interstitial quality of difference. Rather than accept difference as fixed and divisive, *The Chaneyville Incident* reconceives difference as a “liminal” “third

¹⁶ See also Bhabha, “Third Space.”

space” between the binarism of “self” and “other” that allows for both “collaboration and contestation”(Bhabha, *Location 2*, 38). This “interstitial perspective” calls attention to the performative nature of difference. The process of both historical-recovery and self-recovery in the novel involves a shift away from reading difference as “the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.” It moves the reader toward the interstitial position perspective “that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.” In short, like Bhabha, *Chaneyville* perceives difference as situational and contingent, “a complex, on-going negotiation” (Bhabha, *Location 2*).

Bradley’s novel moves toward the interstitial perspective, most obvious in the romance plot structured by black-white coupling, by situating the relationship between John and Judith in America’s “submerged and tangled mestizo past” (Nash 26). In an interview with Susan Blake and James Miller, Bradley acknowledges that with *Chaneyville* he knowingly “opened the door to miscegenation, and all that other stuff” (Blake and Miller 29).¹⁷ The text is suffused with references to and representations of racial and cultural crossings. In fact, it seems to suggest, like Earl E. Fitz, that the issue of “miscegenation lies, albeit restively, at the heart of the entire American experience” (244). Allusions to “miscegenation,” “mingling,” “half-breeds,” concubinage, rape, and the politics of color construct a vivid picture of America’s mestizo history.¹⁸ Although

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that when *Chaneyville* was first published, Bradley was shocked that the heated criticism directed at both him and the novel focused specifically on John’s interracial partnership with Judith rather than the rape scene (Bonetti 84, Worrell, Bradley Interview n.p.). See also Washington, “Black History.”

¹⁸ For some of the numerous references to “race-mixing” in the novel see, e.g., 22, 211-13, 240, 285-87, 291, 298, 323-24, 335-36, 349, 354, 359, 386, 418, 420. These include discussions of miscegenation law, “half-breed” babies, and “mobility through miscegenation” (335-56, 240, 211), as well as a tale of a near lynching over a cross-racial love affair, histories of rape and sexual abuse, prostitutes and mistresses, and even the story of a loving marriage (78-211, 285-90, 354, 75, 418, 368).

John Washington might identify himself as “black,” his mixed heritage – which includes French, African, Irish, and Cherokee ancestors – also reflects America’s tangled diasporic “roots”/“routes.” John’s own cultural hybridity works against the myths of racial, cultural, and national purity that dominate mainstream narratives of “nation.” Instead, the novel’s allusions to interracial mixing and intercultural contact encourage us to consider the complex ways in which peoples’ lives and identities are forged in tension with dominant ideologies of racial, cultural, and social difference. By conjuring up the “hidden history of mestizo America,” *The Chaneyville Incident* attempts to destabilize the racial ideologies that developed out of the institution of slavery and still affect contemporary social relations (Nash 27).

To emphasize the significance of America’s mestizo past Bradley locates much of the action of *The Chaneyville Incident* on the very borderlands of culture. Bradley employs an unnamed, fictional crossroad, a locale, the narrator tells us, Frederick Jackson Turner once dubbed the “watermark of westward expansion” (11). The frontier, after all, was not only a battleground, but also a “cultural merging ground” for a variety of different peoples and cultures (Nash 13). As the scholarship of historians like Gary B. Nash have established, the American frontier was “a zone of deep intercultural contacts rather than a line that divided two societies” (13). Through the device of John Washington’s brief history of the region at the beginning of the novel, Bradley revisits this important frontier as a reminder to the reader.

John’s “lecture” establishes the prominence of this location as a fluid site of intercultural contact and discovery, as well as one of violent conquest. In one particular lecture, John explains that while his home “Town” is known “only as a dot” on present-

day maps, it was originally the point where two major Indian trails crossed (9). It was once a sort of “redman’s Ramada” used by Indians, and later by whites, for an overnight rest on their journey elsewhere, Washington explains (9). This important junction eventually housed a trading post where Indians and Europeans did business and a fort that played a crucial role in the French and Indian War. Yet by leaving both “Town” and “County” unnamed, the narrative links this decidedly local history to the more expansive terrain of a hybrid national – or perhaps even transnational – heritage. And, just as both Town and County disappear into obscurity over time, their complex mestizo histories are eclipsed by dominant narratives of racial and national purity (Kaup and Rosenthal xi).

It is through the progress of the protagonist that *The Chaneyville Incident* attempts to integrate a mestizo past into historical memory. Indeed, it is in the very process of return to the site of a cultural crossroad and the recovery of an obscured history that John Washington is empowered to resolve the dilemmas he faces at the novel’s opening. In order to disentangle the mystery of his ancestral past and determine his future with Judith, John must inhabit a space beyond the essentialist notions of difference that limit his progress.

Divisive Notions of Difference

For most of *Chaneyville*, John remains trapped within binary logic. The dominant racial ideology of the “one drop” rule inscribes the logic of black versus white, them versus us, self versus other. It should come as no surprise that John’s initial conception of history reflects this viewpoint. As he tells whoever will listen, “History is one long string of atrocities. . . . The best way to find out what they did is to find out where they hid the bodies” (186). John “blame[s] white people” – “just because they’re

white” – for the bad things that have happened to African Americans. As he tells Judith, “[t]hings have happened and it’s somebody’s fault, and it sure as hell wasn’t ours” (75-6). Highlighting his professional training, the novel problematizes John’s binary conception of difference by grounding it in the tradition of Western thought that produced the discourse of white supremacy in the first place (Rushdy, *Remembering* 91).

An illustration of John’s binary predisposition – where difference is fixed and divisive – is the extended lecture on religion and death that precedes Jack’s burial in the middle of the novel. There, John constructs European knowledge as oppositional to African systems of belief. Rather than viewing African Americans as the lucky “heirs to two different cultural traditions,” John contends that they are never quite comfortable with “either way” (213). At the same time, John’s oppositional conception of the historical relationship between blacks and whites, as Missy Dehn Kubitschek writes, “amplifies a whole set of other conflicts,” most significantly involving intertwined issues of gender, sexuality, and class (761). He sees things from a decisively antagonistic, either/or perspective. For John, being a historian denotes “hating for things that still mean something. And trying to understand what it is they mean, so you can hate the right things for the right reasons” (274). As Bradley has acknowledged, a binary conception of difference renders John unable to validate his present life. What he will learn as the novel progresses is how to integrate both approaches and draw on various ways of retrieving “history” so that he may finally create a cohesive, subjective understanding of what the past means to him personally (Blake and Miller 31).

John’s personal experiences have also helped shape his essentialist notions of difference. As a young boy growing up on “the Hill,” the black section of a remote

Pennsylvania town, race and racism figured as a prominent part of John's everyday life. When trying to explain to Judith why he hates his hometown, for example, John recalls how, at the age of six, he was punched for the first time "[b]ecause [he] was black" (282).

Indeed, memories of racially motivated violence and intimidation resurface when John returns to the Hill at the novel's opening to tend to the deathbed of his mentor and surrogate father, Jack Crawley. Walking toward this boyhood home, John is assaulted by memories of white boys chasing him, pelting him with rocks and racial slurs. Decades after the fact John can still recall the fear he experienced running home from school to the relative safety of his neighborhood: "More than once I had reached the foot of the Hill on the dead run, pursued by white boys from town, shouting names and curses" (15). At the same time as reaching home brought him relief from impending danger, the flight itself filled him with shame for not standing up to his attackers. Even as an adult, John remembers vividly the searing humiliation of the eyes staring at him through the windows on the Hill, because "they knew, somehow, that that day someone had called me a name or threatened me, and I had done nothing besides close my eyes and ears, trying to pretend it was not happening" (16). This racially charged atmosphere of intimidation and contempt from without and within contributes substantially to John's divisive conception of difference.

What John learns from his own experience is reinforced by his relationship to the two people who raised him: his mother, Yvette Washington, and his mentor, Jack Crawley. Coming from a family that privileged "bright" skin, "'good' hair," and white ways, Yvette tries to protect John by teaching him to fear whites and submit to their power (22, 131). When John begins to stand up for himself and fight back at school, for

instance, Yvette intercedes and warns him that he will become a "*persona non grata*" if he "keeps up this fighting" (118). "It means," she goes on to explain, "that people don't want you. It means they won't talk to you or be with you. It means there won't be a soul you can trust. Folks won't have anything good to say about you" (118). When John brazenly replies that he must be a "person-whatever-it-is already" because the boy he fought "called [him] a nigger," his mother slaps him forcefully and assures the school principal that he "won't be gettin' into no more fights" (118-9). In the car on the way home from school his mother lectures him on how to behave in front of whites and warns John that he must never forget "that white people are the ones that say what happens to you" (119). White people, according to John's mother, have "say" over blacks; therefore, blacks must play into their hands to get what they need and want out of life. This worldview instills in John a sense of resentment and anger that comes to define his attitude toward both his mother and whites in general.

John's male mentor also reinforces his bipolar racial attitudes. While Jack Crawley's understanding of "white ways" stands in contrast to Yvette Washington's, his teachings validate the oppositional worldview that John acquires in his own experience of racism. After Moses Washington dies when John is only nine years old, Jack fulfills his promise to make John "a man" by teaching him the male rites of hunting, fishing, tracking, cussing, and drinking (35). John's initiation into manhood figures also as an induction into an essentialist worldview through the stories Jack tells. One of two survivors of a typhoid epidemic, Jack is a hermit of sorts who has lived life largely isolated from both blacks and whites. The conception of manhood that he imparts to John, therefore, is deeply mistrustful of difference as well as fiercely independent. Jack's

account of Moses's request for him to take care of John "if anything was to happen to him" makes clear the double bind John inherits (35).

Jack's mission is to get the "woman" out of the boy. Cathy Brigham calls Jack's plan a "blueprint for Real Maleness" (305). Jack tells John, "[Moses] was afraid your mama would do for you so much you wasn't never gonna be able to do for yourself, wasn't gonna end up fit for nothin' 'cept getting' turned over to another woman an' goin' to work for a white man" (34-5). Jack explains Moses' misgivings. He felt "there was a lot a woman in" John and that this trait would lead the boy to trust people too much (34). Too much woman, Jack asserts, leads a man to believe "there was always gonna be somebody to help you get through things." This is a "damn dangerous" belief for a man to have, according to Jack, "[o]n accounta he can't afford it. A man can't carry hisself, folks laugh at him" (34). Premised on the "natural" divisions between black and white, man and woman, nature and "civilization," reason and instinct, Jack's model of manhood reinforces John's understanding of difference as divisive and antagonistic.¹⁹

For both Yvette Washington and Jack Crawley power and control are central to their individual conceptions of relations of difference. Whereas John's mother teaches him that white folks have "say" over blacks, Jack teaches John that to be a man he "has to have say" or control over his own life (41). Additionally, for Jack, power is symbolized by the control of a key natural element: fire. According to Jack, fire gives man "final say" because it "lets him destroy. Lets him destroy anything." As Jack explains to John, "[t]here ain't nothin' in the world that won't burn or melt or change some way if you get

¹⁹ For more on misogyny and gender in the novel see Brigham, Egan, and Kubitschek.

it hot enough, if you got enough fire. . . . If a man comes to take your house, you can burn it, an' he can't have it. He can burn your crops. You do the same to his" (42).

Distinctly at odds with Yvette Washington's teachings in which power is yielded to and wielded by whites, Jack's model insists a "real" man must control his world. As Cathy Brigham argues, the underlying remedy for male power in this kind of worldview is "through the use of force" (307). Interpreting and integrating both influential points of views, John conceives of power as something destructive and as something that must be taken from whites. Both notions of power influence John's dialectical conception of difference. Yet John's ideas about power and difference are tempered by the memories he has of his father.

The most memorable lesson Moses Washington imparted to his son is that there is power in knowledge. The father's rejection of reactionary racist behavior provides his son with a model for an affirmative defense against racism. As a young child, John received a brutal blow and a stinging lecture from Moses after telling him a racist joke he had learned at school. Moses's response educates John about his family history and the use of knowledge to undercut racism. He tells John, "I want you to know this: your grandfather had his freedom before Abraham Lincoln was out of short pants. He didn't beg for it and nobody gave it to him. He didn't even buy it. He took it. And if some white man ever looks at you and says, 'Congratulations, boy, now you're free,' you look right back at him and say, 'Jackass, I *been* free'" (283). Moses demonstrates to John how knowledge can be turned into a powerful weapon against the jokes, taunts, and physical blows that accompany racial prejudice.

John recalls how the intuitive connection he made between his father's lesson about knowledge and the magnetism of history initially sustained him. He says that once he understood "that knowing nothing can get you humiliated and knowing a little bit can get you killed, but knowing all of it will bring you power," he began to "just gobbl[e] history right up" (284). For a time, acquiring knowledge was purely about the joy of absorbing himself in history. John even found a kindred spirit in a "little runty white kid" named Robert who shared his passion for reading.

Yet subsequent events challenged John's resilience and tempered the effect of his father's instructions, forcing him to formulate a strategy of survival and sustenance of his own. One such event was the crushing of John and Robert's friendship by Robert's mother when she discovered John's race. Her rejection hardened John, turning the hurt and shame initially inflicted by racist jokes and jabs into hate. In response, John came to integrate these various lessons into his own conception of power. For him, knowledge became not only a way of "getting even," but also a means of "protection" (284).

John's memory of his relationship with Mara Jamison most clearly conveys his theory of the connection between knowledge and power; it also establishes the centrality of sex to the novel's conception of power. At the age of sixteen and while living on the Hill, John has sex with Mara "to keep her" from the white men her mother has planned for her (289). The daughter of Miss Linda Jamison, the town's "courtesan," and one of her mother's white male "friends," Mara is expected to follow in her mother's footsteps (286). As Mara tells John, her mother wanted her to "go with" an important white man from the town, to "get pregnant, and have his child, and be set for life" (287). Exploiting her mother's teaching that a white man "wouldn't want a woman after she'd been with a

black man,” Mara asks John to “be with her” (287). Eager to help and protect her, John agrees. Initially, however, he is unable to achieve an erection. Only by “thinking about how excited [the white man] had to be, thinking about what he was going to do,” could John move beyond his initial impotence (288). It is precisely the knowledge that he “had cheated one of those white bastards out of something” that quite literally stimulated John, gave him “power” (288). John also basks in his father’s sure approval. Moses “would have been proud of [him for] taking something right out from the lion’s nose,” John thinks (288). Thus, by turning racialized codes of sexual conduct against the purveyors of white supremacy, John believes he has beaten the white men at their own game.

At the same time, the narrative explores John’s more intuitive consciousness about gender, race, and authority. John’s memory of his relationship with Mara establishes the centrality of sex within the novel’s conception of power. Even as a teenager, John is aware of the way in which, as historian Catherine Clinton has argued, “status is sexualized and inextricably linked to power relationships within society” (“With a Whip” 208). Thus, when the heady feelings of conquest subsided, John comes to a different conclusion about the real world effect of his actions. He decides to control the knowledge of their affair as a means of “protection.” When John is forced to look at the “facts,” he must admit the plan “was never going to work” (288). “I actually sat down with a piece of paper and a pencil,” he recalls, “and figured out all the pressures that were going to be on [Mara] when I was gone, and I figured out just about when she was going to give up” (290). Realizing how completely Mara is trapped within the communal confines and material expectations placed upon her as the mixed-race daughter of prostitute, John no longer views his relationship with Mara as a way of “getting even.”

He insists that they keep their continuing relationship secret because, as John explains, “I knew sooner or later [Mara] was going to do what her mother wanted her to. And when it happened, I didn’t want anybody thinking that those white men had gotten something that I wanted” (289-90).

As such, the novel further problematizes John’s destructive notion of difference by grounding it in the white supremacist discourse of racialized sexuality. John’s rhetoric of “protection” evokes white patriarchy’s systematic use of sex and sexual terrorism to control women of all classes and races, as well as men within subordinate classes (Clinton, “With a Whip” 208). John’s account of his attempt to “save” Mara places the struggle to control the female body at the center of his patriarchal conception of power. In this struggle the phallus becomes a source of male control and the female body becomes the terrain upon which the male battle for power is waged. While neither Mara nor her mother are represented as feeble victims, both the white men who pay for sex and John who “steals” it use and discard the black female body according to their own needs.²⁰

Furthermore, John’s reaction to his brother’s death powerfully accentuates the inextricable ties between sexuality and violence within struggles for power at the novel’s core. Following his brother’s funeral, John rapes a white woman whom he had dated prior to returning home to bury Bill. Consumed by anger, John views his brother’s death in Vietnam as a “murder.” From his perspective, it was the result of a “slow . . . killing”

²⁰ Within their restricted situations both mother and daughter maneuver within and exact a certain degree of power. Miss Linda, for instance, blackmails the Town’s “great white men” (Miss Linda’s “Powerful friends”) by leaving secret the details of whom among them fathered her two daughters (286). Similarly, Mara manipulates her white male patrons into moving them off the Hill into a grand home in the prominent white section of Town. As John tells Judith, “Mara was as smart as she was beautiful . . . She knew how to do things right. And before long she and her mother and her sister had moved off the Hill and down into a place in Town . . . that the Town Fathers keep wanting to put plaques on” (288-9).

by the Town's whites who had no further use for him after Bill was done "winning a couple of junior high school football games" (279, 281). John places blame on both his mother and the Town; his mother directly because she, unlike himself, talked Bill out of evading the draft. While he blames the Town's white leaders indirectly, he takes out his rage on a young white woman because when he looked at her he "saw white" (75).

Before Bill's death, John regarded the white woman as a "very special girl" whom he had been "scared to death of" and "scared of going out with" (74).

Thus, unable to direct his wrath at the white male power structure, the rape becomes John's way of seizing control and "getting even," further highlighting John's destructive conception of both power and difference. Like his relationship with Mara, taking possession of "a white man's daughter" temporarily empowers John by conquering his fear and anger (290). His violent act proves, as Ashraf Rushdy remarks, that John is so entangled in American racist thought he can only fight against white supremacy by operating within its premises (*Remembering* 92).

Other scenes in the novel also draw upon the rhetoric of "protection" to highlight the connection between gendered forms of sexual and racial domination. Like John's account of the rape, these scenes emphasize the centrality of the white female body in what Trudier Harris calls the "arena of competition between black and white men" (171). John insinuates, for example, that his brother was drafted and sent to his certain death in Vietnam because one of the Town's white leaders wanted to put distance between Bill and his own "oversexed" "prized daughter" (171).²¹

The narrative goes so far as to ridicule the lengths white men will go to "protect"

²¹ See also 176, 279-81.

“their” women. We see this most graphically through John’s ironic discussion of the Town’s refusal to build a bridge joining its main street to the Hill. John explains that such a bridge “would have connected perfectly” Juliana Street – the only street in the Town named after a white woman – to the Hill’s main street, Vondersmith Avenue. Yet the white leaders’ rejection of the more than reasonable public works project signals their intention to safeguard the reputation of Juliana Penn from any physical connection to black men – no matter how ephemeral and seemingly unrelated. Additionally, John’s recollection of his maternal grandfather’s (“the Professor’s”) insistence that a white woman dust his extensive library of “[b]ooks by black people” also reinforces the centrality of the white female body in claiming power and status in society (129). Both scenes construct the white female body as a prized possession, an object to be “mastered” within the dialectical struggle for power enacted by black and white men.

Yet most the compelling link between the white supremacist discourse of protection and racial violence is found in Jack’s account of the attempted lynching of his friend Josh White. Jack’s story implies that like John, Josh becomes a changed man after falling in love with a white woman. Convinced that he could pass for white, Josh courageously decides to ask for the woman’s hand in marriage. Once the word spreads that Josh is not white, a lynch mob is immediately formed to deal with this threat to white supremacy. The white townspeople are in an uproar over the fact that “some colored boy was nosin’ ’round a young lady . . . tryin’ to talk her into doin’ unspeakable things.” As John’s father Moses puts it, “the first damn thing them white folks is gonna get to thinkin’ is if one nigger can quit sneakin’ in the back winda an’ start knockin’ at the front door, we all gonna be linin’ up on the porch” (92). While Jack and Moses manage to

rescue Josh, it is only after he is strung up and “mutilated” (108). Josh’s physical wounds heal, but not the psychological ones. The devastation caused by his lover’s betrayal changes Josh irreparably. Josh “wasn’t never the same,” according to Jack (111). The most obvious change is in his refusal to speak. Jack recalls, “I don’t ever think he ever did say moren three words at a time to anybody again. . . . I guess he was so mad he didn’t want to start talkin’, ’fraid it would all come out” (111).

The stories of Mara, the rape, and the lynching attempt show the ways in which the “protection”/possession of a woman’s body takes center stage in the struggle for power between black and white men. Indeed, Jack relies upon the “ritual” of storytelling and uses the story of the lynching attempt to “bend” John, to convince him that he is wrong to trust and love a white woman (77). Unlike John who insists “things have changed a bit,” Jack does not believe “the whole world changes on account of somebody draws a mark on a map, or passes a law” (64, 67). His version of the story of Josh’s near-lynching is most certainly a cautionary tale. Not only is it one of the book’s longest stories – rivaling only the unraveling of John’s completed ancestry at the novel’s end – and Jack’s last story before his death, it also clearly sacrifices the white female body by insisting on Clydette’s complicity in the lynching. The white woman’s body is eroticized to evoke the expected response. According to Jack, “that girl had been settin’ him up all along.” Sexualizing the white woman’s anticipated response, Jack imagined “that when [Josh] swung she was gonna be right there, watchin’ and’ grinnin’ an’ fixin’ to go gushy in her bloomers when he started jerkin’ around” (101).

Even though the narrative leaves room for other interpretations, because Jack applies the story to ensure a particular response to his present situation, his cautionary

tale provides support for John's divisive notion of difference. Moses, for example, articulates a different view of Clydette's role in the lynching. Indeed, even Jack's own account indicates she might actually have been an innocent victim rather than a co-conspirator. Yet, because of the way Jack filters his interpretation of the event through the lens of his own experience, "the truth according to Old Jack," as John puts it, his narrative dominates.

Just as Jack uses the story of the lynching attempt to influence John, John himself uses the story of the rape to "bend" Judith. The way in which the rape is disclosed suggests that the story itself has become a possession for John who uses it to deflect Judith's need for further intimacy.²² Told within a flashback to a conversation he had with Judith early in their relationship, the narrative placement establishes the rape as both a cautionary tale intended to drive Judith from him, as well as a justification for the distance John has placed between them. The flashback follows a present-day exchange between John and the critically ill Jack Crawley who intuits that it is John's love for a white woman that has changed him, made him "weak" and "trustin'" of "them" (68-9).²³ Opening with Judith's pointed question, "Why don't you ever talk about home," the memory of this conversation conveys the destructive sense of power and difference that has placed limits on John's ability to trust and love Judith (69). After dating John for six

²² At the same time, the story of the rape is symptomatic of how "sick" John is at the beginning of the novel. Bradley, in fact, has stated that he believes "novels are about people getting well. The more you can make them sick in the beginning, the more dramatic the development. He's a rapist, which is about the sickest thing you can dare make a character do" (Bonetti 84). Modeling this element of the novel on Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*, Bradley seemed "motivated" to speak "unspeakable acts" in order to demonstrate just how violent and destructive essentialist notions of race can be (88).

²³ Late on the first day of John's arrival on the backside of the Hill, the two men argue about Jack seeing a doctor. When Jack refuses, arguing that white people will kill him, John insists "things have changed" (64). Jack, however, does not believe that "the whole world changes on account of somebody draws a mark on a map, or passes a law" (67). Instead, he declares it is John who has changed, who has "forg[ot] somethin'"

months, he has not been intimate with Judith either sexually or emotionally. As she tells him, "I think it's pretty damned odd that we haven't ever gone to bed together, but it's even odder that I've never seen . . . where you *live*" (71). Judith begs John to talk to her, to tell her things about him that matter. Because, as she explains, there are some things she "can't do without": "I can't do without learning about you, who you are and what you want. I can't do without love" (71). While Judith concludes that John is unable to trust her or be intimate because she is white, John insists that Judith does not "understand what it means" (73). Through the story of the rape John tries to show Judith the nature of her difference. Whiteness is connected to a history of hatred that, like his brother's "murder," "goes back a long way" (279).

Yet while Judith declares both the rape and John's acrimony against all whites as "sick," surprisingly she does not leave him; instead, she misinterprets his confession as a sign of their deepening intimacy (68). Indeed, by the time the novel opens the two have lived together for three of the more than five years they have been a couple. However, it is only after she herself follows John to the Hill after Jack dies, that Judith discovers how wrong she has been. John's "sharing" is not meant to generate empathy and understanding. In fact, Judith comes to realize that John "hide[s] things" and "lies" (260). She makes this discovery after experiencing the bus trip to the remote Pennsylvania town, the odor of "john" on the bus, and the stench of "a hundred and fifty years' worth of . . . shit" that permeates the Hill (277). She confronts John:

You never shared anything with me. . . . You told me how you acted when your brother died, and I thought it was intimacy. But it was just a little piece of some-

(68). After deducing that a woman is the cause, Jack reminds John that women are "dangerous" because they make a man weak by trying to change him and chastises John for "trustin' white people" (69).

thing you had figured out and finished with. It was a bone and you threw it to me, and I chewed on it for a good long while. But it didn't have anything to do with much of anything, did it (260).

John's reply, "No, it didn't," proves his real objectives, self-protection and detachment from Judith (260). The story of the rape serves only as a mechanism through which John can explain and justify what he feels without ever acknowledging, in Judith's words, "why you feel what you feel" (279).

John's emotional distance is a defense mechanism that masks an overwhelming sense of inadequacy that took root a decade earlier when he could not solve the mystery that had consumed his father. An enigma to his son in life and death, Moses Washington died when John was ten, leaving behind an attic full of books, notebooks, maps, and newspapers. This living "archive" initiates the young John into the world of the historian, sending him on an endless hunt for the "truth" about his father (147). John himself recalls how as a "naïve boy" he had struggled "to give shape to amorphous data, hoping to discover what a legend had been up to, hoping, by doing so, to measure up" (161). Although the young John is initially successful; in the long run he fails. At first he was able to "put the facts together" and "command" every one of them; yet when he "had stepped back and looked at the whole" picture, he saw "nothing. Not a thing" (146). Recognizing his defeat, John acknowledges that he had "[n]ot just taken a wrong path, or run into a dead end in research"; rather, he had "Failed. Completely" (146). What he lacked was the ability to imagine and to "feel [his] way" through the "gaps" in order to create a unified historical narrative (146). "[S]hackled" to the "cold facts" and "incontrovertible logic" of history, and unable to make "any of the burning inductive

leaps that take you from here to there and let you really *understand*,” John feels both intellectually inadequate and is left emotionally numb (147).

Both the perpetual chill and the recurring nightmare that settle in immediately after he admits defeat register the psychological impact of John’s feelings of failure (Gliserman 99). Mirroring the cold trail, the “cold facts,” and the “cold logic” of his failed attempt to decipher the “legend” of Moses Washington, John’s dreams leave him in a state of “all-encompassing . . . icy coldness” (161, 149). The all-consuming “whiteness” of his nightmares about his hatred for his father mirrors the lack of control and feelings of hatred he feels in the face of all things white. Indeed, as Judith theorizes later in the novel, it is precisely these repressed feelings of hatred that have blinded him, caused him to “make all those mistakes” (391). Furious that he cannot “beat” Moses, John’s sense of failure is also, as Martin Gliserman writes, “mapped onto his body” (100). The multiple references to, as John puts it, “the glacier in his guts,” convey the trauma induced by his failure to solve Moses’s puzzle (413). “[T]he place at the base of my belly,” John recalls, “somehow never seemed to get enough warmth” (5).

As a result, facts and historical study become a refuge for John. Indeed, he “acquired a reputation for brilliance simply because [he] would rather sit up late into the night studying rather than take the risk of going to sleep” and freezing to death (149). Thus, even though he is able to, as Judith remarks, “leap to conclusions in a single bound,” John’s brilliance fails him when he gets “within twenty miles of where” he grew up. According to Judith, John’s ability to “make a bonfire by rubbing two dry facts together” works “so long as [he is] talking about the Punic Wars and Saint Francis of

Assisi, or the Lost Chord and Jesus Christ.” Because, as Judith insists, John doesn’t “really want to know,” he “want[s] to win” (391).

John creates a strict separation between fact and feeling in order to suppress his sense of failure and inadequacy. Privileging European epistemology, John’s training justifies this division. Even though John has devoted his career to what Linda Hutcheon refers to as “ex-centric” history, he still approaches the past from a perspective that privileges knowledge based on facts, evidence, and logic (12). The purported objectivity and empirical emphasis of Western conceptions of history allows John to, as he puts it, “tak[e] refuge in my incidents” (224). As he tells Judith, strong feelings “get in the way of the facts” (345). John knows “a great deal – perhaps too much – about the ins and outs of the Slave Trade” and can “shock the joviality right out of a cocktail party” by reciting facts and details concerning this “business,” but, as he insists, historians themselves must be immune to the horrors of the past (206-7). By virtue of their training, John argues, “historians are used to such atrocities” (207). Thus, when reviewing records of his great-grandfather’s life, John consciously pushes emotion aside. “Never mind,” John insists, “that in the year of our Lord 1823 a young man’s mother died of yellow fever, that he must have felt hollow and utterly alone And never mind that in the year of our Lord 1832 that young man exercised the franchise, and must have felt elation, since a decade before he had been a slave” (224).

By focusing upon facts and nothing but the facts, John believes he is able to deflect the emotional, visceral response he might naturally have had when studying such “atrocities.” In essence, John tries to divorce his senses from his mind. Such splitting off goes against all he has learned from his mentor, Jack, who had taught John to rely on his

valued intuition, to “feel his way” through the hunt (146). John refuses to interact with his research. He will not allow himself to “smell the awful odor of eternal misery” or “listen . . . to the sound of it” – “all of it” that, according to African beliefs, “is still going on”: “all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering” (213-4). Eager to leave “home” and all it represents behind, John embraces his chosen profession. For a time, John is able to accept as true that “there’s something good about getting the feelings out of things” (344).

The division that John establishes between fact and feeling renders him incapable of trusting Judith and committing fully to their relationship. He is unable to reconcile what he knows about whites in general (fact), with what he feels for Judith in particular (213). As John observes, “[t]here was a lot that I needed that she would never understand. For she was a woman and she was white, and though I loved her there were points of reference that we did not share. And never would” (384). The novel effectively establishes John’s predicament in his incongruous blend of intimacy and distance with Judith.

On the one hand, moments with and memories of Judith evoke a vivid sense of familiarity and tenderness. When preparing to tell Judith that Jack had died, for instance, John immerses himself in the details of Judith, her habits and rituals. He pictures Judith exercising and settles into his memories of watching her move, “thinking that . . . hers was the most lovely and graceful body in the world, the exercises the most erotic movements I had ever seen” (114). John recalls how he would wait patiently through her stretches and, after that, her bathing for the moment when she would emerge, “pink and dripping, from the tub” so that he could “dry her carefully and slowly, just to have an

excuse to hold her” (114-5). John’s reverie situates the white female body within an intimate context that evokes love rather than hate, consent rather than control. Desire in this and other scenes is palpable between the two lovers, but it is construed within a more complex sense of caring and closeness.²⁴

On the other hand, however, John is mute about his and Judith’s future together. He refuses to “share things” with Judith and is unable to give a straight answer to her question, “What’s going to become of us” (239). Over the course of the novel we learn that their relationship is at a precarious point. At age 31, having been with John for five years, Judith has announced that she wants to have his child. Speaking from the position of white privilege, Judith believes that the strength of her love for John and her belief in his strengths and values outweighs any problems a mixed-race child and family would face. John, however, cannot imagine having a “half-breed” baby with her or, for that matter, committing to Judith any more than he already has. Unsure of what she wants, “a child” or John’s child, Judith considers leaving him unless he can commit to a future with her (240). Limited by his “hate all whites except Judith” syndrome (to paraphrase Trudier Harris), John is unable to respond (178). As John tells Judith elsewhere in the novel, because she was white “I didn’t want you at all. I wanted to stay as far away from you as I could. . . . But you wouldn’t let me stay away . . . and I ended up loving you. But I didn’t know why. Oh, I believed it was for every reason that’s right and good, and for none of the reasons that are anything else. I still believe it. But I don’t know it” (290-91). Ambivalent about his feelings for Judith, John maintains a conspicuous distance from

²⁴ For additional scenes that clearly establish their love and intimacy, see, e.g., 2-5, 305-6. Additional scenes are discussed later in this chapter.

her.²⁵ It is not until more than half way through the novel that we learn that their relationship has reached an impasse and seems destined to fail.

John recalls his conversation with Judith about having a child together at an important juncture in the text. It comes at the end of a chapter that opens with a “lecture” on the slave trade and the merging of European and African cultural traditions. The placement of this scene is telling. The lovers’ conversation at the chapter’s end connects their relationship to that history he “lectures” on earlier in the chapter. The novel’s structure attaches John and Judith’s present and future to “all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering” (213). Most obviously, the juxtaposition of this history and their conversation suggests the connections between interracial sex, white patriarchy, and racialized violence. As John informs Judith elsewhere in the novel, under a 1725 Pennsylvania law “I could be bound into service for living with you. Of course, if we were to get married I’d be sold into slavery immediately. Only it would never get that far; they would have killed me after the second time we made love” (336). By connecting their relationship to the history of antimiscegenation law, John’s “lecture” suggests how racialisms structure power relations across time, space, and location.

Indeed, the specter of a mixed race child epitomizes their irreconcilable understandings of and ties to slavery and its legacies. While John’s ancestors were sold into slavery, Judith’s European ancestors were slave owners. Judith is ignorant, to an extent willfully so, of this aspect of her “proud” Powell ancestry and its connection to the larger history of slavery and racism (241). Shielded by white privilege and ambivalent

²⁵ Indeed, David Bradley has remarked, “he’s not the kind of guy who . . . I mean he’s not going to have a white lover and *keep* her. I knew they couldn’t be married because marriage implies that he has accepted

about altering it, Judith resists unseemly details on slave breeding, the market for light-skinned little girls in New Orleans, and the price of slave children (Gliserman 115).

John, on the other hand, driven by both his personal history and his professional tenacity, has learned about he could Judith's ancestry. He notes, "all the while she was imagining things about her however-many-great-whatever John, the captain, I could have been telling her the truth about her maybe however-many-great-whatever Thomas, the explorer. Or worse, about his for certain grandson Joe" (242). As we learn later in the novel, John knows that Judith's ancestors originally settled Southampton Township, the section of the county where Chaneyville sits. Her family history, therefore, is directly linked to the multiple "incidents" that occur in that location: the death of thirteen fugitive slaves, Josh's attempted lynching, and Moses's death. Although John considers it an act of mercy that he withholds "the truth" from her, he also resists telling her because he himself is not clear what Judith's heritage means to him. Nevertheless, his knowledge leads John to believe Judith would never be able understand him and his world. Over and over again throughout the novel John tells Judith "you don't understand" (73).²⁶ This mantra signals not only his inability to trust her, but also his stubborn belief in the divisive nature of difference.

Juxtaposing various levels of the past with his present decision and actions, the narrative structure makes clear that history weighs heavily on the couple. Given the pattern of his relationships with women and the weight of his knowledge of history's atrocities, John does not "know" if he's involved with Judith for the wrong reasons. Critic

her totally, and he wasn't going to do that" (Blake and Miller 29).

²⁶ For other references see also 5, 149, 160, 240-1, 269, 273-4, 304, 384, 390-1. See also references to trust in the novel, e.g., 70, 73, 150, 240, 261.

Trudier Harris, for one, argues that Judith “has become for him a trophy to reward the turbulent struggling by which he has come to manhood” (168). After hearing the story of Mara Jamison, Judith herself draws a similar conclusion, charging John with wanting her “because [she] was a white man’s woman”:

I was a white man’s daughter and when you met me I was a white man’s lover, and if you hadn’t come along I would have become a white man’s wife and probably a white man’s mother, and if I wanted you then you could cheat them all. That was it, wasn’t it? That’s still it. I’m just like Mara, only this time you’re not just keeping something from them; you’re taking it (290).

Unsure of the degree to which Judith is correct, John remains at an impasse. Unable to integrate what he knows with what he feels, he “can’t imagine” a future with her (291).

History also weighs heavily upon the father/son relationship in regard to Judith. Propelled by the discovery that Moses’s death was a suicide, John moves into Jack’s cabin after his burial to renew the “hunt” for his father. John is determined to use the facts he Moses left him to “try to figure out the why” behind his father’s death. Realizing he would have “to learn to imagine just a little bit” in order to understand, John does not believe he will succeed. As he remarks, “I had no faith I would do it; I had never done it before” (224). Still, armed with new “facts” and a “ruthless” determination to “understand,” John cuts off ties to the present and immerses himself in the past.

Tellingly, after settling into the cabin, John writes a four-lined note to his lover that makes clear, as Judith remarks, John wasn’t “coming back at all” (256). Juxtaposing John’s mailing of the letter with his memory of their conversation about having a child together, the narrative indicates not only that his decision to leave Judith, but also the

reason. John decides that leaving her is an act of kindness and “mercy” (242). He even believes that his lover will feel relief at his disappearance (Egan 276). Abandoning both his life in the city and his lover, John appears suicidal, destined to follow his father’s footsteps. Two incidents, however, alter John’s course and force him to question his understanding of power and knowledge, both of which are at the root of the dilemmas he faces at the outset of the novel.

Difference as Performative

The first event has to do with John’s misperceptions about his father. He discovers that he did not “know that folio” – and by extension, his father – as he thought he did. The “legacy” willed to him was not the detailed records of Moses’s whiskey business. It was not “the lists of names of those from whom he bought and to whom he sold, . . . and to whom he gave bribes, and precisely what services he exacted” (162). Rather, John’s legacy contained primary documents attributed to a fugitive slave named C.K. Washington.

John is caught off guard by both the terms and the contents of Moses’s bequest. He is initially disappointed after discovering “that there is nothing there to use.” Having “heard Old Jack talk about it,” John believed the folio to be “the most feared artifact in the entire County” (162). Understandably, before seeing its contents, he reveled in the idea of its power, in the possibilities it held for exposing the hypocrisy of and reaping revenge on the Town’s prominent white men. Even though he finds it empty of information useful for blackmail, John quickly realizes that the power of the folio is not in its facts, but in the way the artifact itself is exploited. Moses, as John tells the Judge,

“expected you to use it” (233). By extension, the information that *is* found in the folio, the papers of C. K., is meant for John to interpret and use as he sees fit.

The documents do hold unanticipated power. Not the destructive kind that, as the Judge concedes, could cause people a lot of “hurt,” but one that can ultimately heal John by giving him back himself (202). Indeed, Moses had included a note to John that instructed him to tell the Judge “what’s past is ashes” (230). Thus, what Moses intends as his legacy for his son is the means to a constructive knowledge of John’s ancestry and, by extension, of himself. The folio, like knowledge and history, is functional, flexible, and applicable to the present.

Moses’s example suggests that for John “consciously historical” knowledge, which serves to illuminate not destroy or control, is the superior kind of knowledge (Rich, “Resisting Amnesia,” as quoted in Peterson 6). Moses does not intend for the folio to provide “dirt” for blackmail; rather the documents will establish a connection to John’s ancestral history. For Moses, the papers of C.K. Washington are invaluable “because they told the story of a fugitive slave who had risen to social prominence, who had been both an author and an outlaw, gentleman and murderer, husband and whoremaster, and whose blood, he believed, flowed in his veins” (222-3).

John now has the basis upon which to recognize the gap between two very different conceptions of knowledge – his own and his father’s. The narrative achieves this end by juxtaposing the importance Moses placed on the documents with the “value” a historian would place on the “raw stuff of history” – “handwritten autobiography, drafts of published pamphlets, day-by-day journals.” Correspondingly, Moses had “had not cared about history” as a discipline; rather, he had passionately created a vision of his

own life out of the story of his ancestor. Unlike John, Moses thrived on the connection between fact and feeling. Indeed, he used the creative power of the imagination to integrate the two and generate meaning from C.K.'s papers. Moses "feels his way" through the hunt for his grandfather and literally builds his life around getting "ready to find C.K. Washington" (387). John finally comes to understand that Moses "wanted to understand dying, to look before he leaped, so he went to war. . . . He loved a woman because C.K. had loved a woman, maybe two, and Moses Washington needed to understand that. He had a son because C.K. had had a son . . ." (388).

Accepting this premise, John can reinterpret Moses's death. It was not an accident or a suicide; it was a leap of faith. Moses, John realizes, was following the trail of his ancestor who believed that death "was not an ending of things, but a passing on of spirit, a change of shape, and nothing more" (428). Moses's legacy to his oldest son was not a set "plan" or an established "truth"; instead, it was a set of choices and options for John to pursue at will. Thinking like a "hunter" rather than a "historian," Moses "left trail markers, so that if somebody wanted to they could follow him" (387). In addition to the folio, John learns about his father through his discussions with the Judge, Lucian Maccabeus Scott, the Town's most prominent lawyer and the closest thing Moses had to a white friend. As a result, John reconsiders the image of Moses that had long been fixed in his mind.

Because of John's efforts, Moses becomes for his son a more complex individual who moved comfortably between the "black" and "white" worlds. Unlike Jack's entrenched oppositional worldview, Moses epistemology was premised on what Missy Dehn Kubitschek calls a "syndetic" understanding of difference, a "simultaneous

awareness of different realities” (768). Thus, Moses no longer needs to inhabit the role of a trickster to “Old Jack’s” divisive notion of difference. With a more complex, subjective image of his father, John is offered alternative ways of interpreting the Moses’s legacy and its meaning to his own life (Kubitschek 768).

The second event that alters John’s direction has to do with Judith’s arrival at the cabin. Even though John tells Judith “[y]ou don’t belong here,” [g]o home,” the narrative marks her unexpected appearance as a transformative moment. The lecture on historiography immediately following John’s dismissal of Judith indicates its significance most directly. John, as narrator, unexpectedly shifts his view of history from that of a “created, fixed,” “dinosaur,” to Heisenberg’s theory “that one could not look at an event without changing it” (263-4). Judith’s arrival, therefore, helps John to understand “that there is no such thing as a detached researcher” (140). History, in other words, is fluid and open to interpretation. Judith’s unanticipated arrival, like the folio he thought he “knew,” leads John to reconsider his assumptions not only about her difference, but also about the mystery he is trying to solve.

In the marginal space of what was once Jack’s cabin, each partner is thrown into a new relief. John, having cleaned and refurbished it, found space for his books, pads, and pens, had made the cabin his own. Judith, on the other hand, brings “a kind of Philadelphia city atmosphere into the cabin,” altering the space of isolation that John had appropriated from Jack (Harris 178).²⁷

²⁷ Just as John himself planned on making the cabin into his own site of isolation, a typhoid epidemic in the 1870s led to the quarantine of the small black population that lived there, separating the only two survivors, Jack Crawley and Josh White, from the rest of the Hill. To safeguard their lives and their jobs, the blacks on the side of the Hill closest to town “mounted a guard,” as John tells Judith, “to make damn sure Uncle Josh and Old Jack didn’t come across the ridge” (272). John explains, even after most everyone had died out, the adults “were still afraid. And they told the children there were ghosts over here, and that Uncle John and Old Jack were boogeymen, to make sure the children didn’t come exploring” (273).

The in-between space they create displaces the image each has held of “the other.” First is Judith about John. When John walks through the cabin door in his blood-covered hunting garb, Judith asks him, “Who the hell are you supposed to be” (253). She realizes that she knows very little about John and his world because he had hid things from her, “lied to [her] from the beginning” (260). She tells John, “[y]ou made this place, this . . . *shack*, sound like some quaint little cabin with a nice warm stove” (260). For his part, John notices that Judith is not “herself.” Her typically orderly appearance is in disarray (269). She talks to him differently. Uncharacteristically, she ignores the usual silences that had always clued her into the fact that he “did not want to talk” (256, 260). These changes cause John to take pause and look more “closely” at Judith (256).

By crossing over to the “other side” of the Hill, Judith makes the effort to transcend the barriers that have kept her from identifying with John and his world. This in-between space allows her to identify with and resist her “possessive investment” in whiteness (Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment” 384). Judith apologizes to John for acting “like a Southern belle who can’t have everything nice and neat and clean the way she wants it” (293). And while at times she continues to resist the particularly ugly features of history, Judith does all she can to become a sympathetic and supportive listener.

Judith’s empathy is best illustrated towards the end of the novel when she makes important concessions to John’s needs and realities. She tells John,

[y]ou don’t think I understand. You’re right; I don’t understand. But I can believe in you; I do believe in you. If you want to take that gun and blow your head off, I won’t try to stop you; I don’t know that I can help you, but I won’t

try to stop you. And I'll try to understand. And if you need something that I can't give you, something you need a toddy to get, then I'll make a toddy for you (390).

Up until this point, Judith had openly disapproved of John's drinking, linking his need for alcohol to the problems he has stubbornly refused to acknowledge. Within this context, and its connection to the larger drinking motif within the novel, the gesture of making a toddy takes on enormous significance.²⁸ Most obviously, it signals her "faith" in John and his ability to use what he knows *and* feels to recreate his ancestral history. The gesture also exemplifies the depth of her identification and sympathy. Rather than interpreting John's need for a toddy from her own experience as a privileged white woman and a doctor, Judith accepts and respects the importance of the ritual of drinking to John. Indeed, by the novel's final pages, Judith is not only able to anticipate John's need for a toddy before he does, but also she is ready to share in the ritual with him by drinking a toddy of her own (411, 430). Just as sharing a cup of coffee first secured John's connection to Judith at other points in the novel, Judith's participation in the ritual of the toddy reconnects her to John. It establishes her complicity in the history that John narrates.²⁹

In the liminal space of the Hill's far side, John sees Judith in a new light. He even reconsiders her limitations based on difference. His reading of Judith's treatment by Jobie, the white cab driver, suggests this shift. John finds it remarkable that Jobie did not

²⁸ See, e.g., Blake and Miller 31.

²⁹ In the opening scene, for example, John makes a pot of strong coffee before heading home to tend to Jack, knowing that the aroma will wake her (2-3). He also makes a weak pot of coffee to prepare to call her after Jack has died, the taste of it reminding him of Judith: "I should have made the coffee stronger, or have had none at all: strong coffee would have made me feel closer to her, and none might have let me think of something else, but the weak brew simply made me understand how far I was from her; how far I was from anything" (113-5). The scent of coffee also clues John in to Judith's arrival at the cabin (252).

drive Judith all the way up the Hill; instead, he had treated her like “one of them.” Reasoning that Judith must have asked for him by name, John explains, “I guess he figured there was something between us. So he left you off at the bottom of the Hill. . . . It’s interesting. Around here they have never become sophisticated enough to develop the concept of ‘nigger-lover.’ They just sort of figure it rubs off. So you walked up the Hill” (277).

John’s commentary indicates his nascent awareness of the “performative quality of racial affiliation” (Rushdy, *Remembering* 70). His interpretation demonstrates, in other words, how divisions and categories of difference are permeable and sometimes unpredictable. By virtue of her association with John, Judith “becomes” black. John himself suggests his acceptance of the affiliative context of difference when he tells Judith not to do the hating for him, but “[f]or us” (285). By highlighting the way in which “Race matters . . . both relationally and situationally,” interracial intimacy, as sociologists Carmen Luke and Vicki Carrington observe, “puts a very different spin on the politics of othering” (9, 22).

John’s inflexible and irreconcilable notion of difference as fixed and divisive begins to give way as he notices the relative ease with which Judith settles into his world. When she masters the task of making “good coffee in an old iron pot on a wood stove,” for example, John acknowledges, “she had done something to surprise me – and her mother” (270). Recognizing Judith’s willingness and capacity to step out of the bounds of “proper behavior for young upper-class [white] ladies,” John resistance weakens and he begins to talk to her, include her in the process of historical recovery. The oral process of

historical recovery that occurs in the novel's final sections reflects John's revised understanding of difference as complex and relational.

One of the most telling signs of this change is the way in which the narrative comes to intertwine the influences of both Jack and Judith. In contrast to first half of the novel where narrative juxtapositions seem to pit Jack against Judith "in a battle for John's soul," the end of the novel establishes a connection between these two influences (Egan 280). Soon after Judith's arrival, for example, John momentarily confuses his lover with his old mentor. Lost in the puzzle of his multicolored note cards, John believes he hears "Old Jack come back from the dead to give [him] some guidance" (266). Although John quickly realizes that it is "only Judith," his mix-up indicates Judith will take on the nurturing role once provided by Jack. Similarly, as the narrative progresses, it is Judith who makes John toddies and urges him to "forget the facts" and "feel" his way through, just as Jack used to tell John to "[q]uit trying to figure" and work on instinct during a hunt (391, 393). Indeed, as Philip J. Egan observes, the final narrative movements between the memory of Jack and the role Judith plays in the present demonstrates that John has successfully "integrate[d] the influences of both in his own personality so that they may coexist with each other and perhaps even mutually support each other" (280). The overlapping influence of Jack and Judith suggests "difference" as in-between site of "collaboration and contestation" (Bhabha, *Location* 1).

By choosing to include Judith in his life, John reinterprets history as a collaborative endeavor. At the same time as she becomes a nurturing presence, Judith's outsider status places her in the role of the novice. Her arrival shifts John, quite literally, into Jack's position as guide. No longer is the historical process a monologue with Judith

asking questions and John answering. Instead, it is a dialogue where each of them shares in the process of puzzling out the past. Often the questions Judith asks give John pause and make him review his cards or revise his assumptions.³⁰ Judith does not merely propel things forward with her persistent and nagging questions; she also contributes facts, insight, opinion, and feelings that influence the recreation of John's ancestral history in meaningful ways. As Edward Pavlic points out, for example, "Judith's specialized medical knowledge of the spread of epidemics allows her to contribute to the telling of John's story" early on in the process (176). Far from "failing" John, Judith literally stumbles onto the missing evidence John needs. It is this final clue – in the form of a grave marker – that enables John to solve the mystery of C.K. and the fugitive slaves (380). By both literally and figuratively forcing John out of the position "that had always been [his]" into Jack's chair, Judith propels John to integrate what he knows with what he feels (393). In the process, John becomes not only the storyteller who calls to Judith, "[y]ou want a story, do you," but also a skilled bricoleur who is finally able to improvise "a possible historical past" (Hogue 459).

The interaction between the two lovers refigures the far side of the Hill from a site of isolation to a zone of intercultural exchange and collaboration. Desire and intimacy play a key role in this process. By juxtaposing the couple's act of love-making with John's decision to include Judith in the trip to find Moses's suicide site, the narrative establishes intimacy as something John does not want to "do without" (268). Having found "nothing in the cards," John heads out alone before dawn, determined walk to the "nice spot" in Chaneyville where Moses blew his brains out (307). Though John is reluctant to leave Judith behind, he believes this suicidal trip is the "[o]nly chance left for

³⁰ See, e.g., 300, 329, 351, 356, 369-70, 380, 391-4.

[him] to understand” (306).³¹ Armed with a flask and a bottle of whiskey, John sets out on foot only to be stopped short by the sight of his father’s house. As he reflects on Moses’s selfish act of suicide, he allows himself to name its inherent selfishness. Moses had not “care[d] enough about the effect of it on his wife – and his children – to try to make it look like an accident,” he thinks. Simultaneously, John pauses to think of Judith “waking in the morning to find him gone” (307).

This lonely image prompts John in his subsequent actions to choose intimacy over isolation. He enters his mother’s house and questions her about her relationship with Moses. “Why did you marry him, anyway,” he asks (308). He learns from Yvette that there had been little physical intimacy and even less love between his parents. Now he openly questions “Moses Washington’s way” (309). Juxtaposed with the desire and closeness he had just experienced with Judith only hours before, John’s decision to take the keys to his mother’s car signals a rejection of the cold, barren “alliance” created by his parents. Stealing the keys to the car his mother purchased in an act of defiance against Moses, John’s act signifies his decision to chart an alternative route toward a loving relationship (Egan 276). Indeed, the next chapter opens with Judith and John “slamming down off the Hill” together toward Chaneyville and the final clues to the mystery of Moses’s death.

Intimacy is also crucial to the way in which the final narrative of John’s ancestral history unfolds. Like Judith’s act of making toddies, the sound of her voice, the touch of her hands, and the sight of her face in the candlelight sustains John, enabling him to “quit figuring” and feel his way through the story of C.K. and the fugitive slaves. Although

³¹ As Philip Egan writes, in John’s initial plan of “following his father’s footsteps out to Chaneyville, John takes a covertly suicidal action; if he does not consciously plan his death, his project clearly risks it” (275).

many critics have emphasized the importance of John's ability to imagine his way through history, most have overlooked the significance of his ability to "feel" his way through the process of creating a cohesive narrative.³² When Judith surprises him, once again, by anticipating his need for a toddy and uses her hands to warm his own, for instance, John's narration doubles back on itself. At that point, he corrects his vision of Judith. Whereas he initially laments that "she will never understand" in the opening of the penultimate chapter, John revisits the image of Judith's silhouette against the glow of the stove later in the chapter and concedes that "[he] had "underestimated [Judith], and had done it in a way that had cheated [them] both" (384, 411). With this observation, John gives himself over to his love for Judith; his feelings for her inspire the rest of the (hi)story that "[takes] shape in [his] mind." As John tells it, "I became aware of [Judith's] hand, warm, resting on mine. Not resting. Squeezing. I imagined the rest of it then" (425).

John's recognition of Judith propels his ancestral history into a new direction. Moving away from the narrative of "hunting" that he appropriated from Moses, John "leaps" into a new genre, a "narrative of romance" (Egan 283). By connecting his relationship with Judith to C.K.'s love for Harriette, John merges his lover into his ancestral past in a way that makes their future together possible. In an earlier conversation, Judith had defended C.K.'s foray into the writing of "soupy love poems" while John had mocked his ancestor's change in style and focus (341, 356). With the shift

³² Although they do not discuss this explicating, both Egan and Gliserman touch on the importance of feelings in their articles.

into the love story between C.K. and Harriette Brewer, John acknowledges the value of Judith's perspective and suggests his willingness to work through their differences.³³

The link between the two women is established narratively by a "cinematic shift" that abruptly cuts from Judith's face in the candlelight to the image of Harriette "silhouetted against the glowing hearth" (Egan 283; *Chaneyville* 411). From that moment on fragments of Judith are woven into the conclusion of the story.³⁴ C.K.'s hesitation at the mill's door mirrors John's earlier reluctance to enter the cabin where Judith had awaited him (412, 252). Similarly, the feeling of Harriette's hands on the frozen spot at "the base of [C.K.'s] belly" mimics Judith's repeated attempts to warm and nurture John (413).³⁵ Feeling "the warmth of her hands," John suddenly finds that he is "no longer cold" and incorporates "the feeling [that comes] pounding back into" him into the story he tells Judith. The "heat," he explains, "did not come from the fire; it came from her, from the warmth of her body that pressed against his back, the warmth of her arms around him" (413).

Thus, Judith's participation and influence actually change the way John interprets his ancestral history. John's relationship to the past is no longer defined by a Manichean battle between black and white; rather, notions of belonging and difference become more complex and permeable through his act of telling the story to Judith. This shift is obvious, of course, in the reconstruction of John's ancestry, which, as noted earlier, reveals the nation's tangled mestizo heritage. Yet more importantly, by choosing to include Judith,

³³ Critics have pointed to additional details that reflect Judith's influence on John's tale including the figurative "rebirth" of Mara and Cara Jamison (Egan 284-5), and the broader inclusion of both women and children in the traditional slave narrative (Brigham 310-12, Kubitschek 769-70).

³⁴ In fact, pointing to the inclusion of a woman named Juda, the fugitive slave who is the mother of a sickly baby in John's final story, Kubitschek argues that the narrative "would seem to prophesy a child" for John and Judith (772).

³⁵ See especially 5, 74.

John is able to transcend racial ideologies based on blood. He can now view affiliation as a choice. As John puts it, "heritage is something you believe in" (212).

The final exchange between Judith and John about the white miller's act of burying the fugitive slaves establishes this shift in perception:

"What do you think?" she said.

"They were buried next to a family graveyard. They died there, but they didn't have to be buried there. They were buried with the same spacing as the family stones. . . ."

"You're saying the miller -- what's his name? Iames? You think he took the time to bury them like that, to figure out who loved who?"

"Yes," I said. "That's what I believe."

"But he was white," she said.

"I know," I said.

"Why would a white man . . . why would you think a white man . . . ?"

I heard the soft squeaking of the chair as her body stiffened, as she turned to try and see my face (431).

Because of Judith's discovery of the thirteenth gravestone, John no longer interprets the second graveyard as evidence of the Iames's slave-breeding business; instead, John "knows" and "believes" that Iames himself took the time to bury the slaves right next to his own family graveyard. Interpreting Iames's gesture as an act of empathy and love, John's response bears out his revised notion of difference. Acknowledging the potential for individual good without denying or minimizing the violent history of institutionalized

racism, John's interpretation of the grave site "emphasizes his subjectivity, his choice" (Kubitschek 758).

In fact, critic Ashraf Rushdy reads John's interpretation of the burial site as a reconstitution of his notion of "family." Now he can allow himself to include Judith. Rushdy writes, "[j]ust as Iames constructs familial ties that might or might not be biologically provable, so does John assert that familial ties are social connections based on historical and symbolic acts. One is not simply a member of a familial community or tradition by blood, but by emotional investment." By sharing that story orally with his lover, John redefines "family" as a fluid site of difference and belonging, and includes Judith as a "fictive kin relation" (Rushdy, *Remembering* 87). Yet this "symbolic relation" is not simply a "fanciful" one born out of John's imagination; rather, John draws on fact to establish a historical connection between the Iames family and the Powells in a way that reconciles their two ancestral pasts (Rushdy, *Remembering* 85).

At the same time, Judith's reaction is a moment of transcendent sublimity. It "suggests the power of narrative to transform subject positions, to take a reader inside alien cultural assumptions" (Wilson 105). Responding as if she were John – "but he was white," "why would a white man" – Judith signals her own investment in the narrative John shares with her. For Judith, "history" has become a more problematic concept. Judith's disorientation, in fact, reflects the reorientation of her historical memory. Rather than immersing herself only in the romantic stories of her ancestors and resisting the ugly side of history, the narrative suggests that Judith, like John, is now able to consider "all of it" (213).

Signaling the narrative's recognition of difference as an on-going negotiation, the conclusion of the novel leaves the future open. The question that remains does not, as some critics have suggested, revolve around questions of suicide or self immolation; rather, the lingering question is whether or not those outside the liminal space of the Hill's far side will understand the significance of John's final act (432).³⁶ This query, of course, is posed with a particular "someone" in mind: Judith. As Judith awaits him on the other side of the Hill, John burns the tools of his trade and wonders if his lover will continue to understand him. Yet before this reverie, John performs a "fatherly" act of preparing the cabin "for the next man who would need [it]" (431). He carefully organizes the books, maps, and papers, and places the matches back in place so the cabin would be ready for others who will come. By leaving it "ready," the narrative issues a tacit invitation to the reader to revisit the crossroad of the Hill and enter the liminal space of the cabin.

Just as the form and structure of the novel works to implicate the reader in the process of historical discovery, the conclusion wonders if the reader too will maintain this awareness after the text is finished. "Readers," after all, are what Bradley insists "make a novel"; by the end, "it ought to belong to [them]" (Bonetti 87, 82). As a writer, Bradley hopes his readers will enter the in-between space of the novel and find meaning that might be applied to their own life and beliefs. Just as Bradley has come to the realization that writing "costs" him, moves him beyond what is "secure and safe in [himself]," he also suggests that reading, too, has its costs. For, as he explains, the novelist's ultimate goal is "to cause a movement in the minds and hearts of those who read" their work ("The Faith" 17).

³⁶ See, e.g., Brigham 312-13, Stone 372.

Bradley's comment resonates with George Handley's observation that return to the subject of slavery comes with inherent "risks." Chief among them, Handley argues, "is discovery of our own contemporary complicity with the structures of thought slavery has passed on to us, habits that perpetuate racial division and national egotism despite our intention to critique them." In the process of reimagining slavery, Handley continues, "Postslavery literature provides vital warnings that slavery is not fully behind us by demonstrating how slavery's legacies continue to inform the social, economic, and cultural lives of inhabitants of Plantation America." Yet in part through their revisionary approach to black-white coupling, these novels "also point to promising signs of more democratic and racially just possibilities for New World societies" (187).

By imagining the potential for a shared future between John Washington and Judith Powell, as Klaus Ensslen has argued, *The Chaneyville Incident* "ends on a utopian note" (293). Not simply, as he remarks, because it holds out the prospect of a transformed future for cross-racial love; more importantly, the novel envisions the possibility of affecting the world beyond the text itself. Relying on the theme of black-white coupling to highlight the productive possibilities of difference, the narrative brings the same couple together to solve the narrative's mysteries. The relationship between John and Judith establishes a dynamic that compels both characters to maneuver within the in-between space of difference to reimagine the past and understand "the other." Yet their collaboration has specific implications beyond the pages of the text as well.

Chaneyville also works to reimagine the relationship between the novel and its audience. Envisioning the text itself as a bridge by which the reader might choose to cross the divide of racial and cultural difference, *The Chaneyville Incident* attempts to

redefine difference as “something people share” (Cox 24). By situating the trope of (un)conventional coupling within America’s hidden mestizo past, Bradley’s novel suggests that we must consider “*all* of it” our past and “*all* [of] our ancestors” in order to recover (from) the history of slavery (213).

CHAPTER IV

TRIANGULATED RACIAL DESIRE IN VALERIE MARTIN'S *PROPERTY*

Given the novel's representation of the near impossibility of creating any sort of transracial, cross-class sisterhood, it might seem ironic that Valerie Martin's *Property* bears the stamp "Winner of the Orange Prize" on its book jacket. Britain's prestigious literary award for women's fiction, the Orange Prize was conceived in the early 1990s in response to the disparity between male and female writers recognized by established literary prizes (Bury 58). Created by women to celebrate and promote the work of contemporary women writers, the Orange Prize has avowedly feminist intentions. Yet it was not any particular feminist crux to the story that inspired the judges' enthusiasm; rather, it was Martin's use of "an unpleasant character" to take the themes of *Property* "beyond feminism" to raise broader questions about power and injustice (Alberge 9).

Told from the perspective of Manon Gaudet, a self-centered, embittered slave mistress, *Property* chronicles her experience as a planter's wife in early nineteenth-century Louisiana. Evoking both the monotony and terror (imagined and real) of daily life on a remote sugar plantation, the novel focuses particularly on Manon's fraught relationship with her husband, the unnamed Mr. Gaudet, and her growing obsession with her slave (also her husband's concubine), Sarah. Married to a man who repulses her and living a life she disdains, Manon fancies herself the long-suffering victim of an "advantageous match" (Martin, *Property* 38). Through her eyes we see her subjugation,

but inadvertently, and more acutely, her narration also makes us witness to the casual cruelties and daily violence of slavery. From Manon's perspective we gain access to everything from the minute daily dramas of the plantation household, to the momentous events of death and revolt. Yet the figure of Sarah haunts Manon's narration, reminding us of the half truths and silences that pervade the story of slavery. Because her characterization emphasizes both the possibility and impossibility of filling the gaps in our knowledge of the slave past with other witnesses and perspectives, Sarah's fleeting presence evokes a history that remains incomplete and provisional (Handley 38, 148). At the same time, Sarah's relationship with both Mr. Gaudet and Manon reveals how the "odious peculiarities" of slavery affected not only the slave, but also the slaveholder (Thomas Jefferson as quoted in Painter 144).

While *Property* is set in 1828, the novel's themes of power and violence under slavery have been consistently linked to present-day social issues.¹ In interviews as well as in a speech delivered at the British Library, Martin herself has explicitly related the novel's nineteenth-century concerns to contemporary ones.² Similarly, critics have tied the themes of the novel to current global issues including racial oppression, corporate and class inequities, and modern-day slavery, leading London *Times* literary editor Erica Wagner to dub *Property* a "[h]istorical novel that brings us bang up to date" (Wagner 9).³ By probing the "family secrets" of antebellum society, Martin's novel encourages us to look beyond tidy surfaces and to be more critical of both history and, more importantly,

¹ In fact, *Property* is an offshoot of Martin's earlier novel, *The Great Divorce* (1994), which explicitly links the present day to antebellum history. Moving between the past and present, the novel connects the lives of three (white) Louisiana women, two of whom are from the present and one who lives in the nineteenth century but is the subject of research for a contemporary male historian.

² See, e.g., reviews by S. Martin, McHenry, and Wagner.

³ See also McHenry, Miller, and Oates.

of the way we live our lives in the present (Painter 146). As one *News & Observer* critic put it, “The real achievement is that Martin leaves us wondering what ‘peculiar institutions’ we are embracing in our own world.”⁴

Precisely because of its capacity to induce readers to consider forms of injustice across barriers of time and place, critic Laura Miller finds *Property* a welcome relief from the majority of recent historical novels in which writers create “a cozy fictional theme park” out of the past. In a biting critique, Miller laments the fact that recent historical novels “have been overrun with the flabbiest sort of wishful thinking” that implies “the values held by right-thinking people today should have been obvious to any decent person of any previous era because they are eternal, essential truths and therefore subject to no revision” (1). Conversely, Martin’s *Property*, like other neo-slave narratives, conceives of the past as a “minefield” where values and truths are uncertain, precarious, and problematic. The novel is an uncompromising attack on the “lies without end,” to borrow a line from Manon, that have long dominated the subjects of slavery and race (1). As Miller argues, rather than “reinforc[e] the complacency of contemporary readers and absolv[e] the author from coming to terms with the past,” the novel tacitly encourages us to question our own relationship to inequality and injustice (“who’s to say what nightmares might be . . . invisible to us”?) (2). Martin’s novel “shows how easy it is, even for the astute, to adopt the prevailing notions of one’s age, to allow deeper contradictions to go unquestioned, and to protest only when our own rights and comforts are curtailed” (2). Through its unflinching look at the past, as Miller contends, *Property* has the power to remind us of fiction’s capacity to “remake the way we understand ourselves” (1).

⁴ Quote excerpted from the book jacket of *Property*.

Yet strangely, *Property* is not what scholar Patricia Yeager would call a “political conversion narrative” (40). The main character does not experience any sort of epiphany that demonstrates a “coming to knowledge about race” like Ruth in *Dessa Rose* or Judith in *The Chaneyville Incident*, for example, or like many of the white female characters in novels by the contemporary southern women writers Yeager discusses in *Dirt and Desire* (41). Instead, Martin purposely limits the subversive potential of Manon Gaudet by placing her oppression, power, and resistance in relation to both her husband and her slave. While Manon is acutely aware of her own oppression within the rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal society of antebellum Louisiana, she is constrained by an “obscene racial blindness” that limits her ability to consider inequality more broadly (Yeager xii).⁵ Manon’s unwillingness and inability to see across lines of race and class represents what Toni Morrison has termed the “escape from knowledge” that has both produced and maintained American racial epistemologies (as quoted in Yeager xii).

Martin relies on black-white coupling to expose the “everyday world of white unseeing” to her reader (Yeager 104). As the testimony of plantation mistresses like Mary Chestnut, Gertrude Thomas, and their contemporaries bear out, these relationships (and the children they produced) stand as the most potent markers of white antebellum society’s obscene racial blindness.⁶ Indeed, Hortense Spillers contends that the figure of the “mulatta/o” (both as concubine and mixed progeny) embodied “the ‘unspeakable,’ ... the Everything that the dominant culture would forget” about slavery (“Notes” 165-6). Convention held that white slaveholding women pretend not to see, as Chesnut wrote in

⁵ See Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” and Painter on the refusal to recognize or “see” slavery’s horrors.

⁶ On the attention to illicit sexual relations (particularly involving white men and enslaved black women) in the diaries and journals of white women, see, e.g., Block 150-3, Fox-Genovese, *Within* 346-69, Painter 135-6. See also Chesnut.

her journal, “what was plain before their eyes as the sunlight” (as quoted in Painter 136). Yet privately, “jealous mistresses” like Gertrude Thomas despaired over having to “share” their husbands with enslaved women (Painter 135-6). While the journals of white slaveholding women might have provided a safe forum for them to “rail against the unpleasant aspects of” both slavery and patriarchy, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues, “their railing should not ipso facto be taken as a rejection of their society or its reigning worldview” (369). “For that system,” Fox-Genovese points out, “provided privileges and amenities for its women that they had no intention of surrendering” (370). White antebellum society’s “systematic blindness” (“a refusal to see and to understand”) is revealed by the juxtaposition of white women’s private critiques with their public blindness (Foucault 55).

In order to both illuminate and preclude the reader’s own escape from knowledge about past and present oppressions, Martin triangulates her representation of black-white coupling to include not only the master and the enslaved black woman, but also the white mistress in this erotic configuration. By juxtaposing Manon’s (relative) powerlessness in the face of patriarchal oppression with Sarah’s subordinate status under slavery, the novel is able to explore what Eve Sedgwick would call the intersection of oppressions.⁷ In *Epistemology of the Closet* Sedgwick reminds us that all oppressions are “*differently structured*,” and asks us to consider “how a variety of forms of oppression intertwine systemically with each other” and “how the person who is disabled through one set of oppressions may *by the same positioning* be enabled through others” (32-3). The triangular relationship between Manon, Mr. Gaudet, and Sarah emphasizes the ways in

⁷ See also Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 33n31 where she cites the model for this approach as “Gay male-centered work that uses more complex models to investigate the intersection of different oppressions.”

which the oppression of privileged white women and enslaved black women is different yet also mutually constitutive.⁸ Additionally, the context of the erotic triangle emphasizes the inextricable relationship between constructions of racial and sexual identity (Somerville 81).

Predicated on asymmetrical power relations, the triangulated relationships in *Property* hinge on desire, particularly white desire for the racial other.⁹ Similar to Sedgwick's study, Martin's novel reveals the erotic triangle to be "a sensitive register... for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment" (*Between Men* 27). Martin's *Property* forces us to reorient the Sedgwickian triangle, however, by focusing more intensely on the dynamics of race and, to paraphrase Susan Fraiman, the geometries of women's relations (82).¹⁰ The text pivots on what James Kim calls "triangulated racial desire," the unstable, "ambivalent desire for the racial other circulated through a system of three terms" (165). Just as the conventional erotic triangle exposes the unequal distribution of power according to gender, the interracial triangle emphasizes the centrality of race in constructing and maintaining asymmetrical power relations (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 18).

Martin uses this structure to focus more exclusively on women's relationships with "other" women. *Property* makes clear that the role of women and female desire must be included as we embark on projects that "explore the ways in which the shapes of

⁸ Sedgwick insists "the comparison of different axes of oppression is a crucial task . . . because each oppression is likely to be in a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization" (*Epistemology of the Closet* 33). See also Kim how "the oppression of one group can be mutually constitutive of the oppression of other groups" (173).

⁹ As articulated in chapter one, my definition of "desire" is premised on Sedgwick's broader conception of the term (*Between Men* 2).

sexuality, and what counts as sexuality, both depend on and affect historical power relationships” (Sedgwick, *Between Men* 2). In Martin’s representation of the interracial triangle, women are not passive objects that mediate men’s desire for other men (*a la* Sedgwick); instead, women are erotic subjects and female desire is both a complicated expression and a constitutive element of power and resistance.¹¹ Through its representation of triangulated racial desire, *Property* makes us look more closely at “women’s particular complicity with racism and other exploitations” and “the specificity of female domination and defiance” (Fraiman 82). And while the erotic triangle ultimately reinforces the dominant social paradigm within the novel, *Property* relies on this configuration to press its readers to consider alternative geometries of race and gender (Fraiman 82).

The Shifting Geometry of Racial Desire

The novel’s opening scene establishes the complicated, shifting geometry of racial desire. This scene displaces the familiar erotic triangle in order to establish the particular context for understanding the centrality of race in the triangular relationship between Mr. Gaudet, Sarah, and Manon. In the context of sexual “games” played by the white master, the conventional configuration of two men wrangling over a compliant woman is replaced by a less familiar paradigm in which not only the white master and enslaved black women, but also young slave boys and the white mistress are placed within a geometry of relations in which violence is inseparable from desire. In the particular “game” that opens the novel, young black boys mediate the master’s desire for

¹⁰ Susan Fraiman, James Kim, and Mason Stokes have all built upon Sedgwick’s theory of the erotic triangle by emphasizing race in their analyses.

enslaved black women. On a hot summer's day, the master brings five boys to the river, reads to them from the Bible, and then makes them strip naked and swing from a rope into the water. After their bodies are wet and slippery, he forces them to swing two, three, and four at a time, making sure the "boys rub against each other" (4). The as yet unidentified narrator explains that as "[t]heir limbs become entwined, they struggle to hang on, and it isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised" (4). That, of course, is "what the game is for," to sexually provoke the boys in order to find evidence that blacks "are brutes" who have neither the power of self-control nor the power of reason. The master boasts that in contrast, "A white man, knowing he would be beaten for it, would not be able to raise his member" (4). After the offending boy is beaten, the master seeks out his mother and, if "she's pretty, she [pays] dearly for rearing an unnatural child" (4).

The master's game is part of a pattern of abuse and sexual violence that includes both enslaved children and black women in its design. Most obviously, the scene emphasizes the centrality of desire and sex in the maintenance of slavery and the enforcement of racial domination. As in the colonial contexts that Ann Laura Stoler discusses in *Carnal Knowledge*, this scene reminds us that under slavery "Sex was not a leveling mechanism but a site in which social asymmetries were instantiated and expressed" (57). More specifically, through this ritual the master attempts to demarcate the distinction between "whiteness" and "blackness." He constructs the black boys as "brutes" who cannot control their desire and contrasts their "unnaturalness" with white male mastery over the domain of sex. This game demonstrates quite vividly how, as

¹¹ As Sedgwick writes in *Between Men*, because her argument is "structured around the distinctive relation of the male homosocial spectrum to the transmission of unequally distributed power," the focus of her

Stoler argues, “the making of racial boundaries turned on the management of sex” (*Carnal Knowledge* 16). Solidifying his power and supplying proof of his superiority, the master’s game leaves him “in a fine humor for the rest of the day” (4).

However, the tableau we witness undercuts the master’s vision of white male superiority. The narrator’s painstaking attention to his violent, pedophilic desire purposely depicts the master as crude, sadistic, and perverse. Rather than conceal the family secrets of child and sexual abuse, as most historical slaveholder journals do, the narrator seems intent on faithfully exposing the master’s role in that abuse (Painter 146-7). While the form of the novel fits into a chronological, narrative structure, *Property* reads more like a self-absorbed monologue or a soliloquy than a self-conscious “journal” that is intended to be shared (Caldwell E7, Oates 10). Having no community of women to talk to, nor any heirs to whom she might pass on her story, Manon is her own ideal audience. Perhaps it is most useful to consider the novel as a fictional “hidden transcript” of the elite that contests the “public transcript” of power relations at the same time as it divulges “the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed” (Scott x, xii). Manon’s narrative does not publicly challenge the dominant order; rather, it allows her to privately voice her objections to the “lies without end” that surround her but that she is not permitted to speak aloud (48). Through this opening scene, the narrator seeks to inspire sympathy not for the slaves, but for her. Manon’s narrative, in fact, seems to assume a certain affinity between herself and her reader. Relying on an ironic tone and the vividness of peering through a looking glass, Manon reveals her husband’s depravity to establish and accentuate her own abject position. Indeed, the “incredulous refrain: *This*

study is not as attentive as she might like to be to women and lesbianism (18).

is my husband, this is my husband,” with which she ends this first passage indicates that it is she who is the ultimate victim of the master’s game (4).

Positioned as witnesses to this scene, Manon’s ideal reader is meant to see through the veneer of superiority that the master uses to mask his cruelty and violent racial desire. To make plain that she disdains her husband and undermine his arrogance, the narrator describes the sexual response of the master in intimate detail. She forces our gaze upon the phallus in order to expose the fact that she is burdened with a husband who “outrage[s] all decency every day of his life” (176). The narrator makes clear that although the master is excited by the boys’ water play, it is the physical abuse of the offending child that provokes his erection. As the master beats the slave boy with the stick that “is never far from him,” the child loses his erection “as quickly as the master’s rises” (4). The master’s stick and the master’s phallus are both necessary and interchangeable in the sexualized violence that he enacts to prove his mastery. The master’s “tumescence,” we are told, “will last until he gets to the quarters”; the narrator leaves no doubt that it is there he will perform his lust for the young black male body on the body of an enslaved woman (4).

At the same time, Martin’s ideal reader is pressed to take in even more than what our narrator prefers. In addition to serving the narrator’s purpose of debunking the master’s warped self-image, the novel’s opening scene also exposes the particular conditions that shape the triangular relationship between Mr. Gaudet, Sarah, and Manon. Because submission and obedience were integral to the maintenance of patriarchy, white men (particularly the privileged) were rarely punished for child or sexual abuse (Painter

142, 145).¹² As *Property* makes clear, under slavery the master had free reign to do as he chose to with his “possessions.” Legal statutes, in fact, helped institute sexual control and abuse as “a critical part of “slavery’s interlocking systems’ of power” (Clinton, “Southern Dishonor” 52). Under domestic law, for instance, the rape of an enslaved woman did not exist. As Saidiya Hartman observes, “legally unable to give consent or offer resistance,” the slave woman was “presumed to be always willing” (227n6, 81).¹³ Within this context negotiation itself “implied willingness” (Block 143). To disguise “the primacy and extremity of violence in the master-slave relations,” Hartman explains, a “discourse of seduction” developed in which consent was conflated with coercion, feeling with submission, intimacy with domination, and reciprocity with violence (81). The opening scene in *Property* attempts to displace the discourse of seduction. The novel does not make the abuse of slave children and the rape of an enslaved black woman implausible; rather, through this opening scene, it pushes the boundaries of the imaginable in order to expose the centrality of sexual abuse and violence in all relations of mastery under slavery.

And while the end of the opening scene seems to return to a sort of heterosexual status quo (with the master on his way to a woman in the slave quarters), we must not overlook the important element of pedophilic desire that is introduced in this scene. As P. Gabrielle Foreman cautions, “When we figure only relations between female slaves and white men under slavery as a field of sexual violence and contestation, we allow ourselves to construct and maintain ideological gaps and representation silences,” including the erasure of the sexual vulnerability of children and black men under slavery

¹² See also Higginbotham, *In the Matter of Color*, and Bardaglio, “Families, Sex, and the Law.”

¹³ See also Block 143.

(as quoted in Gebhard 142). Embedded within pedophilic inclinations, the master's game destabilizes heterosexual desire as the normative standard (Stokes 13). Instead, by characterizing Mr. Gaudet as a pederast who takes masochistic pleasure from the bodies of enslaved boys, the narrative suggests that both whiteness and white supremacy are predicated on an ambivalent relationship between pleasure and violence. To prove his superiority, the white master routes his desire through the young black male body. The pedophilic element in the master's racial desire not only incites and empowers him, it also motivates and justifies his sexual abuse of black women. Projecting his "unnatural" desire for the young, male body onto the enslaved boys, the master must head to the women in the quarters to consummate his arousal and affirm his mastery. This opening scene undermines the ideal picture of the "'naturally' superior" southern aristocrat as "invariably heterosexual" in order to weaken the foundation upon which myths of white patriarchy are founded (Gebhard 150). The novel works to destabilize whiteness by destabilizing heterosexuality since both, as Mason Stokes argues, are "normative copartners in the coercions of racial and sexual power" (191).

Yet in order to expose whiteness as an "unsettled, disturbed form of authority," we must also factor the crucial role of the white woman into this scenario (Bhabha, as quoted in Stokes 191). Through her tone and her "helpless" position as voyeur, the narrator attempts to distinguish herself from the master and distance herself from the game she witnesses. Within conventional erotic triangles, as Mason Stokes explains, white women are most often "silent markers in the systems of exchange that make both

whiteness and heterosexuality cultural givens” (17).¹⁴ In *Property*’s opening scene, however, the narrator’s voyeurism disrupts the conventional image of white female passivity. In her role as narrator, the white woman determines what we see; she describes the action and filters its meaning. Within this context, the mere act of looking signifies a degree of control and involvement, particularly since this is clearly a ritual performance for both the master and his wife. The narrator knows the game as well as the master, and she recites it by rote: she quotes the passage her husband reads from the Bible, she anticipates what comes next in his litany of horrors, and she predicts how he will react at each stage of the game. The narrator cedes any power she might have to stop her husband’s games so that she can harness it instead to prove her superiority. Seeing her husband act in such a debased way validates her moral authority along with her own sense of helplessness and self-pity. At the same time, watching the master repeat this ritual over and over again seems to inspire a perverse sense of pleasure in the narrator. Manon, after all, is a willing audience. She chooses to watch her husband and predicts each step of the game, including its final round – the rape of a female slave. Manon’s voyeurism prompted critic Sandra Martin to wonder whom the true villain is, “the plantation owner who abuses his slaves or his lady wife who watches and does nothing” (“Sex, Lies, and Slavery” R3).

Property thereby complicates the erotic geometry of this scene by placing the narrator within its field of desire. Through the phallic lens of the spyglass, the white woman’s gaze penetrates the scene. As the novel progresses, her own implication in her husband’s games and sexual arrangements becomes more obvious. The next time we

¹⁴ As Stokes writes, “Simultaneously imagined as the key to whiteness’s future and its weakest defense, white women enable whiteness ... yet are kept from the fullness of its franchise, given their status as

witness Manon peering through the spyglass, in fact, she is “caught” in the act and her role becomes more explicit. In this later scene we once again find our narrator peering through her husband’s spyglass. Positioned here, she watches her husband perform another ritualistic game involving slave boys locked in a bare-knuckle boxing match where the loser receives a whipping. Her narration makes a performance out of the incident. Although Manon cannot hear the sounds of the “eerie scene” unfolding before her, she conjures them up in her own mind to complete the experience. “Doubtless,” she observes, “the boys were grunting and groaning, and he was urging them on, but it all looked as serene and orchestrated as a dance” (17). Constructing herself as a reluctant spectator, Manon’s physical distance seems to mirror her emotional detachment. But when she sees her husband say something to the victor who then turns to “look up boldly at the house, directly at [her], or so it seemed,” Manon’s detached stance is compromised (18).

Not simply a spectator, the slave boy’s gaze exposes his mistress as a participant in her husband’s games. The acknowledgement of her voyeurism makes Manon jerk away from the window as if she’d been physically struck. Manon feels “as guilty as a child caught stealing candy,” but she simultaneously bristles at the tacit implication of her connection to her husband’s perversities. The passage ends with a rhetorical question in which she dismisses her own her own feelings of guilt: “Why should I feel guilty” (189). Nevertheless, the open acknowledgement of her habitual gaze by both her husband and the victor establishes Manon’s complicity in these games. In all likelihood, part of the pleasure her husband derives from his sadistic rituals comes from the fact that Gaudet knows his wife is watching. Relating her act of “spying” to a child’s craving for sweets,

women in the always patriarchal shape that whiteness assumes” (17).

Manon's reaction interprets these moments as stolen pleasures. Moreover, her own sense of guilt calls attention to the centrality of Manon's role in what Saidiya Hartman calls the "intimacies of domination" (92). Hartman argues that terror was part of the mundane, daily existence of enslaved persons where violence was diffused and "perpetrated under the rubric of pleasure, paternalism, and property" (4). By "boldly" returning her gaze, the slave boy turns the spyglass back on Manon and forces us to consider the crucial role of her desire in the larger tableau of slavery. Indeed, by emphasizing his own eroticized abuse, the gaze of the enslaved boy effectively extends the critique expressed by abolitionist Sarah Grimke in 1838. Articulating that which the slave boy cannot say, Grimke wrote, "Can any American woman look at these scenes of shocking licentiousness and cruelty, and fold her hands in apathy, and say 'I have nothing to do with slavery'? *She cannot and be guiltless*" (as quoted in G. Brown 514).

At the same time, these voyeuristic scenes also implicate the audience, since the structure includes us in the complicated geometry of desire. We, too, are looking through the glass and, along with Manon, we are witnesses to these events. But like Saidiya Hartman, we must wonder why we are "called upon to participate in such scenes" (4). Rather than making the reader "a helpless voyeur of Manon's voyeurist experience," as Joyce Carol Oates argues, Martin drops us in the middle of each disturbing scene to jolt us out of our own inertia (10). The book in our hands (like the spyglass in Manon's) extends our connection to a scene and a world that might be closer to us than we allow. Indeed, *Property's* first sentence, "It never ends," suggests the reach of triangulated racial desire (and the power relations it mediates) extends beyond the moment it defines and even the boundaries of the text itself (3).

Linking the geometry of erotic relations to the triangular relationship between the author, the text, and the reader, the novel forcefully inserts the past into the present so that we might consider the impact of slavery's legacies in contemporary culture. In contemplating the intersection of oppressions, we must also consider the ways in which forms of oppression both change and continue across time and circumstance.

Accordingly, any return to the subject of slavery involves the risk of discovering, as George Handley writes, "our own complicity with the structures of thought slavery has passed on to us" (187). Like other neo-slave narratives, *Property* makes us a witness to slavery in order to dispel the illusion of "our own racial innocence" (Handley 187). Just as Manon's tangential stance raises questions about her position vis-à-vis the scene she observes, so too does our role as reader/witness raise questions about where we stand regarding slavery's legacies of racism, inequality, and injustice. The novel, in other words, turns the spyglass back on us and, like other "post-slavery novels," encourages readers to engage in a process of self-reflection and self-criticism (Cox 12).

As the opinion of the Orange Prize judges suggests, the characterization of Manon is essential to this process. By positioning Manon between her husband and Sarah, Martin is able to create a character that both fascinates and repels the reader. When we examine Manon along side her husband, our twenty-first century sensibilities identify with her on several levels. For instance, when she aims her wry sense of humor at her husband or pits her intelligence against his, Manon reveals qualities that might gain the respect of contemporary readers. Similarly, her stance as an outsider who loathes pretense and expresses doubts (albeit privately) about some of the age's most cherished institutions – namely religion, marriage, and the family – makes her an intriguing character.

More important to gaining our sympathy, however, is Manon's subjugated status. Trapped in the prison of a loveless marriage to a despicable man, Manon discloses the particular oppression of an elite white woman. Nineteenth-century coverture laws, as Nancy F. Cott explains, "made a woman's property, labor, and earnings her husband's" (52). Subjected to the laws and norms of a patriarchal society – as well as to her husband's particular desires and caprice – Manon, like her slave Sarah, is the "property" of her husband. While they differ on the crucial issue of consent, under nineteenth-century domestic law, as Cott notes in *Public Vows*, both wife and slave were denied self-possession and self-ownership (62). Moreover, as the "jealous mistress" who has little power to stop her husband's relationship with Sarah, and who is daily reminded of his adultery by the presence of Walter (the product of their adulterous union), we understand Manon's anger and humiliation. And while Manon longs for a divorce (almost as much as she wishes for the death of her husband), neither law nor social custom would permit it.¹⁵ In short, particularly because of our understanding of Manon's abject position in relation to her husband and the institution of marriage, we have a degree of sympathy for our narrator and are not afforded the luxury of distancing ourselves from her completely.

Still, most readers will attempt to do just that as they read the novel. Martin, however, allows us neither the luxury of dismissing Manon completely, nor the convenience of fully identifying with her. Despite the fact that Manon imagines a reader akin to herself, Martin carefully crafted a narrator who most contemporary readers, to paraphrase Bebe Moore Campbell, would not want to "do lunch" with (McHenry 8).

¹⁵ The 1830s mark a shift in divorce law and property rights for women, as Cott discusses in *Public Vows* (52-3). In the novel, Manon is fascinated by the story Sally Pemberly who was not only granted a divorce, but also had the property she brought to the marriage returned to her so that her drunken, abusive husband

Petulant, arrogant, and self-obsessed, Manon is not the least bit endearing. However, it is not these qualities but her racism that is the most abhorrent aspect of her character. As one reviewer writes, while “Martin keeps daring the reader to empathize with Manon and the petticoat prison that the plantation society keeps her in,” her “quietly monstrous racial hatred is never far from view” (“Property” 1647). Manon has no pity for the enslaved boys and women her husband torments. She regards slave children as inhuman “creatures” and can coldly calculate the cash value of any given slave.

By emphasizing her virulent racism, Manon’s relationship with Sarah corrupts what empathy we might have for our narrator. Manon regards Sarah as a “nerveless creature,” contending “[t]here is really something inhuman about her” (42). Manon’s treatment of Sarah emphasizes what Hannah Arendt has called the “banality of evil” (as quoted in Rushdy, *Remembering* 4). Manon taunts Sarah with comments about the master, keeps an almost obsessive watch over her, and criticizes her every move. The construction of their relationship emphasizes Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s characterization of “the racism of [slaveholding] women [as] generally uglier and more meanly expressed than that of the men” (349). Their interactions are tinged with an aura of hostility. Similar to the scenarios Sharon Block describes, Manon seems intent on “[taking] out her displeasure at her husband’s sexual relationship out on her ... slave” (150). As Sarah brushes her hair one evening, for example, Manon is bothered by a fly “crawling over [their] reflection,” and she orders Sarah to ““Kill it”” (12). Joyce Carol Oates argues that this scene subtly communicates the “sickly languor of ‘slaveholding’” and makes clear that “Manon is as much a despot as her despised husband” (11). This combination of

would not squander it: “By some miracle, she has won. Now she has her own income and she is free of her detestable husband. Fortunate woman” (44)!

intimacy and brutality suggests “the terrifying normalcy” of the violence of slavery in which Manon plays no small part (Rushdy, *Remembering* 4). Through the relationship between Sarah and her mistress, Martin highlights Manon’s racial blindness and creates an expectation for the novel’s ideal reader to “see” what the narrator cannot.

By conceiving Manon’s character within the interracial triangle, Martin forces her reader to actively negotiate, rather than casually accept, the version of “truth” that Manon chronicles. The “quality and intensity” of Manon’s racism, of course, is influenced by the triangular relationship between her, her husband, and Sarah (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 24). According to Manon, her husband’s corruption of their marriage has ruined her, leaving her with limited options and a “cold heart” (176). Coming from a good family of modest means (having lost her father to an “accident”/suicide when she was a young girl), Manon’s only dowry was social prestige and beauty. Gaudet was a well-off, eager suitor whose brief words and fleeting visits gave him an air of mystery. Yet it was his obvious desire for her that piqued Manon’s interest in Gaudet. His physical attraction to her made Manon feel powerful. She recalls, “If I let him touch my hand or my waist, I could feel his struggle to refrain from pulling me to him” (150). Aware that her mother was encouraged by the intensity of Gaudet’s physical attraction to her daughter, Manon interpreted his desire for her as proof that she had “some value, something more desirable than money” (151). Her body and desirability became a powerful commodity in the business of marriage.

Emboldened by her newfound erotic power, the naïve Manon willingly entered into a socially “advantageous match,” but she only briefly enjoyed the attention of “friends who clearly thought [she had] done well for herself” (152). By her first

experience in their marital bed, Manon began to understand the nature of the vile man she married. Having been advised by her mother to “submit” on her wedding night, Manon was shocked and horrified by violence of her husband’s initial sexual onslaught. As his “nightly assaults” continued, Manon deluded herself into believing “that the intensity of his abandonment was the direct result of some power [she] had over him.” Consequently, she came to “anticipate his pleasure,” “encourage him, and [even] found some pleasure in it” herself; as Manon puts it, “I entered the fray” (152). Yet neither in bed nor in their daily interactions did Gaudet share any tenderness or intimacy with his wife. By the time she joins Gaudet at his sugar plantation, Manon understands she married “a tyrant.” She notes, “He drained the color from every scene, the flavor from every bit of food, the warmth from every exchange of sentiment” (153).

Nonetheless, it is Gaudet’s relationship with Sarah (and the birth of Walter) that causes the enmity that ultimately poisons Manon’s happiness. As she explains to the physician who investigates her mysterious infertility, “Would the fact that the servant I brought to the marriage has borne him a son, and that this creature is allowed to run loose in the house like a wild animal, would that be, in your view, sufficient cause for a wife to despise her husband” (38)? A wedding present from Manon’s Aunt Lelia, Sarah is a smart, pretty, light-skinned young woman who, Manon learns only too late, had once captured the interest of Manon’s uncle. In contemplating her aunt’s “gift,” Manon wonders “how [her] aunt could have dealt [her] happiness such a blow”: “Did she imagine my husband was different from hers? Did she think that because I was young and pretty, I was proof against the temptations presented by Sarah? ... Or was she only desperate” (19)? Within a few weeks of his marriage to Manon, Gaudet takes Sarah as a

lover. By the year's end, their illicit union has produced an illegitimate "heir" in the form of Walter.

After Sarah's arrival, her husband's sexual desire shifts away from Manon, and the modicum of power Manon once felt she had is lost. Within the erotic triangle, Manon's value to her husband is lowered after he makes Sarah his concubine. As Nell Irvin Painter observes, white women were devalued as sexual partners because "female slaves and female slaveholders were in the same sexual marketplace and ... in this competition, free women circulated at a discount due to the availability of women who could be forced to obey" (136). Thus, it is Sarah, according to Manon, who not only foils her idealized vision of marriage, but also robs Manon of the confidence and empowerment Manon gained from her own desirability. As the property of her husband, Manon finds she is not simply interchangeable with a slave woman, but lesser by comparison (Painter 136). Manon's failure to produce a "legitimate" heir only reinforces her devalued status.

More than faulting her husband for his failings, Manon blames Sarah for corrupting both her uncle and her husband and, consequently, for compromising Manon's happiness and sense of self-worth. Manon presents enough evidence to make clear that Gaudet has coerced any number of slave women into having sex with him. However, it is Sarah to whom he is most obviously emotionally attached. Unable to unleash her full fury on her husband, Manon aims her wrath at Sarah, framing their relationship as a contest of wills. By conceiving the relationship between the two women within the erotic triangle, the novel emphasizes the sense of competition Manon feels. As Nell Painter writes, during slavery, "rich white women saw themselves in competition for the attention of

husbands whose black partners were ideal women: Slave women had to come when summoned and were conceded no will of their own" (136). The interracial triangle emphasizes a crucial element of white women's "distinctive investments...in a racism they shared" with white men (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 45). Although plantation mistress's experience of slavery was often quite different from that of the master, in many cases the premise of sexual competition actually unified white women and men in the hegemonic social structure the master's sexual coercion enforced. Both the master's sexual abuse of slaves and Manon's acceptance of it are premised on the concepts of white superiority and black inferiority, as well as on notions of racialized sexuality.

Manon's reading of her relationship with Sarah as a competition is problematic, of course, because it elides the unequal nature of their oppression. While Manon's marriage prospects were limited by her lack of dowry and she was unaware of the character of the man she married, she had the privilege of choosing to wed Gaudet. Conversely, as a slave legally "unable to give consent or offer resistance," Sarah had no choice in the matter of her relationship with her master (Hartman 81). Under slavery, as Sharon Block writes, "economic mastery created sexual mastery, allowing masters to manipulate forced sexual encounters into a mimicry of consensual ones" (143).

As with the master's sexual access to slave women, a lack of consent also defined slaves' access to marriage. Marital law structured hierarchies of privilege according to gender, race, and class. The ability to enter into the institution of marriage, as Nancy Cott explains, "is bound up in civil rights" (4). Whereas Manon, as a free white woman, had the legal right to enter into marriage, Sarah's enslaved status gave her no such option. Manon herself acknowledges this when she recalls Sarah's request for permission to

marry Bam, “These marriages the negroes make are not legal, but they set great store by them” (23). Enslaved peoples’ inability to marry legally was a quintessential expression of their lack of rights. Indeed, the marriage law that helped define the deprivation of enslavement was also instrumental in constructing racial difference and maintaining racial inequality well into the twentieth century (Cott 4, 33).

By framing her relationship with Sarah as a competition, Manon elides the crucial issue of consent. Manon thereby plays a key role in fashioning the coercive sexual relationship between her husband and Sarah into a consensual one. It is Manon’s role in this interracial triangle that helps perpetuate the discourse of seduction that made enslaved black women responsible for their own sexual violation (Hartman 226n6). Ignoring any part she might have played in determining Sarah’s fate, Manon (like her husband) interprets coercion as willingness. Manon muses, “I sometimes think Sarah blames me for her fate, though I had nothing to do with it. She sealed it herself shortly after I arrived by getting pregnant” (23). Manon’s characterization of Sarah’s central role in her own seduction demonstrates that like the master, the white mistress holds “the power to define an act” (Block 143). By presuming the “complicity of slave women,” according to Saidiya Hartman, white mistresses like Manon “displace[d] the act of sexual violence” (87). Through the frame of competition, Manon imagines herself irreproachable while at the same time she attributes Sarah with the “power to make the master weak.” Framed thusly, Sarah becomes “the mistress of her own subjection” (Hartman 87). Far from kindling any sense of sympathy, their intertwined subjugation within Gaudet’s household leads Manon to interpret Sarah’s sexual exploitation “as evidence of her collusion with the master class and as evidence of her power” (Hartman

87). Hence, in multiple ways the issue of consent highlights the problematic nature of the frame of competition.

Nonetheless, the frame of competition is also useful because it focuses our attention on the unequal way power and resistance is expressed and experienced by the two women. Within the interracial triangle, neither woman actually “wants” Gaudet; rather, both Manon and Sarah are forced to negotiate with him for their own empowerment. In this context, desire, as Sedgwick has argued, is best understood as an “affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotionally charged, that shapes an important relationship” (*Between Men* 2). Within the triangulated racial desire that structures the relationship between the three main characters, the power Manon attributes to Sarah is largely imagined. For instance, even though Manon ascribes to Sarah the erotic power to make the master “weak,” her emphasis on Sarah’s hatred for her husband establishes Manon’s deliberate blindness to the reality of sexual abuse. Speaking of Sarah, Manon observes in more than one instance, “She hates him as much as I do,” thereby undercutting her own construction of Sarah’s willingness (38).

Similarly, the story she tells of how Sarah tried to “outmaneuver” her husband makes evident the limit of Sarah’s “power.” Soon after arriving at Gaudet’s plantation, Sarah tried to use her mistress to arrange a “marriage” for her in order to foil the master’s lascivious designs on her. Her husband’s violent reaction to a seemingly innocuous request made Manon realize that Sarah had used her to best her husband. Manon recalls, “listening to Sarah’s pleas and his curses, I understood everything. Sarah had resisted him all those weeks I wasn’t there, and now she had tried to outmaneuver him, but she never

would again” (24). Sarah’s lover (Bam) was beaten to near death and sold away, their child was sent off the plantation to be sold at a later date, and Sarah was pregnant with Walter by the year’s end. Like the story of Linda Brent, this incident “expresses the limited possibilities, constraint, despair and duress” that defined the lives of enslaved women (Hartman 105). Yet like Mrs. Flint, even in the face of damning evidence Manon remains willfully oblivious to the enslaved woman’s particular oppression.¹⁶

Manon abides by the cover story of seduction to appease the feelings of rejection and degradation she experiences. It is, after all, her husband’s obvious affection for Sarah that most pains Manon. Manon’s resentment is hardened each time she sneaks a glimpse of Sarah leaving her husband’s bed chambers in the middle of the night or catches her husband’s “furtive, wistful” glances in Sarah’s direction (45, 48, 50, 63). As husband and wife say their goodbyes when Manon leaves to tend her ailing mother in New Orleans, for example, she inwardly scoffs at “the touching scene” of their departure: “the master bids farewell to his wife and servant, tremulous with fear that one of them may not return. But which one? He wishes I might die of cholera, and fears she may instead” (63).

Manon’s bitterness over her husband’s infidelity is compounded by the ever-present Walter who stands as a constant reminder of her husband’s philandering as well as her own sense of disillusionment and loss. Manon feels cheated out of having a child and family, as well as a loving, erotic relationship. Her sentiments are made clear when an old marriage prospect, Joel Borden, comes to visit Manon and her husband. “A familiar gloom descended upon [her]” as she reminisces with him and she thinks of what might have been. “With Joel,” she laments, “I would have had children” (27). But just as Manon uses her husband’s games to prove her own victimization, Gaudet’s relationship

¹⁶ As Foucault suggests, the “will to knowledge” has a corollary “refusal to see” (55).

with Sarah and the ever-present figure of Walter serve to justify her own sense of subjugation and self-pity.

Exaggerated to emphasize her grim existence, the erotic power Manon attributes to Sarah is conceived within the discourse of seduction. Manon highlights the way Sarah's relationship with the master affects his decisions, whether it involved dictating where Sarah sleeps during a threatened insurrection or hiring a doctor to check Walter's hearing. With no uncertain amount of jealousy, Manon observes that around Sarah her husband at least "pretend[s] to soften" (5). Manon supposes, for example, that even though a baby hampers Sarah's ability to work, "[s]omehow Sarah has prevailed on my husband, with tears and cajoling, I've no doubt, to let her keep this baby in the house until it is weaned" (6). Similarly, she notes how Gaudet courts Sarah's favor by doting on Walter and allowing her to nurse her new baby (even though he fears it may not be his). This interpretation of Sarah's power reinforces the discourse of seduction by attributing the enslaved with the ability "to pull on the heartstrings of the master" (Harman 92). According to Hartman, the discourse held that "the brutal domination guaranteed by the law was ... regulated by the influence of the enslaved." Sarah's erotic power, according to Manon, is derived in part from her ability to use Gaudet's emotional attachment ("the bonds of affection") to her advantage (Hartman 92).

Manon is not wrong in attributing to Sarah a degree of power. It is, however, the less obvious aspects of Sarah's characterization that suggest the influence she wields in the text. From pregnant pauses and sideward glances to evasive answers and stubborn refusals, Sarah subtly but relentlessly challenges both her master and mistress. Manon's narrative captures the flickers of amusement and annoyance that play on Sarah's mouth,

the “expression[s] of sullen expectation” and the “furtive look[s]” that register her unhappiness (4,13, 20, 28). Most all of the scenes that include Sarah, in fact, give us a glimpse of the various ways she contests her owners’ power. When Manon asks Sarah whether her daughter can hear, for example, Sarah refuses to answer with words. Instead, Sarah uses her hands to respond to her mistress’s query, enabling her to simultaneously defy and satisfy her mistress’s request. After Manon poses the question “Does that one hear,”

Sarah laid the cloth in her lap, turned toward the creature, and clapped her palms together, making a sharp crack, like a shot. The baby’s hands flew up above the top of the box and it let out a soft cry of surprise. Sarah turned back to her work, her mouth set in an annoying smirk. “Why not just answer me”? I protested. She had come to the hem of the gown, which she pulled free of the skirt in one long shriek (55).

The violent imagery (crack, shot, shriek) accentuates the insubordination at the heart of Sarah’s response. The insolence of her manner, along with the clap of her hands and the sound of the cloth Manon has set her to ripping, combine to convey Sarah’s dissatisfaction with Manon and the insinuation behind her spiteful question (which implies Sarah’s infant daughter might be “defective” like Walter).

Manon’s inability to completely control Sarah mirrors the failure of her narrative to contain Sarah’s image. Indeed, Sarah’s presence and, less frequently, her voice, serve as continual disruptions of Manon’s textual and political dominance. Through Sarah’s characterization in particular, *Property* reveals the subtle tactics of resistance that the enslaved used on a daily basis to insinuate “a critique of power spoken behind the back of

the dominant” (Scott xii). Throughout the novel, as in the scene described above, Sarah challenges Manon’s hidden transcript of the dominant by suggesting the ever-present and equally potent hidden transcript of the subordinate (Scott xii). When Manon asks Sarah a question or gives her an order, for example, she often receives a blank look or “one of [the] smirks” that are part of Sarah’s repertoire of “tricks” (8, 13). Through gestures, glances, foot-dragging, dissimulation, gossip, and other “disguised form[s]” Sarah and other enslaved characters in the novel create a discreet pattern of insubordination, thereby demonstrating, as James Scott argues, that “[r]elations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance” (xiii, 45). The unobtrusive methods of symbolic and actual resistance – what Scott calls the “infrapolitics” of the subordinate – are a means of practical resistance within the deadly oppressive system of slavery (183, 200).

The pattern of resistance that is fundamental to Sarah’s characterization prevents her from becoming a mere object of other characters’ desire. She is no “tragic mulatta.”¹⁷ When she seeks permission to marry Bam, for instance, Sarah works to assert authority over herself and her body. Like Linda Brent, she seems to seek “something akin to freedom” in choosing her own lover, rather than simply capitulating to the will of her master. As historian Stephanie M. H. Camp writes, “perceptions of the proper uses of the black body, especially the female body, were central, materially and symbolically, to the formation of slaveholding mastery” (3). Sarah’s attempt to manipulate Manon into securing her “marriage” suggests her awareness of the body as “a political arena” (Camp

¹⁷ As Hortense Spillers writes, “mulatto-ness is not...a figure of self-referentiality. Neither the enslaved man/woman, nor the fugitive-in-freedom would call himself/herself ‘mulatto/a,’ a special category of thingness that isolates and overdetermines the human character to which it points.” Rather, Spillers argues, America’s “tragic mulatto” is a “semantic marker” that “exists for others ... in an attribution of the illicit that designates the violent mingling and commingling of bloodlines that a simplified cultural patrimony wishes to deny” (“Notes” 167).

2). Like Manon's reading of this incident, Gaudet's reaction to Sarah's marriage request clearly interprets Sarah's act as an overt challenge to his authority. At the same time, Sarah's two foiled marriage proposals – first with Mr. Roget, a free black man in New Orleans, and later with Bam – and her determination to breastfeeding her babies suggest that Sarah is the subject of her own desire. Despite the obstacles against her, Sarah continues to seek authority over her sexuality and her body. One of the only peaceful images of Sarah in the novel, in fact, captures her nursing her young daughter “with a dreamy expression on her face,” unaware that Manon looks on (30). These details suggest that the body of enslaved black woman must also be understood as a “site of pleasure and resistance” (3).

As importantly, through the sparing characterization of Sarah, Martin purposely limits the reader's ability to project our desires onto Sarah. Because of the way the novel is structured, we are not privy to Sarah's inner thoughts or private life. One reviewer laments this fact and points to it as a weakness in the novel. Describing Sarah as “enigmatic and inscrutable,” Gail Caldwell writes, “I wish Martin had given [Sarah] a say, if only to cast some light on how Manon is perceived by the woman who must obey her” (E7). Careful attention to Sarah's covert acts of resistance does, however, provide us with undeniable clues to Sarah's perception of her mistress. In fact, far from being a flaw, Sarah's inscrutability is central to creating a metonymic relationship between character and reader.

Our limited access to Sarah suggests the larger story of slavery that still needs to be discovered and explored. This partial and unknowable picture of Sarah points to the incomplete history of slavery, which is “always dependent for its meaning on the

possibility, or indeed the impossibility, of other witnesses” (Handley 38). Allowed only glimpses of Sarah through Manon’s eyes, we are permitted as readers to “be with” Sarah but “not to be her” (Sommer, “Sin secretos” as cited in Handley 37). Our tentative connection to Sarah is meant to both undercut on Manon’s story of slavery and heighten our interest in the stories of those “witnesses who have been traditionally silenced in official memory” (Handley 149). Martin seems intent on resisting what Valerie Smith would characterize as the all too common urge to employ, if not sacrifice, black women as a way to “humanize their white superordinates, to teach them something about the content of their own subject positions” (46). Moreover, by limiting Sarah’s “say,” Martin’s novel creates a longing to hear more from Sarah (as evidenced by Caldwell’s review). Perhaps Martin hoped the yen to hear Sarah’s side of things would arouse her readers to seek out other narratives of slavery rather than be satiated by any one representation of the slave experience.¹⁸

This metonymic relationship with Sarah is also integral to the novel’s themes of power. The reader’s lack of access to Sarah highlights the relations of power that underlie history and narrative. As a privileged white woman, Manon can claim narrative authority over her own story as well as Sarah’s. In contrast, Sarah’s slave status denies her a “legitimate” narrative. Slaves were permitted very little “say” in nineteenth-century discourse. Even within the body of fugitive slave narratives that proliferated with the growth of the anti-slavery movement, black authorship was “overdetermined” by the “discursive terrain” of abolitionism (McBride 3, 175).¹⁹ The discrepancy between Manon

¹⁸ In the acknowledgments at the end of the book, Martin cites a host of literature of slavery that could serve as a sort of bibliography to her readers.

¹⁹ In his book *Impossible Witnesses*, McBride uses the metaphor of a “discursive terrain” to help readers “understand the situation of discourse into which the slave narrator enters when he or she takes pen in hand.

and Sarah's "say" highlights the fact that, as Handley observes, "the act of narration cannot be separated from the forms of power that have given shape to the history narrated" (33). At the same time, Sarah's hovering presence emphasizes historical "truth" as both contingent and contested. The "infrapolitics of the powerless" that simmer near the surface of every page of Manon's narrative make this quite clear (Scott xiii). Keenly aware of Sarah's body language and moods, Manon records the details of her slave's daily acts of insubordination. Sarah's silence, smirks, and refusals slyly critique Manon's power and cast doubt on Manon's interpretation of events. Indeed, the larger pattern of slave resistance within the narrative adds an element of irony to the novel that qualifies Manon's narration and suggests the text's "own fallibility as a verifiable document" (Cox 35).

Resistance

The open acknowledgement of slave resistance by white characters within the text suggests the power of the subordinate's hidden transcript. Manon's father, for instance, "was always being disappointed when his own [slaves] ran away, or got drunk and sassed him, or pretended to be sick" (175). He became consumed with creating a system that would make slave resistance obsolete. As Manon's aunt explains, "He seemed to think somehow he was going to make the Negroes believe he was God and his farm was Eden, and they'd all be happy and grateful, which, you know, they never are" (175). Manon herself is acutely aware of Sarah's defiance and acknowledges in one instance that just as

... The importance of this idea is that the discursive terrain does not simply function to create a kind of overdetermined way of telling an experience; it creates the very codes through which those who would be readers of the slave narrative understand the experience of slavery" (3). He argues that because "slave narrators must navigate" through the "particular discursive situation" of abolitionism "in order to bear witness to the 'truth' about slavery" (16), abolitionist discourse functions "as a discursive reader that both limits and enables the occasion for slave testimony" (175).

Manon dreams of becoming a widow, Sarah “wishes both [her master and mistress] dead” (63). Never entirely hidden or innocuous, the infrapolitics of the enslaved is “always pressing, testing, and probing the boundaries of the permissible” (Scott 200). *Property* is literally bursting at the seams with evidence that the antebellum “order of things” (to borrow a phrase used by both Manon and Stoler) is far from systematic and invariable. Enslaved women dare to choose black lovers over white, family members steal away from their own plantations to visit loved ones who live nearby, illness is feigned, orders are ignored, and food and supplies go missing.

Within the novel, the constant pressure of slave resistance has an obvious impact on the relationships between members of the master class. Along with policing their slaves, white planters monitor each other since a lapse of control could threaten the social order. As Gaudet prepares to join a posse to recapture three runaway slaves, for instance, he blames the situation on the mismanagement of the lackadaisical, absentee plantation owner, Joel Borden. “It’s all Borden’s fault,” Gaudet insists. “He doesn’t half-feed his negroes and his overseer is the meanest man on earth” (10). Gaudet and the other elite white planters around him consider Borden a “fop and a dandy” (12). Not only does Borden prefer city life over plantation culture, he also fails to exert proper control over his “property,” putting the rest of planter society at risk. Similarly, Manon’s mother chastises her for not being a better household manager. She tells Manon, “I thought you would manage better than you have, Manon. ... You neglect your duties and so you have no control in your house” (69). According to her mother, Manon’s negligence makes her a failure as a wife, thereby tacitly assigning Manon the blame for any disharmony in their marriage. Thus, both Joel and Manon are potential threats to the social order because they

fail to live up to their prescribed duties. It is only the vigilance of other white elites that prevents chaos from erupting out of such flaws.

While a certain level of “practical nonconformity” is tolerated within the institution of slavery (as long as it does not overtly challenge the system), the novel makes obvious that the infrapolitics of the enslaved has a real impact and inspires fear in those with power (Scott 204). Manon observes to her aunt that like her late father, all planters “are obsessed with the negroes” (175). The spyglass Gaudet installs is purposely positioned “to see if [the slaves] are congregating” (18). Shutters are mounted on windows of planters’ houses in case of “the threat of revolt” (20). The air of constant danger makes Gaudet paranoid that Sarah will poison him and anxious about information being passed through the quarters and within the plantation household. When Manon asks a question about the runaways and gives away information she has gleaned from a conversation with Sarah, for instance, the “good humor” roused by Gaudet’s “exciting night” of chasing down escaped slaves “evaporate[s]”: “He looked from Sarah to me and back again. ‘All you women do is talk,’ he said” (15).

Even though it is not a direct concern of Manon’s, anxiety about effective slave “management” pervades her narrative. Her narrative corroborates Stephanie Camp’s point that “everyday resistance to pass-laws and plantation rules was an endemic problem in the rural South, one that had real and subversive effects on slaveholding mastering and on plantation productivity” (2). Through their fixation on the possibility of insurrection, their fear of revolt turns the enslaved into a constant threat. The incidence of runaways, missing fire arms, physical attacks, and arson make clear that unremitting vigilance is needed to insure that the small measures of daily resistance do not become acts of open

defiance and rebellion. In the face of the subtle instances of insubordination that pervade the novel, the open forms of political dissent and rebellion that occur later in the narrative are not all that surprising. Indeed, the novel leaves little doubt that the infrapolitics of the enslaved is the “prehistory” of more overt and organized political action (Scott 227).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing signs of the power of the infrapolitics of the weak is the way in which Manon appropriates Sarah’s “tricks” of resistance for use against her husband. When Gaudet speaks to her, for instance, Manon often “look[s] at him for a few moments blankly, without comment, as if he was speaking a foreign language. This unnerves him. It’s a trick I learned from Sarah,” she boasts (8). Similarly, just as Sarah hides both her intelligence (“I hate it when you pretend to be stupid”) and conceals information from her mistress (“Why not just answer me?”), Manon disguises what she thinks and what she knows from her husband (49). In one instance she notes, “He doesn’t know I can read an account book, but I can, and I’ve been looking into his for some time now” (16). Although Manon makes plain that she has more “sense” than her husband about the profitability of various crops, she “never speak[s] to him about such things” for, as she puts it, “[t]hough his ruin entails my own, I long for it” (16-17). Like Sarah’s resistance, Manon’s is meant to undermine her husband’s authority. The infrapolitics of Manon’s hidden transcript are informed by the resistance she both witnesses and encounters in her relationship with Sarah.

More than simply learning tactics of resistance from Sarah, Manon uses Sarah herself to wage an undeclared war against her husband. Once she becomes aware of Gaudet’s obsession with Sarah, Manon uses every excuse to keep her from him. In one scene, for example, Manon keeps Sarah in her room with her all morning, “[o]n the

pretense that she is of some use to me” (6). Similarly, when she leaves to tend her sick mother, Manon announces that she will take Sarah with her to New Orleans, thereby depriving her husband of Sarah’s company. Although she delivers this information to her husband “as if it were an afterthought,” Manon intends her decree to be a “sure and devastating blow” (59). Manon also uses Sarah in a more sinister way as she contests her husband’s control, turning Sarah into her sexual surrogate. She explains that when Walter was born and she could no longer ignore the true nature of Gaudet’s relationship with Sarah, Manon “lost what little desire [she] had for her husband” (55). Repulsed by Gaudet and “nearly blind with resentment,” Manon began to resist her husband’s sexual advances. When she discovers that her “mock resistance” only “inflamed him further,” Manon comes to rely on her “sleeping tincture” to make her numb to her husband’s touch (55-6). The right mixture, she explains, could “frustrate him beyond endurance”:

I found that if I drank two glasses of port at supper and took two spoons of this excellent medicine before getting into bed, I was so perfectly indifferent to my husband that I could endure his embraces without feeling anything at all. I offered neither encouragement nor resistance; I was there and not there at the same time (56).

Uninterested “in making love to a corpse,” her husband is driven away from Manon’s bed. The triumphant Manon tells her husband, “I don’t care what you do. ... I just want you to leave me alone” (57).

An indifferent Manon all but encourages her husband to seek any other outlet to fulfill his sexual needs. Gaudet grants Manon her request not simply because he does not want to have sex with a semi-conscious, “unbalanced” woman, but also because he has

Sarah (and other “willing” enslaved women) at his disposal (57). Thus, Manon’s “resistance” is premised in part on the oppression of Sarah. Uncaring of what her husband does so long as she is left alone, Manon sacrifices Sarah to save herself from her husband’s “nightly assaults.” Not only is Manon freed from her conjugal duties, she also escapes her obligations to produce a “legitimate” heir. According to Manon, her husband was “driven to my bed because he feared [that with Walter] he had fathered the only son he would ever have” (55). In her fury and resentment, Manon wills herself not to conceive a child. Unwilling to ignore the “lies without end” that surround her, or to pretend her “villain” of a husband “was a good and decent man,” Manon not only tolerates but facilitates her husband’s relationship with Sarah (48, 57). In fact, after her mother’s death she tries to strike a bargain with her husband by exchanging the chance for Gaudet “to have Sarah to himself” with the opportunity for Manon to live a life separate from him in the house her mother has willed to her in the city (103). Thus, although she envisions herself as a “virtuous” slaveholder who, like her father before her, is firm but fair, Manon does not simply condones but facilitates the violence of the institution. Just as she is willfully blind to the injustice of slavery, Manon’s “stubborn will to nonknowledge” allows her to deflect any conscious recognition of her particular role in Sarah’s abuse, as well as the abuse of other slaves (Foucault 55).²⁰

Triangulating Racial Desire

Based largely on the enmity for Gaudet that both women harbor, Manon’s willed racial blindness enables her to imagine a potential alliance between her and Sarah, even as she sees herself in competition with her slave. In the novel’s opening pages, Manon

²⁰ As Michel Foucault argues, the “will to knowledge” is premised in part on “a stubborn will to nonknowledge” that produces a “systematic blindness: a refusal to see and to understand” (55).

confides to Sarah that her husband fears Sarah is trying to poison him, all but encouraging Sarah to seize such an opportunity for getting rid of her master (Oates 11). She is candid with Sarah about her own (lack of) feelings for her husband and mocks her husband and their marriage in her conversations with Sarah. When she and Sarah depart for New Orleans, for instance, Manon takes in the image of her husband waving goodbye while a screaming Walter pulls at his father's leg and remarks to Sarah, "Perfect. ... A perfect picture to remind me of the charms of home" (64). Moreover, in moments of loneliness Manon tries to reach out to Sarah, to no avail. She notes in one instance, "Eventually I grew bored and tried talking to [Sarah], a largely hopeless enterprise" (7). Yet privately Manon wonders if, like her, Sarah "thinks about what would become of her if he were gone." Projecting her own desires onto Sarah, Manon declares, "How could she not" (16).²¹ Indeed, Manon is surprised when Sarah runs away after Gaudet is dead: "My husband is dead, I thought. Why would she run now, when she was safe from him? It didn't make any sense" (127). Yet Sarah's act of fleeing underscores the lack of support and protection that she, like other enslaved women, received from their white mistresses (Block 153).

Based on what she sees as their similar oppression under Gaudet, Manon imagines a particular bond between her and Sarah. It is Sarah she seems to be thinking of with longing when Manon admits "the truth" of what she is feeling, that she "wanted nothing more than to pour out the tale of unhappiness to someone who loved me, but there was no such person" (104). Manon's urgent desire to forge some sort of bond with Sarah induces her to vie with her husband for Sarah's attention. In the process, Manon,

²¹ Manon also interprets Sarah's treatment of Walter as a sign of their shared distaste for both the child and the master.

like her husband, makes Sarah an object of her own desire. Manon is overcome by jealousy, for example, when she contrasts the look on Sarah's face "as she rushed from [her] husband's bedroom" with the absence of "feeling" in Sarah's touch and demeanor as she tends to Manon's hair: "Her eyes were lowered, her hand steady, a single line of concentration on her brow [was] all that gave any evidence of any feeling about what she was doing. A very different look from the one I'd seen in the night as she rushed from my husband's bedroom" (50). Manon reacts with an intense physical longing to the disparity between these two images. She notes, "[a] flood of anger rose in me, right up to my throat, so that I gasped for air." Manon raises her hand in a "panic," knocking Sarah's arm so that the coffee she carries splatters all over her dresser. Shifting the consequences of her own actions onto her slave, Manon blames the accident on Sarah and exclaims, "'Why are you so clumsy?'" Manon's instinct to lash out in anger is the only way she is able to release the pent up frustration she feels. As she mutters the last words of this scene, "'I can't stand much more,'" we are left with the distinct understanding that it is more than the heat of the day that has put her on edge (50). Her agitation signals that not unlike Harriet Jacobs's jealous mistress, Manon (to paraphrase Linda Brent) feels much more than jealousy and rage.²² The narrative suggests her unreciprocated desire for Sarah intensifies Manon's sense of confinement within both the plantation household and the erotic triangle.

Within the shifting terms of desire that structure the interracial triangle, Manon's desire for Sarah is always already sexualized. Joyce Carol Oates claims, in fact, that the daily evidence of Manon's attachment to Sarah suggests that she is "unwittingly in love

²² In Jacob's narrative, Linda Brent declares that "The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings toward her but those of jealousy and rage" (Jacobs 26-27).

with her servant.” Oates contends “most of [Manon’s] actions, even when she lashes out bitterly against Sarah, are guided by this thwarted passion” (12). Although “love” might be reading too much into Manon’s feelings for Sarah, her complicated desire for her slave cannot be ignored, particularly once it reaches a crescendo in the wake of her mother’s death. Still reeling from her mother’s recent death, Manon receives a letter from her husband, asking her to return home. “[A]palled” by the tone of Gaudet’s letter and overcome with a sense of helplessness at being “orphaned” with no one to “defend [her] interests,” Manon fixes her gaze on Sarah who is sitting “in the shadows, watching [her]” cry (74, 103). In the most sensuous imagery of the novel, Manon describes what she sees:

Her bodice was open, her breast exposed. The baby lay still in her lap, breathing peacefully, its dark mouth open to reveal a flat pink tongue. She had rested her head against the back of the settee and her eyes were lowered, her shoulders relaxed. The flickering light from the lamp bronzed her skin and made her eyes glisten like wet stones. She was enormously still (74-5).

Manon’s tears of anger and sense of loss vanish as her focus shifts to Sarah and she begins to contemplate the nature of the relationship Sarah shares with her husband. “Why did he let her keep that child? ... What had she done to make him agree to it, what bargain had she struck, what promise given” (75). Sarah’s body, Manon insists, gives her the answers she seeks: “as if to answer me, a white drop formed at her nipple and clung there. ... It was for his own pleasure, I thought” (75).

Emboldened by her “discovery” and intoxicated by the new (if only transitory) freedom from both her husband and her mother, Manon seizes the opportunity to “suckle” Sarah for her own pleasure. Before she moves to take Sarah’s nipple into her

mouth, however, Manon conjures up the scene of her return home when her husband would “use Sarah for support” as he recovered from an ankle injury. The thought makes her wish “he were dead” and causes her “heart to ach[e] in her chest” (75-6). Consumed by jealousy at the prospect of once again sharing Sarah with her husband, Manon drops “to her knees,” leans forward, and “put[s] out her tongue to capture the drop” of milk that remains on Sarah’s nipple:

It dissolved instantly, leaving only a trace of sweetness. I raised my hand, cupping her breast, which was lighter than I would have thought. It seemed to slip away from my fingers, but I guided the nipple to my lips and sucked gently. Nothing happened. I took it more deeply into my mouth and sucked from my cheeks. This is what he does, I thought. At once a sharp, warm jet hit my throat and I swallowed to keep from choking. How thin it was, how sweet! A sensation of utter strangeness came over me, and I struggled not to swoon (76).

Her own pleasure evident both in her expression and the intensity of her climax, Manon’s response emphasizes her sexual desire for Sarah. Her narration suggests, in fact, that Manon has had previous fantasies about such a liaison when she observes that Sarah’s breast is “lighter than [she] would have thought.” Her painstaking attention to detail underscores the significance of this moment to Manon as her narration lends an erotic guise to the novel’s only sex scene.

As the scene continues, however, the premise of Manon’s erotic response becomes more convoluted. Through this scene, the novel begs the question posed by Eve Sedgwick, “What does it mean – what difference does it make – when a social or political relationship is sexualized” (*Between Men* 5). There are, in fact, multiple meanings

embedded within Manon's sexual coercion of Sarah, making evident the complexity of triangulated racial desire. Most obviously, Manon's experience of racial desire is closely linked to her husband's ("This is what he does"). Comparing her act to those her husband performed further inflames Manon's passions. While in the act, Manon's experience intensifies as she imagines her husband's awareness of his wife's sexualized encounter with Sarah. She envisions him in his office "lifting his head from his books with an uncomfortable suspicion that something important was not adding up. This vision made me smile" (76). At the same time, Manon's pleasure is heightened as she visualizes her mother's direct response to her sexual transgression. Manon moves outside of herself to witness her own act, and juxtaposes the image she beholds with that of the lifeless body of her mother in the next room. "[I]t seemed to me," she explains, that "[Mother] was not dead," but instead "bore horrified witness to my action" (76). Imagining her husband and mother as spectators spurs Manon on and she swallows even more "greedily" (76).

Manon's "visions" establish her act as one of rebellion against patriarchy. She quite literally uses the black female body to "escape from white femininity" (Handley 158-9). Manon simultaneously rebuffs the confines of marriage, the hypocrisies of sexual propriety, and her mother's concept of ideal womanhood. As a subversive act Manon's "suckling," like her narrative, flaunts her opposition to the duplicity that structures her world. For Manon, the act is liberating; she exclaims, "How wonderful I felt, how entirely free" (76). In part, Manon celebrates the fact that she will never again have to hear "another [of her mother's] lecture[s] on [her] failings as a wife" (69). Yet she also gloats about the fact that she has discovered the secret of Gaudet's attachment to Sarah and has made that pleasure her own.

By consummating her desire for Sarah, Manon is empowered by a sense of well-being and fulfillment she has never before felt. Throughout the novel, chronic headaches and feelings of suffocation convey her sense of oppression and misery. Clearing up her headache and making her breath easy, the pleasure of Manon's erotic encounter with Sarah assuages her suffering. She notes, "My headache disappeared, my chest seemed to expand, there was a complimentary tingling in my own breasts" (76). At the same time as it conveys sexual bliss, the tingling in Manon's breasts also points to an additional facet of Manon's response.

Manon's sense of fulfillment is intimately tied to her appropriation of Sarah's maternal power as well as her erotic potency. By making her breasts analogous to Sarah's ("a complimentary tingling"), Manon's reading suggests her pleasure is also stimulated by her appropriation of Sarah's mother's milk. The comparison she makes likens the eroticized sensation in her own breasts to the intimate sensations a lactating mother might feel as she nurses her baby. Her act of "suckling," therefore, allows her to experience both being "mothered" at the same time as it allows her to experience the sensation of "mothering" a child.

Although Manon's interpretation might also be linked to her own feelings of loss and motherlessness (making her "suckling" a desperate act of grieving), the novel indicates her act is far more complex.²³ The analogy she makes between the sensation in her own breasts and what Sarah feels calls attention to Manon's attempt to displace her desire onto Sarah. By assuming a parallel tingling in Sarah's breasts, Manon projects her own erotic response onto the enslaved black body. Similarly, when she hears a distinct

²³ Critic Alan Cheuse interprets Manon's act as a search for "succor" in her desperate process of grieving (par. 3).

sigh, Manon insists she is not sure whether the sound came from her or Sarah. However, Sarah's reaction undermines the affinity suggested by Manon's narration. As she opens her eyes to look at Sarah's profile, Manon notices Sarah "ha[s] lifted her chin as far away from [her] as she could, her mouth was set in a thin, hard line, and her eyes were focused intently on the arm of the settee" (76-7). The resistance that has defined Sarah's daily interactions with Manon is barely restrained here. As with her husband's response to her own resistance (and presumably Sarah's), Manon feels empowered by Sarah's reluctant compliance. Her sense of power and pleasure is intensified by the fact that Sarah is "afraid to look at her" (77).

Sarah's reaction and, even more forcefully, the feelings of violence that are integral to Manon's desire, clearly render Manon's act coercive. Upon seeing Sarah's reaction, Manon acknowledges that Sarah is "right to be" fearful. "If she looked at me," she writes, "I would slap her" (77). From this perspective, Manon's act of suckling begs comparison to the sexual abuse of Setha in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Just as Schoolteacher's nephews act of stealing Setha's milk emphasizes both the physical and psychological abuse of slave mothers, so too does Manon's act highlight the terror that is inextricable from a black woman's experience of slavery.²⁴ Taking Setha's milk is a way for the white men to simultaneously perform their mastery and appropriate her productivity (Goldman 325). The scene of Manon's violation of Sarah makes clear that, as Saidiya Hartman writes, "within a particular racial economy of property," "control over the object of property [is intensified] through the deployment of sexuality" (101). As the property of her master and mistress, Sarah's body is not her own. Similar to the

²⁴ On the abuse of Setha see, e.g., Davies "Mother Right" 52, Goldman 323-5, Krumholz 325, Morgenstern, "Mother's Milk," Rody, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" 107.

abuses carried out by Gaudet and Schoolteacher's nephews, Manon's violation is meant to be degrading; it forcefully asserts the inferiority of the enslaved by highlighting her lack of consent. Just as the school boys' act insinuates Setha is analogous to a cow by taking her milk, Manon reinforces her sense of superiority by treating Sarah as if she was inhuman. Manon's act of violating Sarah corrupts a nurturing ritual by turning it into an act of brutality and humiliation.

By sexually coercing Sarah, Manon reveals herself to be an adept student of racial domination. Her voyeuristic experience of her husband's sexual "perversities" has formed the basis of what Ann Laura Stoler would call Manon's "education of desire" (*Carnal Knowledge* 141).²⁵ Continual exposure to a system that not only permitted, but relied upon the "systemic sexual exploitation of slaves" provides Manon with a warped education of sexual (mis)conduct (Clinton, "'Southern Dishonor'" 57). Less about "sexual desires per se than ... the wider array of sentiments that carnal knowledge may express," the "carnal knowledge" acquired on the plantation has taught Manon to link the erotic with possession and white mastery (Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge* 141). The education of desire transforms the sexual violation of slaves into a "fantasy of property rights" (Clinton, "'Southern Dishonor'" 65).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Manon is only able to express her own erotic desire through a violent act of possession. Indeed, the act of taking Sarah's milk must be read within the context of "masculine economic desire" that structures the system of slavery (G. Brown 518). Until this point in the narrative, "mother's milk represents the one labor of the [enslaved] woman which [is] not ... other-directed" (Goldman 324). In

²⁵ See also Stoler's previous study, *The Education of Desire*.

fact, as noted earlier, the narrative establishes nursing as a source of pleasure and control for Sarah. By imagining her husband enjoying the fruits of that “labor,” Manon undermines any maternal authority (or “profit”) Sarah might gain from her “intersubjective bond” with her child (Goldman 324). Additionally, through her own “transaction,” Manon simultaneously challenges and appropriates the authority of both Sarah and her husband in an attempt to assume a modicum of control within slavery’s market economy.

Female(-Female) Desire

The three other moments of arousal that Manon displays in the text premise Manon’s conflation of desire and possession on a masculine mode for expressing sexual desire. In each example, it is not another person that excites Manon, but rather, like Sarah, a piece of “property.” The first incident occurs when she finally feels herself “in possession of [her mother’s] house.” Having settled her mother’s estate and made arrangements for her mother’s slaves, Manon is enjoying a quiet moment by the fire when she experiences “an agreeable sensation, unlike any I have ever known” (86). Moments later when she opens her father’s diary, discovered in the wake of her mother’s death, Manon feels another “shiver of pleasure” (86). In both cases, ownership and possession are eroticized. Rather than link the home to the moralizing influence of the cult of domesticity promulgated in popular nineteenth-century writing, the narrative suggests how sentimental ideology “concealed the cooperative, accommodating function of domesticity” within the patriarchal order (G. Brown 511). Her father’s diary, with its detailed notes on slave management, figuratively brings the both the slave economy and the “masculine practices of power” into the domestic sphere (G. Brown 523). The

narrative emphasizes the overlapping (rather than “separate”) spheres of gender norms through the eroticized possession of Manon’s both her mother’s house and her father’s journal.

Inhibited by nineteenth-century gender conventions, Manon feels she is only able to express herself sexually by appropriating a masculine context of desire. This is most evident in the third example of Manon’s eroticization of possession. Similar to the two earlier moments, she experiences a distinct sensation of pleasure as she inserts her key into her mother’s cottage, knowing that it is finally “hers.” The act of inserting the key associates Manon’s conception of ownership with penetration.²⁶ She notes, “I felt again a pleasurable twinge of ownership as I put the key in the lock and opened the door into the darkened parlor” (93). In nineteenth-century sexual ideology, as Esther Newton points out, “Sex was seen as phallic”; “conceptually, sex could only occur in the presence of an imperial and imperious penis” (561). Because elite white women in particular were constructed as “nondesiring” by popular discourse, Manon’s desire can only be expressed and recognized within a phallocentric context (G. Brown 518). Yet the simultaneous emphasis on penetration and “entry” suggests Manon’s pleasure does not simply mirror masculine desire, but appropriates it as an expression of female-female same-sex desire. The dark passage she “enters” suggests a distinctly gynocentric terrain. Moreover, given the fact that it is Sarah whom Manon is returning to, the reference to a dark space might be read as a sign of her particular desire for the black female body.²⁷ Indeed, like her “suckling” of Sarah, this scene evokes Manon’s “gender dysphoria” and points to what

²⁶ My thanks to Leisa Meyer for pushing me on this point and directing me to Esther Newton’s article.

²⁷ Bidy Martin emphasizes the role of racial difference in the contemporary constructions of lesbian desire. She writes, “Making lesbian desire visible as desire, rather than identification, requires an added measure of difference, figured racially” (as quoted in Somerville 36).

Esther Newton regards as the “‘necessary’ masculinity of the early lesbian persona” (574, 561n11). However, Manon’s sexual identification remains purposely ambiguous, if not closeted, within the narrative. For what she seems to be seeking above all else is autonomy.²⁸

Yet more than sexual authority, Manon’s independence is premised on racial hegemony. Thus, it is not only ideologies of gender and sexuality, but also racial epistemologies structure Manon’s expressions and experience of possession. In particular, knowledge of racial difference and distinction are a crucial part of the education of desire. Manon’s father, who had strict rules on contact between the races, helped school Manon in the intricacies of racial hierarchy. Manon explains,

I was never allowed, as most planters’ children were, to play with negro children on our farm. Father considered it a perverse practice that resulted in the coarsening of the master’s children and was the source of inappropriate expectations in the negroes, who must feel themselves the equals of their playmates. This familiarity could breed naught but contempt, Father maintained, and so I learned to make companions of my dolls (22).

Both Manon’s childhood and married life demonstrate how, as Stoler argues, “domestic and familial intimacies were critical political sites ... where racial affiliations were worked out” (*Carnal Knowledge* 210).

Having lived ten years in what she refers to as her husband’s “madhouse of cupidity, perversion, and lust,” Manon’s understanding of both whiteness and blackness links the demarcation of racial difference with both desire and sexual violation (89). White superiority is premised, in part, on violent sexual control. As her husband’s games

²⁸ Esther Newton makes a similar argument about *The Lamp* in her article “The Mythic Mannish Woman.”

make clear, any perceived “deviance” could be easily displaced onto the body of the racial other within the system of slavery. Sarah’s light skin, in fact, holds particularly meaning in this sexual economy since, as Hortense Spillers writes, “the play and interplay of an open, undisguised sexuality are mapped” the figure of the mulatto/a (“Notes” 168). The same conventional racial thinking that constructed enslaved women to be both will-less and always willing sexual objects held elite white women to be their sexual opposites, passionless. Notions of racialized sexuality not only allow Manon to disguise her coercive act as consensual by displacing her desire onto Sarah; they also allow Manon to recapture her own lost sexual potency by usurping the mythical sexuality of the black woman. Reclaiming the erotic potential denied to her as an elite white woman, Manon’s transgressive act makes her feel vibrant and strong.

Perhaps more than any other moment in the novel, the scene of Manon’s violation of Sarah contests the notion of a “female world of love and ritual” by reminding us of the “contingency of woman as category” (Smith-Rosenberg 1, Hartman 101). The scene highlights the fact that the continuum of women’s relations, as Eve Sedgwick notes, “is crisscrossed with deep discontinuities – with much homophobia, with conflicts of race and class” (*Between Men* 2). By using the body of an enslaved woman to consolidate her power and prove her mastery Manon expresses herself in the masculine mode of husband. Both Manon and her husband take Sarah’s milk for their own pleasure; yet their acts also provide “sustenance” to the system of slavery and the ideology of white supremacy. As Catherine Clinton has observed, when one person forces themselves upon another, it always leaves a mark, “the memory of a violation – force without consent” (“With a Whip in His Hand” 205). Manon’s violation of Sarah “marks” her enslaved body,

reinforcing Sarah's "place as a dominated person" (Fowler 476). Yet in a unique inversion of the system of racial marking, Manon too is "marked" by "race." Citing the work of Colette Guillaumin, Shelli B. Fowler points to the "asymmetry of the system of racial marking" that brands the black body but leaves no evidence on the white body (476-7). Conversely, Martin's novel "marks" Manon with the white milk she takes from Sarah. Her act of suckling makes a symbol of white ownership and mastery out of the "white drop" that "answers" her question about the "bargain" between Sarah and her husband, the sweet milk that Manon "greedily" takes in and then wipes from her lips with the back of her hand. Martin uses this intimate representation of marking to stress the intertwined yet unequal nature of black and white women's oppression. The violation of black woman quite literally nourishes white female privilege just as it satiates white female desire. When Manon is interrupted by the arrival of her aunt, her aunt's reaction to Manon's appearance underscores this point. Invoking the symbol of white suppression in the wake of Reconstruction, her aunt declares "you are as white as a sheet," intimating that Manon has become even "whiter" after violating Sarah (77).

However, we cannot overlook the significance of same-sex desire in Manon's feelings for Sarah. If, as Stoler has argued, "the micromanagement of sexual arrangements and affective attachments [were] so critical to the making of colonial categories and ... so important to the distinctions between ruler and ruled," we must consider the particular meaning of the sexualization of a white mistress's relationship to her female slave (8). Most obviously, as noted above, the sexualization of their relationship emphasizes the power asymmetries endemic to slavery. Manon's act expresses her opposition to her own oppression within the patriarchal structure of

plantation culture. At the same time, her transgression emphasizes how the privilege of whiteness is enabled by the degraded status of black women. Yet as Eve Sedgwick has urged, we must not sacrifice sex itself as we examine the relationship between sexual desire and political power (6, 26). Manon appropriates masculinity to assert herself as a desiring subject, and in the process clearly establishes another woman as the object of her desire. Similar to her husband's penchant for slave boys, this candid acknowledgement of illicit desire undermines the normative standard of heterosexuality that sustains white supremacy. Yet this eruption of female-female same-sex desire holds even more significance within the text.

Focusing on Manon's desire for Sarah, this scene marks the novel's shift away from male desire as the controlling feature of the novel in order to emphasize female desire and the particularity of female domination and resistance. Critic Alan Cheuse suggests the radical nature of this shift when he calls the scene "one of the most perverse scenes [he has] ever read in American literature" (par. 3). In a novel that opens with a startling image of the physical and sexual abuse of slave boys and mothers, Cheuse's remark leaves little doubt that it is, in part, the eruption of female-female same-sex desire that makes this scene "perverse." This reaction suggests it is *Property's* sexualization of women's social and political relations with other women that renders the novel shocking. By constructing white women as agents of desire and domination, their "particular complicity with racism and other exploitations" cannot be explained away solely by the context of competing for their husbands' affections. Manon is driven by her own (same-sex) desire, which empowers her at the same time that it subjugates Sarah. While privately the revelation of her sexual transgression heightens both her pleasure and sense

of liberation, publicly Manon must go on as if nothing has happened. Her desire for Sarah, in other words, must be hidden.

Indeed, we might be able to dismiss this eruption of same-sex desire as an anomaly if it were not for the fact that Manon's obsession for Sarah intensifies after this scene and ultimately structures both Manon's life and the second half of the narrative. Obligated to return home after burying her mother, Manon is tormented by the reality of there being "no escape" from her husband (89). She cannot, however, "resign [her]self" and accept her situation when, as she puts it, "the world that is denied me tantalizes me at every turn" (89). What tempts Manon is a life of freedom away from her husband where she could experience the intimacy she might have shared in a marriage to someone like Joel Borden and the passion she has experienced with Sarah. As Gaudet's wife, she is caught between "[t]he impossibility of collapsing in Joel's embrace" and the implausibility of acting upon her desire for Sarah (91).

However, with the death of Gaudet during the insurrection that occurs on the very night Manon returns home, everything changes. The thing Manon had long wished comes to pass. "He was dead," she notes, and "I was not so hypocritical as to be disturbed by the grim satisfaction I felt whenever that fact surfaced in my consciousness" (134). Her face disfigured and her right arm crippled from the violence of that night, Manon is still able to "smil[e] wanly at her altered reflection" and acknowledge that this permanent damage "is worth it" (134). Free from her husband's control, she can "sell them all" and be done with the life she loathed (16). Within days of her husband's death, Manon makes arrangements to do just that, telling her brother-in-law Charles he should "sell it all, everything and everyone" (133). She adamantly refuses, however, to sell Sarah. Charles

is clearly baffled by Manon's insistence on keeping her dead husband's mistress. To wipe the quizzical look from his face Manon quips, "If I have to live with Walter, ... so does she" (140). Unable to foist Walter off on Charles and having no value as a servant, Walter becomes Manon's responsibility. Indeed, she looks upon him as her husband's "revenge." Not surprisingly, Manon's comment to Charles suggests she intends to reap her own kind of retribution on Sarah (135). Yet Manon's justification does not adequately explain her single-minded focus on reclaiming Sarah.

In fact, after Gaudet's death there is a shift in the erotic geometry of the text as Manon's desire for Sarah consumes her and drives the rest of her narrative. In the wake of the insurrection, Manon devotes all her energy to hunting down Sarah who had fought off Manon to escape during the fray. In part, Manon's determination is driven by anger and resentment. Manon, it seems, can understand and even appreciate the role Sarah played in Gaudet's murder, pointing out Gaudet's hiding place to the rebels in order to shift their attention away from her own escape. But Manon can neither fathom nor forgive the fact that Sarah deserted her and left her to die. Manon is haunted by the image of Sarah during the insurrection as she "turned on [her] in a fury, tearing at [Manon's] face ... her sharp nails digging in her already wounded cheek" (115). Even though Manon begged Sarah to let her have the horse to escape, insisting "They'll kill me if you don't," Sarah kicked, hit, and bit her way past Manon to ride off to safety with her baby Nell clutched to her chest (115). Manon is so confounded by the fury and violence of Sarah's disloyalty that she is temporarily "distracted ... from [her] own peril" during the uproar (115). She comes to her senses in time to escape into the forest on foot, but not before being shot in the shoulder. Even after the event, Manon cannot "make sense" of

the fact that Sarah does not return to her. After all, she muses, “[m]y husband is dead. ... Why would she run now when she was safe from him” (127)?

In her dogged pursuit of Sarah, Manon behaves like a disaffected lover. The “last ‘pleasurable moment’ she recalls from the night of the insurrection, for example, is of Sarah ‘lifting the lid of the tureen’ to serve soup (100). More to the point, the narrative structure itself reflects the fact that in the wake of these events, Manon reconstructs her life around Sarah’s return. Each section that follows the insurrection is in some way connected or devoted to Sarah. Manon’s relentless pursuit of Sarah is what gives her life meaning in the wake of the insurrection. Like her father before her, Manon takes Sarah’s act of running away as a personal affront. She is both perplexed and outraged by the extent and violence of Sarah’s betrayal. “Images from the night [she] wanted to forget” recur over and over again in Manon’s mind, with Sarah always figuring prominently in each recollection (153). As she reviews these images, she “discover[s] a detail [she] hadn’t noticed before”: “The moment before the fatal blow was struck [decapitating Gaudet], my husband called Sarah’s name” (153). Like a jealous lover, Manon sifts through these images to make sense of Sarah’s abandonment. Once she is finally recaptured Manon berates Sarah for having “no moral sense” and for not thinking about “whom [she] left behind” (191-2).

Manon’s obsession with finding and keeping Sarah after the insurrection suggests the centrality of racial desire within white women’s “particular investment” in racism. No longer property of her husband but a property-holder herself, Manon revises the terms of their relationship in reaction to Sarah’s “rejection” of her. She begins to suspect that Sarah might have had a hand in the revolt that allowed her escape. “There were

moments,” Manon confesses, “when I thought Sarah had plotted the whole insurrection, she and Mr. Roget whispering together under my mother’s house” (131). Any erotic desire she feels for Sarah is subsumed by Manon’s need to (re)possess her. As she walks along the streets of New Orleans, Manon finds herself “turning again and again to follow a figure or face that resembles Sarah’s” (155). She constantly wonders where she might be, how she is dressed, and who might be helping or hiding her.

Convinced that her old lover, Mr. Roget, had a hand in Sarah’s escape, Manon sees herself in competition with him for Sarah. In fact, before Mr. Roget comes calling, Manon actually flirts with the idea of selling Sarah upon her return. Once he comes to stake his claim, however, Manon becomes even more determined to keep her. Animated by the prospect of negotiating with Roget, Manon calculatingly introduces him to Walter in order to throw him off guard and foil his “scheme” of purchasing Sarah and her baby. “[T]hunderstruck” by the revelation that Sarah has another child, Roget regards Manon with a “look of frank ill will mixed with grudging admiration, such that one gives a worthy opponent” (169). Empowered by the lead role she plays in this new configuration of the interracial triangle, Manon is only momentarily “gratified” by this sign of Roget’s unspoken respect. When in a transparent sign of mockery Roget’s “lips betrayed the faintest hint of a smile,” Manon immediately “want[s] to slap him” (169). Despite the fact that Roget agrees to buy Walter along with Sarah and Nell, Manon rejects his offer. Offended by his “impertinence” and “enraged” by the way he flicks a bit of plaster from his pants onto her carpet (“that bit of plaster ... sealed his fate and Sarah’s as well”), Manon declares she will never sell Sarah (170). She tells Roget, “It is a mystery ... how you could find the nerve to come here and offer to pay me for what you have stolen. You

seem to think I care for nothing but money. I am going to considerable expense to recover what is mine, by right and by law, and recover her I will” (171). Self-righteously asserting that it is principle, not money, that Manon “cares for,” Manon’s exchange with Roget also suggests Manon’s veiled feelings for Sarah. Sarah, she tells Roget, is “hers.” Vying for Sarah with Mr. Roget only reinforces Manon’s need to (re)possess her.

With Gaudet gone, Manon is free to remarry but she does not. Like the fact of Sarah’s abandonment, Manon’s burgeoning awareness of *all* white men’s duplicity leads to a process of disillusionment that ultimately redoubles her desire for Sarah. In the wake of the insurrection, Manon believes her disfigurement renders finding a suitor “unlikely”: “Who would marry a cripple with only enough money to keep herself” (157)? At the same time as Manon insists she is not a “marriageable commodity,” however, she acknowledges the tacit admiration of her “courage” by white men. Dr. Landry, for one, tells her, “A beautiful woman is rendered more beautiful by a scar. . . . It reminds a man of what suffering she has endured. In your case, we are all awed by your courage” (134). Manon herself notices that white men showed “no trace of revulsion” when they looked at her, but rather “a fascinated admiration.” After all, Manon explains, “I had survived that which we all in some degree feared” (146). Despite the fact that “there was no hope of Joel’s marrying [her]” because he “was desperate for money,” Manon welcomes his attention. She boasts, “he behaved toward me as gallantly as any suitor” (158). But when her Aunt Lelia tells her that Joel has proposed to Alice McKenzie, a young woman from a wealthy, prestigious family, Manon becomes sorely disillusioned. Even with the added capital of her scars, Manon is of little value to Joel. The news of his betrothal, along with the revelation of Joel’s involvement with “light-skinned courtesans” of the famed

quadroon balls, makes Manon feel as if she is “teetering at the brink of a black abyss” (160-1). The man she had so long romanticized was just like all the other white men who enjoyed the company of those “dreadful quadroons” (161).

It is the reality of her father’s “failings,” however, that completes the process of her disillusionment and pushes Manon over the edge to acknowledge a “future as small and dark Joel’s was bright and wide” (173, 179-80). Manon’s idealized image of her father pervades the novel. Once she settles herself into her mother’s house, however, Manon discovers that like all the other men in her life, her father was “an imposter”: “He pretended to be a loving father, a devoted husband, but he wasn’t really with us, ... he did not long for us as we longed for him” (181). What her father longed for and was obsessed with, her aunt reveals, was his slaves. Aunt Lelia informs her that after the death of her young brothers, Manon’s father lost all desire for children and refused any further sexual intimacy with his wife. He devoted his life to perfecting the management of his farm and because of this, her aunt explains, “your mother came to feel your father cared more about the negroes than he did about his family” (175).

Along with the truth about Joel, the revelations about her father’s “failings” force Manon to see the hypocrisy that defined all white women’s relations with their husbands, not just her own. She berates the society that allows white men to make a mockery of the most cherished American institutions – marriage, family, religion, and white womanhood – by taking enslaved lovers and light-skinned mistresses, and creating a class of mixed-race “bastards.” Manon is outraged by the fact that she cannot utter one word about what she calls “the lie at the center of everything, the great lie we all supported, tended, and worshiped as if our lives depended upon it, as if, should one person ever speak honestly,

the world would crack open and send us all tumbling into a flaming pit” (179). This knowledge makes Manon feel “as if an iron collar, such as [she had] seen used to discipline field women, [was] fastened about [her] skull” (182). She imagines she hears her husband’s voice telling her “*You’re next,*” and has to remind herself “He’s dead...He’s not coming back. But it was as if he were there, leaning over me, turning the screw of the hot iron collar tighter and tighter until my skull must crack from the pressure” (183).

Her naiveté destroyed, the disillusioned Manon comes to reject marriage altogether. She views marriage as pathology instead of the “restorative” social force white supremacist discourse makes it out to be (Stokes 20).²⁹ According to Manon, marriage provides a cover story that enables, rather than hinders, adultery and racial mixing. Constructing marriage as a threat to whiteness, Manon’s narrative calls attention to the pretense of the institution’s capacity “to create racial order out of mongrel chaos” (Stokes 20). She vows to “hold fast to [her] independence as a man clings to a life raft in a hurricane. It was all that saved me from drowning in a sea of lies” (180). Asserting that she could not “remain silent ... while [her] husband sought solace for [her] inadequacies in the bed of some light-skinned quadroon,” Manon also forsakes motherhood: “Never. ... Not me. Let Alice McKenzie have a household of Joel’s screaming babies; better her than me” (180).

With her conviction to remain “independent,” the novel constructs Manon as a sort of rebel. Not only, like her father, does Manon “have nothing to do with religion,” she also rejects the other two institutions – marriage and motherhood – that were most

²⁹ According to Mason Stokes, white supremacist discourse constructs marriage as a “social form that buttresses whiteness in its cultural decline” (20).

crucial to preserving slavery and whiteness.³⁰ Manon's willful independence, in other words, poses a threat to the specific conventions that held the fabric of southern antebellum society together. Just as, according to Stoler, "European women were vital to the colonial enterprise" abroad, elite white women were critical to "the solidification of racial boundaries in ways that repeatedly tied their supportive and subordinate posture to community cohesion and ... security" in the antebellum South (*Carnal Knowledge* 62). Marriage in particular took on even greater significance as the institution of slavery came under attack in the 1830s. Pro-slavery activists brought marriage to slavery's defense so as to "len[d] racial slavery a beneficial patina without changing its power relations" (Cott 62-3). Elite southerners believed both wives and slaves were intended by "God and nature" to be the subordinates of the white master/husband (Cott 61). Along with "domesticating" slavery, uniting these two institutions also helped, as Nancy Cott argues, "to keep white women in their place. ... Elite white women could hardly raise a complaint in public about their own positions vis-à-vis their husbands without appearing traitorous to the South" (63).

Not yet encumbered by the competing discourses of marriage that energized both sides of the slavery debate by the late 1830s, Manon nonetheless is "kept in her place" by the dual role of racial thinking. As Ann Stoler points out, racism was a "central organizing principle" that affected people across the divides of gender and class as well as race. Racial thinking not only structured hierarchies along lines of racial difference, it was also "part of a critical, class-based logic that ... kept potentially subversive white[s]

³⁰ Manon's irreverence with regards to both religion and marriage is conveyed clearly early on in the novel when she laments her husband's safe return from putting out a barn fire: "All night I prayed myself a widow, but to prove there is no Supreme Being who hears our prayers, in the morning Sarah came to my

in line” (13). Thus, in *Manon* we have a character whose subversive potential is undercut by the racism that defines her and her social milieu. The racial thinking that justifies *Manon*’s superiority also keeps her “in line.” *Manon* will not speak out publicly on the social injustices around her because they are part and parcel of the system of slavery and tenets of white supremacy that she holds so sacred. While well attuned to the way in which patriarchal southern society oppresses and exploits her, *Manon* is incapable of seeing the part she plays in perpetuating the system that she rails against.

By the end of her narrative, *Manon* lives within the confines of social convention, yet subtly flaunts society’s hypocrisies. As an elite white widow and a “cripple,” she has the privilege of eschewing marriage and living her life outside of direct white male control. *Manon*’s decision to remain independent alleviates the pressure in her head and, just as when she suckles Sarah, her headaches cease. She feels free to rebuild her life in her own way and chooses, as she puts it, to “live quietly, without illusions” (183). Her changing regard for Walter emphasizes the centrality of Sarah in the new life she envisions. Although she had “seldom looked at him” in the past, *Manon*’s newfound serenity encourages her to reflect on Walter’s changed appearance: “His lips were moist and red. ... I noticed his face had grown longer in the last months. Though he had his father’s light eyes, he had begun to favor his mother” (184). Gazing at Walter sleeping before her on the hearth, her thoughts shift to Sarah, “Where was she? Philadelphia? New York? Great cold cities full of foreigners? How much longer would it take for Mr. Leggett to find her? And at what cost” (184). The only person in the novel who willingly touches *Manon* and seeks out her company, Walter becomes the link that connects her to

door with a message that my husband had gone to his brother’s house and would not return until dinner” (49).

Sarah. Seeing so much of Sarah in Walter, Manon comes to tolerate and even welcome his “fascination” for her (184). In the novel’s final pages Manon notes, “Walter turned the morning nap by the fire into a ritual. To the amazement of Rose and Delphine, I allowed it. He was there, sound asleep, when my aunt arrived with the news that Sarah had been apprehended” (184).

The independence Manon carves out, of course, is at Sarah’s expense. Having discerned that Sarah disguised herself as a white gentleman in order to escape north, Manon is instrumental in her capture and return. While impatiently awaiting Sarah’s arrival, Aunt Lelia warns Manon that she “may be very different” after passing as a free woman. Manon counters, “She has done more than that. . . . She has tasted a freedom you and I will never know. . . . She has traveled about the country as a free white man” (189). Manon’s reply suggests a certain amount of envy and her choice of words (“tasted a freedom”) conjures up the sensation of “freedom” Manon experienced when she suckled Sarah. Moreover, like her act of suckling Sarah, Manon interprets Sarah’s cross-dressing as both a sign of “freedom” and an expression of pleasure within a masculine economy of desire.

By returning Sarah to her, Manon reasserts Sarah’s “feminized” position in her own fantasy of familial relations. Once Sarah settles back in after her return, Manon lectures her on the fact that Walter is now their shared responsibility. Manon scolds Sarah exclaiming, “It’s useless to talk about responsibility to you people. . . . You have no sense of it.” Echoing her father’s philosophy on managing “his people,” Manon tells Sarah that notion of responsibility is “the gift we give you all. You just run away and we bring you back and you never have the slightest twinge of conscience. No one ever holds you

responsible for your actions. It's just assumed you have no moral sense" (191). With her lecture on responsibility, Manon designates herself an authority on the very same notions of white superiority that are fundamental to patriarchy. Any potential Manon might have had for radical subjectivity and social disruption is cut short by the prerogatives of racial domination that structure the erotic geometry of race and gender within the novel.

Reconfiguring Desire

Fittingly, there are two configurations that stand at the novel's end. The first is not an erotic triangle, but an irreverent family circle, with Manon, Sarah, and Walter all under one roof. This tableau makes a mockery of the "legitimacy" of the planter class by calling attention to the impurity of "white" and "black" bloodlines. More than once in the novel, Manon makes reference to Walter as the "heir apparent," mocking the genealogical ideologies that, as George Handley writes, "concealed evidence of sexual contact across racial and class lines in order to protect white elite patrimony" (3). While she seeks to expose what Harriet Jacobs refers to as the "tangled skeins" of slavery's genealogies, she does not want to undermine the authority of whiteness that those same genealogical discourses preserve. Thus, rather than challenge the system, Manon seems intent on usurping the power of the displaced "father" to consolidate her own authority. Manon, in effect, assumes the role of the Master. As Joyce Carol Oates writes, "By the novel's end a grotesque but utterly plausible new marriage has evolved: Manon with her scarred face and paralyzed arm, ... Sarah, sullen and recalcitrant, the deaf-mute Walter their child" (12). And while whiteness may not be able to biologically reproduce itself in this unconventional "marriage," the politics of whiteness ("as a locus of identity; as a site for the production of culture; as an organizing trope for community and for politics")

lives on in this configuration (Stokes 190). By creating this perverse family circle, Manon puts her own distinctive stamp on the intimacies of domination, making clear, as Susan Fraiman has argued, “that domination in America . . . is not a matter between men only” (82).

The second configuration we are left is the novel’s very last erotic triangle that pits Manon in a battle for the possession of Sarah with a “colorless Yankee woman” and her husband (193). Confronting Sarah for the first time about the night of the insurrection, Manon glares at her as she exclaims, “You knew my husband was dead. . . . There was no reason for you to run” (192). Still bothered by Sarah’s abandonment, Manon continues,

But you had already hatched your plan with Mr. Roget, hadn’t you. You had it all arranged; your clever disguise, and your ship passage, and your new friends in the North. I’m sure they all made you feel very important, very much the poor helpless victim, and no one asked you how you got away or whom you left behind (192).

Aggrieved by Sarah’s rejection, Manon watches closely for a response. Manon is “dumbfounded” when, with a “strange inward-looking smile,” Sarah tells her, “When you gets to the North, . . . they invites you to the dining room, and they asks you to sit at the table. Then they offers you a cup of tea, and they asks, ‘Does you want cream and sugar’” (192). Shocked at Sarah’s reply Manon realizes Sarah “had changed; she’d gone mad.” Astounded by this recollection, Manon inquires, “And this appealed to you?” Lifting her eyes “coolly” to Manon’s Sarah replies, “Yes. . . . It appeal to me” (192).

Sarah's words cause Manon to wonder about the newest threat to her claim on Sarah. She finds it shocking that Sarah actually relished being waited on and regarded as an equal. Manon not only interprets this as a sign of "change" in Sarah, but as an indication that she has "gone mad." To see it any other way would force Manon to acknowledge both the resistance and the humanity that she has so stubbornly refused to see. The longing that is evident in Sarah's account of her time in the North leads Manon to conjure up a vivid image of Sarah that she leaves us with at the end of her narrative:

I considered this image of Sarah. She was dressed in borrowed clothes, sitting stiffly at a bare wooden table while a colorless Yankee woman, her thin hair pulled into a tight bun, served her tea in a china cup. The righteous husband fetched a cushion to make their guest more comfortable. It struck me as perfectly ridiculous. What on earth did they think they were doing (192-3)?

Manon cannot fathom another white woman inviting Sarah into the intimate setting of the dining room and treating her as if she were white. This "ridiculous" image of a white couple behaving as if Sarah were their equal, and of Sarah enjoying it, is unsettling to Manon precisely because it suggests the inherent vulnerability of white power and domination (Stokes 192). Her final question, "What on earth did they think they were doing," conveys whiteness' own "anxieties about the white future" and the nascent awareness "that such a future may, in fact, be an impossibility" (Stokes 191).

Yet we must consider fact that the "suitor" Manon is up against is not merely the white woman or her husband *per se*, but the ideologies they represent. It might be tempting to read this as a struggle between slavery and freedom, tyranny and justice. However, Manon's image of the northern couple problematizes their intentions. Similar

to Manon's household, the austere image of the northern abolitionists presents an unsettling picture of domestic (dis)order. Even while the presence of the husband signals "the limits of women's power in a patriarchal domesticity," the white male is placed in a "ridiculously" subservient role that undermines his authority (G. Brown 511). Similarly, according to nineteenth-century conventional wisdom, the direct political activism by a white woman would indicate "a fall from domestic purity" and the loss moral superiority (G. Brown 513). Thus, conventions of both race and gender are subverted in Manon's image of this scene. In the process, anti-slavery activism is depicted as a sort of contagion that corrupts the home. Most clearly, it threatens Manon's perverse family circle. Yet more broadly, the context of the erotic racial triangle links Manon's image to the specter of "amalgamation" that provided "a means to discredit the ways in which abolitionists demanded the inclusion of blacks in the political sphere" (Harris 195).

Like Manon's image of the scene, her incredulity raises questions about the egalitarian gesture of anti-slavery activism. Numerous studies demonstrate quite clearly that racism and prejudice were rife in the movement. The paternalism that characterized slavery also influenced the ways in which white activists interacted with black activists. While there was obviously a clear distinction between the proponents of slavery and white anti-slavery activists, both are part of a long history of racial ideologies that "can be turned to the service of oppression" (Pascoe 467). Even today, the pervasive emphasis on the "nonrecognition of race," or what Peggy Pascoe calls "modernist racial ideology," simply continues this theme. Citing the work of critical race theorists, Pascoe suggests "the [contemporary] legal system's deliberate nonrecognition of race erodes the ability to

recognize and name racism and to argue for such policies as affirmative action, which rely on categories to overturn rather than enforce oppression” (482-3).

With this in mind, we might consider the fact that Manon’s question may not be strictly rhetorical. Left with the rival images of Sarah serving and being served, the question seems to be indirectly aimed at the reader. Is the image of a white couple treating a black woman as a favored guest “ridiculous”? What were their intentions and what have they wrought? How far have we come in both our personal and political relationships with those who are different from us – whether it be race, class, ethnicity, or sexuality that distinguishes us from each other? *Property* leaves the final potent question open for its readers to reflect on and respond to. Like the work of writer Fred D’Aguiar, Martin’s conclusion creates “emotional space ... for thought beyond the life of the text” (Frias, “Building Bridges” 5). As witnesses to Manon’s narrative, readers are left with the responsibility of contemplating the competing ideologies represented in this final image. By implicitly moving the question out of the text, the narrative suggests that only by moving beyond the problematic structure of the conventional erotic triangle can we conceive of alternative geometries of race and gender.³¹

The unique “dialogue” on *Property* that Bebe Moore Campbell initiated with Valerie Martin attempts to do just that. Appearing in *Black Issues Book Review* (BIBR), the dialogue reads like a conversation between friends and colleagues. The designation of “dialogue” (rather than discussion or interview) and the description of the private hotel suite where they share a two-hour lunch set the stage for an intimate conversation rather than an interview. Having met only once a few months earlier when they participated on

³¹ See Susan Fraiman’s conclusion for a similar argument (81-2).

a panel at the Tennessee Williams Film Festival, the article makes much of the fact that the two women formed an instant bond. Susan McHenry's editorial comments further highlight the writers' easy rapport, reinforcing the sense of connection the article strives to establish. McHenry comments, "the two novelists were utterly relaxed and delighted in each other's company. They practically finished each other's sentences" (2).

Despite the fact that they barely knew each other, Bebe Moore Campbell deliberately forged an alliance with Valerie Martin in order to help *Property* get the readership she thought it deserved. As Moore Campbell told McHenry, "I thought [*Property*] deserved to be a best seller, and I felt black readers in particular needed to know about it" (1-2). "Mesmerized" by Martin's novel and disappointed by the book's sluggish sales, Moore Campbell organized this informal, recorded dialogue between herself, BIBR contributing editor Susan McHenry, and Martin to initiate a wider dialogue on the novel and the issues it raises.

In the manner of an Oprah book club event, the article's casual format, as its title suggests, works to extend the sense of intimacy shared by the two writers to its audience. The subtitle announces, "Bebe Moore Campbell introduces BIBR readers to prize-winning author Valerie Martin in a cross-racial dialogue on the challenges of writing novels about race and social change" (1). Their conversation takes on a heightened sense of importance, if not urgency, within this wider context. More than a simple chat between friends, the article invites a larger cross-racial dialogue on an array of complex issues springing out of their discussion of *Property*. The two women share not only the experiences and the ideas that shape them as writers, but also as women, as readers, and as activists committed to social change. To this end, McHenry ends her brief introduction

by framing the article as a dialogue about “what it means to write about race in America.” She stages the interview as a forum through which readers can “ponder the capacity in all human beings to make fundamental changes in their hearts, minds and lives, but why such changes continue to be so difficult and rare” (2).

Indeed, more than persuading readers why they should read the novel, the article suggests how they should read the novel. The value of the novel, these women suggest, is its ability to push us as readers to grapple with what Martin calls “moment(s) of moral complexity” and, by so doing, it forces us to recognize and relate to the flaws of individual characters and society as a whole (8). Thus, according to this coalition of women, the failed sisterhood within the novel is not as important as the lessons that failure imparts to *Property*'s readers. The BIBR article suggests the novel's power lies precisely in its potential to inspire twenty-first century readers to contemplate the relational nature of the inequities of the past and present, and apply the lessons of the past to actions in the present. In this context, Bebe Moore Campbell's gesture becomes more important than extending the audience for the novel; it offers reading as a site of coalition building and cross-racial dialogue as a means of exploring the value of difference as well as the thorny issues of racial and gender oppression.

Read within the context of the contemporary neo-slave narrative, Martin's *Property* not only encourages us to rethink the way we understand ourselves, it also helps us to reconsider the way we understand the genre itself. The novel begs the question, is there a place within the genre for a slaveholder's narrative? As discussed in this study's first chapter, neo-slave narratives are generally understood as black-authored texts that privilege the perspective of slaves or their descendants. While mainly perceived as an

African-American form, contemporary production in particular reveals the neo-slave narrative as a mixed-race, multinational phenomenon differentiated by both the internal and external dimensions of diaspora (Edwards 12-13). Just as American and Southern studies have changed the ways subjects and territories within their disciplines are mapped, my reading of *Property* is meant to suggest how scholarship on the neo-slave narrative would be energized and extended by adopting a more expansive conception of genre. Southern studies scholar Patricia Yeager has pointed out that the conflation of “southern” with “white” restricted the ways critics defined and interpreted southern literature. Similarly, the presumption of a specific racial designation or nationality limits the way we read neo-slave narratives (Yeager 44, 49). A more inclusive approach that incorporates a broader comparative context might, as Patricia Yeager has argued for southern literature, “teach us something . . . that we have not seen before” (56).³² Such an approach would likely yield a more varied understanding of slavery and its impact on the formation of subjects and nations. More importantly, by attending to a multitude of different and even competing voices, we can extend the genre’s rigorous critique of slavery’s legacies as they persist “in our economies, our modes of thinking about race, and our discourses of nationalism” (Handley 4).

As Toni Morrison has suggested, more attention needs to be paid to the “impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (*Playing* 11). She continues, “it seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalyzed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject.” To counter this evasion, Morrison challenges scholars “to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on

³² See also Jones and Donaldson, *Haunted Bodies* and Baker and Nelson’s preface to the *American Literature* special issue, “Violence, the Body and ‘The South.’” See also Handley and Cox on a

nonblacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered those notions.” She argues that while “scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable,” “equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (*Playing* 11-2).

Like Morrison, others have suggested that the addition of the voices and stories of the slaveholding class, as well as others in society who were part of the “national experience” of slavery, is crucial to moving toward what historian Nell Irvin Painter calls a “fully loaded cost accounting” of slavery (127).³³ Painter asserts that “No matter how much American convention exempts whites from paying any costs of the enslavement of blacks, the implications of slavery did not stop at the color line; rather, slavery’s theory and praxis permeated the whole of slave-holding society,” even beyond “the borders of the South” (129, 127). The inclusion of white-authored texts in the genre of slavery novels recognizes that slavery, as Timothy Cox writes, “was a shared, multicultural experience” (4). By taking in a variety of perspectives on slavery, the implications of Painter’s statement – and the full costs of slavery – can be uncovered and explored. Yet perhaps more importantly, each new perspective on the slave past might help bring an end to the “escape from knowledge” that engenders racial thinking and enables racism today.

comparative approach to the study of neo-slave novels.

³³ See, e.g., Cox and Handley.

CONCLUSION

The irresolution that structures the conclusion of Valerie Martin's *Property* is not uncommon to the genre of the contemporary neo-slave narrative. Indeed, the narrative is deliberate in ending with Manon's rhetorical question – "What on earth did they think they were doing" – and purposely unclear about whom it addresses. Although her incredulous query suggestively alludes to the goals and desires of antislavery activists, the rhetorical structure indirectly shifts the burden of response onto the reader as the novel comes to an end. *Property*'s conclusion, in other words, has resonance beyond the narrative's final scene by posing a challenge to its readers. Its strategic irresolution works to disrupt and challenge the distant, indifferent stance of contemporary readers by tacitly encouraging us to question our own relationship to inequality and injustice. The ideal reader leaves the novel wondering, as one critic puts it, "what 'peculiar institutions' we are embracing in our own world."¹

Like *Property*, the other texts I present in this study rely upon a similar open-ended conclusion to (dis)place the demands of the text onto its audience. Both *Dessa Rose* and *Chaneyville*, with calculated indirection, "proposition" the reader as they resist and problematize "closure." Both the form and the content of the epilogue in *Dessa Rose* leave matters distinctly unsettled. And, like *Property*, *The Chaneyville Incident*

¹ Quote excerpted from the book jacket of *Property*.

concludes with a rhetorical question that presents the reader with an enigmatic sense of what the future holds.

This structural open-endedness points to the postmodern impulse of the contemporary neo-slave narrative. As Timothy Cox argues, the postmodern characteristics of “slavery novels” propel the reader to rethink what he/she “knows” about history, as well as the value of more contemporary notions of “identity, difference, and change” (130). Indeed, Cox goes so far as to describe writers in this genre as “cultural coach[es] who tell [readers] to keep trying to forge relation through difference where others would insist on separation because of difference” (134).

Reorienting the premise of Cox’s argument, this study establishes the centrality of (un)conventional coupling to the (re)visionary politics of the neo-slave narrative. Not only does this thematic approach reveal the necessity of a more inclusive conception of the genre, it also establishes representations of interracial sexuality and desire as integral to the larger political project undertaken by these authors. Through their diverse constructions of cross-racial intimacy, the novelists in this study are able to envision “slavery” as both a redemptive and utopian “interpretive tool” (Low 122). To begin with, by exposing a submerged (transatlantic) mestizo history, neo-slave narratives employ black-white coupling to serve important double ends. They simultaneously construct a more comprehensive notion of the past while they emphasize the unrealized goals of “freedom” and social justice in the present. Additionally, the novels in the genre rely on representations of transracial intimacy to construct a politics of desire rooted in cross-cultural connection. Thus, through the trope of (un)conventional coupling, writers convey both their dissatisfaction and their hope. While they chart the unrealized promise of

“freedom” and “justice” for all, they also imagine possibilities for a new reality. Their hunger for a better world is premised on an equally complex set of social prerogatives. Paul Gilroy describes this sort of vision as “the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors” (*The Black Atlantic* 39).

The significance of the trope of (un)conventional coupling is especially apparent in the carefully crafted ambivalence of the “conclusions” to each of the novels analyzed in this study. Both the utopian desire for cross-racial connection and the impossibility of that connection are conveyed through strategic irresolution in all three narratives.

Within the structure and content of the epilogue of *Dessa Rose*, for example, Dessa’s narrative voice conveys the essential social conflict at the heart of the novel. Her longing for an unproblematic “integrated” community exists in tension with her equally realistic recognition of the impracticality of that vision. Despite the fact that it is Dessa who urges Ruth to part company with the fugitives and head east without them, Dessa’s memories are clearly marked with a lament about their separation.² “I guess we all have regretted her leaving, one time or another,” Dessa explains. “She couldn’t’ve caused us no more trouble than what the white folks gived us without her” (259). Through her memories, Dessa reconceives Ruth as part of her extended circle of kin. As she recounts Ruth’s role in their journey towards freedom, Dessa wonders, for example, “(Do she call my name to Clara? ...” (259). The open-ended parenthesis suggests Dessa’s lingering desire to know about and connect with Ruth and her family. Yet, this longing is

² In fact, Ashraf Rushdy argues that Dessa’s “friendship” with Ruth is constructed mainly in her memories rather than in the actual experience of their alliance (*Neo-slave* 149).

inevitably cut short by Dessa's ready acknowledgement that "Negro can't live in peace under protection of law, got to have some white person stand protection for us. And who can you friend white, love with like that" (259). At the same time, the experience of Dessa's personal connection to Ruth allows for important intra-personal growth. It enables Dessa to "risk" relationships with people different from herself without ignoring or diminishing the "hate" and "hurt" that plagued them.

Equally important, Dessa's memories of her own and the fugitives' successful alliances with Ruth alter her conception of racial difference and affiliation. As she acknowledges Ruth's willingness to marry Nathan and to go west with the fugitives, Dessa articulates a more nuanced understanding of whiteness. Unlike Adam Nehemiah and Mrs. Vaughn who actively perpetuate the "madness" of slavery and racism for their own benefit, Dessa concedes that not all whites participate in the social structures of inequality in the same way (259). Like Ruth, some reject slavery and resist racism and prejudice by interacting with and forging communities across lines of difference. Dessa also points to the example of their wagon train leader, a white man named Eckland, whom she recalls "was always fair with us." She even hints at a level of social intimacy with Eckland when she notes that he was often included as a guest at her table (259).

Yet Dessa's racial vision is always double-voiced. Citing two other white neighbors with whom she and the fugitives have a good relationship, Dessa both envisions the tentative beginnings of an integrated community while carefully maintaining her guard against it. She as quickly points to the limitations of that same imagined community by asserting that none of these white neighbors were "the equal of Ruth" (260). As Dessa ardently declares, "I hopes I live for my people like they do for

me,” she again represents Ruth as one of her “people” (260). Yet, as Dessa recounts slavery’s “costs” in the final lines of her narrative, she seems to reaffirm the impossibility of befriending and loving someone from the other side of the color line as part of the incalculable loss inflicted by slavery and its legacies (260).

The formal device of the ellipsis that concludes Dessa’s narration conveys an unending sense of the same outrage and regret that structures the novel as a whole. Indeed, the narrative ends with Dessa’s poignant remark, “Oh, we have paid for our children’s place in the world again and again . . .” (260). As is true for the earlier open-ended ellipsis, this ambivalent closure implies that even today African-Americans continue to “pay” dearly for their “freedom.” Thus, even while the epilogue reinforces Dessa’s control over her own story, the finale reminds us that her “book” remains a work in progress (199, 260). The unfinished status of Dessa’s text leaves the task of assessing the (use-)value of Dessa’s story to the twenty-first-century reader who holds the only material version of her “book” in his/her hands (x).

Likewise, the conclusion to David Bradley’s *The Chaneyville Incident* presents a similar unresolved tension between possibility and impossibility in the conclusion. Despite the fact that the black and white lovers must manage work together in order to solve the dilemmas John Washington faces at the opening of the novel, *Chaneyville*’s conclusion leaves their future relationship unresolved precisely because of the (un)conventional nature of their coupling. Ironically, the attention to third space otherness that enables new identifications with difference also informs the enigmatic conclusion by forcing the narrative to recognize difference as an unstable, on-going negotiation. As John strikes a match to ignite the pyre of papers and note cards he has

discarded in the process of cleaning out Jack's cabin, he questions the very nature and reliability of perception itself. He speculates about "how it would all look to someone else, someone from far away." As he watches the flames rise, John expresses his apprehension. He wonders "if that someone would understand. Not just someone; Judith. I wondered if she would understand when she saw the smoke go rising from the far side of the Hill" (342). John's indecision establishes cross-cultural communication as an ongoing, dialogical enterprise rather than a fixed outcome or goal. Particularly for Judith, who occupies the position of (relative) privilege, relating to/through difference will be a continual, collective endeavor. The doubt John harbors suggests the difficulty, if not impossibility, of maintaining successful interracial partnerships in a country that remains divided by difference and structured by institutionalized racism.

Yet John Washington's doubts also carry more positive implications regarding the problematic terrain of interracial understanding and cross-cultural alliances. Opening with an indefinite reference to "someone from far away," the skepticism of John's query can also be indirectly linked to the distanced position of the reader. Like John's preparation of Jack's cabin for the next sojourner in need, the rhetorical structure of the conclusion issues a tacit invitation for the reader to "use" the liminal space of the text to find meaning that might be applied to his/her own experience. David Bradley may well hope that through his novel he might "give [readers] a different kind of vision" that enables them to "make new decisions they wouldn't otherwise make" (Blake and Miller 35). However, the tentative quality of *Chaneysville*'s conclusion suggests that like John Washington, the author also has his doubts.

Finally, in *Property* the narrative's strategic irresolution also indirectly challenges readers to move beyond the same impasse of impossibility that structures its ambiguous conclusion. Manon's final question pits her racialized desire for Sarah against the agenda of two anonymous white northern abolitionists. This oppositional structure foregrounds as deeply problematic both the logic of white supremacy and the presumptions of a "color-blind" "modernist racial ideology" (Pascoe 182-3). Each of these distinct but equally problematic conceptions of racial difference limits the possibilities for social justice and cross-cultural political alliances.

At the same time, the rhetorical structure of the novel's final passage challenges the limitations of these ideologies by moving beyond the interracial erotic triangle constructed by Manon's narration. The strategy of irresolution draws the reader into a more expansive geometry of race and gender, compelling him/her to contemplate the meaning and significance of Manon and Sarah's failed sisterhood. By reflecting on the relational nature of inequality, *Property* encourages an ethical approach to both "history" and difference that might produce a shift in consciousness in its contemporary readers. The radical politics of desire, in this context, is ultimately premised on change (Alexander 100-1). Also, in this context fiction and the act of reading become essential tools in efforts towards achieving transformative cross-racial dialogue and productive political alliances that recognize and value difference.

The provisional quality of the stories neo-slave narratives tell is essential to not only their aesthetics but also to their political designs (Handley 148). To get the story of slavery "right," Hortense Spillers might argue, would "rob the subject of its dynamic character" and "freez[e] it in the ahistorical." For as Spillers contends "The collective and

individual reinvention of the discourse of 'slavery' is ... nothing other than an attempt to restore to a spatio-temporal object its eminent historicity, to evoke *person/persona* in the place of a 'shady' ideal" ("Changing the Letter" 29). Yet by drawing on "facts" from the past, neo-slave narratives (self-)consciously expose both fiction and history "as an ongoing narrative[s]" (Handley 150). Not one story survives or emerges, but several; not one "history" prevails but a range of possible interpretations shift and change "according to new discursive formations, the discovery of new evidence, or new approaches to known sources" (Levecq 165).

Such ceaseless movement recalls the provisional frame of black Atlantic political culture. This study adopts such impermanence in order to situate the genre of the neo-slave narrative within a more expansive, dynamic context. It privileges the perspective of fusion and movement that mark transatlantic cultural production, with all of its "restless, recombinant," and relentlessly "affirmative" dimensions (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 18, 31). It utilizes at the same time as it endorses an analytic framework that "considers the world critically from the point of view of its emancipatory transformation" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 39). Precisely because representations of black-white coupling within neo-slave narratives reveal the double-edged critique of black Atlantic cultural production, such a framework is indispensable to this study's meaning. As they unearth hidden or forgotten aspects of our mestizo past, neo-slave narratives work to complicate our relationship to "history," while also creating an imaginative space for personal and social transformation.

Within this context, writers draw upon history to problematize fixed notions of truth and thereby reconceptualize historical "value." As Paul Gilroy contends,

“imaginative attempts to revisit the slave experience” seek to “sift it for resources with which to bolster contemporary political aspirations” (220). Thus, the authors of neo-slave narratives establish a critical perspective on the past and the present by maintaining a productive tension between “fact” and “fiction” (Peterson 11). Yet at the same time these writers implicitly caution against uncritical references to “revising” history.

David Bradley’s artistic project, as discussed in chapter three of this study, is case in point. Despite the fact that *Chaneyville* is steeped in “research,” Bradley insists that he uses history to confirm its fiction. As Christine Levecq rightly suggests, even when we factor in “the narrativity of historiography” and “its dependence on historians’ ideologies,” critics – like the novelists themselves – must be mindful of the fact that history and fiction are distinct disciplines (165). Moreover, the impulse to “authenticate” or judge a particular novel primarily on its historical “truth” conjures up problematic assumptions about social realism that have beset the African-American novel from its inception. In other words, to reduce the value of a novel to its “sociology” not only undercuts the work’s aesthetic value, but also it decidedly diminishes its performative function.

For neo-slave narratives, the value of history is precisely its capacity to initiate an ethical dialogue about the intricate relationship between the past and the present/future. Rather than convey a sense of postmodern aimlessness, neo-slave narratives strive to create a redemptive postmodern critique, one “that can revitalize the present moment” (Peterson 51). Indeed like other scholars, Nancy Peterson argues that counterhistories of slavery “are not only about history; they are also about healing the wounds of history” (168). Like the novels Peterson examines in *Against Amnesia*, the neo-slave narratives I

interrogate in this study are “committed to intervening in injustices” (168). Equally important in this study’s insistence upon the probative value of intentionality and functionality in the texts under consideration is the “activist emphasis” of the individual and collective project of these writers (168). Through their stories about slavery, the authors of neo-slave narratives encourage readers to become, in Adrienne Rich’s words, “*consciously* historical” (as quoted in Peterson 6).

Finally, neo-slave narratives rely on the trope of (un)conventional coupling as they issue a specific invitation for the reader to become “invested” in the text (Peterson 14). By structuring their (re)visionary project around interracial sexuality, authors push their readers to get at “the heart of race matters.” Representations of black-white coupling encourage rather than preclude contemporary dialogue on race. Indeed, this literary trope enables neo-slave narratives to bring writers and readers together through the text not only to critique the current political situation, but also to imagine, and possibly inspire, “new anti-racist epistemologies of possibility and connection” (Retman 4).

Like recent revisionist scholarship on the history of sexuality, the prevalence of (un)conventional coupling in contemporary neo-slave narratives demands the subject of interracial sexuality command our critical reconsideration. Perhaps most importantly, by envisioning a transformed and transformative future out of a complex logic of transracial intimacy, these novels try to impart an important lesson about change. The lesson that Robin Kelley learned from his friend Joe Wood Jr., is equally instructive to readers of the twenty-first century: “change begins with how we feel, how we think, how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships” (232).

Likewise, the writers of neo-slave narratives also confirm their belief in the possibility of change by the way they implicate the reader into the narrative irresolution that structures *Dessa Rose*, *Chaneyville*, and *Property*. For each of their authors, as for Mary-Mathilda, the protagonist of Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* – and William Shakespeare before all of them, “The story itself is the thing. That experience of living through the story” (210). It should come as no surprise that Clarke's novel is structured around Mary-Mathilda's intricate and intimate process of “confessing” to the murder of her common-law husband and colonial “master,” Mr. Belfeels. In the account of the story she tells, Mary-Mathilda encourages her old friend (and arresting officer) Percy to see things from her position and from her perspective. To enable Percy's identification, Mary-Mathilda persuades him to see that the “facts” themselves only carry significance according to the context of the tale and the purpose of its telling. For, as she explains:

“I don't even know what I related as a experience undertaken by me actually might not've been something that I undertaken. ... It could be that I was relating a story I read in a book. ... It is not those facts that I claiming to be truth. The story itself is the thing. That experience of living through the story” (210).

Inevitably, the writers of neo-slave narratives rely upon the very experience of reading itself to foster understanding and identification across barriers of difference.

Perhaps above all else, the purpose that drives neo-slave narratives is this sense of possibility inherent in the experience of living through a story. Each writer in his/her particular creation of experience reissues the double-edged challenge of the black Atlantic critique. Each, through their individual literary imaginations, encourages the reader to view the world not only as it is, but also as it might be. And, as Mary-

Mathilda's monologue suggests, it is the motivation behind the story that matters most. In particular, neo-slave narratives are keen to "reopen a very old conversation about what kind of world we want to struggle for" (Kelley 2). Like the classic form they draw upon and revise, this fiction seeks to inspire social change by touching people's minds as well as their hearts. Indeed, by revisiting the subject of slavery, contemporary authors "hope [they] might inspire a few more dreamers to 'do' and a few [more] skeptics to dream" (Kelley 232). Perhaps the "infrapolitics" of these neo-slave narratives will become "the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it" (Scott 201).

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