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**Black Mourning: Readings of Loss, Desire, and Racial
Identification**

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**Black Mourning: Readings of Loss, Desire, and Racial
Identification**

by

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Dedication

For the loved ones I have mourned during the completion of this project: My father, Loy Williams, my great aunts Beulah Littles and Mary Caldwell, and my friend, Arin Hill.

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Black Mourning: Readings of Loss, Desire, and Racial Identification

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Black Mourning: Readings of Loss, Desire and Racial Identification explores a diverse archive of African American literary and cultural texts in order to reveal loss as a necessary condition of racial identification. To support this assertion, this study broaches a theoretical gap that persists between black literary and cultural studies and revisionist approaches to psychoanalytic theory. Using the lens of trauma theory, *Black Mourning* reframes cultural memory and black subjectivity in ways that supplant performances of racial authenticity with an affective politics. Black expressive culture and performance aesthetics undergird this critical model. Chapter One “Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning” configures cultural memory in relation to the formation of modern blackness. Chapter Two “‘Nobody Knows My Name’: Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Black Women’s Blues Protest” uses a blues aesthetic to access hidden texts of black female sexual trauma. Chapter Three “The Queerness of Blackness: Marlon Riggs’s *Black Is ... Black Ain’t*” looks at embodied trauma as an a foundation for reimagining black collectivity. The fourth chapter “Archiving Blackness: Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* and Post-Soul Aesthetics” moves beyond fixed narratives of race to conceptualize innovative ways of archiving blackness.

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Introduction

The Blues of Blackness

Blackness is performed to a blues soundtrack. This familiar coupling of black and blue underscores the extent to which blackness is linked with grief. To be sure, African American literature and culture are rife with expressions of loss, mourning, and “the blues.” These structures of feeling articulate the impact of a traumatic history on black subjectivity. *Black Mourning: Readings of Loss, Desire, and Racial Identification* explores a diverse archive of African American literature and culture in order to reveal loss as a necessary condition of black subjectivity.

Modern black subjectivity results directly from a history of traumatic loss, namely the transatlantic slave trade and the physical and cultural displacement of people of African descent through the Middle Passage and by means of forced and voluntary migration in the United States. The cultural memory of these traumas has produced unifying narratives of racial identity in black public culture and aesthetics that betray a desire to recuperate an irrecoverable past.¹ Yet, cultural memory sometimes involves cultural forgetting. Unifying narratives typically elide processes of rupture, revision, and exchange; they forego the routes of New World blackness for roots.² In other words, these quests for an uninterrupted racial continuity rely on fantasies of origin and performances of

authenticity. These performances of “authentic” blackness tend to be maintained by models of cultural production that are both gendered and sexualized.

By reconceptualizing African American literary and cultural history through trauma, I hope to identify ways to construct cultural memory and black subjectivity that neither fall back on narratives of origin nor revel in performances of authenticity. I allude to the blues in order to suggest that the structures of feeling within black expressive culture provide such a model. The difficulty of representing or speaking trauma and the elision of racial trauma in official historical discourse have generated alternative forms of expression. Since *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), black writers, scholars, and cultural critics have identified black music as a privileged site of cultural memory and a mode of expressing sorrow. As a result, the aesthetics and affect of black music are often adapted to other forms of cultural expression—like literature, performance, film, and the visual arts—as a medium through which the ineffable can be articulated.

Although cultural forms like black music have been used to bolster claims of racial authenticity, the structures of feeling contained within the music itself gesture toward more complicated ways of remembering and expressing trauma and reimagining black subjectivity. The texts that I have selected for this dissertation—Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), Marlon Riggs’s *Black Is ... Black Ain’t* (1995), and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1999)—all

draw on black musical affect and aesthetics to access cultural memory and to amend unifying narratives of blackness. The folksongs from the mouths of Georgia's "Negro peasants" sparked Jean Toomer's excavation of a repressed past. Cultural memories muted by sirens and subway trains, among other deafening sounds of urban streets, resurface in a blue note sounded by Ann Petry's protest novel. The repetition and variation of black music inflect Marlon Riggs's improvisational performance of queer blackness. And Danzy Senna's method of sampling and reconstruction evidences a post-soul aesthetic practice of acknowledging the multiplicity already inherent in blackness.

While the primary works in this project span the twentieth century, I do not claim them as representative of a particular period or genre. Rather, I draw on their incongruity as a way to read them against public and aesthetic practices of cultural memory in key black literary and cultural movements of the twentieth century. I revisit the New Negro Renaissance (1920s-late 1930s), the era of black protest fiction (1940s-1950s), the Black Arts Movement (late 1950s-late 1970s), and post-civil rights cultural nationalism (1970s-1980s) from the vantage point of trauma in order to explore the structures of loss and reclamation that shape these movements and the ways in which these dynamics inform unifying narratives of blackness. I argue that these movements emphasize representation and performances of authentic blackness as a means of redressing racial trauma and forming collectivities. They seek to reconstruct the black collective body that has

been severed and displaced from a site of origin and to recreate the black visual body that has been subjected to physical and discursive violence throughout our history in the United States. Hence, the body figures prominently in the aforementioned black literary and cultural movements as a site of memory, a foundation for forming collectivities, and as a basis for exclusionary ideologies.

The texts I look at in this dissertation, on the other hand, make possible a theorization of embodied cultural memory from sites of omission, silence, and invisibility. Jean Toomer limns southern and northern landscapes with women who embody the unspoken sexual trauma that underlies the history of racial formation in America. Petry's female protagonist is literally haunted by this history; wresting herself from an economy of slavery in which black women's bodies are readily perceived as commodities proves impossible. Similar to Toomer, Ann Petry revises black cultural memory and notions of blackness itself but by placing a black woman's body in the urban landscape and thereby challenging narratives of urban despair that regard black men as icons of collective racial oppression. Marlon Riggs further troubles this masculinist model of racial oppression. His highly visible queer black male body complicates and disrupts an eroticized history of black loss that renders racial trauma through tropes of emasculation and castration. Riggs's attention to the body and to his own impending death overturns black collective struggles for survival that rest on the legislation of sexuality and reproduction. Danzy Senna's novel brings this

project's excavation of a sexualized history of racial trauma full circle by revisiting racial passing. The ambiguously raced body in Senna's text compels a reconfiguration of blackness through paradigms of cultural memory that encourage affect over authenticity.

Strange bedfellows: race and psychoanalysis

Notwithstanding the interventions made into psychoanalytic theory by cultural critics Hortense Spillers, Claudia Tate, Homi Bhabha, Isaac Julien and others, there is still some (understandable) resistance in African American studies to psychoanalysis. To be sure, classic Freudian psychoanalysis is steeped in racism and (hetero)sexism. However, one can critique the limitations implicit in traditional psychoanalytic thought while acknowledging its methodological usefulness for exploring the psychic structures of desire and fantasy that underlie race and sexuality. What I am suggesting, however, is not a new racially-inflected model of psychoanalysis, but new ways of reading psychoanalysis and race which may satisfy the absence of interiority that is evident in most critical race theories and the elision of the socioeconomic and the communal in psychoanalytic theory. I agree with Hortense Spillers's suggestion that "the psychoanalytic object, subject and subjectivity constitute the missing layer of hermeneutic and interpretive projects of an entire generation of black intellectuals now at work" (136). Instead, cultural critics and critical race theorists tend to theorize the lived experience of race solely through socioeconomic or

historical lenses. While the material and historical realities of race should influence the ways in which we engage African American texts, an interrogation of the psychic impact of race can change the ways we read history.³

Moreover, the construction of race constitutes the unspoken in much psychoanalytic discourse. The workings of desire and fantasy change when considered within a history of racism and colonialism. Frantz Fanon takes this stance in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), a significant precursor to ongoing theoretical dialogues between race and psychoanalysis. A psychiatrist by trade, Fanon naturally emphasizes the psychic effects of racism and colonialism but he also stresses the primacy of socioeconomic factors in “the disalienation of the black man” (11).⁴ Further, Fanon challenges psychoanalysis’s focus on the individual by maintaining “the black man’s alienation is not an individual question” (11). The black man in Fanon’s estimation must not only confront the deleterious effects of colonial racism on his own psyche, but also – Fanon hopes – effect change at the social level. While Fanon acknowledges the centrality of the family in psychoanalytic theory, he suggests the formation of the family extends to that of the society and the nation. He argues, “The white family is the agent of a certain system” and that society in general is the “sum of all families in it. The family is an institution that prefigures a broader institution: the social or national group” (149).

Though Fanon does not challenge classical psychoanalysis's patriarchal family narrative or question its diagnostic objectives, his foregrounding of the social opens up readings of racial subjectivity to an interchange with the workings of power. The renewed interest in *Black Skin, White Masks* in recent years, particularly in cultural studies and postcolonial theoretical circles echo this sentiment.⁵ While rightly critiquing the sexist and homophobic bent in his text, a great deal of work in critical race theory and cultural studies, including my own, remains indebted to Fanon's groundwork.

The work of Claudia Tate and Hortense Spillers, for instance, supports the potential for psychoanalysis to change how we read the problems of race in an American cultural context. Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (1998) explores the desires and fantasies which underlie representations of race in African American literature. She also critiques widely held expectations – from within African American intellectual circles and the broader academic community – that “black texts” mirror the material realities and struggles black people encounter in a racially hostile environment, or that they make a “political” statement. Texts that are not “black enough” seldom are well-received. This crisis of authenticity that surrounds the anomalous texts which comprise the subject of Tate's could also arguably characterize the texts in my project as well since they challenge fixed notions of blackness. The authors of these atypical texts, according to Tate, place more focus on the inner worlds of

their characters; the social demand for racial identification in these cases gets read against personal longing, fantasy, and desire.

Whereas Fanon's work affirms the psychic impact of race on the collective, Tate centralizes the desires of the individual. She remarks:

Whether in the text or the world, we seldom recognize the surplus of desire associated with black subjectivity because ... expressions that transgress the social and political have been silenced by the master discourses of race. If we persist in reductively defining black subjectivity as political agency, we will continue to overlook the force of desire in black texts as well as in the lives of African Americans. (10)

I agree with Tate that undue focus on the sociopolitical limits our understanding of racial subjectivity. But I do not think there is a stark delineation between the individual and the collective in racial identification. Race by its very nature presumes a community, whether real or imagined. The problem with racial identification, willful or forced, is that it elides considerations of the "individual" functioning within the collective.

Hortense Spillers's "All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother" posits an "interior intersubjective" scene for reading the workings of race (138). In Spillers's estimation, the psychoanalytic subject does not exist outside of ideology. She asserts, "In my view, classical psychoanalytic theory offers interesting suggestions ... by way of Lacanian

schemes, corrected for what I would call the ‘socio-nom,’ or the speaking subject’s involvements with ideological apparatuses, which would embrace in turn a theory of domination” (140). By bridging Lacanian and Althusserian models of subject formation Spillers’s intervention allows for theorizing the psychological as well as the ideological means by which racialized individuals get interpellated into subjectivity.

Like Fanon, Spillers acknowledges the workings of social domination; however, she does not replicate Freud’s family narrative.⁶ Spillers’s theory also resolves the individual-collective opposition that Tate poses by putting forth intersubjectivity as a valuable mode of analysis. This dissertation looks primarily at collective performances of black identification, but implicit within this study is the way in which black collective grief spills over into the lives of individuals functioning within the collective. Hence, the texts I explore within this work frame loss as an intersubjective experience. This interconnected nature of mourning may denote it as symptomatic of unresolved historical trauma as well as a means of surviving it.

unsettled memories: trauma theory

Trauma theory was one of the inroads to my work on mourning. I was drawn to the imperative to remember and to explore how slavery, as the repressed other of American modernity, remains a spectral presence in black cultural memory and continues to shape black subjectivity. Notwithstanding the

prevalence of death and mourning in black literature and culture, critics are only beginning to consider how loss impacts black subjectivity. Part of the reluctance to acknowledge cultural sorrow and grief is rooted in the stigmas of victimization and pathology that have plagued black communities. Even in talking about my dissertation to others in Black Studies or African American literature, I have had to explain the political stakes of what may appear to be a privileging of a story of loss rather than one of triumph.

Trauma studies flowered in the early to mid 1990s as an interdisciplinary field rooted in psychoanalysis and focusing primarily on the Holocaust.⁷ The issues of representation and testimony in Caruth and Felman and Laub's work stimulated my engagement with the role of black expressive culture in articulating trauma. The belatedness of trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, compromises its representability. Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) describes trauma as "a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise observable" (4). She points out the ways in which traumatic histories are inaccessible and unspeakable. Likewise, the challenge of accessing and narrating a history of trauma is the subject of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). These authors use a literary and a clinical perspective to examine the ways in which art and cultural production engage in acts of witnessing and testimony.

While the language of trauma in these works may be easily transportable, the historical and cultural context is not. Theorizing an African American history of trauma calls for models that attend to the traumas of enslavement and racial terror not just as catastrophic events but as cultural memories that shape African American identity and that condition our experiences with everyday forms of racism. As I note in my discussion of psychoanalysis and race, because race groups people into collectivities, inquiries into racial trauma have to account for the individual-in-the-collective or intrasubjective experiences of trauma. Ron Eyerman's sociological study *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) gestures toward such a model and influences my own inquiry into the function of cultural memory in shaping African American identity. Centering his analysis on the role of social movements and "race leaders" in forging a collective African American identity out of the cultural memory of slavery, Eyerman claims:

Institutions like the black church and cultural artifacts like blues music may have embodied and passed on collective memories from generation to generation, but it was through social movements that even these diverse collective memories attained a more unified focus, linking individuals and collectives into a unified subject, with a common future as well as a common past. (21)

Social movements offer a useful context for thinking about mourning as a political and public practice. Unlike Eyerman, however, the texts in this project privilege expressive culture and cultural artifacts as repositories of cultural memory and as alternatives to unifying narratives operative within social and cultural movements. While Eyerman acknowledges the significance of music and material culture, he contends that the meaning of these objects has to be expressed through language. For Eyerman, social movements channel the individual meanings ascribed to objects and artifacts into collective representations or discourse (7-9).

As representation is constrained by trauma as well as by who has the power to speak for the collective, I probe throughout this dissertation how affective forms of expression might engage with and challenge the ways cultural memory and identity are represented in dominant discourses. My concern with affective politics is indebted to Ann Cvetkovich's work on public cultures that form around trauma as well as the forays into mourning and melancholia in Ethnic Studies and queer theory that I will discuss in the following section.

Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) avers that trauma calls for a diverse and nontraditional "archive" that exceeds the limitations of language and encompasses an array of "cultural texts" that house feelings and memories. I find her unconventional approach to representation, testimony, performance, and commemoration — among other

forms of acknowledging trauma – especially useful for thinking about trauma in an African American cultural context. As African American trauma entails the loss of history, the loss of a “name” or a record, and social injustices and invisibility, it has generated unusual archives as well, including music, performance, and varied commemorative objects, and cultural ephemera. The selected texts in this dissertation – music, film, visual writing, and textual performance – mark my own efforts at beginning to construct an archive of feelings and memory that can shift the ways we conceptualize blackness and community.

variations on a (Freudian) theme

The substantial amount of critical attention paid to mourning in the past few years confirms David L. Eng and David Kazanjian’s contention in their introduction to *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* that “[a]t the dawn of the twenty-first century, mourning remains” (6). Most contemporary considerations of mourning, including my own, revisit ideas proposed by Freud in his influential essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917). These recent interventions into Freudian mourning and melancholia address the gap between race and trauma studies by positing racial melancholia as an affective corollary to trauma. As collective responses to loss, racial melancholia opens up possibilities for forming affective alliances around shared histories of trauma.

In “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud differentiates between normative and nonnormative responses to grief. He claims, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (*Mourning* 164). The objective of mourning, according to Freud, is to “work through” loss. To do otherwise, to refuse to detach from the lost object and, instead, to sustain an identification with loss, is to grieve pathologically, to develop melancholia.

Freud returns to melancholia in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). In his revised reading, he attests to the interactive workings between mourning and melancholia. Freud suggests that identifying with the lost object “makes it easier for the object to be given up” or makes mourning possible (*Ego* 19). While he does not recant his initial view of melancholia’s pathological character, as an agent in the process of mourning, melancholia contradicts its own pathological distinction. I agree with Eng, Han and Muñoz’s retrieval of melancholia as a depathologized structure of feeling that characterizes the everyday lives of underrepresented communities in the U.S. I argue further that the notion of persistent mourning disturbs temporal and spatial binaries, such as past and present or presence and absence. For those who refuse *not* to mourn, the lost object lingers as a specter in the ego, ensuring that vestiges of the past persist in the present.

Read through and against Freud, collective practices of mourning entail oppositional possibilities. In response to the AIDS crisis, queer activists and scholars have transformed mourning and melancholia into an affective politics. The scholarship of queer and queer of color activists has been essential to my own research, especially to my work with Marlon Riggs's documentary *Black Is ... Black Ain't* (1995).⁸ Not only can a politics of mourning amend limiting constructs of blackness (as Chapter Three illustrates), but it can also help to bridge queer and black studies and inform coalitions around AIDS. José Esteban Muñoz's *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) recodes melancholia as a depathologized "structure of feeling" that is central to the everyday lives of blacks, queers and queers of color (74). He describes melancholia as a practice "that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names" (74). Muñoz's declaration, which I emphatically agree with, asserts that the fate of blacks, queers, and queers of color are intertwined through our shared relationship to death, not only because of the devastating impact of AIDS on our communities, but also as a result of the insidious violence of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

The scholarship on racial melancholia by Anne Anlin Cheng, David L. Eng, and Shinhee Han gestures towards similar alliances across American ethnic groups. Cheng, Eng, and Han employ the term racial melancholia to describe the

national exclusion of racialized subjects in the United States. Their model of racial melancholia is insightful for thinking about loss across racialized groups through the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that shape traumatic experiences of immigration and assimilation. Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race* and Eng and Han's essay "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia" use Asian American and African American texts to argue that racial melancholia is intrinsic to how America represents itself as a (white) nation as well as how it constructs its racial others.

While an analysis across ethnic groups is not the goal of this project, I expand upon and, to a certain extent trouble, Cheng, Eng, and Han's analyses by looking at the politics of inclusion and exclusion extant in performances of blackness. How does one configure the "lost object" when assimilation into whiteness is not the desired goal but the attainment of an authentic blackness is?⁹ In the case of unifying narratives of racial authenticity, the lost object is a narrative of racial origin and continuity that is typically juxtaposed against whiteness. Further, for blacks who do not meet the criteria for authenticity, "blackness" itself becomes a lost object. Although performances of blackness in identity based politics are acts of mourning compatible with Eng and Han's conception of racial melancholia, these celebratory politics tend to respond to loss through imagined restorations of a unified wholeness.

cultural mourning

Rituals of mourning and remembrance have been integral to black diasporic subjectivities. To a great extent, the ways we bury and pay homage to our dead make us who we are. Some scholars look for Africanisms in cultural acts of mourning.¹⁰ They might trace the ritual in hip hop of pouring out liquor for the deceased to libation practices in West Africa. I am not interested in plotting a narrative of origins from a Béninois village to South Central L.A. as narratives of origin tend to flatten out differences within black diasporic cultures in favor of an organic unity. However, I do find the “routes” of black mourning – black performances of memory that hinge on repetition with a difference – useful for considering how African Americans (re)negotiate a history of loss. Moreover, placing practices of mourning in black literary and cultural traditions beside Freudian based theories of mourning and melancholia enables me to ground these processes of identification in desire even as I trouble Freudian conceptions of mourning and melancholia.

African American funereal and mourning rituals concern Anissa Janine Wardi’s *Death and the Arc of Mourning in African American Literature* (2003) and Karla F.C. Holloway’s *Passed On: African American Mourning Stories* (2002). Wardi frames the appearance of death and mourning practices in African American literature within an exploration of southern and northern landscapes as metaphoric sites of death, home, and exile (3). She grounds her geographical analysis of death in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, a text that I also find paradigmatically

useful for reading loss through tropes of migration and exile. Yet, Wardi's reification of the vernacular and of the South as the site of "communal survivals" – of "roots" – overlooks both the protean and motive nature of black performances of memory (13). Instead of "rooting" African American identity in any fixed place, I think it is more useful to think of modern blackness as a migratory subjectivity. In addition to the theme of migration in *Cane*, the blues aesthetic I probe in Ann Petry's novel, the geographical diversity implicit in Riggs's documentary on blackness, and the motility of passing taken up in Senna's novel affirm displacement and migration as essential to thinking about how black subjectivity is formed from a history of loss.

I find Karla Holloway's archival approach to black death and dying much more suggestive than Wardi's, not only for exploring African American mourning rituals, but also for looking at how African Americans construct intersubjective cultural memories. Holloway announces in her introduction, "The twentieth century rehearsed, nearly to perfection, a relentless cycle of cultural memory and black mourning" (6). According to Holloway, this cycle of death and dying is contained in rituals and artifacts and chronicled by black expressive culture (61). Hence, *Passed On* presents an archive consisting of tales from Holloway's visits to funeral homes and graveyards, her collections of ephemera and photographs, her personal testimony of loss, and the losses shared by African Americans. My affinity for the geographical and textual diversity of

Holloway's text coincides with my own investment in interdisciplinarity and archives that I mention earlier.

While Sharon Patricia Holland does not use the language of mourning, her understanding of death's relationship to (black) subjectivity makes her work a suggestive intermediary between African American studies of death and mourning rituals and Freudian based mourning and melancholia. Holland commands the dead to "speak" in her innovative work *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (2000). According to Holland, black subjects not only bury our dead (in higher numbers) but we also inhabit a liminal space. Holland's study reminds us that narratives of death are not always about "the dead." Rather, death functions discursively within cultures "as a figurative silencing or process of erasure, and as an embodied entity or subject capable of transgression" (5). Following Michael Taussig, Holland aims to uncover those bodies that occupy the "space of death" in the national imagination and to determine the stakes of keeping them there.

The presence of death seems to be a precondition of being black in America. Black intimacy with death exceeds experiences of marginality within a racist social structure. It reiterates the terror and violence of the Middle Passage, that tragic birth into (social) death that defines black modernity. Black boundedness to death not only obscures the delineation between bondage and freedom but also questions the boundary that purportedly separates the living

and the dead. Avery Gordon's notion of the ghost as a social figure is pertinent here. In *Ghostly Matters* (1997), her compelling sociological and literary study of haunting, Gordon poses our challenge of accounting for what modern history has made ghostly (18). A history of black racial trauma is one of those ghostly absences in modern American history that continues to haunt the present and makes its presence felt in everyday forms of racial violence and oppression.

erotic possessions

The emphasis that feminist trauma theorists place on felt everyday experience opens up additional ways for thinking about the ways historical traumas haunt the present. Laura Brown's feminist centered approach to trauma in "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma" retrieves trauma from the catastrophic and makes it applicable to everyday forms of oppression like sexism and racism. Everyday forms of racism and sexism are grounded in broader national histories of trauma as Cvetkovich affirms. The persistence of traumatic history in the present, at times in undocumented or intangible ways, conjures up ghosts as both critical works like Gordon's and literary accounts like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* support. Yet, the return of *Beloved* "in the flesh" has continued to shape my thinking about the ways cultural memories are embodied and acted out and especially how they are gendered and eroticized in ways that affirm the persistence of past trauma in the present.

Hence, my allusions to blackness as performance throughout this introduction are not inconsequential. These references are an effort to unhinge blackness from fixed categories of racial belonging and to think of it instead as a historically and socially constructed process of subject formation that gets contested, mediated, revised, and appropriated in particular ways. The notion of blackness as performance is not new, of course.¹¹ For the purposes of this project, however, the “performance of blackness” offers a useful terminology for thinking about the body as both a site of racial trauma as well as a source of resistance. I also find performance effective for discussing the ways in literary and cultural texts engage with black visibility and spectacularity. But in concert with E. Patrick Johnson, I am well aware that at times blackness exceeds modes of performance that rely on the visible (8). Chapter Four deals with the parameters of racial performance when visible blackness is called into question and puts forth sites of belonging and modes of identification that go beyond the outward markers of race.

At the same time, the spectacular roles tragic and traumatized black bodies have played and continue to play in American media and culture is central to the ways in which racial trauma remains lodged in our cultural memory. This preoccupation guided my reading of Saidiya V. Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997). In her examination of terror as a subject constituting process, Hartman foregoes

restaging scenes of slavery that invoke the shocking and spectacular – exemplified by Frederick Douglass’s detailed description in his narrative of his Aunt Hester’s brutal flogging – and instead chooses to locate terror and resistance in mundane practices like dances in the slave quarters, minstrel shows, the legal foundation of the humanity of slaves, and self-possessed individualism (4). While my project deals with slavery and other forms of racialized terror as cultural memories rather than directly experienced acts of subject making, I am enticed by Hartman’s focus on the quotidian for several reasons.

For one, Hartman’s emphasis on the terror of the mundane dovetails with the work that feminist theorists Laura Brown and Ann Cvetkovich have done to amend trauma’s catastrophic emphasis and foreground the insidious violence of sexual trauma and racism as well as the felt experience of living as a woman and/or as a person of color. My argument for the effects of a traumatic history on constructions of black subjectivity, a subjectivity that is gendered and sexualized in historically inflected ways, rests on the assumption that trauma is not confined to calamitous events but is lived daily.

Second, I am interested in expanding Hartman’s rendering of everyday performative practices under slavery – like “stealing away,” singing, and dancing – as forms of redress to an “emancipated” scene. If, as Hartman argues, “The event of captivity and enslavement engenders the necessity of redress, the inevitability of its failure, and the constancy of repetition yielded by this failure,”

what possibilities of redress reside in performances of blackness outside the context of legal domination? (77). I am thinking of the blues for instance. Most black feminist critics regard the blues stage as a space where black blueswomen could assert their sexual subjectivities. In a capitalist context, however, is the redressive power of these blues performances compromised? Does the commodification of black music and of the black women's bodies performing the music restage a scene of subjection and ultimately constrain the blueswoman's agency over her sexuality? I take up these questions in my second chapter on the blues aesthetic in Ann Petry's *The Street*, but I also raise the blues here because implicit within these narratives are cultural memories of embodied trauma. The body is not just a medium of transmission but discourses of race and sexuality are also encoded in music. Indeed, black music has functioned as a space where racial identity and sexual politics have been affirmed and contested (Gilroy 83).

Likewise the gendered and sexual dimensions of embodied blackness persist throughout black musical traditions. The trauma of sexualized racism, the cultural memory of ruptured heterosexual love relationships in slavery, and intraracial sexual violence (which includes violence against black queers) have all found expression in black music. My musings on the sounds of bodily performance are influenced by Fred Moten's brilliantly complex jazz theory *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). Moten's interdisciplinary analysis of the black radical tradition stays attuned to the

sounds bodies make, to what he calls “visible music.” Acknowledging his indebtedness to Hartman’s *Scenes*, Moten takes a departure from her and cites Douglass’s account of Aunt Hester’s beating in order to listen to Aunt Hester’s “heart-rending shrieks” for a sound of aural resistance analogous to Douglass’s depiction of slaves singing. Amidst the shrieks of Aunt Hester and the lyrical tales of woe, “[w]here shriek turns speech turns song – remote from the impossible comfort of origin – lies the trace of our descent,” Moten writes (22).

mourning sounds

At the beginning of this introduction, I posit black music as a site of memory and mourning and a means of rescuing blackness from authenticating narratives and locating it in the rifts, breaks, and slippages of identity formation instead. Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984) and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) remain indispensable for my thinking about the affective power of black music as do Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du Bois’s early writing on Negro spirituals, Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, Langston Hughes’s and Sherley Anne Williams’s blues poetry, Hazel Carby and Angela Davis’s blues feminist criticism, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act*, and the death-bound lyrics of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. A history of black loss can be chronicled by black music. Houston Baker’s claim for the blues as that “always already” of African American culture extends beyond the 12-bar blues

and hints at a feeling of being black in America that is perhaps best apprehensible and expressible through the aesthetics of music (3-4).

W.E.B. Du Bois's classic *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a text that examines the psychological and economic impact of racial slavery in the post-Reconstruction South, represents a formative gesture to use music as a paradigm of cultural mourning. Du Bois ushers in each of his chapters with a bar from one of the Negro spirituals, which he terms "sorrow songs" and describes as "some echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past" (42). These songs express the collective grief of communities haunted by memories of slavery, disappointed by the lost ideals promised by their emancipation, and trapped along the stricture of the "color line."

By describing these slave songs as laments, Du Bois—following the logic of Frederick Douglass—refutes the post-Civil War propaganda which imagined slaves, as evidenced by their singing, were content with their condition. On the contrary, Du Bois argues that the songs "are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing ..." (267). Characterizing these songs as expressions of loss and despair, Du Bois insists upon the grief of the enslaved and seeks to restore their stolen humanity. His strategy also intimates the possibility for mourning to produce a

counter-historical narrative, thereby reaffirming the political efficacy of mourning that I allude to earlier.

Paul Gilroy's discussion of black music in *The Black Atlantic* furthers this critical genealogy which supports black expressive culture as a site for articulating and transmitting racial terror. He agrees that though these terrors were "unspeakable," they were not "inexpressible" (73). Gilroy and the aforementioned critics who attest to the affective power of black music acknowledge the historical prohibitions placed upon black captives, many whose sole outlet for expressing pain was through song. Gilroy stresses:

It is important to remember that the slaves' access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantations and in the barracoons. Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. (74)

Yet, the persistence of black music as a means of articulating social oppression and racial trauma suggests that the inaccessibility of other forms of language is not the sole determinant for turning to music as a site of articulation. Rather, the form, content, and affect of black music exceed the boundaries placed upon conventional forms of narrative but it is not antithetical to those forms.

In my endeavor to construct black cultural memory through a performative model of trauma, I turned to music. Save the epilogue, music does not function as a primary text in this dissertation. Instead, I use it as a benchmark for conceptualizing the interplay between literary and extraliterary forms that encompass black cultural memory. Each of the texts that comprise this dissertation connects with black musical aesthetics. They engage music as a contested site of authentic blackness, an affective mode of communicating trauma, as a poetics of form that is adaptable to written and visual texts, and as a framework for constructing embodied narratives.

An exemplary musical and performative text, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) makes a suggestive beginning for this study. Chapter One "Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning" examines the coupling of sexual desire and loss in this elegiac book that the author himself termed a "swan song." *Cane* disrupts the conventions of genre and form to create an embodied narrative of a passing era associated with the trauma of slavery. Materializing this passage in song and/as female embodiment, *Cane* accentuates the role of black female sexuality in modern constructions of blackness. Toomer connects anxieties generated by modernity around racial and cultural continuity to the regulation of black female desire.

Though Ann Petry's protest novel *The Street* (1946) is set well after slavery, the ideologies of sexualized racism that took root in slavery informs the threats

of sexual violence that plague Petry's heroine. Chapter Two "'Nobody Knows My Name': Ann Petry's *The Street* and Black Women's Blues Protest" frames insidious racial and sexual trauma through a blues paradigm. The blues offers a framework for reading the repetition of sexual violence in the everyday lives of black women. I also probe the possibilities of redressing sexual trauma through blues performance, particularly within the confines of commodity culture.

Performances of empowered sexuality and well as rage and violence in the blues broaden the emotional landscape of black female subjects. The blueswoman's reappearance in black women's literature in the latter part of the twentieth century may attest to her metaphoric potency as a figure who commands voice amidst the deafening roar of black masculinist politics.

Chapter Three "The Queerness of Blackness: Marlon Riggs's *Black Is ... Black Ain't*" (1995) explores the ways in which restrictive notions of black identity marginalize black queer subjects and render them invisible. Throughout the film, Riggs challenges the invisibility of queer black subjects by offering his own flesh as evidence. Riggs's embodied performance hints at an alternative foundation for black cultural memory and collective identity. In place of the typical visual signifiers of race, Riggs's ailing and naked body suggests that black identity is rooted in African Americans' shared experience with embodied trauma.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999) asks, on the other hand, if blackness cannot be verified through visible markers of race, what counts as evidence? Chapter

Four “Archiving Blackness: Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* and Post-Soul Aesthetics” reads Senna’s revision of the racial passing plot through a post-soul aesthetic. Post-soul criticism examines black literature and culture evolving in the wake of desegregation that deals with the destabilization of modern conceptions of race. Rather than disavow race altogether, post-soul literary and cultural aesthetics move beyond fixed notions of race to conceive of more fluid ways to characterize black belonging. Senna returns to and dismantles the tragic mulatta myths of early passing narratives, myths that rest on modern ideas of racial difference. Instead of catering to anti-essentialist notions of racelessness, however, she expands the category of blackness to accommodate a complex intermingling – or archive – of racial and cultural identity.

The dissertation closes with an epilogue “A moment to mourn,” titled after a collaborative performance by hip hop MCs “Nas” (Nasir Jones) and “Quan” (Don Ferquan). The epilogue meditates on the pervasiveness of death in hip hop music. Tagged as “mourning music” by former hip hop publicist Charlotte Hunter, hip hop, perhaps more than any other form of black cultural expression of the past thirty years, supports my claim for the enduring impact of trauma on the formation of black subjectivity. If hip hop is the contemporary blues soundtrack to black life, what visions of twenty-first century blackness will accompany it?

¹ I spot these unifying narratives in proclamations such as the “New Negro” or other public assertions of “Blackness” in black public culture. Critiquing the limits of these unifying narratives does not belie their contributions to black antiracist activism. Rather, I link these movements to a yearning for an unadulterated blackness, a breach that I claim as irreparable. Efforts to reclaim this wholism nurture boundaries of exclusion.

² Paul Gilroy contrasts these homonyms—routes and roots—to support his argument for the inevitable instabilities of diasporic identities. I remain persuaded by this formulation as well as Joseph Roach’s similar approach to “Circum-Atlantic performance.” See *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Joseph Roach’s *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³ I am thinking specifically about Cathy Caruth’s query about the implications of conceptualizing history as a history of trauma and interested in how such an intervention can influence the way we approach African American narratives. Caruth notes: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.” Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) 18.

⁴ Fanon uses the male pronoun throughout most of *Black Skin...* and disavows any knowledge about “the woman of color.” Part of my project involves questioning how mourning figures into racial and gender identification.

⁵ Homi K. Bhabha is influential in this revival of the work of Frantz Fanon and particularly of *Black Skin, White Masks*. See *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Also see Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996).

⁶ Spillers further explores the inapplicability of Freud’s family narrative to black subject formation in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *The Black Feminist Reader*, eds. Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 57-87.

⁷ These formative texts include but are not limited to Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Dominick LaCapra’s *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1996).

⁸ See Douglas Crimp, “Mourning and Militancy,” *October* 51 (Winter 1989): 3-18; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁹ This observation can also be read in relation to other performances of nationalism like the Yellow Power Movement and Chicano nationalism.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Joseph E. Holloway’s edited volume *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

¹¹ See, for instance Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Kimberly W. Bentson’s *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000) and E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Chapter One

Jean Toomer's *Cane* and the Erotics of Mourning

In a 1924 review essay titled "The Younger Literary Movement," W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke praise Jean Toomer for his daring portrayal of black sexuality in *Cane*. They proclaim:

The world of black folk will some day arise and point to Jean Toomer as a writer who first dared to emancipate the colored world from the conventions of sex. It is quite impossible for most Americans to realize how straight-laced and conventional thought is within the Negro World, despite the very unconventional acts of the group. Yet this contradiction is true. And Jean Toomer is the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality. (289)

Du Bois and Locke laud Toomer as the first black writer to challenge the conventions of black genteel literature, which endorsed Victorian ideals such as purity, chastity and domesticity.¹ While these standards sought to restore dignity to black sexual bodies discursively assaulted in mainstream social and literary propaganda, the ideology of respectability, as well as the surveillance and policing of bodies that reinforced it, proffered a different form of captivity for black bodies. By deviating from these conventions, Toomer's work, according to the review, advances a necessary shift in black arts and letters.

That Toomer's depiction of sexually transgressive women characters marks a literary achievement is certain. However, Du Bois and Locke's serial gloss of Toomer's female characters resembles a seraglio. They announce:

Here is Karintha, an innocent prostitute; Becky, a fallen white woman; Carma, a tender Amazon of unbridled desire; Fern, an unconscious wanton; Esther, a woman who looks age and bastardy in the face and flees in despair; Louise with a white and black lover; Avey, unfeeling and immoral; and Doris, the cheap chorus girl. These are his women, painted with a frankness that is going to make his black readers shrink and criticize; and yet they are done with a certain splendid careless truth. (289)

Locke and Du Bois insinuate that liberating "the colored world" from repressed sexual mores can be achieved through liberating black women's bodies. By ascribing an element of realism and "truth" to Toomer's depictions, these authors bestow a certain degree of authenticity to an unbridled sexuality.²

This rallying cry for sexual freedom betrays the desire of the younger generation of New Negro Renaissance artists and intellectuals, including Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, among others, to rebel against white bourgeois sexual norms, chiefly through their representations of black women. As Jessica Hayes Baldanzi observes, "The problem, however, was that those arguing for African American women's sexual freedom were predominantly African American men. As these men orchestrated this

emancipation in the black community, they left women little say in the matter – a matter so intimately associated with women’s own bodies” (par 5).

Black women writers associated with the New Negro Renaissance did approach matters of sexuality in their literature. In order to counteract stereotypes of black female primitivism, however, they often cloaked their struggles with sexual desire and repression under “safer” subject matters, such as passing, social responsibility and racial uplift. In her introduction to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Deborah McDowell notes that Larsen and her contemporary Jessie Redmon Fauset “could only hint at the idea of black women as sexual subjects behind the safe and protective covers of traditional narrative subjects and conventions” (xiii). While black blueswomen communicated these desires explicitly, this working class performance culture did not meet the criteria for the sort of art most of the spokespeople for the New Negro Renaissance were striving toward. In recent years, however, black feminist critics have recovered a black female blues tradition as the expression of an alternate sexual subjectivity, a matter I discuss further in Chapter Two.³

In *Cane*, Toomer connects these contradictory positions over black women’s sexuality to anxieties induced by modernity around racial integrity and cultural continuity. For Toomer as well as for the proponents of a New Negro or modern black identity, modernity signaled the death of the “Old Negro,” the embodiment of a homogenous southern “folk.” Hence, a New Negro identity

called for mourning. It required the excavation of a shared past in order to proclaim a collective “new” identity. Toomer’s commemoration of a vanishing folk, and particularly his fusion of modernist forms with African American vernacular culture, found *Cane* favorably embraced by proponents of a New Negro Renaissance and designated as the sign of its beginning. Toomer’s presumption that his art would “aid in giving the Negro to himself” rang true (Turner xix).

In order for the New Negro to “know himself,” he had to recover and recreate his past. Arthur Schomburg’s “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” featured in Locke’s edited volume *The New Negro* (1925), expresses this sentiment of recovery and reconstruction in his assertion that “[t]he American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (231). Schomburg reasons that while some Americans have the luxury of dispensing with the past, the Negro must establish a collective tradition to counter racial oppression and to promote racial pride. This reclamation of the past shaped a unifying narrative of blackness as a means to offset the trauma of loss and displacement. According to Nathan Huggins, “The fact that the line back to the past was snarled where enslavement and migration from Africa had begun made the racial past hazy, distant, and impossible to know” (61). Mass migration from the South to northern cities made a connection to “origins” even more tenuous.

Although a New Negro identity relied upon the construction of a narrative of continuity rooted in shared origin, Toomer meant for *Cane* to be a “swan song ... a song of an end” (Turner 123). In a letter to his friend Waldo Frank, Toomer shares this vision of *Cane*:

In my own stuff, in those pieces that come nearest to the old Negro, to the spirit saturate [sic] with folk-song: Karintha and Fern, the dominant emotion is a sadness derived from a sense of fading, from a knowledge of my futility to check solution. There is nothing about these pieces of the buoyant expression of a new race. The folk-songs themselves are of the same order. The deepest of them. “I aint got long to stay here.”

Religiously: “I (am going) to cross over into camp ground.” Socially: “my position here is transient. I’m going to die, or be absorbed.” (Rusch 24-25)

Toomer materializes the folk song and its sorrowful affect in female form. Their bodies carry the memories of a traumatic past that *Cane* transmits through black expressive practices.

This chapter intervenes at that critical crossroads in *Cane*, where sexuality and loss intersect at the (black) female body.⁴ I call this coupling of desire and loss the “erotics of mourning,” following George E. Haggerty’s “Love and Loss: An Elegy” (2004). Haggerty notes the tendency for the pastoral elegy to entail the erotics of mourning. He uses the phrase to describe expressions of male homoeroticism in the elegy form. I find the elegiac connotation of the erotics of

mourning suggestive for considering Toomer's use of the landscape of black female sexuality to uncover a history of racial trauma. Toomer reworks the elegy – as well as its thematic preoccupations with sex and death – and makes it relevant to an African American historical context of slavery, lynching and migration.

In the tradition of the pastoral elegy, Toomer laments modernity's corruption of nature and of folk aesthetics. At the same time, his critique of modernity retains critical ambivalence. He mourns a vanishing "folk spirit" without romanticizing it and attends to the potentially destructive elements of modernity without insisting upon a return to a simpler past. Since the South for African Americans functions as a symbolic homeland as well as a site of trauma, black pastoralists tend to be less nostalgic than their Anglo American counterparts.⁵ Evoking Billie Holiday's performance of "Strange Fruit," for instance, Farah Jasmine Griffin recounts, "[Holiday's] portrayal of the naturally beautiful 'pastoral South,' marred by the realities of burning black bodies, gives meaning and emotion to the descriptions written by [black] novelists" (15).

Like Holiday, Toomer "places the black body at the very center of the pastoral."⁶ Yet, nearly all of the tortured and violated black bodies in *Cane* are female. Crimes committed against the black female body in *Cane's* rural settings echo modernity's displacement of nature. Though Toomer feminizes the southern landscape, his treatment of this conventional pastoral trope takes on

historically inflected meanings. Violation of the land as/and woman cannot be severed from the trauma of enslavement and the sexual exploitation of black women that sustained the institution.

Even in the North, slavery remains an ideological factor in the lives of black women. Black middle class ideologies of respectability support slavery's continued presence in the lifeworlds of black people, a presence that reinforces the connections between race and sexuality and conditions an "emancipated" people's sense of appropriate sexual behavior. American modernity converges with the great wave of African American migration and purportedly signals increased economic, social and sexual possibilities. However, these freedoms remain as closed to Toomer's northern black female characters as they do to the southern ones. *Cane* not only mourns a vanishing folk spirit—an originary essence assigned to black rural women—the text also mourns black women's sexual and subjective freedom in the modern era.

Toomer's account of his text as song gestures toward the elegiac function of African American music in *Cane*.⁷ Spirituals and work songs are interspersed throughout the book's narrative prose and short dramas. *Cane's* religious subtext and plaintive melodies could tag the book itself as a sorrow song. The poems nested between vignettes are infused with blues and jazz cadences. *Cane's* mixing of forms and genres in three parts and under an overarching theme resembles a jazz composition. Additionally, the text's movement—from the

South to the North and back south again—coupled with consistent references to railroad tracks, train engines and travelers—is prototypical of blues tropes of migration and modernity. As also customary for the blues, themes of loss and desire in Toomer’s northern vignettes transpire in heterosexual love plots. This strategy bears out Paul Gilroy’s assertion that “narratives of love and loss systematically transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror” (201).

Of course Toomer is not the first to affirm black music’s transmission of the unsaid and the ineffable. The mournful cadence of *Cane*’s southern sketches are resonant of Du Bois’s interpretation of the “sorrow songs” as “the music of an unhappy people” that “tell[s] of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways” (267). Toomer’s journey south and encounter with the spirituals is but one resemblance between *Cane* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. However, Toomer recollects hearing these songs far outside of hallowed concert halls where the refined voices of the Fisk Jubilee singers could be heard performing them:

A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I’d ever heard folk-songs and spirituals. They were very rich and sad and joyous and beautiful. But I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them.

They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas and player-pianos. So, I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city – and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so tragic. Just this seemed to sum life for me. And this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. (Turner 123)

While both writers regarded the spirituals as a site of cultural memory, Du Bois saw in the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ formalization of the folk spirituals a way of sustaining a connection with a lost African ancestry and of using that ancestral past and the shared trauma of slavery as the basis for nation building.⁸ Toomer, on the other hand, saw the fading of the field hollers and shouts as evidence of a break with the past and with unifying narratives of race. His allusion to Victrolas and player-pianos speaks to modernist forms of black music like blues and jazz. Further, the mention of migration hints toward the tide of black urbanization and modernization that would, according to Toomer, dismantle racial boundaries.

The interrelationship between black music, memory and modern black subjectivity was a critical and contested issue during the New Negro Renaissance. Paul Anderson’s *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (2001) is useful for contextualizing *Cane* within broader

discussions about black expressive culture that emerged during this period. Anderson frames the Negro Renaissance as a musical movement as well as a literary one by emphasizing the function that a black musical lineage played in “debates about history, social memory, and cultural transmission” (3). Offering intellectual portraits of key figures, including Du Bois, Locke, Toomer, Hurston and Hughes, Anderson maintains that “musical performances (and literary evocations of them) provided especially haunting and portable sites for the staging of social memory” (4).

Anderson’s acknowledgement of black music’s “hauntedness” reaffirms music as a medium for communicating trauma. If trauma, as Cathy Caruth has argued, is a state of being possessed by the past then black music in this instance is a means of articulating a haunting. Anderson plays upon this haunting idea in his brief analyses of Toomer’s “Song of the Son,” a widely anthologized poem nested in the middle of *Cane*’s first section, and “Kabnis,” the concluding story in the book. Anderson states, “In a Georgia valley ‘heaving with folk-songs,’ the folk inheritance is not readily available or explicable to outsiders. Instead, shards of incompletely repressed memories occasion traumatic revelations in dreams, haunting melodies, and the cathartic tumult of evangelical church services” (71).

I want to complicate Anderson’s observations about music’s hauntedness in light of the dominating female presence in the book. Since music and memory converge at the female body in *Cane*, what are the implications of staging social

memory in a way that emphasizes the sexual undercurrents of racial history? The haunting cadence of folk songs draws attention to the women in Toomer's rural landscape who are objects of male desire. Women's bodies also function metaphorically as songs in the vignettes set in the South, establishing a female gendered connection with the past, with the site of origin. By gendering song as female, Toomer supports the connection between music and natal alienation, which Nathaniel Mackey terms "wounded kinship." Mackey contends, "Song is both a complaint and a consolation dialectically tied to [natal alienation], where in the back of 'orphan' one hears echoes of 'orphanic,' a music that turns on abandonment, absence, loss. Think of the black spiritual 'Motherless Child.' Music is wounded kinship's last resort" (232).

Consequently, men's sexual desire for Toomer's rural women represents a libidinal investment in a "lost object," which in this case is a folk essence Toomer assigns to southern black culture. These couplings yield no promise of regeneration however. As Toomer transports readers from the southern canefields to the city streets throbbing with jazz rhythms, this longing for a lost culture is played out in heterosexual love plots wherein men project their feelings of loss onto the female objects of their affection. But, similar to the southern vignettes, failed love relationships in the North preclude fantasies of recovery. These failed unions bespeak the impossibilities of mending the ruptures that modernity has wrought.

Due to the juxtaposition of male authorship and female embodiment in *Cane*, however, some critics have read Toomer's narrative strategy in line with Romantic literary conventions. Both Janet Whyde's "Mediating Forms: Narrating the Body in Jean Toomer's *Cane*" (1993) and Laura Doyle's *Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture* (1994) question the interpretive function of the male narrator or narrative voice. Doyle suggests, "By attributing embodiment to women and authorship to men, *Cane* thus reinscribes the function of the embodied woman as material instrument of men's culture" (94). Whyde finds that the speaker transforms the women in the sketches into metaphors "to be interpreted and reinterpreted" (43). By the same token, Toomer uses irony to critique these first-person narrators (Doyle 95). Moreover, he casts doubt on discourse by calling attention to the policing function of community gossip in his southern and northern vignettes. Rumors and talk drive Toomer's female characters mad ("Becky"), make them hysterical ("Carma") and get them ousted from "polite" society ("Avey").

Whyde and Doyle make interesting points particularly in light of the role black female sexuality played in the formation of a (male dominated) New Negro aesthetic, however. At the same time, their critiques presume a privileging of conventional narrative form that I think Toomer undermines through his use of song. Music interrupts narrative continuity in the text to reemphasize the difficulties of witnessing, of representing traumatic loss. Hence, Toomer casts

doubt on his own ability as author to speak for the South; this is a central theme in the semi-biographical short story “Kabnis.”

Further, if Toomer’s lyricism invites us to hear the sounds of a forgotten past differently, his emphasis on black female visuality presents an alternate rendering of the black past in our cultural imagination. In the opening southern sketches, Toomer’s focus on *looking* and *seeing* puts forth black female images as snapshots of the past that readers are urged to capture before the past elapses. But as we witness these images, we have to see their beauty and their trauma. The images of female suffering throughout *Cane* and the violated body of a lynched black woman that haunts the book’s final pages are far from the celebratory images of black female sexuality Du Bois and Locke introduce in their review.

I lead this project with *Cane* in part because of its placement at a defining historical and cultural juncture for African Americans – modernity, the tide of black migration and sociopolitical, as well as legal, reconfigurations of blackness.⁹ Moreover, *Cane*’s transgenerational entanglement with shifting discourses of blackness, coupled with the book’s elegiac aim, make it a fitting overture for this project’s expansive survey of African American literary history through the lens of mourning. To be sure the breadth of *Cane*’s critical reception exposes the intricacies of loss and longing that constitute collective performances of blackness over time. Toomer’s fusion of modernist techniques with African

American lyricism found *Cane* critically embraced as the darling of the New Negro Renaissance, in spite of the book's low sales. Similarly, the recovery of "roots" that characterizes black nationalism drew Black Arts movement artists and intellectuals to *Cane*'s tropes of immersion and ancestral reclamation in spite of Toomer's avowed resistance to originary narratives of race.¹⁰

It makes sense, then, that poststructuralist and post-essentialist reconceptualizations of identity have sparked much recent interest in *Cane*. David Nicholls's *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (2000) and J. Martin Favor's *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* (1999) include *Cane* in their analyses of "the folk" as an authenticating discourse of black identity that emerged during the New Negro Renaissance but that also persisted into the latter parts of the twentieth century with the upsurge of vernacular literary criticism and the retrieval of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936) as the "mother-text" of African American women's literature.¹¹

While Hurston's oeuvre – and black feminist reclamations of it – most certainly contradicts the disintegration of folk culture Toomer observed, her work, as well as that of black women writers Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Gayl Jones bear the mark of *Cane*.¹² Toomer's noted esoteric ideas about women's intuitive predispositions and men's tendencies toward the rational do not resonate well with an evolved feminist critique. At the same time,

he was a vocal critic of women's social repression.¹³ Placing Toomer's representations of black women at the center of this analysis presents an opportunity to complicate myopic readings of the book's sexual politics by reenvisioning these representations through the lens of trauma.

Toomer's treatment of female sexuality provokes a different way of accessing cultural memory and remembering a traumatic history, as I discuss in my readings that follow. Similarly, the blueswoman, the queer black body and the racially ambiguous subject that get taken up in the remaining chapters support a theorization of cultural trauma from a place of embodied performance. Throughout the dissertation, I also build upon Toomer's integration of the visual, the aural, and the textual as a way to access traumatic memory. These archival practices of black collective mourning locate blackness in multiplicity and improvisation rather than in unifying narratives of racial identity.

"her body is a song"

From the verse that opens the first vignette to the birth-song that closes the last, music features prominently in *Cane* as a site of memory and an intermediary between the past and the present. In the following sections, I use music as a structuring device for interrogating dialectical relationships between sexuality and loss. In this first section, I discuss how the haunting affect of folk song works to transform the women in *Cane*'s southern vignettes into "lost objects" of the past. Literally possessed by the past, these women evoke the

suffering and terror associated with slavery. Men who desire them sexually are incapable of knowing them. These abortive love relationships bespeak the impossibility of redemption. My second section expands upon the dynamics of loss in the theatre of love relationships. *Cane's* northern vignettes connect men's projections of loss onto the bodies of their female love objects to anxieties surrounding cultural dissolution. The last section in this chapter relates these anxieties to a history of sexualized racial trauma by focusing on the lynching narratives in *Cane*. I conclude this chapter with a consideration of women's bodies as objects of mourning and the implications this has for women as subjects who mourn.

The hauntedness of music is felt in each of the six vignettes that comprise the first section of *Cane*. Words fail. They slip into ellipses and spill over into song. Song wafts like the pine smoke that "curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley..." (2). Song carries across the valley of cane "that parting soul" the poet of "Song of the Son" has returned just "in time" to claim (12).

Toomer avows folk song as a site of memory and as a haunting presence that collapses space and time. "Carma," the vignette that generates this section's subheading, typifies the coalescence of woman's body and song into the past. Carma frequently cheats on her husband Bane while he is away working with a contractor, but "[n]o one blames her for *that*" (11; emphasis mine). Rather, her

deceit incites the community's disapproval. When Bane confronts Carma about her infidelity, she becomes hysterical, grabs a gun, runs into the canebrake, and feigns suicide. Discovery of his wife's second betrayal, her simulated suicide, drives Bane to madness and murder. Consequently, he ends up on the chain gang.

The song in "Carma" breaks up the narrator's description of tale's namesake and his recounting of the melodrama. Set off in a parenthetical insert, the space of song defies time and space to connect this black woman's body to a site of racial origin beyond the Dixie Pike:

Her voice is loud. Echoes, like rain sweep the valley. Dusk takes the polish from the rails. Lights twinkle in scattered houses. From far away, a sad strong song. Pungent and composite, the smell of farmyards is the fragrance of the woman. She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare .. juju men, greegree, witch-doctors .. torches go out... The Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa. (10)

Carma's singing from "the yard of a whitewashed shack" reverberates and encompasses a song unbound by time and space—a woman's mourning song. Woman embodies the song as well as the sorrow it conveys. The narrator connects that sorrow to the black trauma of diaspora by mapping a trajectory from Africa to Georgia's Dixie Pike. Carma's body, as song, land, and memory,

position her as the site of racial and cultural origin, the loci of loss. Mourning becomes her.

Described as “the crudest melodrama,” “Carma” provokes consideration of *Cane*’s musical overtones (11). Melodrama’s relationship to antislavery sentimentalism may be useful for thinking about how Toomer uses a melancholy affect to invoke memories of slavery and sexual violation throughout *Cane*. Typically disparaged for being a feminine form of writing, melodrama has been recovered in recent years by feminist literary and film critics for its potentially subversive qualities.¹⁴ Both written and staged melodramas elicited support for the antislavery cause by calling attention to enslaved women’s violated sexualities and maternity.

At its most “crude,” perhaps, *Cane* qualifies as melodrama—a drama set to music. Though *Cane* is set in the post-Reconstruction South, by staging the continuing sexual violation of black women, the text presents women bound by new forms of slavery. The haunting affect of sorrow songs that connect these women to a slave past also root blackness in a traumatic history instead of in an ordinary narrative. As Nathaniel Mackey’s ascertains, “The mark of blackness and the mark of femininity meet the mark of oppression invested in music” (Mackey 36).

As in “Carma,” the song in “Fern” ties her to the past. The first-person narrator of the tale confesses, “at first sight of her [Fern] I felt as if I heard a

Jewish cantor sing. As if his singing rose above the unheard chorus of a folk-song" (15). While Carma's song reaches beyond the Dixie Pike to Africa, Fern's evokes black and Jewish traumatic histories. An unrealized Messiah, Fern is pictured, "resting listless-like on the railing of her porch, back propped against a post, head tilted a little forward because there was a nail in the porch post just where her head came which for some reason or other she never took the trouble to pull out" (15). The cross Fern bears is a legacy of sexual trauma that literally possesses her.

The projection of folk song onto black female bodies demonstrates how these female figures are haunted by a traumatic past. What links them to the past is a sustained violation of black sexuality. Both "Carma" and "Fern" end with an act of hysteria, an embodied – and gendered – performance of trauma compatible with the aural "text" and related to sexual trauma.¹⁵ Carma flees into a canefield, where "[t]ime and space have no meaning" (11). Scruggs and VanDemarr interpret Carma's flight as an attempt to escape history (147). I agree with these critics and probe further what it would mean for Carma to "fall outside of history," to borrow Ellison's phrase. My contention that Toomer's southern women are haunted by a slave past suggests that they are subject to traumatic repetition. The "sad strong song" that drifts from an African goat path to Georgia carries with it the resonance of the terror of captivity. By sexualizing this traumatic history, Toomer connects the enduring violation of black women

to a larger history of female captivity. Carma's flight from history, then, would be a bodily emancipation that, as Toomer's southern and northern vignettes suggest, black women have not experienced yet. In the chapter that follows, novelist Ann Petry casts doubt on the liberal rhetoric of freedom as well by examining the extent to which her mid-century protagonist remains trapped by an economy of slavery. Petry gestures toward the blues as a means of expressing this trauma.

Song as a vehicle of expressing suffering, and as an alternate form of narrative is also broached in *Cane*. In "Fern's" hysterical climax, Fern struggles to articulate repressed trauma: "Her body was tortured with something it could not let out" (17). When Fern's anguish makes its way to her throat, "she s[ings], brokenly. A Jewish cantor singing with a broken voice. A child's voice, uncertain, or an old man's. Dusk hid her; I could only hear her song" (17). In both "Carma" and "Fern," song and body merge as the past intercepts the present to create a liminal space of mourning. All of the enigmatic women in Toomer's south reside in this space of liminality, not quite passed and not quite present, but ghostly. Toomer emphasizes the liminal status of these female figures by positioning them at crossroads or depicting their fluidity with metaphors of dusk or water: Becky lives "between the road and the railroad track" but like a ghost, "[n]o one ever [sees] her" (5). Karantha's "skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon ... When the sun goes down" (1).

In Whyde's view, Toomer's southern women "[disappear] by being interpreted, transformed into the physical sign of a unifying abstraction" (46). While I agree with Whyde, I take a detour from her focus on the narrator's interpretive function and use a theoretical and a cultural framework of mourning to explore the implications of Toomer's female characters as "lost objects" or abstract representations of the past. To be sure, males actively mourn a loss that is feminized. But *Cane's* emphasis on women draws attention to their suffering instead of the men who narrate the story and who seek, but fail, to demystify these women.

As women animate the parting soul/song of slavery, men's desire to have sex with these women denotes a longing for union with the past. But in accordance with Toomer's idea of *Cane* as a swan song, the culture associated with a folk past is fading. There is no chance for regeneration. Acts of sexual union in these opening vignettes are punctuated with violence and are most often nonreproductive. These aborted acts of conception stress the impossibility of cultural rebirth. Hence, *Cane* departs from the New Negro's retrieval of a folk past as a way to forge black cultural continuity.

"Karintha," *Cane's* first vignette, is exemplary in this regard. The tale opens by identifying Karintha as an object of male desire: "Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down" (1). But rather than act as regenerative forces,

these men who bide their time until they can “mate” with her, who “[wish] to ripen a growing thing too soon” model the destructive impulse of modernity (1).

Instead of forming meaningful attachments to these women who represent a passing era, men treat them as sexual commodities. Men leave and make money in cities and bring it back to Karinthä in exchange for sex. Similarly, men who offer their bodies to Fern cannot fathom what she might desire. Both women have several lovers but neither reproduces successfully. One can even view the act that concludes “Karinthä” as traumatic repetition.

The climax of the narrative is left open to varied interpretations, in the matter-of-fact statement, “A child fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles in the forest. Pine-needles are smooth and sweet. They are elastic to the feet of rabbits ... A sawmill was nearby. Its pyramidal sawdust pile smouldered. It is a year before one completely burns” (2). As Monica Michlin points out, one could read this passage as evidence of a “stillbirth, abortion, or infanticide” (103). The ellipses intrude upon the narrative, concealing the fate of Karinthä’s baby. My claim for infanticide resides within these very gaps in the telling.

The unspeakable quality of Karinthä’s act intimates its relationship to trauma. The mention of rabbits recalls black women forced to act as breeders during slavery. As some enslaved women used infanticide as a means of resisting the animalistic practice of breeding, Karinthä’s deployment of infanticide conjures collective memories of black women’s sexual subjugation

and forms of resistance. Perhaps like the Beloved of Toni Morrison's novel, the ghost of Karintha's baby, the "smoke [that] curls up and hangs in odd wraiths about the trees, curls up, and spreads itself out over the valley," incorporates the souls of the countless unborn (2).

Bound to and bound by the past, the women in *Cane's* first section are not slated to survive modernity. Like the disappearing folk song, they permeate the landscape and linger between the past and the present. Trains cross their road and male passengers watch them fade into the sunset. When Toomer moves his narrative north, the trappings of bourgeois social conventionality amplify African American anxieties over cultural dissolution associated with the traumas of migration and modernity.

"jazz songs and love"

Toomer confides in a letter to Waldo Frank, "When I come up to Seventh Street and Theatre, a wholly new life confronts me. [...] it is jazzed, strident, modern. Seventh Street is the song of a crude new life. Of a new people. Negro? Only in the boldness of its expression. In its healthy freedom. American" (Rusch 25). While the cadence of the sorrow songs captures the passing folk culture in Part One, a jazz aesthetic erotically charges Part Two. Appropriately Toomer's first northern piece "Seventh Street" quickens the tone of *Cane* by picking up a jazz aesthetic:

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts

Bootleggers in silken shirts,
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks. (39)

The street-car tracks replace the railroad tracks of the South and usher readers into a distinctly modern setting. Instead of a swan song, for Toomer jazz expresses the potential for sexual freedom and the deconstruction of racial boundaries.

Sex is still performed to a soundtrack up north, but the earlier slow, melancholy rhythms of Part One are replaced by a harsh, staccato jazz impulse: “A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (59). Sexual freedom and the potential for racial intermingling provide a lens through which to interrogate black middle class policing and surveillance of Toomer’s urban black women. To be sure, ideologies of respectability were defense mechanisms against claims of black hypersexuality as I note earlier. At the same time, the sexual policing of black women conceals other losses associated with histories of slavery and migration.

Black migration generated sexual panics among black and white communities. Though fears of miscegenation were common to both communities, black desire for racial integrity partly stems from a history of

sexual trauma and cultural loss.¹⁶ If as Toomer asserts, the culture associated with originary blackness is dying, the effort to retain that culture is a practice of mourning. Like the southern vignettes, these dynamics of loss and reclamation play out in heterosexual love plots.

Men's desire to mate with women in the southern vignettes is supplanted by a male desire to shape women in the North. The contrast between Toomer's southern and northern women illustrates the contradictory positions of the New Negro project of cultural regeneration I discuss at the beginning of this chapter. The desire to craft a folk essence into an art form that parts ways with white bourgeois ideals manifested as "liberated" images of black female sexuality. Conversely, models of racial uplift and respectability rested on a restrained black female sexuality. A longing for cultural integrity, as well as a nationalist impulse, underlies both these aims.

The speaker in "Avey" illustrates these two contradictory positions. The sketch unfolds as the male narrator and Avey, both members of Washington, D.C.'s black middle class, form an intimate friendship with one another. The narrator's desire for Avey competes and clashes with his blind adherence to middle class standards of behavior. Alternating between his sexual pursuit of Avey and his critique of her lack of ambition, which he interprets as "downright laziness," the narrator becomes representative of the social forces that want to mold black women into acceptable models of racial uplift (44).

“Avey’s” officious narrator’s later desire to liberate her through art, “an art that would open the way for women the likes of her,” gestures toward the emancipatory aims of cultural representation and its sexual implications (46). The narrator imagines that Avey’s salvation will come from black folk culture. But his desire for her freedom is a projection of his own sense of loss. During their final encounter at Soldier’s Home, the site where Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation, “the soft dusk sky of Washington” and the gust of wind blowing in from the South, “the soil of [the narrator’s] homeland” denotes his nostalgia (46). The narrator wishes the Howard Glee Club would “sing ‘Deep River,’ from the road” and offset the tinny sound of a distant marching band (46). This contrast attests to modernity’s corruption of folk culture, a theme Toomer carries from the southern sketches to the northern ones.

Thomas Fahy surmises that the narrator uses folksong “to mold [Avey] into a symbol for African American culture” (52). In other words, he wants her to represent what he has lost. Avey’s refusal to serve as the storyteller’s muse or clay – she falls asleep while he is talking – suggests the impossibility of reclamation. By the same token, “Deep River’s” dual message of crossing over into freedom or death points toward the uncertainty of Avey’s sexual subjectivity in the modern era, an uncertainty that plagues all of Toomer’s black women.

“Avey” substantiates “the futility of a mere change of place” for black women, foretold in “Fern” (15). Images of Fern in the urban landscape illustrate

how ideologies of slavery persist and continue to confine black women into the modern era. Envisioning Fern in an urban locale, the narrator predicts that economic hardship, unfulfilling domesticity or sexual danger will befall her:

Besides, picture if you can, this cream-colored solitary girl sitting at a tenement window looking down on the indifferent throngs of Harlem. Better that she listen to folk-songs at dusk in Georgia, you would say, and so would I. Or suppose she came up North and married. [...] You and I know, who have had experience in such things, that love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town. Could men in Washington, Chicago, or New York, more than the men of Georgia, bring her something left vacant by the bestowal of their bodies? You and I who know men in these cities will have to say, they could not. See her out and out a prostitute along State Street in Chicago. See her move into a southern town where white men are more aggressive. See her become a white man's concubine ... (15-16)

The narrator assumes a shared knowledge with the community of male listeners/readers who have traveled to northern cities and have seen the fates of black women migrants. While mobility and migration promise freedom to the men in "Karintha" who leave for college and the men in "Fern" who set out for southern and northern cities, women who embrace modernity through travel are subjected to new forms of slavery.

Griffin attributes Avey's exilic status to her southern sensibility. She maintains, "'Avey' exists as a literal southern space within the Northern section of *Cane*. The language, imagery, distanced male gaze, and impenetrable woman all invoke that of the Southern section" (66). Avey's resemblance to the women in Toomer's southern section, however, has more to do with the symbolic meaning placed on black women's sexuality – in spite of migration – than with an inherent southern sensibility. To be sure, the narrator in "Avey," as well as John and Dan in "Theater" and "Box Seat" respectively, attribute a southern essence to their desired love objects. But the cane scent and autumn glow of these women are reflections of the male characters' longings.

In "Box Seat," Toomer seems even more critical of the male artist's desire to sexually liberate black women through re-presenting them. Fancying himself a new world Christ, "come to a sick world to heal it," Dan appoints himself savior of Muriel, his love interest, from middle class repression (56). Houses and streets materialize the boundaries between Muriel and Dan in "Box Seat": "[h]ouses are shy girls whose eyes shine reticently upon the dusk body of the street." In contrast, the streets are masculine spaces: "Dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses" (56). Houses are spaces of containment, of middle class conventionality and economic security. Streets, on the other hand, signal freedom and illicit behavior.

“Avey” overturns these gender boundaries. Readers first meet Avey leaving the flat (house) of her lover. The adolescent band of boys congregated on the street, eager to get a glimpse of Avey, suspects she will marry the man she pays frequent visits to. The storyteller’s final encounter with Avey in the streets, “leaning on the arm of a man, strolling under the recently lit arclights of U Street” and dressed in “some fine, costly stuff,” however, signals her rejection of domesticity and, to some critics, indicates a turn toward prostitution (45). While I am not persuaded that Avey has turned to prostitution at the end of the sketch, it is clear that her location in the streets marks her sexually.

In *Cane*’s northern sketches as well as in *The Street*, the domestic space is associated with confinement. In “Box Seat,” Muriel’s affiliation with houses binds her to middle class conventionality. To Toomer’s middle class, houses offer refuge from the dangers associated with the streets. But as the streets pulsate with life, jazz, and adventure, houses tend to entrap rather than protect their residents. Hence, Muriel and her guardian Mrs. Pribby *click* into their chairs. Their house is pictured as being bolted “to the endless rows of metal houses. Mrs. Pribby’s houses. The rows of houses belong to other Mrs. Pribby’s” (57). Mrs. Pribby represents the values of the middle class community and foreshadows the woman Muriel fears she will become. Muriel wonders, “What has she got to do with me? She *is* me, somehow. No she’s not. Yes she is. She is the town, and the town wont let me love you, Dan” (58). Muriel is unable to

separate her own desires from the expectations of her community. While she is attracted to Dan, his status as an unemployed black man and community outsider casts him in an unfavorable light to Mrs. Pribby and all the other Mrs. Pribbys that line the blocks of Muriel's town.

Dan typifies the restorative claims touted by more primitivist factions of the New Negro movement that I make note of earlier. He is the more pronounced vagrant artist that Avey's narrator is developing into toward the end of that sketch. Dan's ambition to remake Muriel into a less repressed model of herself, however, mirrors the town's efforts to regulate her behavior. Muriel is the would-be instrument of Dan's salvific aims. For him, "Muriel's lips become the flesh-notes of a futile, plaintive longing. Dan's impulse to direct her is its fresh life" (59). But, as Scruggs and VanDemarr agree, Dan's vision for Muriel disregards her own aspirations (178). Like Avey, Muriel is stuck between the demands of black middle class respectability and a self-appointed male rescuer who wants to direct her passion to serve his own sexual desires.

Though Toomer deals with the gendered dimensions of respectability more explicitly in "Box Seat" than in "Theater," both vignettes suggest that women embody and are judged far more harshly by these social codes. "Theater" centers on Dorris, a chorus girl hopeful and John, a stage manager's brother overseeing auditions at the theater. Describing the story's central tension in a letter to his longtime friend, literary critic Gorham Munson, Toomer explains

how middle class ideologies of respectability erect an impermeable wall between Dorris and John:

... there is a barrier between John and Dorris (from her point of view) not of race, but of respectability. Stage-folk are not respectable; audiences are. Dorris' pride and passion break through the stage attitude (voiced by Mame) and she uses the only art at her command: dancing, to win him. John's mind discounts Dorris, first, because he knows that she cannot satisfy him, second, for the reason that he is aware of the way in which this particular set of show girls look upon him: that he is dictie (respectable) and stuck up, and will have nothing to do with them. Dorris' dancing, however, pulls his passion from him to it. (Rusch 20)

While houses and streets demarcate the boundaries of respectability that separate Muriel and Dan, stage and audience depict the gender and class dimensions of respectability in "Theater." These northern spaces digress significantly from the dusk limned landscapes of Toomer's southern settings.

Diverging from "Box Seat," "Theater" spotlights a black female character who tries to free her male love interest from middle class restraint. Dorris's dancing is not only her means of seduction, but it also repeats the embodied aurality of the women in Toomer's southern vignettes. Like Carma's, Dorris's body is a song: "Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs. And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings" (53). The communicative body and

allusion to the southern landscape connect Dorris to a folk spirit uncorrupted by bourgeois social convention. But Toomer undermines this tendency toward primitivism by allowing the reader to access Dorris's wishes for respectability.

Dorris's longing for an idealized domesticity upsets any easy associations between social class and respectability. While Avey rejects her middle class upbringing for urban streetlife, Muriel remains bound by the social dictates of her town. A working class woman, Dorris envisions the security that domesticity would offer. Her dreams of love, marriage, and maternity, as Charles Harmon points out in "*Cane*, Race, and 'Neither/Norism,'" are neither primal nor unconventional as her dance might suggest.¹⁷ Dorris is well aware that the dictates of class deem her an unsuitable love match for John, but hopes her embodied performance will awaken his passion:

Maybe he'd love. I've heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? And give me kids, and a home, and everything? (I'd like to make your nest, and honest, hon, I wouldnt run out on you.) You will if I make you. Just watch me. (52)

Like Toomer's other urban male narrators, however, John reads Dorris in accordance with his own feelings of loss. Dorris's dance inspires John's melancholy, "a deep thing that seals all his senses but his eyes, and makes him whole." He dreams that he meets Dorris in an alley scented with "roasted

chestnuts, sweet with bonfires of old leaves" (53). Toward the end of his dream and Dorris's dance, John foregoes his feelings and reaches for his manuscript, replicating the tendency for Toomer's male narrators/artists to re-present the female body through conventional forms of language. Toomer's continued self-reflexivity about this interpretive role suggests an awareness of the limits of representation, especially when one sets out to capture cultural loss in narrative form. This challenge is dealt with most explicitly in "Kabnis," the semi-biographical story that closes *Cane*.

night songs and bloodred moons

In this last section, I isolate *Cane's* lynching texts in order to further explicate the stakes of sexualizing a traumatic history. This reading of Toomer's representations of lynching brings together three themes that function throughout the text and in this project. The history of lynching attests to the ways that a history of racial trauma is always already sexualized. Moreover, lynching and other forms of violence that maintain racial boundaries betray anxieties over cultural dissolution. Lastly, lynching recalls the spectacularity of black racial trauma. Lynching typically conjures a visual image that signifies a black male history racial trauma. This is a reasonable picture since the majority of lynching victims were black men. But the prominence of black male lynched and otherwise dismembered bodies in black cultural memory also remarks upon a cultural forgetting of black female embodied trauma. Toomer's representations

of lynching restore black women into these narratives of sexualized racism by debunking the myth of white female victimization, highlighting white and black men's proprietorship over women, and remembering the dismembered bodies of women who were lynched.

Toomer addresses lynching in "Portrait in Georgia" and "Blood-Burning Moon," a poem and a short drama in the first part of *Cane* and "Kabnis," the final and longest short story in the book. As lynching was rampant in Georgia during the author's stay there, it is not surprising that it appears in the text. What seems unexpected is the centrality of women in these narratives. Black women's leadership in anti-lynching activism is well-documented. Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell organized black and white women's clubs to form anti-lynching crusades. Black women playwrights, such as Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson and Mary Burril are also responsible for the anti-lynching drama. Toomer's focus on women in his lynching texts is typical of these lynching dramas authored by black women.¹⁸

Despite evidence to the contrary, popular accounts of lynching insisted that black men posed a dangerous threat to white womanhood. Armed with this myth, bands of vigilantes could fancy themselves heroes, charged with protecting white women's purity. Toomer yokes the white female body with the terror of lynching in "Portrait in Georgia," a poem on the page before "Blood-Burning Moon":

In "Blood-Burning Moon," a black man assumes the role of protecting black womanhood. At the same time, Toomer questions this "protective" impulse. Throughout *Cane*, protection can serve as an extension of sexual policing, a disciplinary tactic that bolsters male honor while preserving male domination. Further, Louisa, the woman at the center of an interracial love triangle, does not need protection as she *chooses* to carry on an affair with her white and black lover simultaneously. By fashioning Louisa as a female character who crosses racial and sexual boundaries, Toomer links the violence of lynching to anxieties over miscegenation. Louisa is the black female counterpart to Becky, the white woman in an earlier sketch who reproduces two "black" sons. The physical evidence of Becky's transgression finds her cast out of the white and black communities; her decision to keep hidden the identity of her black lover hints at the violent retribution that would follow his discovery.

"Blood-Burning Moon" bears out the inevitability of death that results from racial and sexual boundary crossing except that the lynching in the story is not the result of a prohibitive sexual encounter. Rather, it follows a deadly battle over masculinity that is rooted in the economics of slavery. Louisa desires and is "loved" by two men, white and black, Bob Stone and Tom Burwell respectively (28). Bob is the son of the white family Louisa works for and Tom a field hand on the Stone estate. Both men claim the right to love Louisa exclusively, but as rumors circulate and each man finds out about his rival, violence ensues. After

killing Bob in self-defense, Tom is hunted down by a band of white vigilantes, lynched and burned to death.

Neither man's death is attributable to Louisa. Their deaths are a consequence of the interrelationship between white privilege, constructs of masculinity, and a history of slavery. Though Tom is implicated in a patriarchal order that vies for ownership of women, he is also a part of a history that continues to oppress black men. Asserting his equal standing with Bob means Tom must "[c]ut him jes like [he] cut a nigger" (30). For Tom, freedom necessitates claiming erotic agency as much as it does for Louisa, but in order to do so, he has to resort to violence.

Just as Tom desires freedoms restricted to white men, Bob fears the status afforded by his whiteness is in decline. Bob thinks his clandestine affair with a black woman evidences a decrease in the value of whiteness caused by the end of slavery. He pictures himself taking Louisa "as a master should ... Direct, honest, bold" were they still in slavery days (31). By choosing to sneak around and "scrap with a nigger over a nigger gal," Bob does not reclaim his former status but assumes equal footing with Tom (32). Thus, when Bob finds Tom with Louisa and commands Tom to "fight like a man," he inadvertently acknowledges Tom's manhood (33). The price Tom pays for his manhood, however, is his life. His charred head, described at the end of the narrative as "a blackened stone," supports the two men's parity in death (34).

Song, body, and history come full circle in *Cane* and meet in “Kabnis,” perhaps one of the most obscure stories in the text. “Kabnis” resumes the melancholy tenor of *Cane*’s first section but rather than an abstract representation of a sorrowful past, the song in this final story materializes as a historical narrative. Toomer’s interrogation of form in this story suggests that the structure of *Cane* may not be limited to an exercise in modernist aesthetics but could point toward the difficulties of witnessing and representing trauma.

A six-part semi-biographical drama, “Kabnis” takes up the last section of *Cane*.¹⁹ Based on Toomer’s time in Sparta, the story centers on Ralph Kabnis, a northerner who has come south to teach. After Kabnis is forced to resign from his post for drinking liquor on school property, he is adopted by middle-class shop owner and wagon maker Fred Halsey as an apprentice. “Kabnis” is the only story set in the South that is dominated by a male cast of characters. The song that haunts almost every page, however, contains a tale of black female trauma:

White-man’s land.

Niggers, sing.

Burn, bear black children

Till poor rivers bring

Rest, and sweet glory

In Camp Ground. (81)

The tune encapsulates the state of peonage under which many black residents of “Sempter” suffer.²⁰ Meanwhile, “Niggers” sing, burn, and bear children. The everyday violence and terror in their lives is nested between a theology that promises freedom in the afterlife, in Camp Ground, and the everyday processes of living, loving, and family making. Alliteration strengthens the relationship among *burn*, *bear* and *black*, all terms that foreshadow the account of Mame Lamkins.

Women’s embodied aurality in “Kabnis” – and throughout *Cane* – serves a political as well as an aesthetic function. Toomer contrasts the verbal recounting of Mame Lamkins’s lynching with nightmarish songs that pepper the story to reemphasize the difficulties of witnessing, of narrating trauma. As such, he casts doubt on his own ability and authority to speak for the South, to bear witness to crimes as unspeakable as lynching. Based upon the Mary Turner lynching, the Mame Lamkins account restores the figure of the black female dis-membered body to black cultural memory.

The story Layman, a wandering teacher-preacher, relays to Kabnis, on a Sunday afternoon in Halsey’s parlor, retains many of the details of the Mary Turner lynching:

White folks know that niggers talk, an they dont mind jes so long as nothing comes of it, so here goes. She was in th family-way, Mame Lamkins was. They killed her in th street, an some white man seein th

risin in her stomach as she lay there soppo in her blood like any cow, took an ripped her belly open, an th kid fell out. It was living; but a nigger baby aint supposed t live. So he jabbed his knife in it an stuck it t a tree. An then they all went away. (90)

The lynching of Mary Turner occurred in Valdosta, Georgia just three years prior to Toomer's tenure in Sparta.²¹ Mary Turner's killing was one of what NAACP's executive secretary Walter White termed a "holocaust of lynchings" that occurred in Brooks and Lowndes Counties from May 17-May 24, 1918. After Mary Turner publicly protested her husband's lynching, the mob, set out to "teach her a lesson," accosted her "at noon on Sunday," tied her ankles together and hung her upside down from a tree. They threw gasoline on her and set her on fire. While she was still alive, one of the men cut open Turner's stomach; she was in her eighth month of pregnancy. The baby fell to the ground, let out a cry and a member of the mob crushed the infant with the heel of his shoe. To finish their "lesson," the gang fired over a hundred bullets into Mary's hanging body.²²

While Barbara Foley mentions that "Kabnis" references other historical incidents, some more publicized than the Mary Turner incident, none affect the text in the same way as that lynching account. The Turner lynching—a stark display of barbarism against a pregnant woman—confirmed the NAACP's repeated claims that lynching was not about black men's sexuality, but was an act of terrorism that sought to keep black people under control (Foley 188). In

addition to divesting the rationale for lynching from the threat of hypersexual black men, Toomer's inclusion of the Mary Turner incident urges readers to remember that black women were also lynched. To be sure, black men comprised the majority of lynching victims. At the same time, our collective identification and remembrance of lynching solely as the literal dismemberment of black men and as a crime against black manhood has caused us to "disremember" – to borrow Toni Morrison's phrase – the centrality of violence against black women in our cultural memory. In my discussion of embodied trauma in the chapters that follow, I show how the specter of lynching gets evoked as a way of constructing a male-centered history of black loss. The loss of manhood – or the emasculation and castration – associated with the legacy of lynching informs the masculinist tenor of black protest and antiracist activism.

The violated maternity of Mary Turner/Mame Lamkins also serves a symbolic function for "wounded kinship," the natal alienation that shapes black modern subjectivity. In Part One of *Cane*, the failure of return and recovery is played out on the landscape of sexual desire. The folk past remains unredeemed. Further, in Toomer's northern vignettes, anxiety over cultural loss instigates sexual repression and the policing of black female sexuality. Still an untainted folk authenticity is overpowered by the sexually democratizing rhythms of jazz.

In "Kabnis," the Mame Lamkins story hearkens back to the black maternal body in captivity and forms the basis of the returned "son's" melancholic

identification with his southern heritage and his struggle to convert that loss into words, to make art out of trauma. *Cane's* other intrusive male narrators hint at this struggle that comes into its fullest fruition in "Kabnis." A perverse lullaby chanted by the winds connects the figure of Mame Lamkins with that of the black captive mother:

rock a-by baby . .

Black mother sways, holding a white child on her bosom.

when the bough bends . .

Her breath hums through pine-cones.

cradle will fall . .

Teat moon-children at your breasts,

down will come baby . .

Black mother. (82)

The black mother nursing a white child conjures an image of an enslaved black woman caring for her owner's children and consequently prohibited from nurturing her own. This image of the attentive mammy interspersed with the bent bough and falling cradle and baby pervert an otherwise saccharine lullaby by recollecting the tale of Mame Lamkins and the child fallen from her womb.

Words cannot contain the story of the lynched black mother that haunts "Kabnis." Song ruptures the narrative and drifts, like the pine smoke rising from the funeral pyre of Karintha's dead baby. It is in Fern's broken song. Kabnis's

declaration that there is no “mold” to fit the “form” branded into his soul supports the limits of language and the use of songs and shouting in “Kabnis” – and throughout *Cane* – as alternative forms of testimony. If Kabnis wants to be the poet of the South, he has to tap into these cultural forms. He must bear the burden of witnessing to the South’s loveliness as well as its horror. His longing to be alleviated from his charge as artist/witness speaks to the traumatic repetition he experiences by virtue of bearing witness to stories like Mame Lamkins’s. Kabnis yells at the others, “I wish t God some lynchin white man ud stick his knife through it an pin it to a tree. An pin it to a tree” (110). His “child” is the art he wants to birth, but the pain of this creation may be too unbearable for him.

The black urban subject’s “return” to the South typifies what Robert Stepto’s terms the “immersion narrative.” Citing Du Bois’s *Souls of Black Folk* as a prototype, Stepto describes the immersion narrative as charting the urban migrant’s journey “to and into the South” (66). Narratives of immersion endow the South – or other sites of return – with symbolic meaning, with the power to transform, inspire, or redeem. Kabnis’s emergence from Halsey’s cellar at the end of the story has left critics split on whether or not the migrant’s immersion has granted him the redemption he sought. The rising sun, a “[g]old-glowing child” that “steps into the sky and sends a birth-song slanting down gray dust streets and sleepy windows of the southern town” could represent redemption through

art (116). Toomer's swan song is entangled with the promise of rebirth, not of narratives of authentic blackness but of a reimagined subjectivity informed by the beauty and the terror of the past.

"not all our songs are mourning"

-Audre Lorde

Toomer's representation of black women's bodies as carriers of sorrow or "lost objects" of a black cultural past raises concerns about the role of black female cultural production in articulations of traumatic loss. Juliana Schiesari's analyses of gendered loss in *The Gendering of Melancholia* (1992) inspires my deliberations on the cultural significance of affect and the role of gender within affective expression in an African American cultural and historical context. Within Toomer's narrative, cultural loss is projected upon the female body. Hence, longing gets translated as a desire for lost origin (writ feminine). How does desire and affect change when women sing their own songs of mourning? Do women mourn loss differently?

As Schiesari points out, women have to be able to access cultural production in order for their expressions of loss to be heard. In my introduction to this chapter I make mention of the restraints placed on black women's literature during the New Negro Renaissance and the subsequent difficulty for writers like Larsen and Fauset to address sexual matters in their texts. Further, I allude to the blues as an alternative space for articulating sexual trauma. The

next chapter emphasizes the blues subtext in Ann Petry's protest novel *The Street* as a way to frame Petry's portrait of insidious forms of sexual violence against black women within a historical narrative of slavery and sexualized racism. Petry not only supports blues performance as a potential way to redress sexual trauma but she also broadens the emotional landscape of women's expressions of loss by appropriating the feelings of rage common to masculinist protest narratives.

¹ These works include William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Pauline Hopkins's *Contending Forces* (1900), among other turn of the century female- and male-authored African American novels. Ann duCille discusses the sociopolitical ramifications of "passionlessness" in these novels in *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

² Du Bois's embrace of these freeing sexual representations had some limitations however. While he applauded Toomer's efforts and defended Langston Hughes's portrayals of prostitutes and cabaret life against charges of vulgarity, he lambasted Claude McKay's depiction of sexuality and jazz culture in *Home To Harlem*. See A.B. Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

³ See Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso Press, 1999), particularly her first section "Women, Migration and the Formation of a Blues Culture); Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); and Daphne Duval Harrison's *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988).

⁴ "Becky," the central figure in one of Toomer's southern vignettes happens to be white. I discuss Becky as a sexually and racially transgressive character later in this chapter.

⁵ See Werner Sollers, "Four Types of Writing under Modern Conditions; or, Black Writers and 'Populist Modernism,'" *Race and the Modern Artist*, eds. Heather Hathaway, Josef Jarab and Jeffrey Melnick (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 42-53.

⁶ See Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who set you flowin'?: The African-American Migration Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press) 15-16. Griffin claims that "Strange Fruit" leaves the gender of the lynched body unspecified, and hence, open to be read as female. I find this observation suggestive in light of the female bodies that occupy *Cane*, especially the lynched woman who haunts the pages of "Kabnis," the short story that closes *Cane*.

⁷ Jahan Ramazani's *The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) provides an impressive overview of modern poets who rework conventional elegies. Though he does not mention Jean Toomer, many of Ramazani's readings of modern elegists, and particularly African American elegiac poets, are applicable to Toomer's work. Ramazani spots an elegiac character in African American musical forms, such as the blues, jazz and spirituals.

⁸ See Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁹ In 1920, the category of "mulatto" was removed from the U.S. Census, further polarizing America into "black" and "white" racial groups.

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- ¹⁰ See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Same Difference: Reading Jean Toomer, 1923-1983," *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
- ¹¹ See also Hazel Carby's "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery" and "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston" in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London and New York: Verso, 1999).
- ¹² Gates, "The Same Difference," 221-223.
- ¹³ See Darwin Turner's Introduction to *Cane* (New York: Norton, 1975) xiv. Toomer also writes about the stronghold his grandfather P.B.S. Pinchback had over Toomer's mother Nina. Toomer believed his mother married his father in order to escape the repression imposed upon her by DC's black elites and especially her father. See Darwin Turner, ed. *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980).
- ¹⁴ See, for instance, E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Deborah Horvitz's "Hysteria and Trauma in Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood, or the Hidden Self*" offers a compelling reading of hysteria and its connection to a sexual trauma rooted in slavery. *African American Review* 33.2 (Summer 1999): 245-261.
- ¹⁶ See Hazel Carby "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context" in *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London and New York: Verso, 1999) 22-39 and Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Chapter Four "Transnational Trauma and Queer Diasporic Publics" (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
- ¹⁷ Charles Harmon, "Cane, Race and 'Neither/Norism,'" *Southern Literary Journal*. 32.2 (Spring 2000): 90-102.
- ¹⁸ See Daylanne K. English, *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004).
- ¹⁹ Toomer dedicates this section to Waldo Frank and tells Frank in a letter, "Kabnis is me." See Frederik L. Rusch, *A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 23.
- ²⁰ Sempter is a fictional name for Sparta, GA.
- ²¹ As the lynching of Mary Turner was widely discussed in Georgia Douglass Johnson's D.C. based literary salons that Toomer attended, Toomer more than likely was well aware of the incident prior to his stay in Sparta.
- ²² Walter White, "The Work of a Mob," *The Crisis Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the NAACP's Crisis Magazine*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (New York: Modern Library, 1999) 345-350.

Chapter Two

“Nobody Knows My Name”:

Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Black Women’s Blues Protest

The Street (1946) emerged as part of a broader swing toward African American protest fiction in the 1940s-1950s, ushered in by Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940). Committed to showing its readership bleak portraits of poverty, violence, and despair in America’s ghettos, protest narratives shed additional light on the ways in which the trauma of the everyday is conditioned by a history of terror and racist violence. Although black protest discourse broadly defined predates the 1940s, Richard Wright has become synonymous with the genre and Bigger, its iconographic figure.¹ Generally, the protest narrative depicts how systematic racism subjugates the black urban underclass and constrains their agency. In a 1946 interview with James Ivey, writer for *The Crisis*, Ann Petry states her intent for *The Street* to convey the grave impact segregation and economic racism have on black Americans. She aimed to refute the prevailing sociological literature that identified “the Negro” as a social problem and instead highlight inhumane living conditions to explain “why the Negro has a high crime rate, a high death rate, and little or no chance of keeping his family unit intact in large northern cities” (Ervin 71). In concert with the protest novels of her male counterparts, Petry connects criminal activity,

violence, and broken families – all supposed indices of urban pathology – to a history of slavery and the nation’s racist ethos.

Petry’s novel attests to what Ann Cvetkovich identifies as the insidious nature of racial trauma by rooting modern forms of racism in historical traumas such as slavery and lynching.² Economic oppression and racial segregation in Petry’s Harlem is supported by similar racial and sexual ideologies that maintained Toomer’s Jim Crow South. Her animate portrayal of “the street” proposes that an African American history of trauma – a history of displacement, migration, and flight – can be mapped from slave ship to plantation to ghetto. In her discussion of Petry’s novel in *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition*, Barbara Christian agrees that *The Street* “is no different from the plantation, except that many of the slaves do not understand that they are slaves” (67). Christian’s observation reinforces the link Petry establishes between African American historical trauma and the daily encounters with oppression experienced by urban subjects.

In a marked detour from the aforementioned masculinist protest narratives, Ann Petry draws on a blues aesthetic as a means of eliciting a history of sexual violence against black women, a legacy that continues to haunt them in the modern city streets. In Petry’s novel, the blues serves as a site of cultural memory, informs the strategies of repetition in Petry’s novel, and gestures toward an alternate subjectivity for her female protagonist. By providing an affective soundtrack to the protagonist’s transition from despair to rage, the

blues aesthetic in Petry's novel revises the genre by supporting the resistant faculties of mourning.

In Chapter One, *Cane's* repeated references to railroad tracks, train engines, and travelers evoke blues migration tropes. Black men in Toomer's South hop northern bound trains, leaving women behind to fade into the southern landscape. Toomer's narratives of male migration and female stasis echo those blues songs that feature a woman lamenting the departure of her lover on a train or a male singer bidding his lady farewell. As Hazel Carby's "The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues" maintains, "Migration for women often meant being left behind. [...] The train, which had symbolized freedom and mobility for men in male blues songs, became a contested symbol" (13). Still, some black women claimed the train as their own. Ma Rainey's "Traveling Blues" expresses black women's desire to move on just like their male counterparts. She croons, "I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more / I'm dangerous and blue, can't stay here no more / Here come my train, folks, and I've got to go" (Davis 251).

Toomer employs both musical and historical themes to encapsulate the motivation for black migration in the early part of the twentieth century, as well as the economic challenges encountered by the working class blacks of his prose poem "Seventh Street." During the years of the Depression, black migration continued to increase, as did the poverty and unemployment of those already residing in cities. The jobs created by World War II spurred a second wave of

black migration to northern cities. At the publication of Petry's *The Street*, the proportion of blacks living in urban areas had risen to almost sixty percent (Trotter 440). With the rising numbers of blacks in urban areas came increased racial tensions and riots that paralleled the ones twenty years prior. In 1943, the rage brought on by persistent racial inequalities and violence reached an apex with the Harlem riot. The blues in Petry's novel connects this urban racial violence to the mob rule in the South.

Toomer's "Blood-Burning Moon" precedes *Cane's* swing north, supporting the violence of lynching as an impetus for black migration.³ For the bluesman, themes of travel are often linked to this lynching threat, as illustrated by Robert Johnson's "Hellhound On My Trail" (1937). But what of the blueswoman's longing to "keep on moving" and avoid the hellhounds that threaten to devour her? The history of sexual violence against black women is an undertheorized dialectical counterpart to the blues. In other words, a blues ideology of sexual liberation is informed by a traumatic past. The articulation of an empowered sexual subjectivity in blueswomen's performances presents an opportunity to politicize black women's sexual histories. Michele Russell's "Slave Codes and Liner Notes" supports this idea. Paying tribute to blues singers, including Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, Russell remarks, "They all recreate our past differently. But each in her own way and for her own day, travels the road from rape to revolution" (130-131). The public affirmation of a

sexually desiring and self-possessed female subject could be read as an intersubjective assertion of black women's freedom.

The recreation of the past that Russell ascribes to female blues singers supports an evaluation of the blues using the language of mourning. The blues transcodes a traumatic history of loss in a modern social context. While I agree with cultural critic Albert Murray that blues music is not limited to the idiomatic conception of "the blues" as depression or melancholy, the tone and cadence of a substantial body of blues songs do uphold its sorrowful implications.⁴ The lyrical content of the blues includes themes as diverse as sexual desire, gender roles, failed love relationships (usually due to infidelity or abandonment), suicide, death, violence, rage, same sex relationships, travel, despair, poverty, and prison sentences, among many other subjects.⁵ Likewise many blues performances entail comedy, irony, or parody. The tragicomic elements of the blues and the scenarios of lost love that make up much of the lyrical content do not discount the blues as expressions of loss. Rather, these characteristics of the blues verify its applicability to the everydayness of trauma.

Consistent with the upsurge in trauma studies, some cultural critics have broached the relationship between the blues and an African American traumatic history. Adam Gussow's *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (2002) reconsiders the blues as a cultural response to the violence of lynching. Gussow reasons, "If trauma, as Cathy Caruth has suggested, is always 'the story of a wound that cries out,' then the cultural mourning that transpires

in the aftermath of the lynching era has indeed found powerful and distinctive voices in the blues literary tradition” (127). Ron Eyerman’s *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) likewise locates the blues in relation to a history of cultural trauma. He acknowledges that the blues emerges in the post-Reconstruction era as an articulation of a different kind of freedom than that made possible by the spirituals or gospel – a freedom of the flesh. A history of violence that included a loss of sexual autonomy and bodily possession, then, precipitates the formation of a “blues” subjectivity that is “intimately connected to a collectivity, to being black in America (“Why am I so black and blue?”) and through this to the shared racial memory of slavery” (Eyerman 119). I agree with Eyerman and want to complicate his allusion to “Black and Blue” in light of the song’s origin as a black *woman’s* lament.

While “Black and Blue” has come to be regarded as one of the first protest anthems of black America, the account of the song’s composition is even more suggestive for thinking about black women’s blues protest. Andy Razaf and Fats Waller wrote the song for the revue “Hot Chocolates” when one of the show’s investors, notorious gangster Dutch Schultz, “requested” the team write something funny “like a little colored girl singing how tough it is being colored” (O’Meally 128). Under duress, the team composed “Black and Blue.” The opening lines, later omitted by Louis Armstrong, announce the “little colored girl’s” grief:

Out in the street, shufflin’ feet,

Couples passin' two by two,
While here am I, left high and dry,
Black, and 'cause I'm black I'm blue.
Browns and yellors, all have fellers,
Gentlemen prefer them light,
Wish I could fade, can't make the grade,
Nothing but dark days in sight.

Like many blues songs, the opening verse centers on love relationships. The speaker bemoans her loneliness as couples pass by and attributes her inability to attract a mate to her darker skin color. While on the surface this original version of "Black and Blue" centers on a black girl's personal longing to be desirable to the opposite sex, the subtext of intraracial skin colorism contains a discourse about blackness that is gendered and sexualized in important ways.⁶ Further, the opening lines combined with the assertions of racial grief in the remaining verses of the song redefine the condition of blackness in America through the voice and body of a black woman. Recalling Ellison's descent into the lower frequencies of sound, O'Meally claims that Invisible Man's encounter with the voices and images of women suggests the author's return to "Black and Blue" as a woman's lament (130). But even prior to Ellison's blues odyssey, Petry employs the blues to resurrect the cultural memory of slavery. But those memories are felt directly in the everyday experiences of her protagonist with sexualized racism.

The journey from rape to revolution taken by women blues singers suggests that in addition to being expressions of mourning, the blues contains elements of protest. Refuting the presumption of earlier (male-centered) blues scholarship that claims the blues lacks social protest, Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998) analyzes the recordings of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey for both explicit and implicit social criticism. Most blues songs emphasize individual needs instead of collective sociopolitical concerns of African Americans. Further, the primary context of blues lyrics is love relationships. The blues crooner's hums and moans about love and loss may not meet conventional criteria for social protest. Yet, expressions of love and loss can and often do incorporate sociopolitical engagement as my readings in the previous chapter illustrate.⁷ Referring to Rainey and Smith's songs, Davis argues:

They are certainly far more than complaint, for they begin to articulate a consciousness that takes into account social conditions of class exploitation, racism, and male dominance as seen through the lenses of the complex emotional responses of black female subjects. While there may not be a direct line to social activism, activist stances are inconceivable without the consciousness such songs suggest. (119)

The articulations of loss and resistance contained within black women's blues performances strengthen the political efficacy of mourning. Similar to the "sorrow songs," the affective emphasis of the blues draws attention to the "everyday" experiences of racial trauma. The focus on individual pain in the

blues extends to the collective and elicits an intersubjective articulation of trauma that expands the connotation of social protest. These elements of affective protest extant in the blues join blueswomen's displays of sexual autonomy to shape a working class black feminist consciousness.

It seems telling, then, that Ann Petry would incorporate the blues as a female-centered aesthetic into her mid-century protest narrative. The "fearless, unadorned realism" Davis ascribes to the blues is also an apt description of protest fiction (23). Realist depictions of urban despair like Petry's and Wright's are subject to criticism for proffering the traumatized black body as a spectacle for white readers to consume. Indeed, James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" makes this accusation against *Native Son*. Toomer's attention to the visual garners similar criticism for "displaying" black female bodies for public consumption.⁸ At the same time, his focus on ocular aesthetics draws attention to the embodied nature of black trauma.

Wright uses the highly visible black male body as a political strategy, to show how black male subjectivity is overdetermined by sexualized racism. Lynching, as a cultural memory and a symbolic threat to black manhood, governs Wright's text. By far the most vile display of an unredeemed black body in Wright's novel, however, is Bessie Mears, the girlfriend Bigger Thomas rapes, bludgeons with a brick, and throws down an airshaft. In many ways, Petry's heroine retrieves characters like Bigger's mother and his girlfriend Bessie from death tinged kitchenette buildings and the bottoms of narrow airshafts. If Petry's

novel repeats Wright's with a difference, the primary difference resides in the sex of their protagonists and the sound of their blues.

The scopic politics of Petry's novel have not gone unquestioned however. Heather Hicks points out in "Rethinking Realism in Ann Petry's *The Street*," that "Despite [Petry's] own racial identification with her subjects, in writing about them to that white audience, she risked much" (93). I would add to Hicks's observation that Petry's class status—her middle class upbringing in Old Saybrook, Connecticut—could potentially place her in the position of spectator, rather than witness. Petry's self-reflexivity may account for what I consider her adherence to ideologies of respectability in crafting her black working class protagonist. By constructing a black female working class protagonist and nascent blueswoman who is "respectable" by bourgeois standards, Petry troubles social presumptions about middle and working class black women's sexualities.

"Worrying the line"

Marking an interesting turn in the novel, Petry's protagonist Lutie Johnson ventures to a local bar and grill in search of refuge from the cloistral apartment she shares with her eight-year-old son. Seated at the bar nursing a beer, she superimposes the wet rings left by her glass upon each other, creating a fluid depiction of the cycle of despair she cannot seem to break free of. The dim lighting and warm atmosphere of the club encourages Lutie to sing along to "Darlin'" while it plays on the juke-box:

The men and women crowded at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn't in the words – a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died. (148)

The story of loss contained, not in the words to Lutie's song but somewhere beneath them, affirms the blues as an expression of loss that emphasizes affect over conventional forms of language. At the close of Lutie's impromptu song, "Just before the record ended, her voice stopped on a note so low and so long sustained that it was impossible to tell where it left off" (148). That lingering tone at the end of Lutie's song has been described as the "blue note" or "worrying the line." Both expressions suggest that the lowered pitch or "worried" note in the blues – and in other forms of black music as well – reconnect singer and hearers with a shared past. As Farah Jasmine Griffin explains, "the falling pitch of the blue note acts as the space where the absence, the terror, the fear, and the tragic moments of black life reside. In this sense the blue note is truly the site of history and memory" (57).

Cheryl Wall's *Worrying the Line: Black Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition* (2005) uses "the line" as a metaphor for lineage and literary tradition (8). In this sense, the line provides access to the past but it also instigates repetition within and between African American texts (Wall 16). Petry "worries

the line" in her novel by responding to other texts in the African American literary tradition, including Wright's and Hurston's, but she also employs patterns of repetition as a means of connecting Lutie's struggles as a black woman to a broader black female history of sexual trauma, a history that Toomer's women-centered lament for a disappearing era plays a part in constructing as well. Alice Walker's seminal essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," spots in Toomer's portraits the stirrings of a black women's artistic lineage. Those women whose bodies were "tortured with something [they] could not let out" had not found the medium to express their longing. Like Walker's essay, this dissertation project plots a lineage as well by drawing on black expressive culture to reconstruct black cultural memory through the rubric of trauma. I locate the roots of this lineage the aesthetics of black expressive culture.

James Snead's seminal essay "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture" proposes that structures of repetition found in black expressive culture be placed in conversation with psychoanalytic discourses, such as Lacan's *tuché* or Freud's repetition compulsion. Though he does not overtly link black music to trauma, one could read the intrusiveness of traumatic memory in tandem with the 'cut' in blues and jazz pieces. The cut "overtly insists on the repetitive nature of the music, by abruptly skipping it back to another beginning we have already heard" (69). This return to a primal scene is a recurring motif in black literature. Jean Toomer, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison, among other black

writers, employ black music's compulsion to repeat to aid their texts in the work of memory and mourning.

Because of *The Street's* relationship with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the protest genre in general, critics tend to limit the patterns of repetition in Petry's novel to social determinism. In his reading of the aforementioned scene when Lutie sings at the Junto Bar and Grill, Robert Cataliotti likens Lutie's blues song to the spirituals but casts doubt on the transformative potential of her performance. Cataliotti claims instead that, in contrast to Frederick Douglass's account of the spirituals, "Lutie's song is not one of hope or transcendence or resistance but one of despair. She speaks for her people but her song is not an affirmation of a cultural heritage; it is a recitation of a stifling, deterministic legacy" (140). Cataliotti seems to overlook a crucial distinction between the spirituals and the blues. To be sure, both musical forms can be termed "sorrow songs," but while the spirituals articulate hope for freedom either in the hereafter or in the North, the blues is a sustained identification with loss, or as Ellison puts it, "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (78).

While Cataliotti reads this impulse to maintain a connection with the traumatic past solely as determinism, I am more inclined to conceptualize Petry's understanding of history as constitutive of the blues aesthetic in the novel.

Michael Barry's "'Same Train be Back Tomorrer': Ann Petry's *The Narrows* and the Repetition of History" follows this logic in his reading of Petry's third novel. Barry troubles readings that force an unqualified determinism on Petry's work, asserting instead that "... not every refusal of progress is deterministic. Folklore and oral culture's vision of history often include cycles of repetition, but these repetitions are not necessarily best understood as the forces of fate" (143).

Fate has little to do with the lineage of black women's sexual violence that haunts Lutie from the novel's opening pages until its climax. The forces of sexual aggression, however, are enlivened by the environment. When readers first meet Lutie, she has fallen victim to the wind's assault, an ethereal battering which has sexual overtones: "The wind lifted Lutie Johnson's hair away from the back of her neck so that she felt suddenly naked and bald, for her hair had been resting softly and warmly against her skin. She shivered as the cold fingers of the wind touched the back of her neck, explored the sides of her head" (2). This passage forecasts the objectification Lutie will encounter in both public and private spaces. After her marriage breaks up, Lutie's existence is defined by attempts to sexually possess her or to force her to exchange her body for money. Petry traces these views of black women to ideologies rooted in slavery.

For instance, Lutie's stint as a domestic for a wealthy white family in Connecticut recalls the dynamics of a plantation household. Mrs. Chandler's mother and friends warn her against having an attractive "colored wench" in her home, presuming Lutie will either welcome or initiate sex with the Chandler

patriarch. Lutie realizes that no matter how modest her demeanor, in the minds of whites her skin color predetermines her sexual availability:

Here she was highly respectable, married, mother of a small boy, and, in spite of all that, knowing all that, these people took one look at her and immediately got that now-I-wonder look. Apparently it was an automatic reaction of white people – if a girl was colored and fairly young, why, it stood to reason she had to be a prostitute. If not that – at least sleeping with her would be just a simple matter, for all one had to do was make the request. In fact, white men wouldn't even have to do the asking because the girl would ask them on sight. (45)

Lutie observes the codes of respectability and domesticity that were instilled in her by her deceased grandmother. As I point out in my readings of *Cane's* northern vignettes, performances of respectability tend to be associated with the black middle class rhetoric of uplift. While Toomer, as well as other (mostly male) New Negro Renaissance artists, sought to explode what they saw as Anglo-centric models of sexual repression, many black women writers and social activists embraced and promoted the ideals of bourgeois domesticity as a way of undermining racist stereotypes of black female sexuality. Hence, class was not the sole determinant of respectability.⁹ As Victoria W. Walcott maintains, middle and working class black women sometimes clashed and at other times agreed on matters of respectability: "Respectability ... reflected more than simply bourgeois Victorian ideology; it was a foundation of African American women's survival

strategies and self-definition irrespective of class" (7). The principles Lutie's Granny passes on to her support Walcott's claim.

Lutie's grandmother's lessons enable her to offset the Chandler's efforts to define her as sexually loose. The voice of Lutie's grandmother issues from a different version of black women's sexual history:

Of course, none of them could know about your grandmother who had brought you up, [Lutie] said to herself. And ever since you were big enough to remember the things that people said to you, had said *over and over*, just like a clock ticking, 'Lutie, baby, don't you never let no white man put his hands on you. They ain't never willin' to let a black woman alone. Seems like they all got a itch and a urge to sleep with 'em. Don't you never let any of 'em touch you.' (my emphasis; 45)

Granny's teachings, those lessons repeated over and over again, function as counter-memory to the dominant discourse that characterizes black women as seductresses and Jezebels. These lessons, rooted in slavery, repeated across time and passed intergenerationally, suggest that the threat of sexual violation remains a haunting presence in black women's lives. While problematic to varying degrees, black women's espousal of respectability bears witness to cultural memories of sexual trauma. It is an attempt to work through a traumatic history and a strategy for black female survival.

Worrying the literary line, Petry's Granny recalls Hurston's Nanny in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), possibly *The Street's* most immediate

predecessor. After *Cane*, Hurston's novel was the first major work of African American fiction that centered on black southern folk culture. But unlike Toomer's, the folk culture of Hurston's fictional world is thriving. By the time Hurston's novel was published, however, the reading public's fascination with black folk culture had waned. Alain Locke and Richard Wright's virulent criticism of Hurston's novel was symptomatic of the turn in black literature toward social protest fiction and its attendant focus on the black urban male subject.

Similar to the parallels Toomer draws between Fern and Avey, the kinship I am establishing here between Janie and Lutie disrupts oppositions between "the folk" and the urban and instead posits a continuity of black women's violation. In Hurston's novel, the sexual violation Nanny endures under slavery, and the rape of her daughter Leafy, makes Nanny determined to protect Janie from a similar fate. Rationalizing her decision to marry Janie off, Nanny tells her, "Ah can't die easy thinkin' maybe de menfolks white or black is makin' a spit cut outa you" (Hurston 19). Lutie is raised by her grandmother as well. All we learn about Lutie's mother is that the street "killed [her] off when she was in her prime" (56). Granny's insistence on marrying Lutie off in her teens may indicate that Lutie's mother's death had something to do with sexual violence or degradation. Reminiscent of Nanny, we are told through flashbacks that Granny cautioned Lutie's father, "Lookin' like she do men goin' to chase her till they catches up. Better she get married" (76).

The road beckons Janie from her loveless marriage: “The morning road air was like a new dress” (Hurston 31). Janie tries it on for size and embarks upon a journey to find her own voice. Lutie’s marriage succumbs to financial pressures: “the marriage had busted up, cracking wide open like a cheap record. Come to think about it, an awful lot of colored marriages ended like that” (76). The blues songs of colored marriages do not often adhere to the romantic ideals of popular standards. Forced to go it solo, Lutie must find a viable alternative to exchanging her sexuality – either through becoming a mistress or through prostitution – for money. Initially Lutie views a career in entertainment as merely a financial opportunity, a way to leave “the street.” However, a singing career also occasions a chance for Lutie to re-dress herself, to clothe herself in a new identity. She imagines her transformation “would be like discarding a worn-out dress, a dress that was shiny from wear and faded from washing and whose seams were forever giving way” (207).

My play on re-dress here is intentional as both these protagonists’ endeavors toward subjectivity require them to redress or work through the past of their grandmothers and their mothers. Following Saidiya Hartman, I am using redress as a means of “re-membering” the violated and “dis-membered” bodies of the enslaved. This act of re-membering, Hartman informs us, involves the body as a site of articulation, of pain as well as desire, and as “a vessel of communication” (77). Both storytelling and song facilitated redress for captives. Expanding the context of Hartman’s analysis a bit, these forms of redress work

similarly in Hurston and Petry's texts. In particular, the blueswoman possesses the liminal characteristics Hartman speaks of. The affective power of her performance bridges the gap between the past and the present.

Classic blueswomen, such as Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and several others, defied a history of objectification and presented an unconventional model of sexual empowerment and independence with which many working-class black women could identify.¹⁰ Though by 1944, when the setting of *The Street* unfolds, the social impact of blueswomen had waned, the entertainment industry still "fueled the dreams of black girls who yearned for a life's work of glamour and triumph" (Jones 220). Evoking an image that fuses the classic blues queen with the jazz sophisticate, "[Lutie] started building a picture of herself standing before a microphone in a long taffeta dress that whispered sweetly as she moved; of a room full of dancers who paused in their dancing to listen as she sang. Their faces were expectant, worshipping, as they looked up at her" (207). The live performances of classic blueswomen held audiences captive in this way. Indeed blues performances, as Bessie Smith's "Preaching the Blues" suggests, were alternative "worship" services. By the forties, female bluesy jazz vocalists like Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, and Billie Holiday had taken to the stage. Lutie's thought picture most immediately summons a mental snapshot of Holiday on stage, Holiday's classy deportment having earned her the moniker "Lady."¹¹

While Holiday was not a “lady” in the conventional sense, her performance of and self-designation as “Lady” was a powerful act of self-definition.¹² Lady was a title of respect in Holiday’s era, especially for a black woman. Holiday made it clear by her behavior and in her lyrics that she did not care to subscribe to conservative ideologies of femininity though. She gambled, drank, used drugs, took male and female lovers, and touted “ain’t nobody business if I do.” It would be wrong, however, to romanticize Billie Holiday without acknowledging the sexual exploitation she endured. Holiday’s childhood sexual abuse, stint as a prostitute, and repeated violations by the men in her life are well documented.

In other words, Holiday was no stranger to the street. A major player in Petry’s drama, the street makes a formidable opponent to Lutie Johnson though. Kimberly Drake suspects that in her pursuit of blues divadom, Lutie miscalculates her ability to associate with the working class world without brushing up against corruption (91). Yet the sexual manipulation Lutie experiences has far less to do with a working class ethos than it does with the social construction of women as objects of exchange between men. That Junto was the name of Benjamin Franklin’s male social club is not coincidental.

Even black women’s performing bodies did not exist outside of a (male-dominated) system of economic exchange. Johanna X.K. Garvey recalls that the commercialization of blues and jazz music that began in the 1920s persisted throughout the 1940s (135). The increased commercialization of the music

advanced the commodification of black female sexuality, signing both song and singer as marketable objects for public consumption. What happens to the sociopolitical efficacy of black women's blues when it circulates in the marketplace? For Lutie to thrive in this context, she would have to be willing to parlay her sexuality into a marketable commodity.

Lutie's blues

As I mention earlier, Lutie's initial motivation for pursuing a singing career is economic, an extension of her pursuit of the American Dream.¹³ In what Kimberly Drake describes as "a decidedly Algeresque moment," Boots Smith, the leader of a band, spots Lutie singing at the bar and offers her an opportunity to perform with his band (91). Lutie's longing to "sing her way out of the street" — to use music to improve her economic and psychological circumstances — is not unlike rural black women's dreams of leaving the South (83). Indeed, her desire to escape the streets speaks to the disappointments of black urbanization voiced in urban blues music and black literature. Lutie substantiates Davis's claim that "[a]s the socioeconomic realities of the North shattered black immigrants' illusions, the historical meaning accorded the South was reconfigured and became associated with release from the traumas of migration" (84). But akin to her pursuit of the American Dream, Lutie's dream of becoming a blues singer rests on the illusion of freedom.

Petry uses spatial metaphors of confinement to cast doubt on the liberal rhetoric of freedom. As Larry Andrews's "The Sensory Assault of the City in

Ann Petry's *The Street* observes, "The dominant images of the novel are claustal and suffocating – walls, cages, cellars, even other people's stares. Alienation and isolation are a corollary of this spatial deprivation" (196-7). Taking on elements of the female gothic novel, most of these images of confinement occur in reference to domestic space. In the book's opening chapter, the repeated mention of "dark, narrow hallways" signals the domestic as a space of confinement and terror (4, 5, 12, and 19). Consistent with gothic tropes, that terror is sexual. Calling upon blues aesthetics, however, Lutie attempts to "fix" her would be sexual predator with the evil eye should he come sniffing 'round her door:

That'll fix you, Mister William Jones, but, of course, if it was only my imagination upstairs, it isn't fair to look at you like this. But just in case some dark leftover instinct warned me of what was on your mind – just in case it made me know you were snuffing on my trail, slathering, slobbering after me like some dark hound of hell seeking me out, tonguing along in back of me, this look, my fine feathered friend, should give you much food for thought. (25)

Unfortunately Lutie's look does nothing to hinder the hellhound on her trail. As first foretold by her intuition and then later in a dream, the Super attempts to drag her into the cellar in order to rape her (84). Her allusion to Johnson's "Hellhound" speaks to the danger and violence that stalks black bodies. In place of the memory of lynching, however, Petry's hellhounds signal the threat of rape.

Public space offers Lutie succor from the confinement and terror that lurks in her “home” and from the drudgery of domestic work. The freedom afforded Lutie at the Junto is illusory though. Lutie feels free there because of the bar’s spaciousness, yet the large space is a trick of mirrors: “The big mirror in front of her made the Junto an enormous room. It pushed the walls back and back into space” (146). The pushed back walls give Lutie the false impression of freedom. I agree with Trudier Harris’s observation that “[t]he space arrangement puts Lutie on display, almost on an auction block, as two powerful males, one black and one white, gauge her sexual value to each of them. Boots sees her as a potential singer and sexual partner; Junto sees her simply as a body he wants to possess” (75).

At every turn, Lutie is appraised as a marketable commodity. Mrs. Hedges, an older black woman who runs a whorehouse in Lutie’s building, assesses her with a “calculating eye” (84). When Junto tells Boots not to pay Lutie for singing, anticipating that her desperation will drive her to become his mistress, Boots measures Lutie’s value against the perks of being Junto’s right-hand man:

Balance Lutie Johnson. Weigh Lutie Johnson. Long legs and warm mouth. Soft skin and pointed breasts. Straight slim back and small waist. Mouth that curves over white, white teeth. Not enough. She didn’t weigh enough when she was balanced against a life of saying ‘yes sir’ to every white bastard who had the price of a Pullman ticket. Lutie Johnson at the end of

a Pullman run. Not enough. One hundred Lutie Johnsons didn't weigh enough. (265)

Boots weighs and measures Lutie as a master would a potential slave. After determining she does not measure up, he resolves to sell her (out).

Petry makes an overt connection between efforts to commodify Lutie's sexuality and slavery when, after her disappointment with Boots's band, Lutie answers a newspaper ad and auditions at the Crosse School for Singers. The owner of the studio tells Lutie that in lieu of paying for voice training, she can "be nice to him." Lutie connects Crosse's mistreatment of her to the historical oppression of black women: "Yes, she thought, if you were born black and not too ugly, this is what you get, this is what you find. It was a pity he hadn't lived back in the days of slavery, so he could have raided the slave quarters for a likely wench any hour of the day or night" (321-2). Like Toomer's Fern, the cross Lutie bears is her sex. Her experience at the Crosse school also signals a crossroads for Lutie, the point at which her despair turns to rage. Kept from an opportunity to voice her rage through song, Lutie resists physically. Her anger compels her to throw an inkwell at Crosse. Lutie's increasing rage and its transformation into violence foreshadows her actions at end of the novel.

While Petry's acknowledgment of black expressive culture as an outlet for grief separates *The Street* from masculinist protest novels, her turn to rage is common to protest texts authored by male writers, wherein the protagonist possesses few options for resistance save crime, rage, and/or violence. Such is

the fate of Richard Wright's *Bigger* Thomas. In spite of *Bigger*'s destructive end, Wright's disclosure of the rage engendered by insidious racism continues to shape literary and cultural representations of black urban male subjectivity. To be sure, one can spot *Bigger* in several of hip hop's narratives of black male trauma.

While both Wright and Petry broach rage as the inevitable consequence of unabated oppression, reading these two narratives alongside one another underscores the gendered aspects of rage. Bell hooks calls *The Street* a "prophetic novel about black female rage," declaring, "It is Lutie Johnson who exposes the rage underneath the calm persona" (12). While works like Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Marita Bonner's prose piece "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored" also approach the rage that lurks beneath the contained facade of respectability, rage is typically regarded as a male emotion. In Petry's novel, Lutie not only embodies the rage associated with a community primed to explode, but her rage also results from the repeated sexual trauma she endures and keeps repressed until her encounter with Crosse.

Consistent with sexual trauma, Lutie's anger is initially directed inward. After Mrs. Hedges thwarts the Super's attempted rape, Lutie climbs the dark narrow steps to her apartment:

Once she stopped and leaned against the wall, filled with a sick loathing of herself, wondering if there was something about her that subtly suggested to the Super that she would welcome his love-making,

wondering if the same thing had led Mrs. Hedges to believe that she would leap at the opportunity to make money sleeping with white men, remembering the women at the Chandlers' who had looked at her and assumed she wanted their husbands. (241)

For Lutie, then, acting out her rage becomes a strategy for resisting sexual trauma and its attendant feelings of abjection. Lutie's acts of rage and vengeance also place her within a tradition of badwomen avengers, personified by the blueswoman.

The blueswoman as badwoman avenger

Lutie's bourgeois value system, estrangement from the black working class community around her, and pursuit of a singing career for upward mobility lead some critics to disqualify her as an "authentic" blueswoman.¹⁴ Johanna X.K. Garvey and Kimberly Drake, for instance, evaluate Petry's Mamie Smith Powther in *The Narrows* as a more authentic blueswoman; Drake even tags her as "a true blues woman" (73). Aside from being named after Mamie Smith, Mamie Smith Powther is an empowered sexual subject. Secure in her married life, however, Mamie subscribes to certain forms of domesticity, albeit in an unconventional way; she remains with her husband and keeps a lover on the side. It may have been safer for Petry to present Mamie as a more erotically charged character as *The Narrows*, set in Monmouth, Connecticut, does not share the sociopolitical demands of *The Street* – to illustrate the deleterious effects of racial segregation, poverty and sexism on black subjects. As I note earlier in this

chapter, Petry is also an outsider looking at Harlem. To present Lutie in a more sexually explicit manner may have been seen as pandering to stereotypes of working class black women as sexually loose and available.

Rather than present Lutie as a woman who takes ownership of her sexuality, like Mamie Smith Powther, Petry emphasizes how Lutie's economic circumstances coupled with racist ideology bind her to a traumatic history that reduces black women to commodities. Lutie's violent turn, however, touches upon a different manifestation of the blueswoman: the badwoman avenger.¹⁵ Claiming Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" (1920) as a social text, Adam Gussow suggests that the blending of political and romantic disappointment in the song facilitates the reconfiguration of "the badman tradition as a *badwoman* tradition, a lyric discourse of gun-, knife-, and dynamite-inflicted vengeance against black lovers and white oppressors elaborated by blues singers ... and by their southern-born literary inheritors" (164). These imagined acts of vengeance, according to Gussow, are often responses to lost love objects or to losses attributable to racial violence, such as the loss of black men to lynch mobs.

In an intimate sense, Lutie acts out her badwoman tendencies after catching her husband cheating with another woman. While working in the Chandler household, Lutie frees her husband up to play house with someone else. Recalling her anger at finding the other woman preparing dinner for her family, Lutie thinks, "If [Jim] hadn't held her arms, she would have killed the other girl. Even now she could feel rage rise inside her at the very thought" (54).

Couched within this common blues scenario of infidelity and violence is a more complicated history of loss and desire that gets played out on the terrain of black heterosexual love relationships. The disappointments and failures of these love relationships are connected to a longer chain of the nation's broken promises.

Gussow suspects that female abandonment blues like Smith's "Crazy Blues" often contain veiled social commentary about the deaths of black men at the hand of white vigilantes. In the closing verse of "Crazy Blues," the female singer mourns the loss of her lover but she also fantasizes retribution against the law:

Now I've got the crazy blues
Since my baby went away
I ain't had no time to lose
I must find him today
I'm gonna do like a Chinaman, go and get some hop
Get myself a gun, and shoot myself a cop
I ain't had nothin' but bad news
Now I've got the crazy blues. (Gussow 194)

The singer's fantasy of shooting a cop expresses concerns about police brutality – the new form of mob violence – and also touches upon the revolts that were taking place in northern cities during the Red Summer of 1919. Attesting to the song's impact, within the first month of its 1920 Harlem debut, tens of thousands of copies were sold (Gussow 164). The prevalence of lynching at the

time only heightens the potency of Smith's blues protest. The transformation of mourning into rage performed in "Crazy Blues" captured a sentiment felt by southern and northern black communities.

Petry evokes the cultural memory of lynching to critique the living conditions of poor blacks in post-Depression era Harlem as well. Echoing Richard Wright's decree in *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) that "[t]he kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks" (106), Lutie thinks of the streets as "the North's lynch mobs ... the method the big cities [use] to keep Negroes in their place" (323). You-me Park and Gayle Wald suggest Petry's use of lynching as a metaphor for the violence in the streets sustains a split between the public and "masculinized" spectacular trauma of lynching and private "feminized" sexual trauma. They find that "the trope of lynch mobs reveals the moment when Petry herself privileges the masculinized rendering of Lutie's plight and suffering, and privatizes the issue of gender. Lutie's narrative is folded into the larger narrative of racial violence that doesn't read Lutie as a gendered subject" (619).

Petry's use of the lynching trope does not privilege a masculinized interpretation of Lutie's condition as much as it confirms the prominence of lynching in African American cultural memory and, as such, it attests to the ways in which a history of racial trauma is imagined through forms recognized as male oppression. Black feminist critics, notably Hazel V. Carby and Elsa

Barkley Brown, have suggested that our cultural memory of lynching shapes our understanding of black traumatic history in a way that elides acts of violence against women.¹⁶ While Jean Toomer's account of the Mary Turner lynching in "Kabnis" urges readers to re-member the dis-membered bodies of black women, the absence of rape as a critical discourse in black collective memory says a great deal about how we conceptualize black subjectivity in relation to loss. Elsa Barkley Brown suggests that the rendering of black collective struggle in masculine terms was forecast by the critical reception of *Native Son* as representative of black oppression. Brown questions:

If Bigger Thomas came to stand for the oppression of African Americans and *Native Son* for the ultimate protest novel, what does it mean for our collective memory and our definition of blackness that Bessie, her life, and her death were lost in that process? Can we claim Bigger without claiming Bessie, and how would claiming both revise our historical memory and our definition of Blackness? (113)

Rather than privilege the masculinist trope of lynching, as Park and Wald maintain, Petry *regenders* the lynching trope in a textual move that matches Wright's inversion of rape in *Native Son*. When Bigger confesses to Bessie that he has accidentally murdered Mary Dalton, the daughter of his wealthy white employers, Bessie tells him he will be accused of rape. Contemplating the likelihood that he will be falsely accused, Bigger supplants rape's literal meaning with a symbolic connotation that enables him to cast himself as rape victim:

Had he raped her? Yes he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long, taut piece of rubber which *a thousand white hands* had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape (213-214; emphasis mine).

Bigger's revision of rape holds white racism accountable for constructing the myth of the black rapist. He repudiates this familiar narrative by evoking the memory of lynching through his references to "the pack" and being torn apart by "a thousand white hands." As such, Bigger equates rape with the physical and psychological castration of black men. Black men's experience with racism, then, gets translated into the act of being feminized. Snapping, or resorting to violence, becomes both a means of resistance and a way to recuperate their "manhood."

Had Bigger actually not committed rape in the novel, his adaptation may have been more effectual. Bigger does not rape the white woman Mary, but he does rape and murder his black girlfriend Bessie. Characterizing himself as victim rather than victimizer, Bigger minimizes his violence against Bessie and converts it—along with his murder of Mary—into a subject constituting act.

Petry's use of lynching serves as a suggestive rejoinder to Wright's overturning of rape. Bigger equates rape with a feeling of confinement brought on by racism, with a sense of being backed against a wall. Similarly after describing the streets as the North's lynch mobs, Lutie reflects upon her own position: "From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was very nearly walled in and the wall had been built brick by brick by *eager white hands*" (324; emphasis mine). Lynching in this instance refers to sexual violence against women. The image of eager white hands recalls Granny's admonition to Lutie not to ever let a white man put his hands on her. The mention of bricks hearkens back to Bigger's bludgeoning of Bessie, a character some critics have established as Lutie's literary kin.¹⁷ The coupling of white hands and bricks holds white and black men culpable for violating black women.

Farah Jasmine Griffin considers the bricks of Lutie's metaphorical wall "as fatal to Lutie as Bigger's brick is to Bessie in *Native Son*," but it seems to me that Lutie's violent turn marks a radical act of textual repetition and revision. Lutie's performance of badwoman vengeance saves her from becoming another rape and murder victim of a black assailant trying to assert his manhood. It also challenges the masculinist prerogative of acting out rage and violence. Gussow locates badwoman heroism within a black male tradition, linking it with the "crazy nigger" trope of southern folklore (168). Though black badwomen existed before the blues – poisoning slave masters, inciting rebellions, and leading bands

of fugitives to the North—it is interesting that they did not emerge as iconographic figures until the blues era.¹⁸

Lutie's urge to "hum a fragment of melody" that haunts her merges with her impulse to kill Junto (422). Her short-lived singing career gave her more than a potential way out of her economic circumstances; it assuaged her despair and enabled her to channel her rage. Lutie's opportunity to voice her blues thwarted, she thinks that her voice sounds "like a victrola, ... one that had run down, that needed winding" (397). Petry's allusion to the Victrola is suggestive, as the earliest blues recordings were those of black women, with Mamie Smith's recording of Perry Bradford's "Crazy Blues" as the first.¹⁹

Like the cop in "Crazy Blues," Junto is representative of white regulatory power. He signifies the invisibility of disciplinary power as opposed to the visible presence of law enforcement. People who frequent his bar are "dumb, blind, deaf to Junto's existence. Yet he had them coming and going. If they wanted to sleep, they paid him; if they wanted to drink, they paid him; if they wanted to dance, they paid him, and never even knew it" (275). He owns the apartment building Lutie lives in, the whorehouse Mrs. Hedges runs, and the clubs Lutie performed in. And after Boots promises to loan Lutie money to defend Bub against a bogus mail fraud charge, Junto is waiting at Boots's apartment to collect interest.

Lutie imagines Junto has the final brick that will completely wall her in (423). Instead of Junto, Boots unleashes that final brick after the boss leaves and

Boots tries to force himself on Lutie. In an act of badwoman vengeance, Lutie beats Boots to a bloody pulp with an iron candlestick, as obvious a phallic symbol as the female persona's gun in "Crazy Blues." I emphasize the phallic imagery here to suggest, along with Imani Perry, that because rage is far too often conceived in masculine terms, these acts of taking hold of these masculinist symbols coincide with attempts of black women writers and performers to create spaces to vent their grief and rage (Perry 164-165).

Blues note to a native son

That Lutie takes her revenge out on Boots instead of Junto may garner questions about the racial implications of the novel's climax. Boots becomes a "handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her" (429). The displacement of Lutie's desire to kill Junto onto her actual killing of Boots may have been a matter of accessibility. But perhaps the anonymity Boots assumes as the target of Lutie's rage makes possible retaliation against *that other* literary badman.

While I agree with Richard Yarborough, to a certain degree, that "[o]ne of the many sad ironies of Lutie's fate is that while Boots is the handiest embodiment of an oppression she can bear no longer, he too is a victim," black men's oppression under racism does not absolve them of their participation in violence against women (36). At the same time, Lutie and Boots's similar experiences with racial oppression suggest that they could have had a basis for

an intimate connection. The degradation Boots recalls from his stint as a Pullman porter, for instance, is similar to Lutie's experience working for the Chandlers: "Nameless. He got a handful of silver at the end of each run, and a mountain of silver couldn't pay a man to stay nameless like that. No Name, black my shoes. No Name, hold my coat. No Name, brush me off. No Name, take my bags. No Name. No Name" (264).

Boots also suffers the pain of betrayal when he catches his wife cheating on him with a white man. Perhaps the most pertinent connection between Lutie and Boots is the music itself. Playing the piano does for Boots what singing does for Lutie. While playing, Boots

forgot there were such things as Pullmans and rumpled sheets and wadded-up blankets to be handled. Forgot there was a world that was full of white voices saying: 'Hustle 'em up, boy'; 'Step on it, boy'; Hey, boy, I saw a hot-looking colored gal a couple of coaches back - fix it up for me, boy.' He forgot about bells that were a shrill command to 'come a-running, boy.' (273)

In a similar way, singing facilitates Lutie's imaginary flight from "the street with its dark hallways, its mean, shabby rooms; she was taking Bub away with her to a place where there were no Mrs. Hedges, no resigned and disillusioned little girls, no half-human creatures like the Super" (222).

Like Bigger and Bessie, Lutie and Boots are unable to mix their solo blues into a two-part harmony. Instead, Lutie adopts another characteristically

masculinist blues response to pain by disengaging from domestic responsibility and boarding a Chicago-bound train. Read through a blues lens, the train may gesture toward hope. Yet the novel's open-ending, like the "series of circles" Lutie traces on the train window, promises only a changing same (435).

The intraracial gender conflict in Petry and Wright's work presaged similar debates that would emerge in antiracist struggles during the latter half of the twentieth century. The violent resistance to emasculation immortalized by Wright's antihero foreshadowed the recovery of black manhood that would dominate black cultural nationalism and aesthetics, also at the expense of black women. Likewise, black women's opposition to being silenced would come into its fullest fruition within the climate of antiracist activism of the sixties and seventies. It is not surprising then that the blueswoman would reoccur as a key literary figure in black women's literature published during and after the seventies, such as Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

¹ Other works of fiction that fall into the protest genre include Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941) and Frank Yerby's *Speak Now* (1969). Clark identifies Sutton Griggs and Charles Chesnutt as early predecessors of a masculinist tradition of black protest writing. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Pauline Hopkins serve a parallel function as forerunners in a black women's protest writing tradition. Mid-century writers like Wright, Petry and Himes, however shift protest writing from the South to the North's urban centers: Chicago, Harlem and Los Angeles respectively.

² Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 38.

³ See also Griffin's "*Who set you flowin, ?*" particularly her first chapter "Boll Weevil in the Cotton/Devil in the White Man": Reasons for Leaving the South" (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ See Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982).

⁵ See Davis's *Blues Legacies* and Harrison's *Black Pearls*.

⁶ See, for instance, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*, which was coincidentally released the same year Razaf and Waller penned "Black and Blue," 1929. Thurman's tragic story of a dark skinned black

woman who goes to such lengths as bleaching her skin and eating arsenic wafers to lighten her skin could be read as an extended meditation of Razaf and Waller's song in light of its original subject matter.

⁷ See Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy" and Anne Anlin Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁸ See Jessica Hayes Baldanzi, "Stillborns, Orphans, and Self-Proclaimed Virgins: Packaging and Policing the Rural Women of *Cane*," *Genders* 42 (2005), 2 Feb 2006 <http://www.genders.org/g42/g42_baldanzi.html>.

⁹ See Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

¹⁰ The classic blues era spanned roughly from 1920—when Mamie Smith's version of "Crazy Blues" became the first recorded blues single—until the stock market crash of 1929.

¹¹ Robert Cataliotti mentions that the time frame of the novel was at the heart of Billie Holiday's career, *The Music*, 142.

¹² Farah Jasmine Griffin's *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) offers an insightful discussion about Lady Day and the politics of respectability.

¹³ The American Dream trope in Petry's novel has been discussed a great deal. See, for instance, Keith Clark's "A Distaff Dream Deferred? Ann Petry and the Art of Subversion," *African American Review* 26.3 (1992): 495-504; Bernard W. Bell's "Ann Petry's Demythologizing of American Culture and Afro-American Character," *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985): 105-115; and Richard Yarborough's "The Quest for the American Dream in Three Afro-American Novels: *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, *The Street*, and *Invisible Man*," *Melus* 8.4 (Winter 1981): 33-59.

¹⁴ See for instance, Johanna X.K. Garvey's "That Old Black Magic? Gender and Music in Ann Petry's Fiction" in *Black Orpheus: Music in African American Fiction from the Harlem Renaissance to Toni Morrison*, ed. Saadi A. Simawe (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000); Kimberly Drake's "Women on the Go: Blues, Conjure, and Other Alternatives to Domesticity in Ann Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows*," *Arizona Quarterly* 54.1 (Spring 1998): 65-95; and Robert H. Cataliotti's *The Music in African American Fiction* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

¹⁵ Critics have remarked upon Lutie's rage as a revolutionary aspect of her character. Gloria Wade-Gayles claims that "in attitude and behavior, she is a forerunner of the black militant of the sixties," *No Crystal Stair: Visions of Race and Sex in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984) 151. Jerry H. Bryant cosigns Wade-Gayles, donning Lutie a "pre-revolutionary," *Victims and Heroes: Racial Violence in the African American Novel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) 223.

¹⁶ See Hazel V. Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Elsa Barkley Brown's "Imaging Lynching: African American Women, Communities of Struggle, and Collective Memory," *African American Women Speak Out on Anita Hill – Clarence Thomas*, ed. Geneva Smitherman (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1995) 100-124.

¹⁷ Jerry H. Bryant suggests that "What was Bessie Mears' passivity is Lutie's rage," *Victims and Heroes*, 276. Farah Jasmine Griffin calls Bessie "Lutie's literary sister," "Who Set You Flowin'?" 212.

¹⁸ Jerry Bryant's *Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Men in African American Folklore and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) supports the absence of a badwoman type in African American folklore and fiction. Imani Perry's *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) credits hip hop with "the first cultural configuration of the female badman, the badwoman. Although women have used all of the badman's various trappings at one time or another ... one is hard pressed to find a historical period in which women have combined these qualities to parallel the 'bad nigger' image and his symbolism so exactly" (167). While I agree with Perry that female hip hop MCs are our contemporary manifestation of the badwoman, even though she mentions the blues and black women's fiction, Perry seems to give short shrift to those bad, crazy blueswomen foremothers and their literary counterparts like Gayl Jones's Eva (*Eva's Man*), Toni Morrison's Sula (*Sula*) and others.

¹⁹ I credit Tracey Sherard for this observation about the Victrola. See "Women's Classic Blues in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*: Cultural Artifact as Narrator," *Genders* 31 (2000), 15 Nov 2004 <http://www.genders.org/g31/g31_sherard.html>. Sherard offers a compelling argument about the function of records and Victrolas in female narratives.

Chapter Three

The Queerness of Blackness: Marlon Riggs's *Black Is ... Black Ain't*

In the previous chapter, I argue that the blues provides a feminist aesthetic framework for Ann Petry to redress black women's histories of sexual violation. By using the medium of black expressive culture to focus on female sexual trauma, Petry complicates the masculinist protest tradition typified by Richard Wright. The lynching-rape dialectic I establish between those two narratives hearkens back to the spectacularity of black racial trauma and its permanence in our cultural imagination.

As my discussion of Petry and Wright makes clear, the notion of racial trauma as the metaphoric "rape" (castration and feminization) of black men by white men sexualizes a racial history of loss. However, the "lost object" gets transformed into a coveted phallus; the struggle for power gets waged between men. This retrieval of a lost (phallic) masculinity became a defining element of the artistic production and cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s, a crucial sociopolitical context of Marlon Riggs's film *Black Is ... Black Ain't*.¹ Evidenced by the history of lynching, the longing for an unadulterated masculinity is not merely the reification of sexual difference; it springs from a real and persistent threat of black male death. At the same time, as Chapter One's discussion of the sexual politics of the New Negro Renaissance shows, anxiety around cultural

dissolution often lends itself to a legislation of seduction and reproduction that reinforces ideologies of sexualized racism.²

As a defining condition of being black in the U.S., however, the persistent threat of death presents an occasion to reconceptualize blackness through the prism of trauma instead of through celebratory narratives of racial unity. Toomer took what he saw as the disappearance of black folk culture as an opportunity to pay homage to the terror and the beauty of a passing era and particularly to black female suffering. Similarly, insidious racial trauma and constant threats to the integrity of black subjects in urban America motivated mid-century authors like Petry and Wright to resituate modern forms of racial terror within a historical continuum of violence against black bodies. In *Black Is*, Riggs places his own fight against AIDS within this broader discourse of black trauma and survival. Riggs does not propose that black communities merely accommodate black gays and lesbians or and/or blacks who are HIV+; instead his documentary suggests that “our” survival necessitates changing the ways we think about blackness and black community.

Accordingly, *Black Is* exposes the instability of visible signifiers of race and particularly the performances of blackness that took precedence during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. These movements relied on political visibility but they also entailed visibly “acting out” blackness. The affirmation “Black is Beautiful,” for instance, unhinged blackness from its association with racist

signifiers operative in the dominant American imagination and redefined blackness by using the body as a positive symbol. Like performances of respectability, these assertions of value and self-worth aim to counteract racial trauma. While black nationalist identity politics are not reducible to the visible, skin color, hair texture, and manners of dress, walk and talk remain potent signifiers of this era in revolutionary consciousness.

In a similar way that Toomer and Petry invert the iconography of lynching to allow for a compatible remembrance of black women's sexual violation, Riggs uses his embodiment as a racially marked subject to challenge the invisibility of black queers in cultural and historical narratives of blackness. Riggs's film, then, sustains the focus on the visual and the performative that binds the texts throughout this dissertation. Likewise, his blending of text, sound, movement, and image destabilizes linear narratives of blackness that rely on the construction of originary narratives. Traceable to black musical traditions, this improvisational form becomes a model for a blackness that is defined by fluidity and multiplicity.

Like Toomer, Riggs uses improvisatory strategies affiliated with black music in general, and a jazz aesthetic in particular, as a way to disrupt fixed narratives of blackness. The recurring metaphor for black multiplicity throughout *Black Is ... Black Ain't* is gumbo. Periodically the camera cuts to a boiling pot of this savory dish in order to affirm it as one of the film's unifying

themes. Gumbo blends a variety of elements to arrive at a distinctive flavor; the binding factor is the roux. Moreover, as “soul” food – a contested and ultimately indefinable descriptor of black identity – gumbo’s improvisational qualities make it a fitting metaphor for blackness. Without disavowing black identity and community, Riggs’s film seeks to expand it to – like gumbo – incorporate “a little bit of everything.”³

In an interview with Robert O’Meally, jazz musician Wynton Marsalis describes Duke Ellington’s music “like a big hot pot of good gumbo and every spoon that you pick up is gonna have a great proportion to it and it will surprise you pleasantly” (146). Black music, like gumbo, offers a template for blackness, a claim that I reiterate throughout this dissertation and that Riggs reaffirms in his commentary in the documentary. About midway through the film, Riggs treats viewers to an amusing medley of the black musical tradition while lying in his hospital bed. He says that black music has “been such a crucial part of our heritage. I mean beyond the entertainment value, it too is what binds us together as a people. That creation and recreation from generation to generation.”

In concert with the other varied texts that shape this project, Riggs affirms black music as a site of memory as well as an expression of black multiplicity. Riggs’s “gumbo” of text, sound, and imagery resembles Toomer’s montage of music, narrative, and focus on the visual. This improvisational strategy suggests to me that the excavation of black traumatic memory calls for unconventional

forms and different voices. Accordingly, Riggs's film combines historical footage and features cameos of well-renown black intellectuals as well as "ordinary" black people from the suburbs of Maryland to South Central Los Angeles, Louisiana, the Gullah Sea Islands, and even a neo-African village in South Carolina. Mixed in with historical footage and recorded interviews are interpretive dance performances by Bill T. Jones and Andrea E. Woods, spoken word poetry by Essex Hemphill, a diverse mixture of black music, and clips from popular music videos. Riggs also places throughout the film portraits and memories from his childhood, as well as personal reflections from his hospital bed, and scenes of his naked figure running through the woods. The diversity of Riggs's archive reflects the range of blackness.

Evidence of the flesh

Black Is ... Black Ain't is titled after the parodied sermon from *Invisible Man's* Prologue. Riggs and his cast of performance artists humorously act out a variation of Ralph Ellison's "sermon" in an early part of the film. Riggs carries on Ellison's desire to unpack the "Blackness of Blackness" but rather than meditate on the exclusion of black men from American democracy, *Black Is* explores the ways in which unifying narratives of black identity marginalize black queer subjects and render them invisible. Riggs's avowed affinity with Ellison's *Invisible Man*—he declares himself an invisible man in *Tongues Untied* (1990) as well—is even more evocative in light of the recent unearthing in Roderick A.

Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black* (2004) of Ellison's unpublished chapter featuring a black gay character.⁴ Ellison's omission of this character from his text is a microcosm of the historic erasure of queer subjects from the text of blackness.

The invisibility of black queers from black cultural memory is akin to social death, which Orlando Patterson links to the trauma of slavery. In both instances, this state of liminality is ghostly; it is positioned between the living and the dead. Redolent of Toomer's southern vignettes, ghosts harbor the silences associated with an unfinished past. Ghosts are the unnamed and unaccounted for – the unmourned. The silences that give rise to ghosts are often associated with sex.

A number of black queer cultural critics have suggested that the production and reproduction of blackness relies on the ghostly presence of a homosexual other.⁵ In her reading of Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* (1996), Sharon Holland finds that Horace, Kenan's protagonist, functions similarly to Morrison's *Beloved*; he returns as a ghost "to witness his own story because others cannot, or simply will not, speak his name" (104). I find Holland's observation valuable for looking at how Riggs's film works to fend off his historic erasure as well as that of other black queers. Though he does not literally come back from the dead, his body figuratively bears witness for those unnamed black queers who died in silence. Additionally, as Riggs dies prior to the film's

completion, we restage his “return” from the dead as viewers each time we watch the film.

Like Kenan’s novel, Riggs’s documentary, then, is a ghost story. Commenting on Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997) explores the ghostliness of invisibility. She maintains:

To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows. (17)

The materiality of ghostliness is useful for considering the dialectic between flesh and invisibility undertaken in Riggs’s film. Invisibility is not an absence of materiality but it is an assertion that those we refuse to see do not matter.

Riggs puts forth his flesh as evidence, to counter his exclusion. His body features prominently in the film. He screens parts of his narration from his hospital bed, where he informs viewers of his steadily declining T-cell count. We also witness Riggs’s naked form running through the woods periodically. The director articulates his desire to retain the forest scenes as they symbolize his attempt to sort through the disorder in his life and to grapple with the restrictive

notions of black identity. Riggs makes an analogy between those scenes of him “lost” in the woods and the black community’s confining concepts of identity. His “performance” hints at an alternative foundation for black collective identity. In place of the typical visible signifiers of race, such as skin color, hair texture, and style of dress, Riggs’s ailing and naked body locates black identity in our shared experience with embodied trauma. The evidence of the “flesh” is more than skin deep; it hearkens back to the terror that ushered blacks into the New World.⁶

In his discussion of *Black Is in Performing Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson cautions that Riggs’s naked journey may signify in ways the filmmaker does not intend. Noting the discursive and historical associations elicited by Riggs’s run through the woods, Johnson suggests his nakedness may call to mind racist stereotypes made popular in ante and postbellum America of the sexually predatory black male. He adds further that Riggs’s moving figure could also represent “a larger body of racist discourse on the black male body in motion. This trope of black bodily kinesthetics is manifest in various forms: in the vernacular-laden expression ‘Keep this Nigger-Boy running,’ in the fugitive slave, and even in contemporary hypermasculized images of black athletes” (Johnson 43). While I agree with Johnson about the myriad racist interpretations made possible by those scenes in the woods, I do not think those readings go beyond Riggs’s stated intention to sort through the clutter of black identity.

Much of that “clutter” has to do with derogatory meanings attached to the black body, and in this case the black male body. Like Ellison’s “invisible” protagonist, Riggs’s running is an attempt to find identity amidst the ruins of racist signifiers.

The ideological implications of Riggs’s scenes in the hospital bed are as far-reaching as those in the woods. One could misread Riggs’s documentary as “victim art” as Arlene Croce does with “Still/Here” (1994), a multimedia performance piece choreographed and directed by Bill T. Jones, an artist who is also featured in Riggs’s documentary. Inspired by workshops conducted with people living with terminal illnesses, “Still/Here” uses dance to narrate feelings about one’s mortality that might otherwise be inexpressible. In her critique – of a piece she refused to see – Croce voices resentment at being “*forced* to feel sorry for ... dissed blacks, abused women, or disenfranchised homosexuals” and suggests that such victim art disarms critics by placing such performances “beyond the reach of criticism” (16-17; emphasis in original). Croce’s uninformed lambasting of Jones’s performance piece insinuates that art and trauma belong in separate spheres. That bearing witness to suffering automatically translates into an act of self-victimization. And that we, as cultural critics, can turn away or cover our eyes to art forms that make us uncomfortable or leave us at a loss for words.

Harvey Young’s “Memorializing Memory: Marlon Riggs and Life Writing in *Tongues Untied* and *Black Is Black Ain’t*” challenges Croce’s notion of victim art

by attending to Riggs's authority over the work he is producing. Young reasons that while Riggs may fit "societal expectations of the AIDS 'victim' – he is emaciated, wears a blue hospital gown, and is confined to his hospital bed, it is important that we do not lose sight of his authorial agency over the filmmaking process. He controls his own image. He determines what we see" (253). I concur with Young and maintain further that Riggs's hospital scenes open up even more complicated readings when we view them in relation to the running scenes. If the running scenes evoke "the black male body in motion," those in the hospital conjure the black (male) body in pain. To dehumanized, lynched, and brutalized black (male) bodies, Riggs adds the trauma of impending death from AIDS complications. Yet he does so not by appealing to a history of black male victimization. Rather he reminds us that the struggle against death is at the crux of black racial identity.

Riggs's body, then, functions as the site upon which blackness and AIDS coalesce, thus incorporating AIDS into an experience of black embodied trauma. Contextualizing his personal battle against AIDS within the broader struggle for black subjectivity, Riggs reasons:

The connection between AIDS and black folks and black folks' identity is metaphoric. Both of them are a struggle against the odds. In the face of adversity. In the face of possible extinction. How do we keep ourselves

together as a people in the face of all our differences? How do we maintain a communal selfhood if you will? Who's in the community and who's not?

The connection between black folks and AIDS, however, is as real as it is metaphoric since the black diasporic community comprises a large percentage of HIV/AIDS cases. The historic connection between racist and homophobic discourses makes a filmed battle with AIDS a vital lens through which to revise constructs of black identity.⁷

While Johnson worries that Riggs's body could function as a "spectacle of contagion" and as such perpetuate the association of AIDS with homosexual bodies, I want to extend this observation to the racialization of AIDS that characterizes contemporary discourse around the disease. The racialization of AIDS illustrates the ways in which modern stereotypes of racial and sexual perversion continue to haunt the western cultural imagination and influence policy making decisions. Scientific conjecture that the AIDS virus originated in Africa, spread to Haiti, and then penetrated the West is an interesting reversal of the narrative of colonial conquest. Further, the supposed transmission of the virus from monkeys to Africans reinforces a colonialist discourse of African primitivism and uncontrolled sexuality. The ideologies of respectability that accompanied the emergence of New Negro subjectivity negated those discourses of sexualized racism. However, these same preoccupations with respectability

and “the” black public image have silenced public dialogue about black sexuality and stifled black collective struggles against AIDS.⁸

In place of a critical dialogue about the interrelatedness of race and sexuality, the media frenzy over J.L. King’s *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (2004), and “down low” culture in general, perpetuates the construction of black men as sexual predators by framing married men’s clandestine affairs with other men in racialized terms. King’s part-confessional, part-exposé, part-heterosexual black women’s self-help guide became a *New York Times* bestseller by cultivating the culture of fear and contagion that already circumscribes black sexuality. King’s appearance on *Oprah* sparked follow-up newspaper and magazine articles about this supposedly “new” phenomenon, books that question and refute some of the author’s claims and targeted research studies that focus on “down-low” (D.L.) black men in an effort to determine their culpability in increasing black women’s exposure to the HIV virus. Meanwhile protection and prevention strategies that can empower black women get ignored.

The media’s down-low spectacle keeps alive stereotypes of black men as sexual threats and creates a convenient scapegoat for the increased incidence of AIDS in black communities. Instead of initiating dialogue about the interrelatedness of racism, sexism and homophobia, the down-low scare villainizes black men and victimizes black women who sleep with men. HIV+

activist and minister Rae Lewis Thornton tells *Salon.com* that focus needs to shift from identifying men on the D.L. to having frank discussions about black sexuality. She reasons, “King has made a lot of money and scared the hell out of a lot of black women ... But it makes all black men the bad guy. It’s not that we can’t trust black men—that isn’t what the discussion should be about. It’s about how do we address homosexuality in the black community?” (Joiner). Looking back at Riggs’s documentary through the prism of the down-low panic underscores the failure of the black community to adequately address sexuality even a decade after Riggs’s passing. Undue emphasis on the down-low culture also continues to deflect attention from the devastating impact of the disease on various segments of the black community and the ongoing need to prioritize AIDS prevention and treatment as a communal issue, as a collectively acknowledged trauma that is connected to the other forms of racial and sexual violence that shape black subjectivity.

All the Blacks are Straight, All the Gays are White, But Some of Us are Dying

In a poignant scene in the film, Riggs wears ACT UP’s signature “Silence=Death” t-shirt as a roll call of identity markers scroll across his seated figure: black ... colored ... Negro ... African American ... gay ... HIV+. By adding gay and HIV+ to this list of names, he “writes” himself—and other black (HIV+) gays by extension—into a legacy of struggle for black self-definition. This act of naming combines with Riggs’s embodied performance to remind us that

the struggle against namelessness and invisibility experienced by black queers, and blacks who are HIV+, is inseparable from the broader collective struggle for black subjectivity. In place of a unifying narrative, Riggs reconnects this process of naming to a history of loss and fragmentation. As such, the act of naming becomes a way of re-membling rather than an act of defining.

Historically, naming has played an integral role in assertions of black subjectivity as a means of offsetting natal alienation and claims to a site of “origin.” Kimberly Bentson’s “‘I Yam What I Am,’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature” furthers, “For the Afro-American ... self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven: Naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism” (3). Commenting in the film, Angela Davis attributes a black compulsion to name ourselves to a history of always being named by someone else. Slave owners insisted upon naming bondspeople in order to confer the status of property on them. After slavery’s abolishment, plantation literature “named” blacks through stereotypes and other forms of racist propaganda.

Naming, as a public practice of (re)defining blackness, is central to all of the unifying narratives that I discuss throughout this dissertation. Proclaiming themselves *New Negroes*, black modernist intellectuals and literati sought to distance themselves from slavery and a folk “past” and to counteract negative images of blacks that circulated in American popular culture. In an effort to

supplant negative images with positive ones, black intellectuals and community spokespersons nurtured the culture of respectability and bourgeois uplift that I unpack in Chapter One and make reference to in Chapter Two. I recall the performances of respectability again here in order to reiterate the ways in which some strategies of collective affirmation and resistance to cultural loss also foster boundaries of exclusion.

Like the New Negro Renaissance, the Black Power Movement employed (re)naming as a form of psychological recovery and collective affirmation. “Black” emerged as a moniker of pride in the 1960s while terms like “colored” or “Negro” evoked memories of subjection and powerlessness.⁹ By shifting from Negro to Black, the purveyors of Black Power wanted to set themselves apart from what they viewed as the accommodating tendencies of civil rights leaders. Further, they sought to unhinge “black” from its negative etymological associations and transform it into a designation of strength and racial pride.

Black Is reminds us that “black” was not always beautiful by recalling the derogatory meanings attached to the word before activists and artists embraced and redefined it. A voiceover by Riggs heralds the definitions of black recorded in the OED, which include stained, dirty, malignant, and involving death. The internalization of these negative meanings of blackness by blacks is shown through a humorous recollection of a conflict between Riggs and his childhood friend Edward Lee over being called black and more somber historical footage of

black children jumping rope to the rhyme: “If you’re black, get back/If you’re brown, stick around/If you’re red, go ‘head/If you’re yellow, you’re mellow/If you’re white, you’re right.”

In light of these derogatory associations, proclaiming black beautiful was a radical assertion. As Angela Davis affirms in the film, the slogan signified “a politics of struggle.” Renaming, then, was a politicized performance of mourning and reclamation similar to blues protest. Like the blues mode of call-and-response, this contest over the meaning of blackness spanned from the public to the personal. Elting Smalls, an older South Carolinian man featured in *Black Is*, recalls the impact hearing Stokely Carmichael had on his life: “One guy came along ... and said that ‘Black is beautiful’ and then we realized that Black is beautiful. This kinky hair could go all kinds of ways. This brown chocolate skin looked so nice and could be all kinds of color. And then we began to realize ‘I am somebody.’” Likewise footage from a 1960s black power school featuring children singing black is beautiful (“Free Huey!”) acts as a counternarrative to the earlier playground rhyme.

This movement toward collective affirmation, however, as Phillip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men?* (1996) discusses in detail, turned into “a project to recuperate the viability of black masculinity” (67). Angela Davis echoes Harper’s claim in her film commentary, recalling that when voices cried out “Black is Beautiful” in the sixties, they were referring to the black man. The recovery of

black manhood dominated the Black Power Movement and cultural nationalism to such an extent that black suffering was interpreted as the loss of black manhood and black redemption as manhood regained. Bearing out my assertions in the previous chapter about the cultural memory of lynching, bell hooks, signifying on Eddie Murphy's stand-up routine from his film *Raw* (1987), warns against conceptualizing black oppression in these sexual terms:

When we translate the history of black oppression sexually, especially through the writings of George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, it's all sexualized into emasculation and castration. So the reclamation of the black race gets translated into 'it's a dick thing.' That's why I'm fond of saying if the black thing is really a dick thing in disguise, we're in serious trouble.

It is possible to sexualize racial trauma – as Toomer's work does so brilliantly – in order to re-member black embodied trauma as well as black sentience. By making his body such a visible presence in the film and incorporating footage from other unnamed and unmourned queer pioneers, Riggs encourages a similar excavation of an eroticized history of loss.

Though *Black Is* focuses primarily on the reclamation of black manhood in the post civil rights era, one can also spot black men's monopoly over black representation much earlier, as the previous two chapters have shown.¹⁰ The black feminist scholars and activists featured in Riggs's documentary – Angela

Davis, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Michele Wallace – critique black heterosexual men’s ownership of black representation throughout the film. Riggs’s incorporation of this footage attests to the lineage that exists between black feminism and black queer activism and theory. My citation of Hull, Scott and Smith’s *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982) cosigns this genealogy. The oft cited Combahee River Collective’s manifesto expresses modern black feminism’s commitment to fighting against black women’s concurrent oppressions – racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. Black feminism’s acknowledgment of these interlocking oppressions does not preclude the necessity of interrogating sexuality apart from and in dialogue with gender, race, and class, however. By placing Riggs’s documentary in a project that centers a great deal on black women’s elided traumatic histories, I am locating these silenced narratives with a broader discourse of blackness that privileges a particular masculinized performance of identity.

Both the title and content of Hull, Scott and Smith’s anthology assert that when “woman” is synonymous with “white women” and “black” is tantamount to “black men,” black women are invisible. In a similar vein, black lesbian and gay critics and artists have articulated the invisibility they feel in both gay and black communities. Charles I. Nero laments in “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic,” “Because of the heterosexism among African American intellectuals and the racism in the white gay community, black gay men have been an invisible

population” (229). But as Ellison’s novel and Avery Gordon’s rendering of Ellisonian invisibility make poignantly clear, invisibility does not always indicate material absence. Rather, it is a refusal of recognition.

This refusal of recognition lends itself to feelings of alienation and loss that are endemic to trauma. Mourning both the loss of his queer black ancestry and the loss of his self in black cultural memory, Riggs makes an appeal to the dead for confirmation of his existence: “Oh dear fathers tell me what to do. I search for ancestral affirmation to find only this – pathos. Or worse, historic erasure. How much longer can I walk this winding road?” This invocation is supported by footage of Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, and scenes from *Portrait of Jason* (1967), Shirley Clarke’s experimental cult classic about an aging black gay hustler. By incorporating the footage of these forgotten black gay pioneers, Riggs reinserts them into black cultural memory, but in a way that problematizes recorded history.

When I Think of Home: Reimagining Black Communities

A mock sermon toward the end of the film draws on Joseph Beam’s familiar refrain, “I cannot go home as who I am.” Beam explains in his collection *In the Life* (1986):

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is

my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply. (231)

This longing for home – for an imagined return – is an established trope in African American literature and culture as my analysis of *Cane* makes plain. Part of *Cane*'s lasting appeal in African American literary discourse hinges on the tropes of return and rememory the book espouses. *Cane*'s circular form – and the migratory underpinnings of this dissertation as a whole – affirms that the trauma of forced and voluntary migration and displacement lends itself to a spatial mapping of African American loss. Petry's use of space further supports a sense of homelessness that plagues her urban female protagonist. Riggs employs movement in his documentary as well not only to attest to the centrality of migration but as added testimony to black multiplicity – as urban, southern, inner city, and suburban.

Home, then, acts as a floating signifier for black loss. It is often imagined as Africa, as the South, or as a unified African American community. While these sites of home historically have provided refuge from America's racist environment, the heterosexism in these spaces makes black gay and lesbian members of "the community" feel more like unwelcome guests. Throughout *Black Is*, Riggs suggests that expanding the notion of black community is critical to reimagining black collectivity. During part of her narration, bell hooks

recommends that black communities start emphasizing “communion” instead of “unity.” The spiritual undertones of communion – the notion of spiritual union – is suggestive in light of the historical importance of the black church.

Akin to other real and imagined “homes,” the black church is a critical site of cultural memory. Historically, the black church has offered sociopolitical and psychological support to many members of the black community. It has been central to antiracist activism from the struggle for the abolition of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement. The black spirituals, which occupy a critical place in black cultural memory, are also rooted in ideals of liberation in a world to come or in a conferred or claimed freedom. Yet the incompatibility of spirit and flesh that gave rise to the blues and jazz is still symptomatic of the conservative sexual politics in black religious spaces.

Many contemporary black Christian communities continue to promote an orthodox ethos concerning matters of gender and sexuality. A Mississippi minister featured in Riggs’s documentary expresses the general sentiment of the black church regarding gender and sexuality. Women are deemed subordinate to their male counterparts and homosexuality is concerned a sin. While some black churches have relaxed their views around gender, allowing some women to assume leadership positions, their stance on homosexuality, if it has shifted at all, has moved to the right.

In spite of fire-and-brimstone sermons, attempts to “save” and convert gays and lesbians, refusal to adequately address the AIDS crisis, and mounting opposition to same-sex marriage, conventional black churches still boast significant numbers of gay and lesbian parishioners, musicians, and even deacons and ministers. Rather than abandon these spaces that have served as spiritual homes, many black gay Christians succumb to the church’s code of silence regarding sexual identity. Gay and lesbian church members, however, are becoming increasingly more vocal against the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy of black churches. In recent years – and seemingly in concert with the conservative turn in American politics – black churches have become less tolerant of and more outspoken against gay and lesbian civil rights.¹¹ In turn, some gay and lesbian Christians have created or have sought out alternative spaces for spiritual nurturance and unconditional acceptance.

For instance, the Unity Fellowship Church, a predominantly lesbian and gay church founded by Archbishop Carl Bean and spotlighted in Riggs’s documentary, espouses a theology of unconditional love and acceptance. The film shows Unity Fellowship participating in many of the same rituals as other black Protestant churches, such as gospel music and theatricality. According to the church’s website, the congregation also advocates a liberation theology, a philosophy that has fueled the black church’s commitment to service and politics for hundreds of years.¹² The critical difference between Unity Fellowship and

most traditional black church congregations is that UFC stresses the value and equality of all its members. Their diversity is embraced rather than condemned.

In addition to “the black church,” the film highlights the South as a spiritual home of black people and a site of historical memory. Riggs’s “return” to the South is significant considering the contemporary focus on the urban as a site of black authenticity. As black people continued to migrate to cities, blackness became increasingly associated with the urban and later with the urban underclass as Chapter Two confirms. As the loosening of segregation in the post civil rights era set off a wave of “black flight” from mixed class urban communities, members of the black middle and upper classes desiring homes in the suburbs were accused of trying to emulate whites. Riggs intersperses scenes of suburban blacks with Ice Cube’s music video “True to the Game,” a song that castigates the black middle class for abandoning black neighborhoods: “Stop being an Uncle Tom, you little sell out/House nigga scum,” Ice Cube chides and threatens to revoke the black assimilator’s “ghetto pass.”

Ice Cube’s rant against the middle class is not new of course. Certainly, one can read his critique as a vulgarization of Franklin Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957). Ice Cube’s song, however, is symptomatic of the contemporary narrative of black authenticity evidenced in hip hop culture. Black “realness,” according to much of mainstream hip hop, is measured by one’s proximity to urban space, crime, poverty, and violence. By returning south, then, Riggs goes against

prevailing representations of blacks as urban subjects and resurrects the South as a site of black historical memory.

Like Toomer, Riggs acknowledges the complex connection African Americans have with the South. In a segment that centers on families, Angela Davis mentions that many blacks are uncomfortable with the South because we associate it with traumatic memories. Echoing Toomer's imperative, Davis encourages us instead to have "a willingness to remember." This responsibility to remember sustains Riggs's project of mourning as well. Supporting Davis's comment, Sweet Honey in the Rock's "Remember Me" resounds in the background as the St. Juliens, a New Orleanian family spotlighted in the documentary, pour libations to observe the tenth anniversary of their father's death. These personal acts of memory tie in with the themes of history and memory that recur throughout the documentary and with the film itself as a memorial to Riggs. Remembering both the individual and the collective body, then, is central to Riggs's goal of rescuing blackness from its already unstable signifiers of race and returning it to a shared history of struggle.

In place of conventional narratives, Riggs's montage aesthetic is rooted within black musical traditions but it also resonates with what Ann Cvetkovich calls an "archiving impulse," an urge to leave a record that has been generated by gay and lesbian publics in response to the AIDS crisis. In *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), Cvetkovich describes this impulse as "the desire to collect objects not just

to protect against death but in order to create practices of mourning” (269).

Consistent with this characterization of an archiving impulse, Riggs’s encounter with death served as an impetus for his documentary. He not only set out to record his “own living memory,” but he also constructed an archive of the black collective struggle for self-definition. The following chapter builds upon this notion of an archive as both a way to reconstruct a loss past and to reconceptualize blackness from the perspective of a traumatic history instead of fixed narrative of origins.

¹ Black nationalism is a contested and complicated ideology that politically takes root in the US in the 19th century with Martin Delany and in the early 20th century with Marcus Garvey. However, in this chapter I am discussing black nationalism(s) roughly from the 1960s until the late 1970s. Due to the marriage of aesthetics and politics within the Black Arts Movement, the Black Power movement and more culturally centered nationalist expressions, such as Molefi Asante and Maulana Karenga’s championing of Afrocentricity, I discuss this “artistic” period in a broad sense as black nationalism or sixties era black nationalism. See Robert Carr, *Nationalism in the New World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002) and William L. VanDeburg, *Modern Black Nationalism: From Marcus Garvey to Louis Farrakhan* (New York: NYU Press, 1997).

² The policing functions of black nationalism are well-elucidated in Wahneema Lubiano’s “Black Nationalism and Black Commonsense: Policing Ourselves and Others,” *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997): 232-252.

³ All quotes from the film are my own transcription.

⁴ A black gay professor named Woodridge is included in one of Ellison’s early manuscripts for the novel. Roderick A. Ferguson’s *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) is apparently the first critical work to engage this excluded chapter. I find the exclusion of Woodridge suggestive considering recent scholars’ laudable efforts to “queer” *Invisible Man*. See for instance Daniel Y. Kim’s “Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and Its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 30.3 (1997): 309-328 and Michael Hardin’s “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: Invisibility, Race, and Homoeroticism from Frederick Douglass to E. Lynn Harris,” *Southern Literary Journal* 37.1 (Fall 2004): 96-120.

⁵ See, for instance, Robert F. Reid-Pharr, “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity,” *Studies in the Novel*, 28.3 (Fall 1996): 372-394; Sharon P. Holland’s *Raising the Dead*, especially Chapter Four “(Pro)Creating Imaginative Spaces and Other Queer Acts: Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* and Its Revival of James Baldwin’s Absent Black Gay Man in *Giovanni’s Room*”; and E. Patrick Johnson’s “Manifest Faggotry: Queering Masculinity in African American Culture” in *Appropriating Blackness*, 48-75.

⁶ Here I use the term “flesh” in concert with Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” where she conjectures, “If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard,” 61.

⁷ For more on the convergence of 19th century discourses of racial and sexual deviancy, see Siobhan Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

⁸ See Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Patricia Hill Collins *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge Press, 2004).

⁹ Phillip Brian Harper’s *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) credits Stokely Carmichael with encouraging the change from Negro to black.

¹⁰ Hazel Carby’s *Race Men* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1998) also foregrounds male dominance over black intellectual life by incorporating examples from film, literature and public culture.

¹¹ The public stance Reverend Bernice King, daughter of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has taken against gay marriage seems a telling example of this turn toward intolerance in many black church communities.

¹² See “The Unity Fellowship Church” <<http://www.unityfellowshipchurch.org>>.

Chapter Four

Archiving Blackness: Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Post-Soul Aesthetics

This chapter advances a post-soul aesthetic as a framework for reading Danzy Senna's 1998 "neo-passing" novel *Caucasia*.¹ Post-soul criticism encapsulates the aesthetic and cultural shifts experienced by African Americans after the civil rights and black power eras. Embraced by cultural critics Mark Anthony Neal, Trey Ellis, Greg Tate, among others, to convey black postmodern realities, a post-soul aesthetic contends with the dissolution of modern constructs of racial identity, legal desegregation, postindustrialism, and a commodification of blackness.² A post-soul aesthetic has been used to categorize the literature of seventies pioneers Ntozake Shange, Ishmael Reed, and Gayl Jones as well as recent fiction by Danzy Senna, Trey Ellis, and Colson Whitehead, the films of Julie Dash and Spike Lee, the visual art of Kara Walker and Adrian Piper, the music of Fishbone and Me'Shell NdegéOcello and the culture of hip hop.³

The common thread that binds post-soul artistic and cultural production is a mode of sampling and reconstructing across black historical and cultural moments, at times with doses of parody, satire, and irreverence. What I consider an "archiving" tendency marks the post-soul generation's engagement with cultural memory, collective history, and racial identity. Diverging from previous generations, a post-soul aesthetic does not rely on fixed concepts of blackness as

a biological essence or “soul.” In this chapter, I build off of the “post” in post-soul in order to interrogate the structures of loss and desire that inform these revisions of the past.

Post-soul or the end of soul is not the “end of blackness,” but a fading away of outmoded aesthetics of black authenticity.⁴ Mark Anthony Neal locates these dated aesthetics in modern constructs of blackness or “soul”:

Premised on the construction of “positive” black images that could be juxtaposed against the overextended influence of Western caricatures of black life, the soul aesthetic dramatically altered the projects of Harlem Renaissance artists and critics by sanctioning both vernacular and popular expression largely valued within the black community without concern for the reactions of mainstream critics or institutions. (Neal 4)

As I discuss at length in my first chapter, southern folk culture became the loci of “soul” in black modernist literary portrayals, a soul W.E.B. Du Bois rooted in “sorrow songs,” that same soul Toomer felt was dying and sought to memorialize. This notion of a folk soul persists throughout the protest tradition with both Ellison and Wright responding to and reacting against a black folk aesthetic. *The Street* is instrumental during the protest era for relocating black women from a folk past to an urban present through the migratory trope of the blues.

By the sixties, soul takes on new dimensions in concert with Black Power ideology and its aesthetic counterpart, the Black Arts Movement, a point I raise in the previous chapter. Raised fists, Afros, and African-inspired dress become visible signifiers of soul. Black music continues to be soul's sound. Yet, as Julian Mayfield makes plain in "You Touch My Black Aesthetic and I'll Touch Yours," one must not get caught up in the outward show, a black aesthetic "rests on something much more substantial than hip talk, African dress, natural hair, and endless, fruitless discussions of 'soul.' It is in our racial memory, and the unshakable knowledge of who we are, where we have been and, springing up from this, where we are going" (27).

Far too often the evocation of racial memory in the service of unifying narratives of racial identity, however, mandates a restoration of black masculinity and a marginalization of those who do not perform accordingly. Such blackness is predicated on exclusion as Riggs's film demonstrates. This exclusion, however, prompts those black subjects who are absented from "authentic" blackness – those abject black subjects – to form alternate black subjectivities which explode the category of blackness from the inside. If then, to borrow from Trey Ellis's manifesto, a post-soul or "new" black aesthetic is premised on *being* natural rather than *wearing* one, then notions of blackness based upon indices of authenticity like language, dress, and geography must

concede defeat to self-constructed identifications with blackness that are anchored in multiplicity.

Post-soul aesthetes remain critical of fixed narratives of race and narrow identity politics without abandoning blackness as a category of belonging. Instead, they insinuate themselves into an ongoing dialogue about black meaning. Phrased a different way, these artists disidentify with blackness. As explained by Jose Muñoz, the practice of disidentification does not dismiss conflicting ideologies, “rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life” (12). Blackness acts as the lost object in this instance. Instead of relinquishing blackness, a disidentifying subject amends black identity while broadening and complicating it.

By positing blackness as a lost object, I am necessarily attributing a certain degree of pleasure and desire to black racial identification. Because black identity is formed out of a shared history of trauma, it is often “too easy to forget to what extent we can *and do* find pleasure in our group identification, even in, or perhaps especially in those identities historically burdened by the divisive politics of identity” (Ross 833). Greg Tate affirms in *Black Popular Culture* that few black people, even those who support anti-essentialist stances, want “to give up a certain kind of romance we have with being black, with being part of a collectivity, and with identifying ourselves as black in the world. These are all

parts of what gives meaning and sustains us as black folks” (275). Black artists and cultural nationalists in the sixties and seventies appreciated the pleasure derived from collective identification and proclaimed blackness as a beloved object in an effort to compensate for the loss of a unifying or originary narrative. But like all unifying narratives, black nationalism entails boundaries of exclusion that are mostly predicated on the legislation of sexuality.

Post-passing(?)

As I discuss in previous chapters, anxieties surrounding black racial identity tend to be consistent with the shifting of national boundaries. At the turn of the twentieth century, as my analysis of *Cane* makes evident, increased black migration influenced the tighter policing of racial and sexual boundaries among whites *and* blacks. The trauma of migration shaped black people’s desire for racial unity as well as the construction of originary narratives, such as the authenticity of the “folk.” As the northern influx of blacks increased, blackness became tied to urban realities. The social protest novel evolved, in part, to confront the pathologization of the urban underclass. In the post civil rights era, legal desegregation and the increased economic and social mobility of the black middle class—coupled with the ghettoization of the black underclass—had similar destabilizing effects on discourses of black racial identity.

Published within the politicized multiracialism of the latter part of the twentieth century and an intellectual climate espousing racial hybridity and

ambiguity, Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia* revisits the narrative of passing as a way of critiquing modern constructs of race without succumbing to the "racelessness" of the multiracial movement. In an interview with Claudia M. Milian Arias, Senna's comments about the proposed multiracial census category echo the sentiment of her novel:

I'm suspicious of adding a new category to the Census for a lot of reasons. I think the idea of a separate multiracial category in many ways upholds a simplistic, scientific vision of race: If you mix a white and a black, you get a biracial. If you mix a Chicano and an Asian, you get a Chic-Asian, as if race were simply like mixing colors in a paint box. I'm not so much interested in categorizing further, or adding new groups, so much as I am interested in deconstructing the premise of race itself. My hope is that the addition of this new category will spur a debate on the idea of race. But I also wonder if we're becoming more like Brazil, where complexion rather than race is the predominant system of identification. In Brazil, racism is able to function within a "land of miscegenation" – so we should see that as a warning.

As Senna makes clear, multiracialism may upset racial categories but it does not dismantle the notion of race. Similar critiques have been levied against a categorical anti-essentialism that espouses hybridity, *métissage*, and racial ambiguity but elides everyday practices of and experiences with racism. These

concepts seek to address the variegated racial identities resulting from the removal of legal barriers to integration but seem to get stuck in the mire between social constructivism and essentialism.

By revisiting modern constructs of race through the prism of passing, Senna's novel asks if blackness cannot be verified through visible markers of race—through flesh—what counts as evidence? What separates Senna's interrogation from Toomer's is that while Toomer thought a racially transcendent American identity would inevitably result from intermixing, Senna retains an identification with blackness, but following Riggs, Senna pushes the boundaries of blackness by questioning the veracity of the body. Senna also redresses a history of embodied trauma but from the perspective of unmarked racial subjectivity.

While the proliferation of passing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected post-Reconstruction era race anxieties, the setting of Senna's novel spans from 1975 to 1982, a period when passing has theoretically passed on. In fact, Gayle Wald's *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (2000) uncovers "postpassing" narratives emerging in the black popular discourse of the 1950s (121). Wald contends that this self-conscious resistance to passing reflects the sense of hopefulness associated with civil rights aims. If black people were granted equal rights and privileges, there would be no need to pass as white.

By the post civil rights era, passing had become passé. Samira Kawash's *Dislocating the Color Line* (1997) observes, "the ending of legal segregation and the transformations in racial politics of the 1960s made the theme of passing politically irrelevant. Passing disappeared from popular racial discourse and representations. In the 1970s, discussions of passing were by and large confined to literary studies of passing fiction" (126). Moreover, as Riggs's film makes clear, the Black Power Movement touted blackness as a privileged identity category. Cultural and political nationalism found some blacks essentially "passing for black" or performing versions of blackness deemed most authentic.

It is within this atmosphere of increased black visibility and pride that Birdie—*Caucasia's* biracial narrator who appears to be white or racially ambiguous—is compelled to fight for her survival. Senna's refiguring of the passing narrative in the desegregation period suggests that the symbolic removal of racial barriers heralded by integration sparked a renewed crisis in American racial identity, affirming Juda Bennett's suggestion that "narratives of passing, whether they be through racial or gender dissimulations, provide insight into the prevailing anxieties of a culture" (95). The novel's opening recalls the violence and anxiety surrounding desegregation: "It was 1975, and Boston was a battleground. My mother and her friends spent hours huddled around the kitchen table, talking about the trouble out there. *Forced integration. Roxbury. South Boston. Separate but not quite equal. God made the Irish number one. A fight, a*

fight, a nigga and a white ..." (7). Twenty years post-Brown, the city of Boston became a prototype of the nation's failure to desegregate the public school system.⁵ The rift in Birdie's family mirrors the violence in the streets. Like Petry, then, Senna draws attention to more insidious, and consequently less visible, forms of racial trauma.

Jewelle Gomez observes in her review of *Caucasia* that Birdie and her sister Cole become "casualties of an ongoing race war in the U.S., their lives endangered most immediately by friendly fire." Sandra Lodge and Deck Lee's marriage epitomizes the optimism of integration. Sandy abandoned her blueblooded roots to marry Deck and engage in radical activism. Deck escaped the projects to matriculate in the Ivy League. As integration gives way to Black Power and cultural nationalism, the couple's own political and philosophical differences place their family at risk. Sandy gets more deeply entrenched with a group of radical activists while Deck, having become a Boston University professor, grows more consumed with race theories and decides that his newfound "Black Pride" cannot accommodate a "crazy" white wife.

Birdie and Cole create a temporary safe haven from the warring factions inside and outside their home, an imaginary language, place, and people they call "Elemeno." Elemeno becomes an identity free zone where the perceptible difference between Birdie's beige skin and Cole's brown complexion ceases to matter. Cole tells her younger sister that the Elemenos are shapeshifters, a people

who can take on all forms and colors in their pursuit of invisibility. Birdie recalls, “According to her [Cole], their changing routine was a serious matter – less a game of make-believe than a fight for the survival of their species” (7). Still Birdie remains skeptical of a power that relies on camouflage and wonders, “What was the point of surviving if you had to disappear?” (8).

If survival necessitates visibility, then passing – inevitably a disappearing act – implies nonexistence. Birdie’s query about survival foreshadows her imminent passing as Jesse Goldman. It also calls into question the power that reputedly resides in invisibility. In modern passing narratives, such as Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing* and Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *Plum Bun*, black characters who choose to pass as white do not necessarily desire whiteness, but they long for the privilege of invisibility that whiteness confers. Deck tells his daughters that invisibility is a white prerogative, that “white people find their power in invisibility, while the rest of us remain bodies for them to study and watch” (72); his comment is somewhat ironic considering he is an anthropology professor. Deck encourages Birdie’s participation in espionage as well, admonishing her to remain observant of white people, “Study them, Birdie. And take notes,” he says, “Always take notes” (61). His suggestion that Birdie take notes implies that whiteness can be studied and learned, an implication that Birdie’s later rehearsal and staging of whiteness avers.

But even prior to passing as Jesse, Birdie discovers “the art of changing.” She learns “how to become someone else, how to erase the person [she] was before” (62). Birdie first remakes herself at Nkrumah, a Black Power school. At the all black school, Birdie is scrutinized in a different way than her sister since Cole “had a face that betrayed all of its origins” (49). Volunteering her own body as evidence of Birdie’s racial identity, Cole insists “Birdie isn’t white. She’s black. Just like me” (48). This symbolic twinning of Birdie and Cole troubles phenotypic race logic. If both sisters are “black” though Birdie appears to be “white,” then blackness must connote something other than that which is perceptible.

Similar to Riggs’s film, then, Senna’s novel suggests that blackness—and identity itself—is in part performative. Yet blackness can be performative in a way that narrows the parameters of identity or in a way that disrupts them as I will show throughout this chapter. In spite of Birdie and Cole’s physical differences, both sisters are compelled to act out their blackness at Nkrumah. Under the tutelage of *Ebony* magazine, they learn to “talk black,” to drop appropriate word endings. They incorporate *nigga* into their vocabularies—as a term of endearment *not* a racial slur. They re-outfit themselves in the latest urban fashions and gold hoop earrings. Cole has her unruly hair adorned in braids at a black salon; Birdie attempts to disguise her bone straight locks.

Even Deck conforms to what Bennett terms the “anti-passing” rhetoric of black cultural nationalism. He lapses into slang around his black friends and

attempts to grow an Afro. Bennett points out that “the anti-passing narrative condemns the black man or woman who acts too white” (115). Like acting black, acting white entails dressing and talking in a particular way or – as Riggs’s Ft. Washington, Maryland footage reveals – living in the suburbs. Senna’s novel insinuates that all identity involves passing, advancing Deck’s claim that “[w]e’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one” (391). At the same time, the text makes clear that the performative nature of race does not invalidate its existence.

“soundtrack to a pass”

As I mention in the introduction to this chapter, a post-soul aesthetic debunks modern constructs of race but with hints of parody and satire. Hence, one can spot Ralph Ellison’s influence in the works of post-soul writers like Trey Ellis, Colson Whitehead, and Danzy Senna. Also in an Ellisonian vein, modes of sampling and reconstruction that characterize a post-soul aesthetic are rooted in black music. Throughout *Caucasia*, Senna intersperses musical references that provide a soundtrack to Birdie’s passing.⁶ Even the names Birdie and Cole give a nod to Charlie Parker and Coltrane. Song references also act as signposts for the era in which the novel is set. In the book’s opening pages, Earth, Wind, and Fire’s “Shining Star” plays on Deck’s car radio, placing readers in 1975. Perhaps most importantly, music captures Birdie’s loss in a way that acknowledges the feeling ascribed to racial belonging without indulging the rhetoric of authenticity.

While Senna uses music to signal racial identity, she does so facetiously. Birdie's black life is punctuated by references to Barry White, the Ohio Players, Natalie Cole, and Roberta Flack. When Birdie and her mother enter New Hampshire, their van radio only picks up AM, "making Patsy Cline sound tinny, washed out, like an echo of music, not quite the real thing" (142). Birdie's time spent in New Hampshire is chronicled by Pat Benatar, the Rolling Stones, and an overt disdain for disco.

Ultimately, it is black music that inspires Birdie to retrieve what she loses while passing. On a trip to New York, Birdie spots a cluster of black and Puerto Rican teenagers gathered around a boom box: "It played some kind of talking music, the first [she] had ever heard of its kind, and [she] strained to listen, as if it held some secret." Beneath the newness of the sound, "the underlying tune was somehow familiar, something [she] had known once, long ago" (260). This allusion to hip hop is suggestive for considering racial identity since hip hop remains entangled in debates over authenticity – of the music and of blackness. And yet, the role of sampling in hip hop – of borrowing geographically, temporally, and stylistically – disrupts attempts to fix it as a narrative of realness.

On the contrary, hip hop regenerates the past as a strategy for innovation. As Russell Potter maintains, "Reanimating 'dead' sounds, bringing repressed histories back to vivid life, hip-hop sustains a profound historical consciousness, all of which serves to frame contemporary struggles within a continuum of

African-American history" (113). I find Potter's claim for hip hop's practice of reanimation and revision applicable to Senna's resurrection of the passing narrative, and particularly the ghost of the "tragic mulatta," as a way of reframing passing through a paradigm of black cultural trauma.

By probing the survival of the biracial subject, Senna's novel redresses the "tragic mulatta" stereotype. Deck tells Birdie toward the end of the novel that mulattos in America act as canaries in the coal mine, that they have "historically been the gauge of how poisonous American race relations were" (393). He illustrates his point by showing Birdie a chart comprised of pictures of famous mulattoes, including Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer. Below these photographs, a record of their fates: poverty, obscurity, death. A picture of Birdie and Cole completes the chart. Beneath it, "where the others had their fates written, there was a blank space" (393).

Reminiscent of Du Boisian double-consciousness, the "tragedy" ascribed to the mulatta comes from her purported inability to hold two oppositional races in one body. Her only refuge from a life of sorrow was death. This tragic figure haunts Senna's novel. In a most revealing way, Birdie begins to feel as if she is floating outside of her body. She recalls, "I would, quite literally, feel myself rising above a scene, looking down at myself, hearing myself speak" (190). Like double-consciousness, Birdie's dissociation stems from the tension that exists between the way she conceptualizes her own identity and the way she is seen

through the eyes of others. In concert with other trauma narratives, her dissociation is also rooted in the repression of experiences associated with her “other” self.

Birdie’s ghostly relationship to blackness also resembles Riggs’s. In both cases, their identification with the lost object of blackness effects a condition of haunting that Eng and Han connect with racial melancholia, which they describe as “a type of haunted, ghostly identification” (346). In their brief discussion of *Caucasia*, Eng and Han use assimilation and passing coterminously. Assimilation does entail passing in order to accede to the demands of the dominant culture. By raising the issue of passing within a social context of assimilation and integration, Senna affirms the connections between these two practices. At the same time, racial passing not only has particularly historical valences in black literary and cultural traditions, as illustrated by the “tragic mulatta” myth, but it also involves a distinct bodily performance. The passer has to look like what she is passing for whereas the assimilator does not.

The tragic mulatto upholds the interconnectedness of racial and sexual trauma that I establish throughout this dissertation. Historically, the mixed race body offered visual evidence of the sexual violation of black women by white men. Mixed race slave women, whose physical markers denoted the trauma of rape, paradoxically were deemed hypersexual and/or psychologically unstable on the basis of those signs. Passing, then, is part of a racially traumatic history

rooted in slavery. Indeed, passing itself is traumatic. The loss of history, uprootedness, and the “middle-passage” from one subject position to another define the trauma of black modernity. Senna uses these cultural tropes to denote Birdie’s passing and to establish her blackness through shared trauma rather than markers of racial authenticity.

Doubling as a metaphor for death, passing implies a loss of history. Moreover, real and fictional passers who are obliged to change geographic locations suffer alienation from family and community; in other words they lose an individual and a collective past. The themes of black migration I examine in earlier chapters support these feelings of isolation and rootlessness. Birdie’s experience of passing elicits these themes of loss. She is separated from family members, accompanying only her mother underground, ostensibly to escape the radar of the Cointelpro, while Deck runs off with Cole and his black girlfriend Carmen to rumored racial utopia, Brazil.⁷ Birdie is also stripped of history. She “disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name, without a record. With only the body [she] traveled in. And a memory of something lost” (1).

Akin to Riggs’s film, naming or having a historical record plays a vital role in Senna’s text. Birdie’s lack of a record ties her to a black/Creole heritage, embodied by her paternal grandmother. Birdie’s white maternal relatives can

trace their line back to Cotton Mather, but her father's family history consists only of traces of memory. Birdie muses:

It was strange. While there seemed to be remnants of my mother's family everywhere – history books, PBS specials, plaques in Harvard Square – my father's family was a mystery. [...] I knew little of their real past, their blood, which lay somewhere in the Louisiana bayou, where Nana was born. There was nothing in writing, nothing in stone. (100)

Yet, Senna defies these “master narratives” of history through privileging unconventional records, as I discuss toward the end of this chapter.

Senna articulates the loss of (black) subjectivity through processes of naming. Tellingly, Birdie does not have an actual birth name. Birdie is the name her sister gives her, “though her birth certificate still reads, ‘Baby Lee,’ like the gravestone of some stillborn child” (19). The inability for her parents to arrive at an agreed upon name for her dovetailed with the disintegration of their marriage and in a striking parallel, the death of integration. Not unlike the polarization of “black” and “white” racial categories at the turn of the twentieth century, the failed project of integration means there is no name for Birdie. Because blackness rests upon recognizable features of race, Birdie is not “called” black; others do not interpellate her as such. By virtue of her lineage, Birdie is also not white. Without an identity – a name and a record – she assumes a state of living death,

haunted by the ghost of her (former) self and the memories of her father and sister.

Reworking ACT UP's silence equals death maxim a bit, Birdie's inability to "speak her name" compromises her survival. Describing Birdie's struggle against dissolution, Brenda Boudreau furthers, "it is clear that letting her body speak *for* her, by 'becoming' white, Birdie is stripped of the agency to define herself. Forced to negate her 'invisible' blackness, Birdie literally begins to disappear behind a white identity she doesn't understand or want" (60). To be certain, Riggs allows his body to speak for him in oppositional ways, even as his work challenges visible markers of race. The high visibility of his black male form throughout *Black Is* is a performative assertion of queerness as blackness. Conversely, in Senna's novel, the body remains an unreliable witness. Instead of the body, Senna locates blackness, not in unifying narratives such as those espoused by visual performances of authenticity, but in fragments and traces of memory instead.

Evidence of things not seen

Passing is an experience of racial trauma. With no name, no record and no visibly identifiable connection to blackness, the evidence of Birdie's trauma takes unconventional form. Returning to Cvetkovich's model of archives of feeling that are generated by trauma, I want to tie what I am describing here as Birdie's "archive of blackness" to the other forms of representation in this project—

music, the visual, text, and affect – that recall a history of racial trauma.

Cvetkovich asserts:

Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind not records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. It thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral. (7)

This conception of the archive is useful not only for thinking about the ways in which the diverse textual makeup of this project recalls a black history of cultural trauma but also for putting forth new ways of *constructing* racial identity.

The notion of the archive performs a similar role in Senna's novel as it does in Riggs's film; it protects Birdie against complete erasure. As in *Cane*, the archive in *Caucasia* is a repository of memory. On the night of Deck and Cole's departure for Brazil, they leave Birdie with a shoe box marked "Negrobilia." The shoe box contains a haphazard assortment of objects:

It included a Black Nativity program from the Nkrumah School, a fisted pick (the smell of someone's scalp oil still lingering in between the sharp black teeth), a black Barbie doll head, an informational tourist pamphlet

on Brazil, the silver Egyptian necklace inscribed with hieroglyphics that my father had bought me at a museum so many years before, and a James Brown eight-track cassette with a faded sticker in the corner that said “Nubian Notion,” the name of the record shop on Washington Street. That, along with Cole’s Golliwog, was all that was left of them. (127)

These objects capture some of Birdie’s earliest memories, providing evidence of her previous existence. Sandra’s mother gave Cole Golliwog as a Christmas present—a not so subtly veiled insult to her darker skinned granddaughter. Though this vestige of racist memorabilia enraged Sandra, Golly never failed to enchant and entertain Birdie and Cole. The uncanny presence of Golliwog in a box composed mostly of black sixties ephemera provokes consideration of how negrobilia inverts but also bears the trace of racist memorabilia.

Most of the objects in Birdie’s collection memorialize those cultural signposts of blackness characteristic of Black Power. James Brown’s grainy voice bellowing “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud” almost immediately conjures in the popular imagination images of Afros, raised fists, and daishikis. These positive representations of blackness aimed to offset caricatures like Gollywogs, Sambos, and Mammies. Yet, removed from their political context, Afro combs and Egyptian necklaces belittle blackness as well.

Birdie’s shoebox also invokes Invisible Man’s briefcase in Ralph Ellison’s novel. In *Invisible Man*’s opening pages, after Ellison’s protagonist “wins” the

battle royal, he is awarded a calfskin briefcase containing a scholarship to a “Negro” college. Throughout the novel, he carts the briefcase around, adding to it objects that shape his journey northward and ultimately underground. Racist memorabilia makes up part of his collection. A pitch black cast iron bank in the figure of wide-eyed, crimson-mouthed, grinning Negro and a paper Sambo doll recall popular efforts to fix blackness, and particularly black maleness, into shuffling and dancing caricatures. Those widely circulated objects inspire a perverse nostalgia for the antebellum South for some. For others they are hurtful reminders of a traumatic history and subsequent attempts to conceal that pain with a smile.⁸ In Ellison’s novel, these objects perform a revelatory function for the protagonist. When he is able to see how the past informs but does not determine who he is, he can dispel external constructions of black identity and imagine a more subjective way of being in the world.

Birdie’s collection of negrobilia works in a similar manner by providing an ephemeral narrative of her past. In “Ephemera as Evidence,” his poignant introduction to a special issue of *Women and Performance*, José Muñoz likens ephemera to

alternate modes of textuality and narrativity like memory and performance: it is all of those things that remain after a performance, a kind of evidence of what has transpired but certainly not the thing itself. It does not rest on epistemological foundations but is instead interested in

following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things. (10)

The performance of blackness memorialized by Birdie's negrobilia is not the thing itself, not a stable notion of black authenticity, but rather a trace of individual and collective memory. Like Riggs's *mélange* of historical and personal footage, Birdie's objects uphold the multiplicity and the constructed nature of blackness. As Birdie adds objects to her memory archive, she begins to construct her own identity, one that is informed but not determined by the past.

"soul babies"

A post-soul aesthetic does not dispense with the category of blackness but it wrests blackness away from narratives of authenticity and locates it in an archive of memory and affect instead. The advent of this aesthetic practice coincides with the goals of this dissertation. In many ways, this project is a personal effort from a post-soul/post-civil rights generational standpoint to come up with a model for remembering and honoring an African American history of trauma and survival that does not fall back on fruitless recoveries of origins and narrow performances of racial authenticity. My entry point to such a model was black music, not as a harbinger of soul or a marker of authenticity, but as a structure of feeling that captures and expresses a history of trauma in a way that challenges sanctioned historical narratives.

Music also entails a performing body. Any model of reckoning with a black traumatic history has to deal with the high visibility of racially marked

bodies in America's historical and cultural imagination. The risks of attending to embodied trauma without reinforcing black bodies as spectacles for public consumption are many, as evidenced by the concern with the body in each of my chapters. Uncovering the hidden texts of sexual history may at times call for listening to the sounds that bodies make.

And of course there is "text." The texts in this project are broad and varied. My own vacillations between the conceptual and the lyrical may suggest that theorizing trauma lends itself to textual performance. Because trauma puts pressure on language and documentation, a convergence of the performative and the literary may be a radical theoretical position from which to approach trauma. I lead this project with *Cane* because in many ways it is a palimpsest upon which so many other narrative forms of trauma and mourning can be writ. Its defiance of genre and form makes it relatable to the other visual and musical texts in this project. For me, Toomer's juxtaposition of traveling men and women in place also gestured toward an alternative performative rendering of trauma, migration, and the formation of modern blackness, a rendering that is rehearsed in blackwomen's blues songs and staged in Petry's novel. Between Toomer and Petry's books a concern about the ways in which a traumatic history manifests itself in black visual and cultural tropes ensued. Issues of representation and (in)visibility characterize the struggle for black subjectivity in a New World context. It is a struggle brought on by a history of loss and social death. This

mediation between visibility and invisibility or “ghostliness” extends across my body of texts and arrives at the fallibility of visible markers of blackness.

¹ I am using “neo-passing” in a similar vein as Ashraf Rushdy uses “neo-slave” narrative. In both cases, contemporary authors make a connection between past traumas and the present through recreating historical narratives. See “Neo-Slave Narrative,” *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, eds. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 533-35.

² Framed by Trey Ellis and Greg Tate as the “New Black Aesthetic,” post-soul criticism starts to take shape in the mid to late 1980s. See Greg Tate’s *Flyboy in the Buttermilk, Essays on Contemporary America: An Eye-Opening Look at Race, Politics, Literature, and Music* (New York: Fireside, 1992), particularly his piece “Cult-Nats Meet Freaky-Deke,” originally published in the *Village Voice* in 1986. Also see Trey Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic,” *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989): 233-43. Post-soul as a critical framework to talk about black post-civil rights culture and aesthetics is outlined in Nelson George’s *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and BoHos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Mark Anthony Neal’s *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002); and Greg Tate’s Introduction to *Everything But the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003). For further delineation of a post-soul aesthetic see Darryl Dickson Carr, *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

³ I glean this working archive of post-soul cultural production from the works of the above authors as well as my own understanding of post-soul aesthetics. To date, there exists little, if any, critical work applying a post-soul aesthetic to these works of cultural production though a special issue is forthcoming in *African American Review*.

⁴ See Debra J. Dickerson, *The End of Blackness: Returning the Souls of Black Folk to Their Rightful Owners* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

⁵ See Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) and Charles Ogletree, *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half-Century of Brown v Board of Education* (New York: Norton, 2004).

⁶ Robert Gallopini, a student in my African American literature survey course, counted over 80 references to music in the novel.

⁷ This presumption that Brazil is free of racism occurs in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* as well. Irene Redfield’s husband Brian wants to take his family to Brazil to escape the racial violence that he presumes will befall his sons as they come of age.

⁸ In his Introduction to the 30th Anniversary Edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison talks about how blackface artifacts influenced his crafting of the novel. During a residency in Vermont, while he was still shaping the protagonist for the novel, Ellison recalls seeing a poster in a neighboring village publicizing the performance of a “Tom Show.” The poster “reminded [him] of the tenacity which a nation’s moral evasions can take on when given the trappings of racial stereotypes, and the ease with which its deepest experience of tragedy could be converted into blackface farce” (xiii). Saidiya Hartman echoes Ellison’s sentiment in *Scenes of Subjection*, particularly in her chapter titled “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance.” Hartman asserts that performances of minstrelsy and staged theatrics like the slave coffle portrayed slaves as happy dancing darkies and thereby served to delegitimize their grief.

Epilogue

“A Moment to Mourn”

“As day comes and night falls
For the rest of our lifes [sic] we’ll miss y’all
And even though life must go on, we still mourn
While wishing y’all were home.”

-Nas and Quan “Just a Moment”

It was one of those typical wet-hot summer days in July. Children sought solace in the fountain outside the Brooklyn Museum as their parents looked on. The corners of Crown Heights were littered with pedestrians and trash. Our path to Brower Park was encumbered by busses and jitney cabs.

Five years my junior, my friend Eve had no idea who Big Daddy Kane was. My improvisational renditions of “Smooth Operator” and “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” fell on deaf ears. “Old heads” and new spread out along the field of dry grass.¹ Bodies moved in time to bass thumping from the sound system set up near the rear of the park. Eyes widened with recognition when the D.J. introduced an old school track. Doug E. Fresh, D.J. Marley Marl and Schooly D. sounded like some ancient language of a bygone tribe.

Kane emerged decked out in royal blue from head to toe. Visibly older and a little heavier in the midsection, he had not lost his renowned ability to

commandeer a crowd. He moved across the stage effortlessly. Rhymes rolled off his tongue with quickness and dexterity. Fulfilling the pronouncement of his opening song, Kane proved he could still “get the job done.”

Kane followed his first song by paying homage to hip hop’s “fallen soldiers.” Instead of a moment of silence, he called for a “moment of noise” for Biggie, Tupac, Jam Master Jay, Left Eye, Eazy-E, and others who died too young, and more often than not, of tragic and violent deaths. A moment of noise seemed appropriate for remembering young men and women who practiced an art form predicated on ending silence. Silence around poverty and despair, broken homes, broken hearts, and broken dreams that shadow the postindustrial ghettos of America.

While I would be remiss not to acknowledge the pleasurable aspects of hip hop music and culture, I want to take this moment in the text to consider the prevalence of death in the genre. If hip hop music is today’s blues, how does the music further a historical association of blackness with loss? Not only do the unsolved murders of rappers Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur and D.J. Jam Master Jay still haunt hip hop’s imagined community, but hip hop has become so linked with a culture of death, even the Academy has seen fit to award this overblown performance of blackness.² The depoliticization and increased commodification of hip hop coincides with the death narratives that have come to dominate much of mainstream hip hop and to define black cultural

authenticity. Reminiscent of Wrightian-style urban protest, this tragic urban subject gets defined in masculinist terms. How does the perpetuation of this narrative shape our vision of twenty-first century blackness? And how might reading hip hop within an African American literary and cultural tradition of mourning complicate our conception of black cultural memory?

hip hop's culture of death

The highly publicized deaths of 2Pac (Tupac Amaru Shakur) and Notorious B.I.G. a.k.a. Biggie Smalls (Christopher Wallace) represent a convergence of hip hop's culture of death with real lives lost.³ While violent deaths are not uncommon for black men in their twenties, Tupac and Biggie's celebrity and talent made their untimely passing appear all the more tragic and senseless. Even prior to their murders, both men confronted death in their lyrics. Now their lyrical entanglements with death seem like prophecy. These visionary dirges suggest that to be born black and male is to be always already bound for death.

Rap's death narratives may in part attest to the dangers that befall black men in urban America, but the purported fearlessness of death or willingness to kill professed in rap lyrics also underscores a particular performance of black maleness. The preoccupation with violence and death in some rap music is an extension of a gangsta or hardcore aesthetic that has held sway over the industry since the late 1980s. Popularized by N.W.A., gangsta rap delivers nightmarish

tales of poverty, violence, and police brutality in inner cities. In doing so, however, it teeters between political commentary and spectacle. The market's demand for these images hints at a perverse entertainment value implicit within gazed upon tragic blackmaleness. Predicated on realness, gangsta rap and the imperiled black men performing it have become central to contemporary narratives of black authenticity.

These death encounters have an even lengthier genealogy, however. In his recent study of Richard Wright's work *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* (2005), Abdul R. JanMohamed suggests that the threat of death as a means of subjection is "a powerful, if somewhat submerged, tradition within African American literature" that spans from slave narratives to hip hop lyrics (3). JanMohamed's notion of the death-bound-subject, "the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" is valuable for reading the lyrics of Tupac and Biggie as preludes to their deaths (2). Indeed, the doubling of death-bound – as bound *to* as well as bound *for* death – is suggestive for considering how loss continues to impact black subjectivity and particularly a performance of black maleness. Further, if hip hop extends a history of racial oppression as black male trauma, a theme that I discuss throughout this dissertation, what implications might this have for a history of racial trauma that I argue is gendered and eroticized in varied ways?

Prior to their deaths, Tupac and Biggie garnered notoriety and a wide fan base due to their skills as MCs as well as the lyrical and thematic complexity of their music. Both performers explored issues of suicide, despair, maternal relationships, and fatherlessness. While I am not presuming that these lyrics are strict autobiography, many incidents described in the songs of both these rappers correspond to their life experiences. Examples of death-bound lyricism can be found in a number of their songs. Notorious B.I.G.'s aptly titled *Ready to Die* album (1994) and tracks from Tupac's *Thug Life Volume I* (1994) and *All Eyez On Me* (1996) are but a sample from the oeuvres of two artists whose intimacy with death spans their short careers.

An upbeat track with a dancehall hook, "Respect," from Biggie's *Ready to Die* album, starts at his overdue birth and ends in the 1990s when he has established himself in the hip hop industry. In the song's opening verse, the delayed delivery and anticipation of getting out into the world contrasts the impending threat of death:

Then came the worst date, May 21st
2:19 is when my momma water burst
No spouse in the house so she rode for self
to the hospital, to see if she could get a little help
Umbilical cord's wrapped around my neck
I'm seein my death and I ain't even took my first step.⁴

The date of the narrator's/Biggie's birth is described as the "worst date" of what he states earlier in the verse is his mother's ten month pregnancy, or the amount of time he has spent in her "gut." The absent "spouse"/father seems tangentially connected to the danger that could befall the child. I am thinking here of Sharon Holland's thoughtful piece "Bill T. Jones, Tupac Shakur and the (Queer) Art of Death" and particularly her suggestion that the trauma of absent fatherhood or "fatherlack" signals a condition of endangerment that is shared by a number of black men (387). Black women's (maternal) bodies, according to Holland, "serve as the point of *articulation* of this loss – rather than being responsible, as the logic of slavery's law (and Moynihan's report) would have it, for passing on a 'condition' to her children ..." (387). The narrator's fantasy of almost being strangled by the umbilical cord, of confronting death prior to even being born, not only suggests that the loss of the father imperils the black male child but also that the threat of death is a founding condition of black male subjectivity.

Death is a recurring theme throughout *Ready to Die*, a CD that elapses like a coming of age tale. The "Intro" simulates a birth and features the voice of a father encouraging the mother to push then progresses to a staged fight in which the unnamed father leaves his wife (Voletta) after they quarrel about their uncontrollable child.⁵ At the end of the sketch, and echoing mid twentieth-century protest literature, the boy has turned to a life of crime. The remainder of the CD unfolds similarly. Biggie raps about being driven to sell drugs because of

poverty. In “Everyday Struggle,” life is likened to a hustle, one the narrator is not certain he can endure as he chants in the chorus, “I don’t wanna live no mo/Sometimes I hear death knockin at my front do’.” Not only does *Ready to Die* present death as a presence that haunts the storyteller at every turn, but the dead bodies that the narrator is called to identify or that continue to turn up in his neighborhood evidence death’s inescapability in an imagined urban landscape that magnifies Ann Petry’s vision of inner city terror in 1946.

Perhaps Biggie’s most chilling dialogue with death transpires in “Suicidal Thoughts,” the final track on *Ready to Die*. The scenario of suicide that makes up this song is consistent with works in the African American literary canon, including James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962) and *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952) and Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989). Moreover, the storyteller’s declaration, “I know my mother wished she got a fuckin abortion” is reminiscent of *Native Son*, although Bigger Thomas does not consciously commit suicide.⁶ Indeed, the similarities between Bigger and Biggie (at least the persona he presents in his music) go beyond their nicknames. In queer black texts like Baldwin’s and Kenan’s as well as Wright’s masculinist narrative, an intimacy with death appears to be a central to black manhood.

Biggie’s “Suicidal Thoughts” begins with the ring of a telephone in the middle of the night. The speaker confesses to his friend his thoughts about death and his desire to go to hell instead of heaven where he will be surrounded by

“goodie-goodies.” He goes on to reflect upon his life, the grief he has caused his mother and the stress he feels as an expectant father. The narrator admits, “The stress is building up, I can’t/I can’t believe suicide’s on my fuckin mind, I want to leave/I swear to God I feel like death is fuckin callin me.” Death lurks, stalks and calls the persona in Biggie’s thematically coherent CD and at the end of “Suicidal Thoughts,” the song that concludes the album, the narrator ends his life with a gun shot.

Tupac’s preoccupations with death may have even surpassed Biggie’s. In his extensive discography, Tupac constantly anticipates his death, leading some critics to tag albums like *Me Against the World* (1995) as an exercise in paranoia. After being shot five times in 1994, however, Tupac’s visions of “Death Around the Corner” were more realistic than paranoid. *Thug Life Volume I*, one of Tupac’s collaborative efforts with lesser known rappers, affirms that the lifestyle of a thug – of dealing drugs, shooting dice, drinking gin, among other activities – requires both a willingness to kill and a readiness to die. *Thug Life* is filled with allusions to death, burial, and mourning. The CD’s ninth track “Cradle to the Grave” sums up the ethos of the project in its chorus: “From the cradle to the grave/Life ain’t never been easy/Living in the ghetto.” For a thug, the trajectory from cradle to grave tends to be a short one, paved with near misses and lost friends.

Like Biggie, Tupac explores death as an intrasubjective experience. The ill-timed deaths of others in the community seem to forecast his own. For instance, “How Long Will They Mourn Me?” is a lament for Tupac’s deceased friend Kato, yet the song vacillates between an articulation of loss for a fallen friend and personal reflections by Tupac about his own mortality. In the opening verse, feelings of grief and a longing for vengeance against those who killed his friend spark a crisis of meaning:

It’s kinda hard to be optimistic
When your homie’s lying dead on the pavement twisted
[...] I’m trying hard to make amends
But I’m losing all my muthafuckin friends
They should’ve shot me when I was born
Now I’m trapped in the muthafuckin storm
How long will they mourn me?

The deaths of his friends make the narrator question his own purpose for being born. Resonant of Biggie’s thinking that his mother probably wishes she had had an abortion, Tupac’s reflection that he should have been shot when he was born supports a birth into death that typifies the subject forced to navigate a violent existence, simultaneously bound *to* and bound *for* death. By asking, “How long will they mourn *me*?” Tupac identifies with the dead though he has not passed yet. He is mourning a life that is always already lost.

Tupac's premature mourning mingles with his actual death in "I Ain't Mad at Cha," a rap ballad from his multiplatinum *All Eyez On Me*. Tupac's double CD release, comprised of 27 tracks, marked his signing with Suge Knight's Death Row Records, a turn in his career that ironically would end in his death. Reminiscent of the Negro spirituals, both the lyrics to and the video accompanying "I Ain't Mad at Cha" pictures the afterlife as a place of rest from life's troubles. The third verse bemoans, "Father forgive us for livin while all my homies stuck in prison/Barely breathin, believin that the world is a prison/ It's like a ghetto we can never leave." Death seems the only escape from the death-in-life that many rap artists portray as ghetto life.

The almost six minute video for "I Ain't Mad at Cha" aired days after Tupac's fatal shooting in Las Vegas. In the video, after Tupac dies from gunshot wounds, he is pictured in heaven, dressed in a gleaming white suit and surrounded by departed black entertainers. J. Kevin Swain, the video director who collaborated with Tupac, tells Cheryl Keyes of Tupac's premonitory vision:

I think there are a few people in this world who see their deaths. There are few artists who go out with their boots on, so to speak. I think in that respect that made him [2Pac] great. Coincidence, if you will, but awfully close. He said that this is the concept: "I want to get shot and I want to go to a heaven, where I'm talking to my homies." It was real easy to do. In this video, there appeared look-and-sound alike of deceased luminaries:

Redd Foxx, Donny Hathaway, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Marvin Gaye, Nat King Cole, and Sammy Davis Jr. That was the fun part to me, the look alikes. (224)

Foreshadowing or eerie coincidence, Tupac's picture of himself in death sustains a black literary and cultural tradition of identifying with death as a form of political commentary. Michel Marriot maintains, "Out of this sense of oppressive mortality that many in the hip-hop generation say they face daily has come a soundtrack for their fatalism and their struggle to openly express their pain" (38). As I point out earlier, the hip hop, or post civil rights generation, is extending a lineage of musical lamentation that reaches back as far as Negro spirituals, slave narratives, and the blues. Returning for a moment to my sentiment in the previous chapter about hip hop's archival quality, its tendency to sample across time and space, what might hip hop's revisitation of a masculinist history of loss tell us about how racial trauma continues to shape our current perceptions of black subjectivity?

Hip hop feminism

In April 2005, I attended a national conference on hip hop feminism hosted by The University of Chicago. One of the recurring questions throughout the conference was whether or not "hip hop feminism" was a contradiction in terms. The sexism and misogyny that is prevalent in hip hop is well-documented and left some critics and conference participants doubtful about the potential of

locating a feminist politics in hip hop. And yet works like Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip Hop Feminist* (1999), Rachel Raimist's documentary *Nobody Knows My Name* (1999), Gwendolyn Pough's *Check it While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (2004), and Patricia Hill Collins's *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, Feminism* (2006), among other titles, suggests that hip hop can be a critical site for investigating black female sexuality, agency, rage, and trauma.

Notwithstanding black women's foundational roles in hip hop music and culture, black female MCs remain on the margins of the male-dominated industry. If hip hop functions as a social mirror of sorts, the scarcity of black women's narratives of loss may indicate a lack of agency for black women in the industry, the absence of an audience for particular kinds of black women's stories, a preference for other forms of cultural expression, or perhaps a combination of these factors. Arguably the most billable female rapper, Lil' Kim (Kimberly Denise Jones) gained fame and notoriety as the protégé and lover of Notorious B.I.G. and as a black female MC whose sexually explicit lyrics could raise even the raunchiest blueswoman's eyebrows. And yet, Kim's history of sexual abuse and her recent stint in prison suggest that beneath her over-the-top persona, a story remains unspoken.

Approaching hip hop music and culture from sites of silence and omission seems a necessary step in further politicizing a sexual history of black loss.

Taking a cue from political rap artists Dead Prez that “it’s bigger than hip hop,” the absence of a critical discourse concerning the plight of black women and girls extends beyond the hip hop stage as is symptomatic of the unaddressed trauma of black women living in imperiled communities. Positioning hip hop within a longer genealogy of racial trauma may reveal it as a suggestive aesthetic model for reformulating blackness.

¹ “Old heads” is a colloquial expression used to describe hip hop listeners typically born in the latter part of the 1960s and early 1970s.

² I am speaking here of the Academy’s decision to award the Oscar to Three 6 Mafia for their rendition of “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp,” in Craig Brewer’s *Hustle and Flow* (2005).

³ Tupac was murdered in September of 1996 and Biggie was killed six months later in March of 1997.

⁴ Lyrical transcriptions are my own.

⁵ The real name of Biggie’s mother.

⁶ I agree with JanMohammed that Bigger’s murder of Mary puts into motion a drive toward his own death. Hence the murder is also a symbolic suicide.

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Vita

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