ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: IMAGINARY ESCAPES: FUGITIVE IDENTITY CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Rewa Burnham, Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

Dissertation directed by: Professor Zita Nunes
Department of English

Since the antebellum period, the fugitive has been one of the most consistent figures in African American literature. My dissertation explores the descendants of this figure, focusing on representations of black fugitive that have emerged in late post-civil rights literature by African American authors. I respond to recent debates about the usefulness of distinguishing African American literature as a category separate from American literature in the post civil rights era by examining literary texts in which the authors address their own difficulties articulating contemporary African American identity through inherited literary forms. Each of my authors, I argue, creates a fugitive writer-protagonist who, unable to produce a racial identity narrative to suit his or her experience, abandons traditional literary genres and reading practices—such as the written poem, slave narrative, autobiography, bildungsroman, and academic literary criticism—in favor of performance, interactive reading, speculative autobiography, and hybrid forms of scholarship. I maintain, ultimately, that the late twentieth century insistence that "race is socially constructed" is activated through experiments with literary form *and* interactive reading practices appropriate for our time.

In chapter one, I examine Phyllis Alesia Perry's novel, *Stigmata*, in which she presents the novel of slavery as a limited form for representing contemporary African

American identity. Instead, Perry argues that African Americans should rely on more interactive forms of representation that focus on the duty to the future rather than the losses of the past. In chapter two, I focus on Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle.* The novel suggests that the interactive spoken word form enables the collective articulation of racial grievance while validating individual racial narratives, which challenge ideas about race sedimented in the history of conventional literary forms. In chapter three, I turn to Gloria Naylor's autobiographical novel, *1996*. Naylor resists realism as a method for representing contemporary black life. Instead, she positions herself as the central figure in a speculative novel about race in America in order to draw attention to the ways black people are literally and literarily policed. In the concluding chapter, I analyze innovative texts produced by Henry Louis Gates, Saidiya Hartman and Carla Peterson illustrate that African American literary scholars also struggle to find a form to represent African American history and identity in the twenty first century.

IMAGINARY ESCAPES: FUGITIVE IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Rewa Burnham

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014

Advisory Committee:

Professor Zita Nunes, Chair
Professor Carla Peterson
Professor Psyche Williams-Forson
Professor Edlie Wong
Professor David Wyatt

©Copyright by

Rewa Burnham

2014

Acknowledgements

I thank Jaron Bowman for his optimism. I thank Zita Nunes for her patience and encouragement and Carla Peterson for her support and enthusiasm. I could not have done this without the love and prayers of my family and the aggressive goodwill of my dissertation support team: Jackie Padgett, Ondrea Rhymes, Schuyler Esprit and Nina Candia.

Table of Contents

Introduction:
Fugitive Figures and Fugitive Forms……………………..…………………………1

Chapter One:
"Surely I Want to Get Out":
Escaping Slavery in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* ………………..……. 38

Chapter Two:
"Stay Black and Die": Escaping the Canon in
Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* ……………………………………..……. 72

Chapter Three:
Black Literature Under Surveillance:
Autobiographical Escape in Gloria Naylor's *1996*………..……………..…109

Chapter Four:
Escaping History:
The Fugitive Turn in African American Historical
Writing…………………………………………………………........…………..…148

Works Cited……………………………………………………………………………..181

Introduction: Fugitive Figures and Fugitive Forms

"Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus.
Steal away, steal away home
I ain't got long to stay here."
--African American Spiritual

"*Centuries down the line, the problem is how to explain the way by which 'race' translates into cultural self-production, at the same time that it is evidently imposed by agencies (agentification) that come to rest in the public/administrative sphere, or what we understand as such. The provocation is to grasp its self-reflexivity, which is presumptively 'private' and 'mine*'" (Spillers 381).
--Hortense Spillers "'All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Race and Psychoanalysis."

"Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things," writes W. E.B. Du Bois in the concluding essay of *The Souls of Black Folks* (162). In "Steal Away to Jesus," an exemplar of the form, the hope for freedom and justice is embodied in the fugitive figure who "steals away" to a "home" outside of the plantation economy, a psychic space signified by Jesus.[1] Thus, the song suggests that the "gifts of the spirit" that Du Bois attributes to black culture are embodied in the figure of the fugitive—the one who dares flee oppression (162). The fugitive is one of the most familiar figures in the African American literary tradition. The prominence of this trope indicates its importance. In "Imaginary Escapes," I analyze fugitive figures that emerge in late post-civil rights African American literature in an attempt to understand the continuities and discontinuities between post-civil rights African American literature and the literary traditions that preceded it.

---

[1] *Steal Away to Jesus* was one of many songs used by enslaved Americans as a code for subversive action. The song is frequently attributed to Nat Turner who is said to have used it to call his followers to strategy meetings in preparation for the 1831 rebellion he led in Virginia. For more on this, see Dwight Hopkins' essay, "Theological Method and Cultural Studies: Slave Religious Culture as a Heuristic" found in *Changing conversations: religious reflection & cultural analysis* (1996).

Even a cursory review of African American letters reveals that the fugitive of the sorrow songs has had a long afterlife. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a work of African American literature that does not contain a fugitive figure, meant here a character who embarks on an illicit journey with the hope that his /her migrations will enable escape from state sanctioned social confinement. During the antebellum period, authors of slave narratives traced the fugitive's flight from southern chattel slavery to debilitating social restriction in the North. During the post-bellum years, the philosophy of racial uplift, characterized by the efforts of exceptional African Americans to move members of the race out of poverty through education and socialization, undergirded much of the literature. Although the African American intellectuals at the forefront of the uplift movement represent the antithesis of fugitives, the fugitive figure lives on in novels like Charles Chestnut's *The House Behind the Cedars (1900)*, Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter (1901-1902)* and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). These novels feature African American protagonists whose complexions allow them to "pass" as white. Passing novels document the efforts of fugitive protagonists to escape the stigma of blackness through the performance of whiteness.

After the First World War, the New Negro Renaissance offered variations on the theme of the fugitive who "passes" yet fails truly to escape the crippling oppression of Jim Crow racism. Protagonists in passing novels such as Jesse Fauset's *Plum Bun (1928)*, Nella Larsen's *Passing (1929)*, and George Schuyler's *Black No More (1931)* attempt to escape oppression by slipping into whiteness. Writers also suggest flight to foreign lands as a reprieve from the racism of the color line. In the years following the Second World War, social realist literature in the 1940's and modernist literature in the 1950's each

provided their own versions of fugitives who run from the law in search of unencumbered personhood. During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans united in public support of fugitive figures like Malcolm X and Angela Davis and voraciously consumed their autobiographies.

As in the earlier periods, the fugitive figure appears frequently in post-civil rights literature. African American authors have produced neo-slave narratives that re-imagine the lives of fugitive slaves since the late 1960's. The authors who participated in the Black Women's Literary Renaissance in the 1970's and 1980's represent African American women as fugitive figures who, successfully and unsuccessfully, flee from the limitations imposed by both racial and gender stereotypes. In "Imaginary Escapes" I focus on fugitive figures that materialize during the late 1990's, in the shadow of debates about canon formation and literary theory sparked by the publication of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* in 1997. The fugitive figures in this study flee from the restrictions that canonization and the subsequent commodification of African American literature present. The texts I study illustrate that the fugitive continues to serve as a symbol for African American resistance against social restriction and stands as a unifying figure in the African American literary tradition.

Recent critical studies that question the continued existence of African American literature as a category separate from American literature have created an urgent need for this study. In particular, works such as Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, Madhu Dubey's *Signs and Cities*, Gene Jarrett's *Deans and Truants* and Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature?* draw attention to the need to consider exactly what constitutes African American literature both historically and in the

contemporary moment. I contend that we must look to the black fugitive figure as a unifying force and spiritual embodiment of African American literary traditions. Contemporary African American writers deploy fugitive figures as symbols of their connection to the literary tradition of resistance. Even authors such as Paul Beatty who contest racial definition and literary categorization rely on the fugitive figure as a representative of the black author. The post-civil rights writers studied here employ fugitive figures as proxies to dramatize their own manipulations of canonical literary forms in order to articulate the subtleties of African American identity in the post-civil rights period.

In order to make clear the connections between texts in the African American tradition that for historical reasons appear so different, I focus on literary works that fall into the category of "life writing." Each text studied here is, to some extent, autobiographical. Phyllis Perry's *Stigmata* (1998) and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) are *bildungsromans*, a form noted for containing autobiographical elements. In the final two chapters, I argue that Gloria Naylor's *1996* (2005), Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007), Henry Louis Gates' *In Search of Our Roots: How Nineteen Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Pasts* (2008), and Carla Peterson's *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (2011) function as autobiographical texts. As such, my analysis places the ways in which the authors embrace and resist the most foundational African American autobiographical form—the slave narrative—in stark relief. In these texts the authors thematize their own difficulties articulating contemporary African American identity through inherited literary forms.

Each writer creates a fugitive protagonist who, unable to produce a racial identity narrative that suits his or her experience, abandons traditional literary genres and reading practices—the written poem, trauma narratives, autobiography and academic literary criticism—in favor of performance, interactive reading, speculative autobiography, and alternative forms of scholarship. Fugitive protagonists represent the author's own negotiations of racial identity in the post-civil rights period while connecting the authors to the most foundational aspects of the African American literary tradition.

The fugitive practice of leaving the racial collective in order to construct an identity that is paradoxically racial and individual plays out in the familial plot of each text I study. At the level of action, the fugitive's desire for freedom is always a response to a genealogical-historical narrative marred by trauma or debilitating absences. These elements of the storyline signal the author's attempts to negotiate his/her own place in African American literary history. Ultimately, the family represented in each text signifies the African American literary tradition itself. Just as young adults must step away from their families in order to create their own identities, the authors in this study use their texts to play out their own coming-of-age processes in which they depart from conventional literary forms and collective identity narratives in order to forge their own particular racial identities. In doing so, they tie themselves ever closer to the African American tradition of reconfiguring traditional literary forms as a method of rebellion against stereotypes.

My readings suggest that each protagonist uses textual spaces to develop, maintain, and give voice to selves that exceed the racial identities sanctioned by both the state and literary tradition. I call these spaces black imaginaries. The black imaginary is

an interstitial space to which fugitives escape the public gaze and construct their "selves" with only strategic influence from outside forces. It is here that they can choose which components of the publically-established racial identity suit them rather than accepting conventional racial understandings wholesale. The shift enacted by the fugitive figures represents a move away from empty, corporatized black identity and racial discourse toward more meaningful individualized articulations of black identity.

The black imaginary spaces that I identify are representations of African American literature. Each author creates a fugitive narrative by manipulating literary forms to signal his/her own desire to escape conventional literary spaces. Phyllis Alesia Perry offers a quilted novel in lieu of a neo-slave narrative in *Stigmata*. Paul Beatty transforms his novel into a stage for poetic performance in *The White Boy Shuffle*. Gloria Naylor writes herself into a speculative novel with *1996,* and the literary critics studied in the final chapter reconstruct African American literary criticism through alternative approaches to the representation of African American history.

The Black Interior

The work of W.E.B. Du Bois provides insight into the authors' depictions of textual spaces as a means of further developing racial consciousness. In Du Bois' estimation, the black psyche is dominated by the anxiety of understanding the self in relation to the other and as an entity subject to the other's approval or disapproval. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois describes African American existence as a life lived in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (11). Despite these anxieties, Du Bois emphasizes the advantages that double consciousness provides African Americans and

the nation state.   He understands African Americans and black culture as a necessary counterweight to capitalism, the "sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in the dusty desert of dollars and smartness" (16). This tension between the advantages and disadvantages of racial dualism plays out in the psyche of the fugitive figures I follow. At the plot level, contemporary fugitive protagonists resist crippling self-consciousness and social restriction resulting from stereotypes while attesting to the special insight that "twoness" enables. Through their representations, the authors studied here demonstrate both the difficulty and the necessity of maintaining double consciousness in an integrated society. Black imaginary spaces enable fugitives to better manage the blessing and curse embodied in double consciousness.

Ultimately, racial duality is portrayed as a source of strength for fugitive figures. Withdrawal into black imaginary spaces provides them shelter from the defining gaze while functioning as a vantage point for the assessment and rejection of policing narratives. For example, Gloria Naylor writes a speculative novel about a character named Gloria Naylor who must hide in the stacks at the Brooklyn Public Library in order to escape the gaze of the National Security Agency. In Naylor's novel, writing can only be productive when it happens in a secluded space away from the prying eyes of the state, that is, from behind the veil. Her experience of being racially profiled and targeted by the government positions her to pen a critique of government corruption. In the words of the author/protagonist, she has a heightened awareness of the activities of the government "because she is African American" ("Under the Watchful Eye of the Government"). Although her character is singled out because of race, she is in fact empowered by her experience of race to fight against those who would treat her unfairly. Her "twoness" is

her greatest weapon, which she can only access in the black imaginary space. In Naylor's novel about recuperating writing from those who wish to appropriate it for their own designs, writing is safe only in the black imaginary space.

Retreat into the black imaginary enables the fugitive to develop an identity that is, paradoxically, both racial and individual. Hortense Spiller explains in her seminal essay, "All the Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother: Race and Psychoanalysis," that racial identity cannot be private because race itself is a social construction achieved through public negotiation. The characteristics of race are either public knowledge, or a secret to be divulged to exclusive groups of people. In either case, race must be a shared experience in order to be valid. The black imaginary spaces analyzed here, however, provide fugitives with a loophole within society to craft an identity narrative that strategically includes and rejects components of racial identity imposed by the mainstream.

In the same essay, Spillers offers an analysis that clarifies the purpose of the black imaginary space. As I understand it, the black imaginary enables the position that Spillers identifies as "the one who counts." She explains that the black "individual" always operates as a "synecdoche for the masses," rather than as an independent entity (395). That is to say, the single black body is often assumed to represent all black people. Spillers contrasts this representative black "individual" with "the one who counts," who represents both a position in discourse and the speaking subject. Unlike the individual, "the one who counts" can create the discourse through which he/she is understood. The fugitive, then, runs to a space where he/she can both tell his/her story and fashion the

interpretative apparatus for the story. The fugitives in the texts that I study emerge from black imaginary spaces as "the ones who count."

The fugitive protagonists' flight away from the collective and into black spaces of their own creation represents the authors' desire to assume and adapt certain elements of popular racial narratives without surrendering to mainstream appropriations. The black imaginary proves the psychic space where, as my second epigraph explains, one can determine what is "mine." As such, it functions as a retreat from popular projections of black identity and enables fugitives to decide which elements of racial identity they wish to accept or reject. Authors use these individual configurations of racial identity to represent new iterations of black culture in a society that perpetuates stereotypical images of blacks.

My understanding of black imaginary spaces is equally informed by the work of Elizabeth Alexander and Robin Kelley. In "Toward the Black Interior" published in her book *Black Interior* (2004), Elizabeth Alexander detects an "inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what the black "I" isn't or should be" (5). Alexander's "interior," the space from which black creative energies originate, resembles the black imaginary space because it enables artists to exceed the "limited expectations" of black identity by turning inward. In *Freedom Dreams* (2003), Robin Kelley similarly identifies dreams, ideas spawned in the imaginations of black radicals, that have resulted in "political engagement" and served as "incubators for new knowledge" (8). Although they serve as collective imaginaries, the dreams that Kelley identifies invite African Americans to find freedom outside of socially constructed limitations just like the black imaginary spaces I examine. The authors in

question draw attention to their own negotiations of racial identity by telling stories about fugitives who use black imaginary spaces to imagine textual spaces that exist outside of racial stereotypes yet maintain an affiliation with blackness.

Ultimately, fugitives seek spaces to configure composite racial identities that strategically adopt certain aspects of stereotypical racial identities and combine them with the quotidian experience of black life. All of the texts studied here document the escape of an African American protagonist to a psychical black imaginary space where he or she can create a self without interference from outside forces. Fugitive protagonists turn inward to construct individualized racial identities that have origins inside rather than outside the black body. Even as the authors studied here portray African American literature and literary criticism as a means of reproducing the politically-informed regulation of the black body and perpetuating stereotypical paradigms for understanding black identity, they turn to the most consistent symbol of the African American search for freedom, the fugitive, to articulate their dissatisfaction with literary tradition. By doing so, they connect to the tradition by rejecting the stereotypes and strictures it perpetuates.

Black Narrative

In particular, fugitive figures represent authorial resistance to standards established by the canonization and corporatization of African American literature. My readings illustrate that each text I study identifies the influence of the slave narrative as that which makes it difficult for the protagonist to fashion a "self" that is simultaneously individualized and "racial," where "racial" emerges from the public collective compact that determines its meaning from its immediate context. As the foundation of African American literature, the slave narrative serves as the master narrative of racial inequality

to which African American writers and critics must repeatedly respond. In his essay, "Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times," Henry Louis Gates explains that "Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in dialogue with its harshest critics" (Gates 2452). This resistance to master narratives has resulted in a set of what I call "master counter-narratives," narratives that revolve around stereotypical responses to oppression. Despite their emphasis on black lives, these stories rehearse oppressive conditions and thereby amplify the power of the master narratives they seek to subvert, short-circuiting attempts to imagine a racially affiliated "self" outside of historically entrenched racial discourse.

Moreover, as Claudia Tate, Gene Jarrett and Kenneth Warren have observed, the African American literary critical enterprise closely guards the boundaries of this tradition, thereby ensuring the continued existence of master counter narratives. In *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels,* Claudia Tate explains that black authors must employ racial protocols, "explicit, public, racial identifications, lest their literature be marginalized" (10). Tate's term proves useful to describe those seemingly immovable literary conventions that inhere in African American literature such as images of a unified black community, explicit connections between slavery and the quotidian experiences of African American life, and the emphasis on realism and authenticating documents. In *Deans and Truants*, Jarrett goes as far as to identify "deans" of the tradition, mammoth figures in the African American literary critical enterprise entrusted with the power to dictate literary standards and thereby perpetuate stereotypical plot lines and tropes (1). In *What Was African American Literature?*, Warren asserts that the conventionality of

African American criticism perpetuates dated models for understanding literature written by African Americans (18) The fugitive figures that I study support the findings of Tate, Jarrett and Warren. Fugitive protagonists turn to familiar literary forms to craft their identities only to find that these forms confine their narrative possibilities. In response, they reconfigure their texts in order to accommodate the contemporary black "self." The resistance of the fugitive protagonist represents the desire of black authors to explode the boundaries of African American literature.

My fugitive authors' representations of escape dramatize both departure from the discourse associated with the fugitive slave narrative and continuation of the resistance that the authors of the first fugitive slave narratives orchestrated. The racial protocols that Claudia Tate describes have their origins in slave narratives that were designed to showcase black submission and black humanity. The white abolitionists who orchestrated the construction of the slave narratives were certainly the first "deans" of the tradition, as Jarrett defines the term, since they edited black-authored texts and wrote authenticating prefatory materials. Yet, the earliest African American authors were not fully complicit with abolitionists. Instead, they manipulated the genres and language available to them as a method of resistance. In *Self Discovery and African American Narrative*, Valerie Smith explains that African American slave narrators wrote in order to gain some form of power over their oppressors (2). Similarly, post-civil rights fugitive takes up the cause of pre-emancipation black authors by resisting the restrictions that inhere in their literary tradition. This goal does not contradict the emphasis on the distance between past and present that authors like Paul Beatty and Phyllis Alesia Perry insist upon. Instead, the

flight of the fugitive represents the desire to make the past a tool to negotiate the future. The post-civil rights fugitive moves closer to the freedom that the fugitive slave desired.

While the authors in question take up the cause of the fugitive slave, they also seek to diversify the collective narrative so that it can accommodate black identity in the post-civil rights era. My readings of the post-civil rights era fugitive's escape as one that enables a connection to both a racial past and a post-identity future are informed by scholars associated with the Afrofuturist movement. Alondra Nelson claimed the title "Afrofuturism" for the online community she formed in 1998. She defines it as a space for "African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come" (9). The key phrase, "other stories to tell," contrasts the Afrofuturist stories infused with "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African Diaspora" with the well-trodden counter master narratives (Nelson 9). I understand the fugitive figures in late post-civil rights literature as products of the Afrofuturist movement because they represent the paradoxical process of seeking racial identity while positioning the "self" outside of the boundaries of traditional racial discourse. Each of the fugitive figures I study insists on tethering his or her racial identity to the historical experience of blackness. Simultaneously, however, these figures resist oppressive identity constructions that portray black identity as excessively material.

The difficulties that the African American literary tradition presents for black authors are compounded by the complexities of print culture in the digital age. Madhu Dubey's insight into both the obstacles presented by print literature and the haunting presence of essentialism in postmodern African American literature has led me to ponder the inflexibility of literary forms in contemporary African American literature. Dubey's

book, *Signs and Cities* (2003), marks the skepticism demonstrated by postmodern theorists towards print literature. It provides a detailed analysis of the representation of literary value in African American literature by exploring tropes of the "book-within-a-book" in postmodern African American literature. The author examines print literature's failure to deliver on its utopian promises for African Americans and opines that postmodern African American authors distrust literature as a representative medium (15). My study complements hers in that I highlight protagonists who flee from essentialist identities articulated by African American literature. Fugitive protagonists escape to black imaginary spaces that enable them to construct independent racial identities that strategically appropriate selective components of the African American historical narrative while discarding others.

Like Dubey, I begin my study in the late 1990's, a historical moment rife with confusion and disappointment about the signification value of race. My readings suggest that while the digital age has enabled unprecedented representational freedoms via the internet, it has also highlighted issues concerning the corporatization of black culture to which the texts studied here respond. In cyberspace, ethnic affiliation functions according to choices made by the user rather than by appearance or bloodlines associated with the body. Cyber-citizens have the power to choose how and to what extent they want to ethnically identify their avatars and voices. In the world that N. Katherine Hayles describes in *My Mother Was A Computer*, reality is a precarious mixture of computation and human intention. In such a climate, citizens can choose how to represent themselves, and how to develop their unique racial narrative. Even racial stereotypes identified by earlier generations as oppressive must now be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. As

Mark B.N. Hansen argues in *Bodies in Code*, some stereotypical images may be redeemed in the digital age since digital spaces function as a forum to invest the raced image with affect (172). Thus digital spaces enable African Americans to make stereotypical images meaningful by selectively choosing from all or part of these images. Cyberspace offers African Americans the opportunity to personalize components of the collective racial narrative.

Despite the freedoms that cyberspace appears to permit, it contains the same difficulties of any representational medium. As Lisa Nakumura demonstrates in *Cybertypes*, computation does not lessen the destructive impact of stereotypes, which she calls "cybertypes." Instead, stereotypes are often exaggerated in cyberspace so that they might "stabilize a sense of white self and identity threatened by the…fluidity" of the digital era (5). Despite Mark B.N. Hansen's optimism, essentialism will emerge when racial identity is reduced to iconographic displays, no matter how personalized. Further, when symbols of black cultural identity are separated from black history and experience, they have the potential to be appropriated in ways that dilute the value of black culture. Indeed, as cultural critic Toure` observes in *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* (2012) "African American culture is the 'lingua franca' of the nation. Blackness is both product and property of the nation and as ubiquitous as Starbucks" (41). The post-civil rights fugitive figure arises from this historical moment when it is difficult to distinguish black culture from mainstream culture, and, hence the African American critics, as illustrated by Claudia Tate, Gene Jarrett and Kenneth Warren, police the boundaries of blackness.

Toure's observation facilitates my argument about a shift within African American literature from a tradition unified by a concern for justice for African

Americans to one unified by a concern for black freedom. While African American literature produced before emancipation and during the Jim Crow period sought to advocate that African Americans receive just treatment under the law, African American literature of the digital age attempts to achieve true freedom from stereotypes and other oppressive renderings of collective black identity. Political theorist Richard Rorty describes this type of freedom as the need to "find our own words" to "speak the language of the tribe" (xiv). African American authors use fugitive protagonists as illustrations of their own desires to be both free enough to speak about their own individuality while still maintaining their connection to a black culture that can be distinguished from American culture. The fugitive figure represents the freedom both to be black and to determine what blackness means on a case by case basis.

In opposition to critics who suggest that black culture cannot be distinguished in meaningful ways from American culture, I argue that the persistence of the fugitive figure serves as evidence of the continued existence of a coherent African American literary tradition despite the success of integration. Hortense Spiller warns in her essay, "The Idea of Black Culture," the recent move of black culture from margin to center has made black culture too central to offer a counter-narrative. Thus, she theorizes that we must find something "like black culture" to occupy a position of critique (26). Yet, the fugitive who flees in search of freedom always occupies the position of critique that Spillers seeks to protect. African American culture, as Du Bois reminds us, is a culture defined by a persistent striving for a more just society. He explains,

"Actively we have woven ourselves into the very warp and woof of this nation…generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with curse…Is not this

work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?" (162-163).

In Du Bois' estimation, resistance to injustice is the key component of African American culture. With his final question, he situates the African American struggle at the heart of the national personality. He describes this struggle as the "active" and "headstrong" pursuit of justice rather than a stagnant or passive culture that might be assimilated into the body politic. This "work and striving," or black culture, is defined by its commitment to critique mainstream American culture. Thus, the fugitive emerges as the most appropriate representative of the African American literary tradition since the black fugitive always occupies an aspirational position. Even in the post-civil rights era the black fugitive escapes oppressive spaces in search of freedom, an ever-shifting goal. Hence, literature written from the black fugitive's perspective always inhabits the position of critique because the fugitive by his/her very nature resists oppression.

Origins of the Tradition

Consideration of the texts written by Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson and Martin Delany suggests that the fugitive figures and fugitive forms that appear in twentieth and twenty first century African American texts follow a tradition established by nineteenth-century black authors. For example, Martin Delany's *Blake; or the Huts of America* (1859-61) contains a fugitive protagonist who journeys from plantation to plantation in the south planning a slave insurrection. Delany writes Blake's speech in standard English rather than the illegible dialect that he uses with the other enslaved characters thereby drawing attention to his intelligence and aggression which contrasts with the stereotypical images of enslaved men perpetuated by texts such as Harriett Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Undaunted by his failure to secure a publisher for the novel, Delany published *Blake* as a serial novel in African American publishing venues, first in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in 1859 and then in the *Weekly Anglo-African* in 1861. Publishing in the black press gave Delany the freedom to construct a more polemical text than he might have otherwise since he did not have to concern himself with the sensibilities of a white audience. Like Gloria Naylor, Delany constructs an alternate universe that toes the line between reality and impossibility in order to draw attention to the unjust nature of the laws that constrain the black body. Written in response to the fugitive slave laws of the 1850's, Delany's novel unfolds as a fugitive plot that, in keeping with the serial form, is highly episodic and fragmented. Blake travels as far north as Canada and as far south as Cuba, as well as to Africa to foment insurrection among peoples of the African diaspora, suggesting that his desire for freedom transcends geographic and chronological boundaries. He operates under the utmost secrecy, and is often invisible to those who wish to place him under surveillance, leaving only the faintest traces of his operations. The mythical "fugitive slave" remains impossible to capture. Thus, Delany uses both a fugitive figure and fugitive form to circumvent an inhospitable literary marketplace, and challenge stereotypes and unjust laws.

Harriet Wilson's autobiographical novel, *Our Nig* (1859), also features a fugitive protagonist. Her protagonist, Frado, first cast as a fugitive figure when her mother abandons her and "sells" her into indentured servitude as a child. The family who purchases her mistreats her and almost reduces her to slave status. When her contract expires, Frado again becomes a fugitive after she leaves the family as an act of resistance, is impoverished because of lack of work, and finally marries a fugitive slave who turns

out to be an imposter. Although an autobiography, Wilson writes *Our Nig* in the third person and changes her name. Thus, she manipulates the form of the novel to construct a clear boundary between her lived life and her textual representation of it. Wilson provides a fugitive figure that draws attention to a barely visible class of African Americans, free black working women, and uses a fugitive form, an autobiography written in the third person, in an effort to support herself and her child by publishing a narrative, without completely surrendering her private life to the public sphere.

In a similar move to protect her privacy, Harriet Jacobs published her slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) under the pseudonym, Linda Brent. The slave narrative was a form that relied on the complete exposure of African American protagonists who revealed their most humiliating moments in texts that identified them by name, thereby commoditizing their selves and their suffering. Yet, Jacobs does not follow the rules; she withholds her name and thus does not completely expose herself. Rejecting the sentimental tradition, Jacobs refuses to portray herself as a victim, using her own sexuality to thwart Flint's advances by sleeping with another man. Jacobs works against both the political conventions of white abolitionists and the literary conventions that dominated the literature of the period.

Jacobs uses her narrative to align the power to manipulate texts with black freedom. Taking flight by hiding in the attic of her grandmother's house, Linda Brent writes letters to Flint and her grandmother, in which she assumes the identity of a fugitive on the run in the North specifically Boston and New York. By constructing alternate historical narratives by writing her own accounts of both her enslavement and her freedom, she asserts power over flint. She imagines herself outside of the degraded

position that the nation has imposed upon her. In her letter, Linda portrays Dr. Flint as the villain in her narrative of enslavement. She explains, "I reminded him how he, a gray-headed man, had treated a helpless child, who had been placed in his power, and what years of misery he had brought upon her" (Jacobs 106). Brent also writes a letter to her grandmother, in which she imagines herself as a free mother who requests that her children be sent to New York so that she might "teach [her children] to respect themselves and set a virtuous example; which a slave mother was not allowed to do in the south" (Jacobs 106). Harriett Jacobs uses her text to tell her story in a way that critiques the system of slavery and reveals her aspirations for her "self."

In order to make her personal narrative legible, Jacobs consciously works against the literary conventions of the sentimental novel that would deny her authority.[2] She uses the language of the sentimental drama to implicate Flint and emphasize the complexities of the black female "self." Brent is simultaneously helpless and resourceful—pious and cunning. Like later post-civil rights era authors, Jacobs uses a fugitive protagonist and manipulates literary conventions in order to reveal the complexity of the black subject. Rather than reflecting on the "dreary past and uncertain future," Jacobs creates a textual space within the slave narrative where she is not burdened by race, gender, or literary conventions associated with the sentimental novel.

Like the contemporary black authors I examine in "Imaginary Escapes," nineteenth-century African American writers used fugitive protagonists to draw attention

---

[2] In *Invented Lives (1988)*, Mary Helen Washington considers the emphasis placed on Jacobs' sexuality in the novel, which ensured that the character could not be considered virtuous or upstanding in the sentimental tradition. Washington goes on to note that male writers were not expected to discuss their sexuality (4). In *Self Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative (1991)* Valerie Smith observes that Jacobs "trivializes the complexity of her situation" by adhering to some of the conventions of sentimental fiction (37).

to fugitive forms, textual innovations that signal the author's desire to exceed both social and literary boundaries. Like Gloria Naylor, Jacobs and Wilson fictionalize their autobiographies. Like Paul Beatty, Delany embeds a rebellious fugitive protagonist in a novel whose plot challenged the respectability standards of the era. All these early writers utilize fugitive protagonists and alternative literary forms to articulate a black identity that exceed the stereotypical and socially acceptable representations of blackness in the nineteenth century. Thus, the tradition of relying on the fugitive figure as a representative of a departure from oppressive literary and social conventions is as old as the African American literary tradition itself.

Resisting Jim Crow

In the Jim Crow period, the fugitive figure continued as the most significant character in African American literature. As in the preceding period, the fugitive is a symbol of both social and literary trespass. Rather than seeking release from bondage or searching for shelter on the other side of a significant border as they had during slavery, African Americans of this era confronted the reality of a life of state-mandated inequality that carried with it the expectation of self-sufficiency.[3] In response, the African American elite spearheaded a racial uplift movement. Nevertheless, some authors imagined protagonists who abandoned the racial cause by choosing to take advantage of their fair complexions and live as though they did not have "black blood." Passing protagonists are fugitives since they "migrate" in search of social freedom by violating social laws. Characters who pass for white violate both the social laws, both those established by the state and those established by African American racial leaders in

[3] The obstacles to social equality for African Americans were most apparent in the Plessy-v-Ferguson ruling in 1896. The court case transformed the practice of separating blacks and whites in social situations from custom into law.

conventional literary forms. As such, the passing plot always concludes with punishment for the rebellious figure that chooses to deny his/her birthright.

James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man (1912)* provides as an example of both a post-bellum fugitive figure and a fugitive form. Following Jacobs and Wilson, Johnson writes a fictionalized autobiography. Hence, his first person account of a protagonist who attempts to "run away" from oppression underscores the connections between enslavement and Jim Crow. Rather than manipulating the autobiographical form to resist commodification, Johnson does so to make his protagonist more "real" to his audience. The ex-colored man is unnamed; he could be a friend or neighbor. By doing so, the author underscores the Ex-Colored Man's fugitive status. Johnson's choice of an anonymous first-person narrator represents his desire to depart from the pattern set by heroic fugitive slave narrators like Frederick Douglass who chooses to risk re-capture by publishing his story.

His disappointment that he does not have the same rights and privileges as his white father mirrors the disappointment that comes from the knowledge that emancipation did not provide true freedom. Hence, he decides to reject the social restrictions associated with black identity by passing for white. Before doing so, he runs from place to place and cycles through the various iterations of black identity available to him in search of freedom. He thus denies the state the power of policing narratives over his body and establishes himself as a fugitive. He experiences aimless sorrow that culminates in his witnessing of a lynching. The traumatic event leads to his decision not to "go about with the label of inferiority pasted across [his] forehead" (139). Instead, he changes his name and allows the world to "take [him] for what it would" (139). However,

the location of freedom remains undefined since no physical boundary exists through which he can cross into free territory. His decision not only makes him a fugitive from the law, since to pretend to be white was illegal, but it also places him outside the social boundaries established by African Americans invested in racial uplift projects. The ex-colored man is a fugitive who decides to flee racial restrictions rather than suffer under Jim Crow racism. Because he is a musician, Johnson's protagonist registers his choice to give up his affiliation with black culture as a particularly expensive cost for a limited measure of social freedom. He likens his decision to that of forfeiting his "birthright for a mess of pottage" (154). This quote, taken from the Old Testament story of Jacob's betrayal of Esau, embodies the sadness inextricable from his life as a post-bellum fugitive.

Like Jacob, who is punished by God for killing his own brother to gain social and economic advantages, the ex-colored man sees himself as a clever coward. Unlike the intergroup endorsement of escape that dominated the antebellum period, the political literature of the racial nadir discouraged fugitive activity. Instead of abandoning the race, successful African Americans were encouraged to lend their talents to the effort to elevate the race. Yet, the impulse to run away from social restriction is evident in other passing novels of the nadir period, even in earlier texts such as Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars (1900)* and Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter (1901-1902).*

Following the post-bellum period, African Americans began to migrate North in large numbers. This migration itself serves as evidence of a fugitive impulse. As such, flight from social restriction emerges as a prevalent theme in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance. African Americans moved North in hope of securing better lives. Like the

ex-colored man, many fled the horrifying lynching culture that had developed in the South. However, the cruelty of segregation was itself enough motivation to run north. A large number of African Americans chose New York as their destination, although large cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Boston received numerous black southern transplants as well.

During the New Negro Renaissance, African Americans were inspired to experiment with artistic form. A wave of new authors and new texts flooded the literary scene. African American literature was united by the desire to draw attention to racial social injustices and to develop a distinct black aesthetic. Overall, the texts of the Renaissance illustrate three types of fugitives: tragic mulatto characters, protagonists migrating from the South, and those traveling internationally. The passing novel continued in novels such as Jesse Fauset's *Plum Bun (1928)*, Nella Larsen's *Passing (1929)*, and George Schuyler's *Black No More (1931)*. In addition, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912)* was re-issued in 1927. In addition, the Renaissance saw the production of a host of international travelogues and expatriate texts.

Nella Larsen's 1928 novel, *Quicksand*, provides a powerful example of all three fugitive themes. Helga Crane, a character of racially-mixed parentage struggles to establish herself socially, migrating from the South to the North and even traveling abroad in search of social acceptance. Like the ex-colored man who kills his black identity and passes into whiteness, Helga runs herself to social death. The novel opens with her choice to perform "social suicide" by ending her engagement to James Vayle a representative of the "stuffy" African American social scene represented by the southern

boarding school where she teaches, whose policies reflect the sentiments of the racial uplift movement (8). Helga does not desire to be “inconspicuous and conformable” but instead desires the freedom to live passionately outside of social confinements. She thus becomes a fugitive and flees to Chicago where she lands a job as a personal assistant for a “race” woman. Helga is again encouraged to suppress a part of herself when Ms. Hayes-Rore explains that she might make her life easier if she “didn’t mention that [her] people are white” (41). Helga travels to New York where she again feels “shut in, trapped” (47). After her uncle softens the news that he never wants to see her again with a sum of money, Helga flees to Copenhagen in hopes of finding some relief from the stifling social scene in New York.

Like a true fugitive, Helga once again imagines that flight will provide her satisfaction. She “dreams delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else” (56). Her hopes are always vested in flight to “strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated and understood” (57). Even in Copenhagen, however, Helga does not find the freedom she desires. Instead, she is treated like an exotic object and quite literally painted into that position by Axel Olsen, the artist who courts her (73). Helga’s refusal of Olsen’s marriage proposal represents her rejection of both objectification and domesticity since both would require her to suppress parts of herself. She flees Copenhagen and returns to New York where she endures “an acute feeling of insecurity, for which she could not account” (96). In a theme that presents itself time and again, the fugitive impulse during the Jim Crow era instills a desire in protagonists to escape social constraint but without a destination in mind. Thus, the impulse to run is not rewarding or heroic as in the slave narrative; instead, it proves

exhausting. In a moment of fatigue from running without a refuge in sight, Helga marries a minister and attempts to revel in her life as a dutiful wife and mother. Yet, motherhood requires her to abandon parts of herself quite literally since the pregnancies "use her up" (123). After running from place to place, Helga's story ends with her lying paralyzed in her marital bed. Larsen's modernist novel, like Jacobs's slave narrative departs from the traditional marriage plot. In this case, Larsen suggests that her protagonist is suffocated by her marriage. Despite the artistic freedom that characterizes the New Negro Renaissance period, its literature exposes the limitations imposed on African Americans both inside and outside their communities.

In 1937 Richard Wright called for a new type of African American character in his seminal essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Published in the literary magazine *New Challenge,* Wright's essay advocates for authors to use literature to create an African American national identity and protest injustice by casting light on the oppressive social conditions that have shaped African American experience. Wright condemns his contemporaries for neglecting to produce literature for an African American audience with the explicit goal of preserving black folkloric expressions; instead, he accuses them of working in favor of "escaping the harsh lot of their race" by producing writing that mimics the conventions of Western traditions (97). He argues that artists of the Renaissance attempted to use art as a path away from the burden of racial stigmatization. Yet it is Helga Crane's aesthetic sensibility, reflective of Harlem Renaissance culture, that heightens her awareness of the social restrictions placed on her life, thereby necessitating her escape.

Wright's model of American naturalism, *Native Son* (1940), published three years after "Blueprint," serves as a model of both a fugitive figure and fugitive form. As Wright explains in "Blueprint," he sought to depart from those Harlem Renaissance artists who had experimented with high-modernism. Since he understood such experimentation as an aspiration towards Western culture, he sought to articulate a black identity grounded in folk culture and the quotidian experience of blackness. Indeed, Wright's concrete, detailed accounts of the poverty and violence that haunts Bigger Thomas' life serves as a dramatic departure from the fragmentation that characterized Larsen's modernist novel. Wright emphasizes the physical conditions of urban misery to make the argument that Bigger and his contemporaries are products of their environment and corrupt social and legal systems. Rather than examine how the delicate "modernist" sensibility unravels under pressure, Wright's naturalist novel suggests that oppressive conditions bring out the brute in generally reasonable human beings. With his exemplar of literary naturalism, Richard Wright departs from the high-modernist tendencies of the Harlem Renaissance.

Despite differences in form, Wright's novel examines the psyche of a black fugitive. *Native Son* portrays the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, as a victim of oppressive social systems. A far cry from the refinement of the ex-colored man or the heroism of Frederick Douglass, Bigger is crude, uneducated and violent. Yet, like the fugitive figures before him, Bigger rebels against a social system that diminishes his humanity. Bigger does not have a North to run toward since he lives in urban Chicago, nor does he possess the small measure of white privilege that enables the ex-colored man to escape into whiteness by passing, nor can he afford Helga Crane's trip to Copenhagen. Instead,

Bigger commits a horrific murder, which places him on the wrong side of the law and thereby precipitates his flight. When he becomes a fugitive running and hiding to avoid arrest, Bigger finally escapes the intense scrutiny that was a defining part of his quotidian experience. On the run, he learns how to avoid the gaze that paralyzed him. Bigger explains, "I hurt folks 'cause I felt I had to; that's all. They was crowding me too close; they wouldn't give me no room" (425). Bigger's violent escape from the "crowding" that threatens to obliterate his identity marks him as a fugitive. By breaking the law, he breaks through the suffocating wall that Jim Crow racism built around his life, and allows him to feel alive for the first time. Bigger reflects on the freedom he experiences when he states, "I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em" (425). Wright's novel sets the standard for social realist novels by rejecting peaceful resolution for disturbing ambiguity.

Unlike the fugitive slaves who escape with a specific destination in mind, all of the characters who run during the Jim Crow era have an air of uncertainty that lingers over their lives at the novels' end. The figures spend much of the text running away from racism, and yet they all succumb to exhaustion rather than finding resolution. The ex-colored man disappears into banal whiteness, Helga Crane ends up spent and confined to her marital bed, and Bigger ends in a jail cell welcoming his execution. Perhaps these ambiguous endings are an indication that Jim Crow racism remains an active battle. Although these fugitives did not have the sustaining hope of emancipation as did African Americans in the antebellum period, they could hope for legislative changes that would dismantle the system of Jim Crow racism.

In his1952 novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison introduces another fugitive figure who runs from place to place in search of social acceptance and freedom. Ellison follows Johnson's example by choosing to leave his protagonist nameless. By doing so, he departs from the naturalist framework established by Richard Wright that sought to make characters as detailed and human as possible in order to invoke empathy for the socially oppressed. Ellison seeks to create a more cerebral figure than Bigger Thomas. This impulse shapes the narrative itself. Ellison's novel contains dream-like scenes that resist the concrete realism key to the naturalist novel. Hence, Ellison offers both fugitive figure and fugitive form in *Invisible Man* in an effort to articulate a version of black identity outside of the shadow of Richard Wright's *Native Son*.

Ellison's unnamed protagonist establishes himself as a fugitive moving in search of something that other people try to define for him. In the first chapter of the novel, he explains, "All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was" (15). He begins as a talented young student who must perform in order to earn a scholarship to college. Initially asked to deliver a speech that he wrote, he ends up having to fight in a boxing ring. Ellison suggests that this performance functions to "keep that nigger boy running," using the racial epithet and image of escape to establish the connection between the unnamed protagonist and the fugitive slave (33). Like all the authors discussed here, Ellison uses the figure of the fugitive to illustrate the desperate desire of African Americans to escape the social restrictions imposed upon them by Jim Crow racism. His phrase foreshadows the movement from place to place that characterizes the Invisible Man as a fugitive. Ironically, the Invisible Man is first made to run by the forces of racial uplift that rule the

college he attended. He gets in trouble for not protecting Mr. Norton, a wealthy benefactor, from exposure to black life in the South. Referring to the protagonist's mistakes as "a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment," the head of the college functions as one of the many authority figures who attempt to police the Invisible Man (190).

Running north to New York, the Invisible Man manages to gain a position with Liberty Paints, where he meets Lucius Brockway, another figure bent on enforcing social boundaries (225). After being injured on the job, the Invisible Man is taken in by Mary, a member of the local black community. Mary tries to mold him into a race leader by reminding him that "something was expected of [him], some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement," which causes him to resent her attempts to force him to meet the standards of black respectability (258).

The Invisible Man does, however, become a leader in a group called the Brotherhood, which recruits him to assist them in their fight for the oppressed. After the Brotherhood is exposed as not having the best interest of the people at heart, the Invisible Man runs away and falls down a manhole, only to decide to remain there. During his life underground, he steals power from the electric company. Breaking the law enables him to achieve a measure of freedom available to those who operate outside of social systems. Like the other Jim Crow period fugitives, Ellison's protagonist's story ends on a note of ambiguity. The Invisible Man has chosen to hide like a fugitive rather than conform. His confinement resembles the social death experienced by the other Jim Crow fugitives who run until they collapse, in this case in an underground cave beyond the reach of social law. In the Jim Crow era, stereotypes are stifling, and there is no place to escape. Not

until the victories of the Civil Rights Movement are black people able to approach the destination towards which they have been running.

The end of the Jim Crow period was marked by the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These gains were the result of organized protest activities that took place primarily in the South after the 1954 Brown *vs. Board of Education* decision. During this period, African American authors and artists created art intended to inspire African American people to celebrate blackness and to participate in the fight for black rights. The fugitive figure emerged in the form of autobiographical texts detailing actual stories of escape.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1964) is a fugitive form that articulates the fugitive impulse of the period. Published after Malcom X's assassination, the autobiography was co-authored by Alex Haley. Unlike most autobiographies, Haley's text did not receive final approval of the subject. Haley manipulates his source material, interviews with Malcolm X, in order to ensure that Malcolm X would be represented as a heroic fugitive figure. As such, the narrative functions more as biography than autobiography. It captures the protagonist's desire to escape the boundaries that conventional racial discourse had constructed around the black body. When Malcolm X becomes aware that his independence displeases Elijah Muhammad, he choses to flee the country and embark on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1965 (365). His pilgrimage turns into a tour of several countries in Africa, but like all fugitives, he was "aware of constant surveillance" (427).

Malcolm X expresses his frustration that he is locked into a dated image of himself that is intimately connected to racial beliefs of the public. He laments, "My

earlier public image…kept blocking me. I was trying to gradually reshape that image. I was trying to turn a corner, into a new regard by the public, especially Negroes" (431). In an effort to reposition himself in the eyes of the public and for his own edification, Malcolm X changes his name to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. This move underscores his position as a fugitive. Even in a moment of rapid social development—the year the first civil rights legislation was passed by Congress-- Malcolm X is a fugitive who seeks to escape the boundaries of the nation and changes his name in an effort to reconfigure his religious beliefs and racial identity beyond the scrutiny of the American people.

Theorizing the Post-Civil Rights Fugitive

After the passage of major civil rights legislation in the 1960's, it became evident that legislation could not completely correct racial inequality. Legislative victories offered immediate legal changes, but changes in the day-to-day experience of racism were slow to follow. Thus, African Americans were left to deal with the ghosts left by slavery and Jim Crow racism without the hope that political movements of the past had offered. As in earlier periods of African American literature, fugitive figures emerge to plot a path of escape. In addition, African American authors seek to escape restrictive literary forms riddled with the specters of dated political positions and codified by the institutionalization of African American literary study. My choice of texts reflects my interest in the responses of black authors to the commodification of African American literature. Like fugitive slaves, black intellectuals of the nineteenth century, and authors of the black fiction of the early twentieth century, black writers of the post-civil rights era turn to textual spaces to create themselves by renouncing narratives and forms that do not fit. Through their fugitive protagonists, these authors dramatize their own experiences of

re-working conventional literary forms in order to articulate unconventional black identities.

Few studies focus exclusively on the trope of the fugitive in African American literature. While Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory* (2001) and Michael Chaney's *Fugitive Vision* (2009) evaluate visual representations of the runaway slave in the post-bellum period, they do not place emphasis on the fugitive figure. Edlie Wong's *Neither Fugitive or Free* (2011) considers the legal status of the traveling slave in the nineteenth century through the examination of freedom suits filed by enslaved women. She understands the traveling slave as a contrasting figure to the fugitive since the enslaved who filed freedom suits had to prove that they were transported into free states against their will. Wong's study illustrates that the politically charged space between slavery and freedom in pre-emancipation America was not as clear-cut as the fugitive slave narratives suggest.

Both Phyllis Klotman and Bill Beverly look at the power of the fugitive trope in African American literature, but neither understands the fugitive as a symbol of its author. Klotman's comprehensive study, *Another Man Gone* (1977), offers an overview of what she terms the "running man" in African American literature. She begins with the figure of the running man, as an expression of social critique and reflection of an "unrealized desire for freedom" (8). She follows this figure through the fugitive slave narratives and into the work of Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, William Kelly, Claude McKay, and others, concluding with popular fiction published in the 1970's. Following Klotman, I understand the fugitive figure as a champion for freedom. In contrast to Klotman, however, I focus on fugitive figures who appear as representations of their authors in autobiographical African American texts published

after 1990. A more specialized study, Bill Beverly's *On the Lam: Narratives of Flight in J. Edgar Hoover's America* (2003) analyzes the connection between Hoover's modification of federal laws and the emergence of American fugitive narratives. Although most of the texts her examines were written by white men before 1950, Beverly's book explores the connection between fugitive slave narratives and other American narratives of flight, including Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

I organize my texts according to the decades in the post-civil rights era to which they most directly respond. In chapter one I explore a novel partially set in the 1970's. In "'Surely I Want to Get Out': Escaping Slavery in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata,"* I illustrate how Perry employs a fugitive form, a "quilted novel," that forces her audience to adopt new methods of reading African American history. Perry uses the story of her fugitive protagonist, also a quilter, to encourage African American readers to reject destructive rehearsals of historical trauma. Instead, critical readers must gather and re-organize facts in order to make history meaningful and useful. This method of interacting with history facilitates acknowledgement of the past while discouraging conflation between past and present. I use Hortense Spiller's concept of "the one who counts," a figure who distinguishes her racial identity from the racial collective, and Alexander Crummell's distinction between "memory" and "recollection," to explain Perry's difficult novel. Through her textile manipulations, Perry's fugitive is able to control the memory of slavery and move beyond the trauma of family history into a contemporary position of independence and social privilege. The development of the fugitive figure draws attention to the author's paradoxical desire to produce a neo-slave narrative that also attends to the future of black American identity.

While Perry's novel documents her character's response to images of racial trauma during the 1970's, Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) explores his fugitive protagonist's responses to the racial discourse that permeate the late 1980's. In my second chapter, "'Stay Black and Die': Fugitive Identity in *The White Boy Shuffle*," I examine award winning spoken word poet Paul Beatty's first novel. My reading suggests that Beatty transforms his novel into a stage for racial identity performances that challenge stereotypical representations of blackness that he links to the canonization of black literature. Just as Beatty experiments with the form of his novel by embedding the performance of poems, music, and comedic sketches within it, his fugitive protagonist, experiments with his poetry in an effort to express his racial identity in a way that feels natural to him. He does so through poetic performances rather than simply reading outdated novels or adhering to the strictures inherent in canonical poetic forms. The improvisational form of the novel reflects the author's own desire to produce a novel that, like spoken word poetry, resists the commodification of black culture. Textual performances enable both Paul Beatty and his fugitive protagonist to create new identities visible in the familiar space of the novel.

The novels featured in the first two chapters focus on youthful protagonists who come of age during the first twenty years of the post-civil rights period. These chapters show how the protagonists' development parallels the development of African American literature during this time. In my third and fourth chapters, I focus on autobiographical texts produced by more mature African American scholars. I understand these texts as evidence that even during African American literature's "moment of maturity" a great deal of uncertainty surrounds autobiography as a medium for the articulation of African

American identity. This uncertainty is exacerbated by the historical connection between black autobiography and the fugitive slave narrative.

In my third chapter, "Black Literature under Surveillance: Fugitive Identity in Gloria Naylor's *1996,*" I examine Naylor's most recent novel, *1996* (2005). Far from conventional, this autobiographical novel resists realism with the inclusion of fantastic plot elements such as mind control technologies. Ultimately, Naylor relies on both fugitive figure and fugitive form to position herself and her work in the literary margins. I rely on bell hooks' definition of the social margin as a space of black empowerment to illustrate that Naylor deliberately seeks to alienate herself from the literary mainstream in order to preserve the position of critique that collapsed under the weight of the commodification of black literary culture. Unlike the other fugitive novels, Naylor gives her own name to her fugitive protagonist who attempts to escape National Security Agency agents while trying to pen a "big book." Thus, she invites the audience to see her character as a direct representation of the author in a novel about the writing process itself. Naylor sets the novel in 1996, a year in the middle of an important decade that witnessed the transition of African American literature from marginal race literature to mainstream American literature. In this decade, African American authors won the Nobel Prize for literature, the MacArthur Genius Grant and the National Book Award. By insisting on the veracity of her speculative novel, Naylor deliberately seeks to antagonize the literary critical establishment and marginalize herself. Ultimately, I argue that in *1996* Gloria Naylor manipulates the autobiographical form in order to position herself as a fugitive figure and protect the position of critique historically occupied by African American literature.

Moving from autobiographical novel to alternative autobiographies in the concluding chapter, "Embracing and Escaping History: The Fugitive Turn in African American Historical Writing," I explore twenty-first century life writings by three African American literary scholars. The pioneering texts produced by Henry Louis Gates, Saidiya Hartman, and Carla Peterson underscore the necessity of departing from traditional literary biographical formats in order to articulate the complexities of African American history and identity in the post-civil rights era. In this chapter, I highlight the intersection between *The African American Lives Project* and *The Human Genome Project* to illustrate the ways that *In Search of Our Roots* re-inscribes collective notions of African American identity. Additionally, I analyze Hartman's and Peterson's fugitive narratives that insist on departing from the framework that Gates reifies in his text. I highlight specific moments when Hartman pursues and then rejects the Afrocentrism put forward in *In Search of Our Roots* and place emphasis on Peterson's historical research which challenges the slavery-to-freedom trajectory that dominates African American historical narratives. Hartman and Peterson use alternative literary forms to illustrate the necessity producing "new" African American historical narratives in the twenty-first century. My analysis of these texts suggests that even established African American literary scholars are impelled to create new literary forms to articulate the complexity of twenty-first century black identity.

Chapter One

"Surely I Want To Get Out": Escaping Slavery in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

"But let me remind you here that, while indeed we do live in two worlds, the world of the past and the world of the future, DUTY lies in the future. It is in life as it is on the street: the sentinel DUTY, like the policeman, is ever bidding man 'Pass on!' We can, indeed, get inspiration and instruction in the *yesterdays* of existence, but we cannot healthily live in them."

" The Need of New Ideas and New Aims for a New Era," Alexander Crummell (1885)

Shortly after the publication of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997) formalized the position of slave narratives as foundational reading for anyone interested in the creation and interpretation of African American literature, Phyllis Alesia Perry argued that traumatic historical trauma narratives must be carefully managed in order to avoid conflation of the collective African American past and the African American present. In her novel *Stigmata* (1998), Perry creates a plot that follows a fugitive protagonist in a quilted narrative structure to encourage her audience to adopt new methods of reading and writing about slavery. In particular, Perry uses her protagonist to dramatize her own struggle to incorporate the slave narrative into her vision of the future.

Perry's quilted narrative structure functions as a critique of coming-of-age trauma narratives that compel readers to understand contemporary black life through the lens of slavery. The authors of trauma narratives such as *Corregidora (1975)*, *Kindred (1979)*, and *Beloved*[4] *(1987)* rely on narrative structures that intentionally disorient the reader and invite conflation: between the consciousness of the protagonists and the consciousness of the audience; between past and present; between settings within the novel. The blurred

[4] Gayl Jones, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison, respectively.

boundaries encourage readers to get lost in the narrative. In contrast, Perry draws attention to the chronological distance between contemporary black life and black life in the years before emancipation.

I analyze the quilted structure and characters of *Stigmata* in support of my argument that the emergence of fugitive figures in late post-civil rights era African American novels is an indication of the author's desires to adjust African American literary forms in order to articulate contemporary black identity. Perry's protagonist, Elizabeth DuBose, called "Lizzie," is a fugitive who escapes from a psychiatric hospital by pretending to conform to normative structures of racial identity. Lizzie cannot progress until she escapes the traumatic collective narratives of slavery by representing her individual racial identity narrative with a quilt. The character comes to quilting after shifting her space of confinement, the hospital, into a black imaginary space, which furnishes a psychic retreat from oppressive racial narratives.

With *Stigmata*, Perry rejects both empathetic conflations of past and present and willful ignorance as appropriate post-civil rights era frameworks for interacting with African American history. Perry uses quilting as a metaphor and a form to mediate between these two positions, thus encouraging controlled interactions between narratives of the past and present that privilege the present and, ultimately, the future. Perry identifies increased attention to narratives of slavery in the 1970's as a unpleasant manifestation of African American culture because it fosters an unhealthy fixation on unresolvable past wrongs. I show that quilting replaces empathetic reading practices that blur the lines between past and present. Further, by organizing her novel as a narrative quilt, Perry produces an alternative model for the African American narrative of slavery

that disrupts the reader's empathetic experience. As such, quilting frees Lizzie and her mother Sarah from debilitating relationships with African American history. I use Hortense Spillers's concept of "the one who counts," a figure who distinguishes her personal racial identity from the racial collective, as a lens through which to read Perry's depiction of Lizzie's quilting.

Phyllis Alesia Perry is not the first African American writer to question the prominence of slavery in the African American collective historical narrative. As my epigraph illustrates, only twenty years after emancipation Alexander Crummell warns the graduating class of Storer College to "Pass on!" or resist the temptation to "dwell morbidly and absorbingly upon the servile past" (121). By associating his mandate to move beyond all consuming recollections of slavery with the "policeman," he lends his directive the force of law. Crummell understands the degree to which an over-absorbing interest in the slave narrative could become an obstacle to progress.

Crummell outlines his sentiments clearly in his discussion of the distinction between the practice of memory—"the necessary and unavoidable entrance, storage and recurrence of facts and ideas to the understanding and the consciousness"—and recollection—"the painstaking endeavor of the mind to bring them back again to consciousness" (123). Crummell's distinction hinges on the level of emotional attachment one assigns to the past. While memory is the simply a passive acknowledgement of historical facts, recollection denotes the internalization of historical experience. Thus, for Crummell, reading and writing about slavery keeps the degrading institution alive in the consciousness. A mere twenty years after emancipation, Crummell

sought to minimize the role of the slave narrative that, in his opinion, inscribed the degradation of slavery on the black psyche.

By the turn of the century, the genre of the slave narrative no longer dominated African American political discourse. Frederick Douglass, the most prominent fugitive hero and de facto leader of the race, died in 1895. In the period following his death, African Americans sought to counter stereotypes of barbarism with images of black civility and success. For example, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* confines the narrative of slavery to the first chapter. The subsequent chapters describe Washington's path to success. Thus the racial uplift framework dominates African American discourse in the Post-Reconstruction period. Instead of fugitive slave narratives, African American authors wrote about the injustices of Jim Crow racism, ordered domestic households, religious conviction and highly educated leaders. While the figure of the fugitive lived on in passing novels, the most celebrated tropes of this period were those that were complicit with the standards of racial uplift.

The slave narrative did not re-emerge in contemporary African American literature until eighty years later. The latter years of the civil rights movement saw a rise in the publication of neo-slave narratives, a term introduced by Bernard Bell to refer to contemporary African American novels featuring enslaved protagonists.[5] The first was Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, published in 1966, which retells bedtime stories that Walker heard from her grandmother. *Jubilee*, like most neo-slave narratives, underscores the connection between the slave past and contemporary black identity. In her essay "Neo-

---

[5] Bernard Bell was the first to use the term "neo-slave narrative" in his 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. In his comprehensive study, *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (1999), Ashraf Rushdy distinguishes between the "neo-slave narrative," a fictional first person account of enslavement, and the "novel of slavery," a third person narrative of slavery. In this chapter, I collapse all contemporary novels about slavery into the term "novel of slavery."

Slave Narratives," Valerie Smith avers that modern-day slave narratives provide a "perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses" (168). Similarly, Karla F. C. Holloway maintains that "mourning stories of African American culture form a cultural narrative" that proclaims the distinctiveness of this culture (655). For these scholars, African American trauma narratives function as the foundation of black identity. In *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), Arlene Keizer argues that black writers use the narrative of slavery to "reclaim a 'true sense of [the] time and identity' of the black diasporic subject" (5). In her estimation, the act of recreating historical trauma narratives enables authors and readers to understand not only the ways in which slaves had been constituted but also the construction of the modern subject in general (20).

Rather than rely on the slave narrative to establish a "true sense" of black identity, Perry seeks properly to contextualize the form. The author manipulates the structure of her novel to emphasize the differences between black life in the 1990's and black life at earlier historical periods. She organizes her novel like an applique quilt, systematically alternating between decades and character perspectives in a way that intentionally disrupts the flow of the narrative. Instead of portraying fluid transitions between past and present, Perry crafts her narrative in a way that draws attention to the boundaries between past and present in order to avoid unproductive recollection. *Stigmata* is a disjointed tale that requires working through rather than reading.

Perry dramatizes the process of working through history in order to make meaning through a plot focused on the development of her fugitive protagonist. Elizabeth

Du Bose becomes consumed by her family's historical narrative. She gives herself over to unproductive recollection and requires hospitalization because of her obsession with re-living the past. The narrative of slavery functions to separate the family just as effectively as actual enslavement did. Lizzie stands as Perry's warning against reading practices that encourage conflation between past and present. She is redeemed through the practice of creating a quilt that represents the family history. True escape can only be enabled through the careful negotiation of historical narratives. By structuring the novel like a quilt, Perry connects her own process of writing to her story about quilting. Perry uses Lizzie's story to encourage her reader to work through memory rather than recollect traumatic historical narratives.

Passing On

Lizzie Du Bose's story begins in 1974 with the death of her aunt Mary Nell, the guardian of a trunk of family artifacts, which she bequeaths to her fourteen-year-old niece according to the wishes of Lizzie's maternal grandmother, Grace, the trunk's original owner. This bequest creates tension between Lizzie and her mother, Sarah, because both women had been denied access to information about Grace. Shortly after exploring the contents of the trunk, which includes a diary written by her great-grandmother Joy and a quilt sewn by Grace, Lizzie begins to have visions of Grace and her great-great grandmother, Ayo.

Up to this point, Lizzie's middle class life had protected her from the violent effects of American racial systems. Over the next three years, however, Lizzie's visions of the past become increasingly more real, and their content begins to inscribe itself directly on her body. After one particularly brutal vision about Ayo's middle passage

experience, Lizzie's parents commit her to a hospital because they interpret the physical manifestations of her vision—bloody wounds around her wrists and ankles from the shackles—as evidence of an attempted suicide. In the hospital, Lizzie becomes mute, her voice overwhelmed by the voices of the past. Perry's depiction of Lizzie's suffering is her metaphor for the negative impact of the literature of slavery that flooded the market during the late 1960's and early 1970's culminating with the *Roots* franchise in 1976. The trunk of historical information represents the infiltration of the narrative of slavery into the collective African American psyche during this time. In response, Perry proposes a more active and less destructive relationship to the past. Eventually, a painting class inspires Lizzie to create a visual representation of the information she gleans from her grandmother's trunk. This shift, from consumer to creator of narratives, empowers Lizzie. With her newfound discovery of self-fashioning, she converts the hospital into a space where she can interpret and contextualize the information she inherits. Lizzie's self-control signals to her doctor, an authority figure entrenched in the black middle class, that Lizzie is ready for release and willing to conform to the mores of the black bourgeoisie narrative around which her parents have built their lives.

Lizzie's escape from the confinement of the hospital where her movements and thoughts are tracked around the clock represents her shift into fugitive status. Although Lizzie returns home, she must pretend that she no longer believes in the visions that she experienced after opening the trunk. Essentially, she must lie to disguise her true motives and maintain her freedom from the institution. Lizzie begins quilting a graphic display of her own version of her grandmother Grace's story. The process empowers her to become what Hortense Spillers calls "the one who counts." Lizzie chooses which parts of the

collective racial narrative she wants to represent as a part of her personal identity narrative. Furthermore, after she sketches the design of the quilt in isolation she then teaches her mother how to sew the panels. In doing so, Lizzie subverts her mother's middle-class control by making her mother follow her instructions rather than the other way around. Lizzie's new position as a creator authorizes her to fashion an identity narrative that acknowledges the influence of racial history without tethering her future to collective narratives of racial trauma. After she constructs the quilt that represents her racial identity, Lizzie is finally free. She leaves Alabama, where the novel is set, to work for a non-profit agency that provides support for the homeless suggesting that Lizzie's properly contextualized racial identity now empowers her to assist the rootless. The author ends the novel with Lizzie's flight "off-stage" to Georgia that includes not only a new vocation but also a rejection of her boyfriend, Anthony Paul, a printer by profession who likes to paint Lizzie into nineteenth-century scenes. Thus, Lizzie's move signals her escape from the conventions of print literature, the marriage plot, and a racial narrative that would freeze her into re-living the slave narrative since Anthony Paul is painter, printer and potential husband. Perry includes few concrete details about the ending to suggest that Lizzie's new life and new identity narrative take place outside the boundaries of the literary text.

Historical Backdrop

Perry uses the heroine of her *bildungsroman* to dramatize her experience as an African American author of feeling confined by traumatic historical narratives. She depicts the enthusiasm African Americans felt about gaining access to information about their personal connections to slavery and Africa with Lizzie's anxious anticipation of

opening a trunk of family artifacts on her birthday in 1974, a date that places her protagonist's interaction with the trunk within two years of the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1976 and in the thick of the Black Woman's Literary Renaissance. By creating a protagonist who "comes of age" at the same time as herself and as black women's literature, Perry examines the influence of the slave narrative on African American literature in general and black women authors in particular. Perry uses Lizzie's journey to suggest that literary forms that conflate past and present impede progress into the future.

Phyllis Alesia Perry was born in 1961, within one year of the birthdate she assigns to Lizzie DuBose. Like Lizzie, Perry grew up in a small southern town to middle-class parents in the 1960's and 1970's. Perry's father was the first black reporter hired at the *Atlanta Journal* and, among other achievements, served as an editor of *Jet* magazine from 1973 to 1981 ("Phyllis Alesia Perry"). It is likely that the Perry home bubbled over with media and popular culture during Perry's teenage years. Distinguished by its small size and the brevity of its articles, *Jet* magazine functioned as a hub of black culture.[6] Indeed, just as Perry's protagonist opens a trunk filled with evidence of her family's traumatic history when she is fourteen, Perry herself would been that age when her father began his tenure at *Jet.* His position might have increased her awareness of African American history and popular culture at a crucial moment in her development. Thus, Perry's story about a young woman losing herself in African American history may reflect the author's own difficulties processing the narratives about American slavery that were a prominent

---

[6] Founded in 1951, *Jet* was still the most popular African American weekly newsmagazine in 2003 ("Jet").For more on *Jet,* see the *Encyclopedia of African American Culture and History* entry on *Jet Magazine.*

feature of black popular culture during her formative years.

The historical backdrop of *Stigmata*, the early years of the post-civil rights era, sets the stage for the difficulties that accompany coming of age during a moment when racial trauma narratives dominate African American popular culture. In Lizzie's act of opening the family trunk, Perry depicts the enthusiasm African Americans felt about gaining access to information about their personal connections to slavery and Africa. In 1970, twenty-five black novels were published (Rushdy 89). Of those, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) inaugurated the Black Woman's Literary Renaissance,[7] resulting in a proliferation of novels that continued well into the 1980's that explored the position of African American women in society and in the literary tradition. Morrison was a foundational figure in the movement because she both wrote novels such as *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) and edited work by Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Gayle Jones. In 1974, in a review of *The Black Book*[8] written for *The New York Times Magazine*, Morrison warned that in the "push towards middle-class respectability," which she located chronologically in the late 1950's and early 1960's, important stories of black history in America were "being driven underground" by blacks themselves (Morrison 41). In contrast, the literature of the Black Women's Literary Renaissance addressed darker topics. By lending voice to black suffering, black women authors recalled the slave narrative tradition

Trauma narratives by black women writers included Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*

---

[7] We might consider Margaret Walker's 1966 novel of slavery, *Jubilee*, the beginning of the Black Women's Literary Renaissance since the novel addresses many of the same issues as Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* from a more historical perspective.

[8] Morrison was one of the editors of *The Black Book.*

(1975), Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple (1982)*, and Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place (1982).* Thus, a woman coming of age during this period had the opportunity, perhaps even a perceived obligation, to immerse herself in black trauma narratives. Moreover, a woman like Perry's protagonist would have had greater access to information about African American history than the generations that came before her—a fact underscored by the author's inclusion of a family tree graphic as a frontispiece and the meticulous dating of both the novel's chapters and diary entries written in the first person. Thus, Lizzie "opens the trunk" of historical artifacts at the same moment that black people across the country were presented with the opportunity to read narratives about the difficulties experienced by African Americans in prior centuries. As a result, she becomes absorbed by "old stories" and loses track of her contemporary black experience.

Following emancipation up to the 1960's, slavery functioned as the open secret of many African American families. Black history was considered too painful to discuss or "pass on" to subsequent generations. For example, in an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Maya Angelou recalls her grandmother, Mary Wafford's, refusal to discuss her history with her family: "she absolutely prohibited anybody from knowing anything more about her background. She said, 'I am Kentucky, and that's all you need to know.' And that's all we ever did know" (Gates 30). For Mary Wafford, who spent the first 12 years of her life enslaved, the shame was simply too painful to recount. Thus, many African Americans did not feel free to ask or speak about slavery until the latter years of the civil

rights movement. In the novel, Perry dramatizes this generational shift in attitudes by having Lizzie, born in 1960— and not her mother Sarah, born in 1934—inherit the trunk of historical family artifacts from Grace (13).

By the early 1970's, slavery had shifted from a taboo subject to a source of solidarity and strength. The civil rights movement produced a more radical black identity that challenged what some viewed as the assimilationist inclinations of black politics in the 1950's. Frustrations with the slow pace of desegregation, continuing social inequality after the legal victories in 1965, and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 changed the tenor of the movement.[9] African American optimism dissipated and left depression in its wake. Nikhil Pal Singh explains the tumultuous years between 1965 and 1968, "At this point a series of sudden, coincidental shifts are said to have occurred: from civil rights to black power; south to north; nonviolent to violent; tolerant to divisive; integrationist to black nationalist" (5). Rather than the optimistic, non-violent and "respectable" groups most visible during its early years, the later years of the civil rights movement were dominated by black power groups who followed a separatist agenda and were often associated with more violent protests than the nation experienced before 1965.

Perhaps one of the most important changes to arise out of the radical years of the civil rights movement was the development of interdisciplinary Black Studies departments across the nation. These departments grew out of students and faculty demands for a Black Studies program at San Francisco State University and Merritt

[9] The end of the Jim Crow period was marked by the passage of the civil rights acts of 1964 and 1968 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These gains were the result of organized protest activities that took place primarily in the South after the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954.

College in 1968.[10] Their success prompted other universities to follow suit. The Black Studies scholars who emerged from this movement placed the African American struggle for social equality in a global context. They examined the impact of Western imperialism and colonialism on people of color and highlighted similarities among the people of the African diaspora. As such, African Americans began to feel a strong kinship with people on the continent of Africa that extended beyond real and imagined genealogical ties to shared experiences of oppression.

The creation of Black Studies programs resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of black texts published. In 1969 alone, six anthologies of slave narratives were released (Rushdy 89). In addition to black academics, liberal intellectuals of all races contributed to the progressive political movements of the 1960's by changing the way Americans studied the past. Historians constructed revisionist narratives from the perspective of the socially disadvantaged rather than repeating the status quo accounts. Thus, by the 1970's more historical information about African Americans and people of African heritage became available to the general public. Slavery served as an important symbol for these groups because it so clearly illustrated the black suffering at the center of America's racial drama. The popularity of Alex Haley's *Roots* franchise evidences mass culture's[11] turn towards slavery. Like Lizzie whose foray into the trunk of historical

---

[10] For more on this, see chapter 4 of Donna Jean Murch's *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

[11] *Roots* is only one example of the slave narratives that permeated the popular culture of the period. In 1969, John O. Killens' novel *Slaves* was published. *Slaves* was Killens' novelization of the 1969 movie adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Keith Gilyard notes in his biography of Killens that *Slaves* functioned as a response to William Styron's novel of slavery, The *Confessions of Nat Turner (1967)* for which Styron won the Pulitzer prize (247). Killens was not alone in his objections to the novel. Some African American authors expressed disdain for Styron's interpretation of the Turner story in the essay collection, *William*

artifacts take her back to her great-great-grandmother's middle passage experience, African Americans were encouraged to follow their "roots" back to Africa.[12] Just as Lizzie finds herself thrust into the middle of a compelling and traumatic history, Perry's early adolescence would have been filled with images of slavery.

As a black woman author, Perry has to account for the canonical narratives of the black literary tradition. In a 2009 interview with Corinne Duboin, Perry's comments reveal a bit of anxiety of influence in this regard. When Duboin tells Perry that *Stigmata* reminds her of other black woman authors, "Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones and Octavia Butler," Perry denies their direct influence (635). She responds, "They were not my literary models, but I consider them to be my literary 'cheer leaders' because many of those writers I did not start to read until after I started writing" (635). Despite the similarities between Perry's work and other black women authors, she carefully positions them on the sidelines rather than at the center of her creative process. Thus, Perry distinguishes herself as a fugitive author both apart of and set apart from this distinguished literary lineage. Perry's choice of a quilted narrative structure distinguishes her neo-slave narrative from the others in the tradition.

Narrative Quilting

Perry uses a practice that I call narrative quilting in *Stigmata* to underscore her

---

Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond (1968). The authors felt that William Styron misappropriated the slave narrative in his novel. Also a representation of slavery in the 1970's, Kyle Onstott's pulp fiction novel about slavery, *Mandingo* (1954) was turned into a poorly reviewed movie in 1975.

[12] This moment in history was certainly not the first time African Americans expressed an interest in developing a connection to Africa. During the nineteenth-century, Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1901-1902) explored the concept of Ethiopianism and return to Africa. In addition, Marcus Garvey, an advocate of African American return to Africa, figured importantly in the Harlem Renaissance.

departure from the neo-slave narrative tradition. Rather than blurring the lines between the years before emancipation and the post-modern moment, she carefully arranges fragments of five different stories occurring at five different moments in history into one novel. I understand Perry's practice as narrative quilting because in a 2007 interview Perry likens quilting and storytelling. She reflects, "the quilt is representative of the way we remember…the quilt is a material representation of the way the story is told…it says a lot about what parts of the story are valued, what parts of the stories resonate with that particular person" (Duboin 646-647). Perry understands quilting as a method of taking ownership of a narrative. The quilt represents an individual interpretation of a collective memory. Further, the practice of narrative quilting, combining "old" narrative scraps to create a new narrative, follows Crummell's mandate to acknowledge the past, while focusing on the duty to the future (123). Perry uses narrative quilting as an alternative to neo-slave narratives that conflate past and present.

The first edition of *Stigmata* was actually printed to resemble a quilt. The front page of the 1998 Hyperion first-edition of the novel features the title and author's name superimposed on black squares against a printed background made to look like a quilt. Each chapter heading features the chapter number overlaid on a solid black square surrounded by a printed design made to look like a quilt. The pages of the book are uneven and finished to resemble layers of fabric. The physical design of the text emphasizes the quilt-like nature of the narrative because Perry understands the quilt as the ideal form through which to articulate African American identity narrative that incorporates the past into a vision for the future.

Perry strategically layers the life stories of five women in the novel which has the

effect of disrupting empathetic reading practices. Perry tells the stories simultaneously, even though they are not all set in the same time and place. She relates them in brief and alternating segments. Thus, the stories are "quilted" together into one novel. The disruptions in the narrative prevent readers from losing themselves in the story. For instance, the first chapter contains, as every chapter in the novel does, a heading indicating the setting, "June 1994—Atlanta" (1). The novel opens in media res, with Lizzie Du Bose deciding to lie in order to escape the final in a series of psychiatric hospitals that have been her home for the past fourteen years. As soon as the reader becomes accustomed to the narrative, she reaches the end of the chapter and discovers a diary entry dated "December 1898." The entry introduces four additional characters, Joy, Ayo/Bessie, Frank, and Sam without explanation of the speaker's relationship to Lizzie. When chapter two, "April 1974—Johnson Creek," begins the reader is thrown, quite unexpectedly, into the middle of a third story (8). This story, a mystery that is more engrossing than the first two, explains Lizzie's inheritance of a trunk of historical family artifacts. The reader is introduced to five new characters, aunt Eva, deceased aunt Mary Nell, Lizzie's parents, and her deceased grandmother, Grace. Just as the reader becomes comfortable, she is again thrust back into the tension of the 1990's storyline, this time in Tuskegee (26). At the end of the chapter, another diary entry, "March 1899," appears. This narrative style makes the cast of minor characters, mostly family members, difficult for the reader to follow. To address this problem, Perry includes a family tree frontispiece and even notes in the Duboin interview that fans of the novel have thanked her for the family tree because it was the only way that they could keep track of the characters (648). Hence, while the narrative pattern is easily discernable, the reader must make peace with

a certain amount of disorientation in the early chapters of the novel because the abrupt shifts make it impossible to fully understand what is happening. Without complete understanding, empathetic reading is impossible.

Elsa Barkley Brown's "African American Quilts: Framework for African American Women Studies" provides insight into the quilting process that Perry mimics in the novel. Brown defines a distinctly African American quilting aesthetic where, "symmetry…does not come from uniformity as it does in Euro-American quilts; rather, the symmetry comes through the diversity" (12). Brown highlights a similarity between the quilting aesthetic and *gumbo yaya*, a Creole word that describes the conversational practice of several women speaking simultaneously and only stopping if there is a misunderstanding. For Brown, *gumbo yaya* mimics the African American narrative tradition at large because the practice requires women to assert their individuality—by sharing their own stories as part of the community and by participating in conversation with the other women. As in *gumbo yaya,* quilting enables the simultaneous representation of identities that are distinctly different, yet distinctly African American, making it possible to produce a collective identity without resorting to a reductive historical narrative. In *Stigmata*, Perry presents several women's stories simultaneously in an effort to illustrate that Lizzie's independent identity, an African American identity, is informed by all of the women who came before her.

Since Perry adopts a *gumbo yaya* approach to narrative in *Stigmata,* the first time reader might feel disoriented in the early chapters of the novel. Essentially, the novel is structured like an applique quilt. Appliqué quilting involves constructing recognizable images or patterns by layering fragments of material (Woolfork 54). Perry alternates

between three storylines involving five women throughout the novel. She layers the stories so that they unfold simultaneously and, just as would be the case if looking at a partially completed quilt, the actual connection among the stories is not completely clear until the final chapters of the novel. More specifically, in the final diary entry, Joy gives birth to Grace, a fulfillment of Ayo/Bessie's earlier promise that a girl would be born to "take her place" (34). This explains how the stigmata—the scars from Ayo/Bessie shackles—are passed along to Grace who later stores the painful legacy in a trunk for Lizzie to inherit. In the final chapter of Lizzie's 1970's story, she learns to paint—to create rather than just consume a narrative. This act of creation empowers her to control Grace's and Ayo/Bessie's memories (and to fool the therapist in the opening scene of the novel). Perry illustrates the relationships among the characters by telling all of the women's stories at the same time. Rather than construct a linear narrative, Perry suggests as Faulkner famously wrote, "the past is not past." Lizzie's life is not one event in a series. Instead, her life is a multilayered creation wrought from the collective struggle of five women marked by the memory of slavery. For Perry, historical trauma narratives must be incorporated—quilted—into a productive future. As such, Perry tells multiple stories at once and forces the reader to struggle with them until the very end when she reveals how they all fit together.

The narrative form of *Stigmata* reveals the similarities between Perry's and Crummell's understandings of the role of the past. Perry's novel forces her reader to interact with a slave narrative through Ayo/Bessie, but does not allow that story to take over the narrative. The reader cannot fall into unproductive recollection because Ayo/Bessie's trauma narrative is the smallest fragment of all, only appearing as vignettes

at the end of the most contemporary chapters. Perry intentionally gives the slavery storyline fewer words than any other storyline in the novel. Further, the slave narrative is mediated through two frames, Ayo/Bessie's narrative appears as a journal entry written by her daughter, Joy, and found in a trunk by Lizzie. The frames emphasize the Ayo/Bessie story's chronological distance from both Lizzie and the audience. The form of the novel positions the slave narrative as a fragmented and distant memory.

The women in Perry's novel represent the shifts in the interpretation of the slave narrative over time. Ayo/Bessie represents the first hand account of slavery mediated through an amanuensis. Her memories are painful as illustrated by her fragmented language. She recalls, "And soon my feet was following my eyes roaming the distant dusty alleys lookin lookin lookin. And down one way I went and felt someone looking back. I los my family that day I los my home that day" (50). Ayo/Bessie is reduced to feet and eyes and her captor to a ghost, to someone who looks without being seen. The pain is still fresh for her, even at a chronologically distant moment. Her captors are still nameless, terrible and disembodied. Joy, on the other hand, softens the violence of her mother's memory in her diary entry of April 1899. The date in spring reminds the reader that slavery has ended and a new life cycle begun. The entry opens with a cheerful first sentence, "It's a real good day." Joy's narrative frame is grounded in domestic stability which reflects the racial uplift agenda of the time in which it was written.

Grace, on the other hand, is driven from her home in the Jim Crow South by the memory of slavery. Grace is ashamed of the scars from Ayo/Bessie's shackles that manifest themselves on her body, as they do Lizzie's. She abandons her family in hopes of protecting them from the stigmata (15). Her shame represents a moment in African

American literature when emphasis on respectability precluded the retelling of the slave narrative. Unlike Joy, who simply records her mother's narrative, Grace internalizes the stigma of slavery and packs material evidence of the memory away in a trunk. Grace represents the generation of women, like Maya Angelou's grandmother, who were too ashamed to discuss slavery. As a result, Sarah does not have any knowledge of Ayo/Bessie's slave narrative. She cannot discuss slavery because she lacks information. Lizzie is a product of all these women who came before her. She must consider all of their perspectives on slavery in order to form her own racial identity. Perry relies on a layered narrative to dramatize Lizzie's construction of an identity from narrative fragments accumulated over five generations.

Just as Lizzie manipulates scraps of cloth into a quilt representing the life of her grandmother, Perry quilts five women's stories into a novel representing the life of the slave narrative. For Perry, quilting is an active process that converts narratives of the past into completely new future oriented narratives. The novel's layers provide the reader with a sense of the complexity of the relationship between contemporary black identity and the slave narrative. Perry produces a nuanced consideration of the narrative of slavery. She incorporates multiple perspectives into her narrative and, subsequently, suggests that one must escape these past positions in order to move into the future.

<u>Trapped by the Story</u>

The plot of the novel supports its structure by illustrating that narrative quilting allows disruptive narratives to be incorporated into a new entity appropriate for the future. In the same interview with Duboin, Perry describes the need to conquer family history rather than simply inherit it:

> Once you know, you have to be able to get free of it. As an African American person, I share a history with other African American people and I'm glad that I share that history. I'm glad that I know what that history is. I'm glad that I have some idea of how that history influenced my life right now. But if I just lived in the historical context of who I was, it would be a trap. We create a box for ourselves because of our culture and history, things you are not supposed to step out of...But you also have to make doorways to get out of it. You have to be able to also look back at it and say: that informs something of who I am, but it does not limit who I am (Duboin 638).

While Perry accepts the necessity of understanding African American history, she cautions that absorption into narratives of slavery can result in stagnation. Instead, the author encourages her audience to become fugitives, to "make doorways" of escape, rather than live trapped in the "historical context" of racial identity (Duboin 638). With the plot of *Stigmata*, Perry dramatizes the complex process of allowing the past to inform racial identity without constraining identity. The author establishes a connection between the structure and plot of her novel, which follows the protagonist's shift from recollecting, and thereby reliving, traumatic historical events to understanding and memorializing them in a quilt.

Through Lizzie's experiences as an inheritor and consumer of trauma narratives, Perry examines the detrimental consequences of relying on recollections of slavery as a foundation for racial identity. Perry recalls African American enthusiasm in the 1970's to connect to the past through her description of Lizzie's first encounters with her grandmother's trunk. An inquisitive teen, Lizzie is unable to sleep on the night she receives her legacy; she sneaks out of bed to inspect its contents (18). It is not enough, however, for Lizzie to simply derive aesthetic pleasure from her grandmother's quilt. Instead, Lizzie begins to lose herself as she allows the quilt to "engulf [her] twin bed" (24). Despite the hot temperature of her room, she "pulls the quilt up to her chin,"

suggesting that she disregards her individual comfort in favor of a connection to her ancestors (24). After a vivid dream in which she walks in Africa, Lizzie wakes up the next morning to find "dust about [her] feet" (25). The quilt has dislodged Lizzie in both time and space. It leads her to overlook her own physical needs and transports her from her local environment, in which she thrives, back in time to Africa. Like African Americans obsessed with slave narratives in the early years following the civil rights movement, Lizzie begins to lose her contemporary life and sanity to the exigencies of the slave narrative.

Perry employs the conventions associated with the neo-salve narrative in order to question their value. Lizzie reads her great grandmother's diary written in the 1890's and re-tells the stories she finds there, in a parallel to Margaret Walker who based *Jubilee* (1966) on family stories. Lizzie travels into the past and brings back physical injuries, bloody scars from her great-grandmother's shackles, to the present just as Octavia Butler's protagonist in *Kindred* (1979) does. Lizzie re-lives her grandmother's memories just as Denver re-lives Sethe's memories in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Yet, each of these conventions only adds to Lizzie's misery rather than providing her with a resolution to her problems. When Lizzie re-lives the experiences of her ancestors, shares the stories, and manifests injuries on her body, she loses rather than gains agency. Eventually, her strange behavior results in her hospitalization. Perry's novel suggests that allowing historical narratives to shape one's life leads to psychological illness and possession by traumatic history. Perry's novel represents her critique of the neo-slave narratives that are part of the African American literary tradition. Instead of encouraging conflation of past and present, Perry's novel suggests that such behavior facilitates the type of

recollection that Crummell warned against.

Perry's skepticism of this type of recollection is most clear in the series of conversations that Lizzie has with the therapists she encounters. One therapist, a friend of Lizzie's physician father, reasons, "Elizabeth, you can't lose yourself in those old stories. You obviously are using them to fill some emptiness in your life" (139). The comment underscores the futile nature of the practice of "re-living" the past, but Lizzie's response is telling, "I'm not trying to fill my life. This is my life" (159). The line represents Lizzie's difficulty separating individual from collective identity, and highlights the "emptiness" of living as an individual who can only achieve meaning as "synecdoche for the whole."[13]

Lizzie's comment that she is "not trying" to fill her life illuminates her stagnation. Perry imagines that absorption into trauma narratives not only paralyzes, but also contradicts the African American tradition that the narratives celebrate. Rather than surviving through perseverance and innovation, Lizzie embraces life as an empty trope. She surrenders her contemporary life to an oppressive past rather than fight for her sanity. Lizzie's interaction with the historical artifacts in the trunk results in the effacement of her individual identity rather than the strengthening of her cultural identity. Her commitment to "old stories" results in the spontaneous appearance of wounds and scars. Lizzie has no control over the way the text impacts her body. Instead, her exposure to the information in the trunk renders her body a text to be read by those she encounters both inside and outside the hospital. Lizzie's consumption of trauma narratives transforms her

---

[13] In "'All the Things You Could Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Race and Psychoanalysis," Hortense Spillers explains that African American individuals are always understood as synecdoche for the whole (395). Spillers elaborates, "every black man or woman *is* the race" (395).

body into a “novel” of slavery.

Perry warns that “old stories” can fog out[14] real life experiences in the black psyche. These stories shape how Lizzie sees herself. In the chapter dated “February 1980,” Lizzie dozes off while wrapped in the quilt and staring at her grandmother’s photograph only to awaken suddenly and find herself,

> sitting, not lying down. I’m at the dressing table. In a chair. And it is Grace’s face that looks back at me from the glass, her flesh-and-blood, three-dimensional face, looking very surprised inside its frame of very black hair. I half expect to look out a window and see myself stretched on Sarah Du Bose’s good sofa. (53).

Lizzie becomes disoriented by her vision. She is no longer lying down but sitting. She does not see her own face but Grace’s captured inside a mirror, itself framed by “very black hair.” Lizzie imagines herself doubly framed in an exaggerated blackness that turns her face into Grace’s. Lizzie looks for herself, indeed “expects to see herself,” through a different frame—a window—suggesting that she continues to look for a more contemporary frame that delimits the actual circumstances of her life. The frame-inside-of-a-frame existence that Lizzie endures makes it impossible for her to know herself. Her glimpse into the mirror reveals that she is wholly consumed by her grandmother Grace. She is bound by a body that she cannot control. Lizzie’s engagement with the trunk severs her connection to the independent space of her own imagination and tethers her to an image of someone else’s black body.

Perry’s choice to use a family surname reminiscent of W.E.B. Du Bois connects Lizzie’s dilemma to Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness, the “sense of looking at oneself through the eyes of others” (10). When Lizzie finds Grace in the mirror, she can

[14] My use of the phrase “fog out” recalls Gwendolyn’s Brook’s use of the phrase in “The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith” (1945) to describe the confusion her subject feels because “The pasts of his ancestors lean against/Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity.”

only see herself through the eyes of another. Lizzie is trapped in another person's image of her life. As such, Lizzie does not feel comforted by the absorption of herself into the image of her grandmother. Instead, she understands that this image is only a distorted reflection, and she longs for the depth of her own life—a place where she can stretch out on the sofa. Lizzie hopes to see herself "outside" of the image of her grandmother as suggested by her desire to look out of a window and see herself enjoying her "real" life of privilege. She desires to see herself from multiple perspectives. Instead, Lizzie's uncontrolled exposure to historical narratives leads to her internalization of the traumatic experiences of her ancestors and flattens her into the many nameless bodies who populate the collective—an object of discourse rather than a real person.

As an object, Lizzie lacks agency as illustrated though her confinement in a mental hospital. After a few more episodes of blacking out, and a particularly violent vision of the middle passage that leaves Lizzie bloody, she is committed to a mental hospital for attempted suicide. She describes her despair in the hospital, "I spin around in the chair one more time. I surely want to get out" (203). The spinning chair reminds the reader that Lizzie leads a circular existence that prevents her progress. Lizzie cannot get her bearings and becomes so frustrated with the refusal of the doctor to understand her plight that she strips to the waist so that he can see the "maze of scars from neck to waist" (204). These scars, "proof of lives intersecting from past to present," confirm the power history has over her life (204). Lizzie reveals her feelings of powerlessness: "what you're looking at was rather commonplace back then. Scars like these. That's the thing, Doctor, I'm just a typical nineteenth-century nigger with an extraordinary gift. The gift of memory" (204). By using a racial epithet and locating herself in the nineteenth century,

Lizzie reveals that she can neither separate herself from derisive popular culture ideas about slavery nor understand the position of her body in the world. She has completely given her interior life over to the stereotype and has lost track of her "self." Lizzie cannot assert a singular contemporary identity; instead, she has become a "commonplace," a nineteenth-century enslaved and traumatized girl. Ironically, Lizzie ends the scene by asserting that her memory "sets her apart" (204). Actually, the pervasive inscriptions that memory places on her body have quite the opposite effect. They make her a walking stereotype.

Because of her fixation on the historical experiences of her ancestors, Lizzie suffers muteness, captivity, and alienation from her closest family members. She grows weary of explaining her condition. Her spinning illustrates that she is trapped in an endless cycle—stranded in history. Lizzie's interior spaces are crowded by the voices of her ancestors, which leaves no space for her own consciousness. Silent and immobile for two years, and stuck in an asylum for fourteen years, half of Lizzie's life is consumed by the traumatic experiences of her ancestors. Hospitalization prevents her from enjoying the pleasures of her privileged middle-class existence. Through Lizzie, Perry suggests that unregulated consumption of trauma narratives can decrease the quality and length of life by half.

Lizzie is able to move beyond the trauma narratives only after switching from consumer to creator of narratives. Although the hospital initially functions as a space of confinement, Lizzie learns to appreciate the "separation from the world at large [that] allows quiet contemplation" (232). The distance that the hospital provides her from her grandmother's trunk and her mother's oppressive middle-class sensibilities ultimately

proves useful for meditation.

Lizzie chooses to take an art class in the hospital which gradually allows her shift into a greater awareness of her place in the world. After watching a fellow patient, Maria Elena, swallow the contents of a container of red paint, Lizzie realizes the absurdity of swallowing collective identity narratives that do not reflect her life experiences. Lizzie first notices that Maria Elena is out of place and comments, “I’m surprised that she’s allowed to mess with paints” (233). Shortly afterwards, Lizzie notices, “she smiles and waves with her brush. I frown at her, because we’re supposed to just be at the sketching stage” (233). Maria Elena is out of sync with the rest of her community much like Lizzie who chooses to live in the past rather than enjoy her present. Lizzie describes the aftermath of Maria Elena’s paint consumption in gory terms: “there’s red paint smeared around her mouth and on her hands…She’s turned the little pot of paint over in her lap and everything, her hands, her dress, the floor beneath her stool, is crimson wet” (233). Like Lizzie, whose consumption of trauma narratives left her bloody and scarred, Maria Elena appears frightfully injured; however, she is only marked by paint that is easily washed away. When Lizzie asks Maria Elena why she eats things, she responds that she is “hungry.” Perry situates Lizzie and Maria Elena side by side to highlight that both characters consume wrong things to fill voids in their lives. Lizzie has the option to choose another way to fill the emptiness just as Maria Elena could consume food rather than paint. Moreover, the consequences of Lizzie’s choices are not permanent. Just as Maria Elena can be cleaned up, Lizzie can choose an alternate path.

After her observation of Maria Elena, Lizzie begins to paint with red paint but distinguishes herself from Maria Elena by using the paint properly (234). Here Perry

represents the character's desire to be in sync with her present. Initially, she paints an image of a figure "drift[ing] toward a vortex" (234). Significantly, Lizzie does not see the figure firsthand but instead hears Grace narrating the story in her head. She has, in this moment of creation, gotten her historical bearings. She paints the image of the figure, to which the art instructor responds, "That's not your original idea, Miss DuBose," before commanding her to "Embellish!" (234-235). The instructor validates Lizzie's suspicion that the images she sees in her mind do not belong to her. Instead, they must be placed in the appropriate historical context. Lizzie continues, "I take up another brush to paint a gray ship and brown girl standing at the rail" (235). After considering the image, Lizzie is able to create an appropriate scene. She draws a slave ship and a rail around the figure thereby providing historical context. Lizzie includes a rail to represent the boundary between her and the "brown girl" in her head. Lizzie is finally able to properly understand her position in time and space, and separate herself from the memories of Grace and Ayo. Thus, Lizzie learns to take pieces of the historical collective identity narrative to use as the foundation of her individual racial identity without consuming the narrative or allowing it to consume her. She shifts from passive reader to creator. It is important to note that this is the final scene in the book. In terms of the narrative timeline, the scene immediately precedes the opening chapter of the book.

In this opening scene, Perry uses Dr. Harper to represent the line between normal and deviant. Lizzie reflects that the soothing tone of his voice makes it clear that, "You're crazy and I'm not" (2). Despite the racial and class similarities between the two, the psychiatrist does not conflate Lizzie's particular raced version of insanity with his own life. His voice maintains the boundary between Lizzie's obsession with slavery, which is

"crazy," and his choice to maintain his classed position, which is "not" (2). An African American doctor like Lizzie's father, Harper feels so comfortable in his position that he refers to his office as his "place"— a term that denotes his socio-economic position as middle-class and highly educated. His place is one of privilege, as Lizzie's should be. The office is marked by the comforts of bourgeois financial security, "two purple armchairs and punctuated with a round, glass coffee table" and made complete with a "doctor's assistant" to serve Lizzie herbal tea (1). Dr. Harper frequently invites Lizzie to his "place" of stability. Yet, she cannot be comfortable there. Her body is already scarred by the past.

Dr. Harper's negation of Lizzie's psychic experiences represents the social gaze that reduces Lizzie to acceptable collective narratives of racial identity. In his office, she tells him what he expects to hear rather than admit the truth of her experiences. She begins to live up to the standard set by her namesake, Du Bois. Her lies evidence her ability to perceive both her own consciousness and the visions that outsiders have of her. Although the narrative of slavery paralyzes her, Lizzie cannot adapt to the competing narrative of bourgeois privilege offered by Harper. Rather than occupy the doctor's place, Lizzie escapes the hospital by lying in order to create her own "place," one that will allow her to acknowledge the past without allowing it to consume her present and future.

Lizzie becomes both consumer and creator of history in order to construct a place of her own. Although her quilt depicts Grace's story, Lizzie represents it from her own perspective. This functions as a reversal of the moment earlier in the story when Lizzie found Grace's face looking back at her in the mirror. In the chapter dated "August 1995," Lizzie begins to sketch panels for an appliqué quilt and subsequently "draws a picture of

Grace in bed, lying under a tiny replica of her quilt" (71). In this moment, Lizzie is simultaneously author and reader. She designs a representation of Grace and her quilt rather than conflating her own image with Grace's image as she did earlier in the novel. That is to say, Lizzie looks down on Grace rather than looking out from Grace's eyes. In this moment, Lizzie controls both Grace's story and her own. Lizzie no longer passively consumes narratives. Instead, she uses the quilt to produce a story that interacts with historical narratives in productive ways. Perry's novel marks the act of empathetic reading—inviting narratives into the psyche—as a dangerous activity that must be replaced with interactive reading and interpretation of narratives.

Lizzie layers fabric to create scattered scenes that represent her foremothers' impact on her life. Although the images are arranged into a single circle, they are distinct. Following Elsa Barkley Brown, Perry suggests that African Americans can maintain individual identities while remaining a part of the collective. Constructing a quilt, a concrete material object that enables the organization of information, transforms Lizzie into "the one who counts." Lizzie reflects on her shift from consumer to creator, "The pictures I've designed for that quilt so obviously tell Grace's story that I'm beginning to think Mother is deliberately pretending to be the densest woman on the planet" (169). Lizzie has taken control of the narrative that had confined her. She uses her creative energies to "design" the images on the quilt. Lizzie creates a history that suits her contemporary identity. This accomplishment provides her with a critical distance from her family that enables her to notice the denials that cripple her mother, Sarah.

In this moment, we can contrast Lizzie's ability to reconcile the past and move into the future with her mother's refusal to memorialize the past. Sarah challenges

Lizzie's approach to quilting. Rather than constructing an appliqué quilt—where images exist in free association with one another—Sarah chooses to represent the past in the form of a patchwork quilt—pieces of fabric sewn together according to a master pattern. Sarah prefers a fragmented and broken history that she can piece together according to society's expectations. Ultimately she is more concerned with developing a linear life narrative of respectability than with creating an identity narrative that reflects her own desires. Sarah even hopes that Lizzie will "change [her] mind and do a pieced quilt" because Sarah does not "'know anything about appliqué'" (66-67). As such, she can only "replace buttons" or repair the flawed narratives that she uses as the foundation of her identity (67). She cannot move into the future because of her futile efforts to piece together the past.

Since Sarah realizes that the traumatic history associated with race will never be respectable, she attempts to displace the narrative of race with the "master pattern" narrative of class. Sarah elevates herself socially by marrying a doctor in her small southern town. She exhibits a great deal of anxiety about maintaining the distinctions between public and private spaces because bourgeois individualism relies on privacy. Privacy is keeping some parts of the self from others—owning it. The middle-class agent must own property and perhaps more importantly must own herself. Therefore, Sarah cannot be a part of both the bourgeois individual narrative, which requires ownership of self, and the racial narrative, which precludes ownership of self. Since the relationship between "race" and "body" is developed through community consensus, racial narratives are completely outside of her personal control. The tension between these two narratives—one that requires privacy and the other that precludes privacy—plays out in

Sarah's interior life.

Sarah is so riddled with anxiety and compulsive obsessions that Lizzie is surprised to see Sarah's sleeping pills "arranged neatly in her dresser drawer" (140). Not even Sarah's daughter was aware that her mother needed sleeping pills. Sarah maintains her privacy even in her family environment. The private space of Sarah's nightstand drawer, the space where she stores the pills that salve her mental distress, must be perfectly ordered, as if any disorder might cause her whole self-enterprise to collapse.

Sarah has created a stable life for herself that contrasts with the shame that her mother's abandonment inflicted on the family. She does everything in her power to ensure that Lizzie maintains this stable image. She asserts control over her household and her daughter. Her house is so neat and orderly that Lizzie is not allowed an afternoon nap on the couch (55). Sarah projects this desire for order onto her daughter with her insistent concern for her respectability. She makes hair appointments for Lizzie and chastises Lizzie for calling her by her first name, a verbal gesture she dismisses as an inappropriate or "common" practice (55). Sarah attempts to instill this same sense of order in Lizzie, reducing her to one of the possessions that denotes the Du Bose's membership in the upper middle-class. Sarah tellingly describes her daughter's illness and subsequent hospitalization as the moment when Lizzie had "no control over what happened" (154). Sarah identifies control as that which makes the difference not only between sickness and health but also between freedom and confinement.

The differences between the women's approaches to quilting represent the differences in their worldviews. Sarah deems the design of Lizzie's quilt "unsettling" because Lizzie organizes images from Grace's life in a semicircle which Sarah describes

as “hopelessly jumbled” because life should be represented “like a line” (93). Obsessed with maintaining a neat middle-class existence, Sarah endorses a representational model that operates under the premise that the “past is past” rather than one that allows controlled interactions between past, present, and future (93). Rather than understanding slavery as the core of her racial identity, Lizzie separates herself from the collective racial narrative in order to create an individual narrative—a complete image—that incorporates only historical pieces that she deems appropriate. It reflects Lizzie’s process of self-fashioning. The quilt empowers Lizzie to move forward into the future. Thus, Perry proposes quilting as the most appropriate approach to managing the trauma of slavery.

Lizzie’s relationship with Anthony Paul parallels her maturation process. A printer by profession, Anthony Paul spends much of his leisure time painting portraits of enslaved women. As she becomes more intimate with him, Lizzie learns that Anthony Paul dreams about her. His bedroom is filled his painting that transpose onto scenes of her great-great grandmother Ayo’s life (182). Despite his benevolent intentions, Anthony’s paintings freeze Lizzie into the image of her ancestors. Anthony Paul serves as a representation of neo-slave narratives which, when read passively, draws readers into traumatic racial narratives. Anthony Paul attempts to celebrate Lizzie by bringing her into his imaginary spaces. Lizzie has no control over these images that connect her to slavery and restrain her social and psychological freedom. In doing so, he robs her of agency. Further, he has the potential to wed Lizzie and draw her into the marriage plot that her mother desires for her. As such, it is no surprise that she rejects him at her moment of maturity. Her separation from Anthony Paul represents her release from the final layer of constraint that prevents her from being able to create a life outside of the shadow cast by

her enslaved ancestors. Lizzie chooses to control her interaction with traumatic historical narratives through the quilt. This empowers her to internalize some parts of the narratives while leaving behind other parts. Thus, she is able to "pass on" into the future. Rather than live a life at the mercy of traumatic historical narratives or classed narratives of respectability, Lizzie chooses to dedicate her life to the pursuit of a public good that has nothing to do with race. She moves to Georgia to work for an organization that supports the homeless. By the end of her story, Lizzie is grounded enough to help others grow roots.

Ultimately, Perry's novel is a parable about reading and writing. In the beginning of the novel, Lizzie is an empathetic reader. By internalizing family history, Lizzie loses sight of her own life. As a result of her misguided reading practices, black identity becomes a traumatic experience that makes it difficult to move into the future. Lizzie's experience supports Crummell's assertion that since slavery was "a degrading thing, the constant recalling of it to the mind serves, by law of association, to degradation" (123). By reliving her ancestor's experiences, Lizzie becomes confined. But after she learns how to quilt, to frame the experiences of her ancestor with the comfort and security of her own life, she is able to produce a racial identity narrative that suits her and gives her the freedom to help others. The quilted structure that Perry uses in the novel facilitates reading without conflation—memory rather than recollection.

Chapter Two

"Stay Black and Die": Escaping the Canon in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*

"I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write" (37).
Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

"The literature of a country or of an age, as I have said, is considered, and as a rule is, a fair reflection of the social conditions of that age or country. But conventions, in literature, as in religion, in politics and in social usage, sometimes persist long past the point where they correctly mirror the time. This is particularly true where they are confused by prejudice…This 'Buy a Book Movement,' I imagine, was conceived with this idea, that colored people should show their appreciation of those of their own number and those of their outside friends who should take the chance of writing books which treat the Negro fairly " (176)

Charles Chesnutt, "The Negro in Books" (1916)

"I think that I am most excited about the fact that we will have at our disposal the means to edit an anthology that will define a canon of African-American literature for instructors and students at any institution which desires to teach a course in African-American literature. Once our anthology is published, no one will ever again be able to use the unavailability of black texts as an excuse not to teach our literature. A well-marked anthology functions in the academy to *create* a tradition, as well as to define and preserve it" (31).
Henry Louis Gates Jr., Loose Canons Notes on the Culture Wars (1992)

In his novel published just four years after my final epigraph, *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996), Paul Beatty suggests that the canonization that Gates celebrates has resulted in oppressive literary categories that make it difficult to imagine a racially affiliated "self" outside of historically entrenched racial discourse. In the post-civil rights era, African Americans experience unprecedented social freedom. Yet, Beatty's novel illustrates that literary texts and literary criticism remain so littered with the political intentions of the past that they have become, in some cases, even more restrictive than the

social conditions to which they serve as an alternative. In Beatty's estimation, canonical literary forms freeze African Americans into stereotypes that preclude political action. Beatty's attitude towards the role of literature in black society represents a startling departure from the attitudes that shaped the earliest texts in the tradition.

As my first epigraph illustrates, Frederick Douglass understands writing as a tool for personal development and maturity culminating in freedom. Douglass's narrative uses the conventions of the *bildungsroman* to narrate his journey from boyhood to manhood, with a focus on the role that writing would play. Douglass links enslavement, youth, and illiteracy, on the one hand, and freedom, maturity, and literacy, on the other. By the end of his 1845 narrative, Frederick Douglass, the fugitive, has succeeded in, at least metaphorically, writ[ing his] own pass out of slavery.

Just over seventy years later, Charles Chesnutt again looks to literature as a force of development. His focus, however, is on the maturity of the race. My second epigraph comes from a lengthy speech that Chesnutt delivered in support of the "Buy-a-Book-Movement, " led by Dr. Richard R. Wright, Jr.[15] Wright encouraged African Americans to buy books written by black authors so that black children might *develop* "self-respect" and "become acquainted as soon as possible with the books that tell the story of their race's *progress* in civilization" (*The Southern Workman* 141, my emphasis). Wright understood literature as both a developing force for black children and a record of the social development of the race.

---

[15] Dr. Wright was a sociologist by training. He served as editor of the *Christian Recorder,* an African American periodical and voice of the African Methodist Episcopal church, from 1909 to 1936. Wright became a bishop in the same church. He also served as president of Wilberforce University for one year in 1941. For more on Richard Wright Jr,, see Kevin Modesto's biographical essay, "'Won't Be Weighted down': Richard R. Wright, Jr.'s Contributions to Social Work and Social Welfare." For more on the *Christian Recorder,* see chapter 2 of Julius Bailey's *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the A.M.E. Church.*

In his contribution to the cause, Chesnutt lectured on the necessity of supporting black authors so that they might offer more realistic representations of black life to combat the stereotypes so common in literature. Chesnutt's endorsement of Wright's efforts to get black books in black homes reveals that, fifty years after emancipation, African American authors struggled to secure audiences to sustain their literary efforts and demonstrate a fully formed and identifiable culture. In 1997, only seventy years after Chesnutt's speech, the post-civil rights era witnessed the publication of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. While there had been many African American literary anthologies prior to the 1990's, the prestige of the W.W. Norton Company signaled the entry of African American literature into the center of American academic culture.[16] As the introduction to the volume notes, the shift from the margins to a canonical position beside English and American literatures should also be understood as a moment of maturity similar to that at the end of Douglass's *bildungsroman* (Gates et al. xxix). With this maturity, African Americans wrote themselves out of the literary margins and into a set of conventions and expectations about what constituted African American literature as a category.

Recent debates[17] about the utility of African American literature as a representative medium suggest that some African American literary "conventions" have continued to persist "long past the point where they correctly mirror the time" (Chesnutt 176). These critical conversations co-exist with contemporary literary explorations by

---

[16] For more on this see Gates' "The Master's Pieces: On Canon Formation and the African American Tradition." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.1 (1990): 89-111.

[17] In *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), Kenneth Warren contends that African American literature is a product of a particular historical period characterized by the strictures of Jim Crow racism More recently, the March 2013 "Theories and Methodologies" section of *PMLA* was devoted to responses to Kenneth Warren's *What Was African American Literature*?

African American writers who engage with the tradition of African American literature even as they question its timeliness. In his 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, Paul Beatty satirizes the autobiography of the black artist as a young man. Through his protagonist's quest to gain public recognition for his decidedly multicultural identity, Beatty argues that literary canonization and racial discourse codify African American literature in ways that continue to perpetuate the very stereotypes that Chesnutt hoped to combat. In this moment of maturity, African American literature is too set in its ways to allow the flexibility necessary to respond to racism in the twenty-first century. I maintain that, in response to this problem, Beatty proposes that black writers escape traditional literary forms by turning to performance poetry in which artists interact with audiences to create literary forms that are responsive and, as Chesnutt explains, "correct for their time." At the moment of his maturation in *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty's protagonist chooses to run away from his academic and state-mandated affiliations to perform rather than simply write about his black identity.

I analyze Beatty's depiction of an African American poet and his relationship to literary forms and academic environments in support of my assertion that fugitive figures in twentieth and twenty-first century African American literature indicate the resistance of some black authors to traditional African American literary forms. In his essay, "Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race and Simulation," Rolland Murray asserts that Beatty uses *The White Boy Shuffle* to argue that the commodification of black culture has created a form of "blackness" that "is not an authentic ground for communion, but rather a product of mass culture industries such as cinema, television and recorded music"(215). Indeed, Beatty's novel reflects his concern about the impact of the centralization of black culture

on the day-to-day experience of blackness. In this chapter, I pay attention to Beatty's emphasis on the role of the African American literary tradition in the commodification of black culture.

In particular, I examine Beatty's depictions of the relationship between literature and stereotypes. Beatty uses the Kaufman family genealogy and Gunnar's educational experiences to critique both the African American literary canon and academic discourses about race. In the first section, I analyze Beatty's manipulation of the protest novel. Beatty enlivens the stagnant form by incorporating into the text a variety of fictional documents that serve as props in Beatty's narrative performance. He infuses Gunnar's scenes of instruction with irony and meta-commentary to dramatize both the negative impact of the literary canon on black writers and the destructive impact of liberal discourses about race on academic spaces. Beatty further manipulates the form by including scenes of poetic performance in the novel. Gunnar's poetry evolves in conjunction with his maturation and underscores the point that canonical literary forms perpetuate stereotypes and preclude the use of literature for contemporary political gain. Eventually, Gunnar discards written poetry all together in favor of poetic performance. In the final section, I explore the black imaginary space to which Beatty's fugitive protagonist retreats. The Bacchanalian Misery Fest functions as a multicultural open mike venue that encourages collective identity performance in a protected space. This space facilitates the shift from artificially categorized literary representations of racial identity toward local multicultural identity performances.

With *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty suggests that "maturity" has stifled African American literature. In the early years of the African American literary tradition,

literature enabled African Americans and "their outside friends" to craft dynamic images (Chesnutt 176). This was certainly the case for African Americans during the nineteenth-century. As Carla Peterson explains in *Doers of the Word* (1995), "fictional narratives resisted teleology, offering [African American authors] a discursive space for a larger meditation on the 'economics of freedom'" (149). Henry Louis Gates locates the roots of the expanded discursive space that Peterson describes in the responsive origins of African American narrative. Gates expounds, "Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics" (Gates 2428). Thus, the earliest African American fiction writers used writing to make arguments for social equality, or, at least, to demonstrate the humanity and intelligence of their people.

Valerie Smith makes an even bolder claim than Gates. In *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (1987), she argues that both slave narrators and other black protagonist narrators "affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the stories of their own lives" (2). Thus, Smith understands writing as an act of self-creation. However, Beatty's novel suggests that the discursive space of African American literature has not expanded enough to represent the diversity of African American identity and experience in the post-civil rights period.

Beatty is not alone in his skepticism about the disciplinary forces that inhere within literary communities to police literary texts. Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race (1998)* notes that the disciplinary gaze is rooted in local and intercommunity politics (9). In *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism*

in African American Literature (2007), Gene Jarrett concludes that literary "deans" police the boundaries of African American literature for their own gain. Thus, traditional African American authority figures are often uncongenial to counter-normative racial identity constructions.

In response, Beatty highlights performance poetry as a medium that enables artists to construct identity narratives that rely on the performance of culture rather than adherence to restrictive categories. Political resistance to master narratives functioned for many years as a central aim of African American literature. This habit left little room for the articulation of black identities or political ideologies that fell outside of or between the racial political discourses currently included in the African American literary canon. By adopting a "collage" approach to narration—the use of a variety of fictional documents to tell Gunnar's story—Beatty articulates multiple political positions simultaneously and creates a text that defies generic classification.

The novel begins during Gunnar Kaufman's middle school years in Santa Monica, California. Gunnar and his two sisters are raised by his single mother and have limited interaction with their sexually-abusive father, Rolf Kaufman. In the early chapters, Gunnar narrates his anxieties about his life as the only African American in his middle school class in Santa Monica, California. Despite the rhetoric of racial diversity that permeates the middle school curriculum, Gunnar finds it difficult to feel comfortable in an environment where he is known as "funny cool black guy" instead of by his name.

After realizing that her children have no desire to spend time with other black children, Gunnar's mother, Brenda, moves her family to a West Los Angeles neighborhood called Hillside (41). Gunnar finds it difficult to fit in socially in his new

neighborhood because he never learned how to interact with other people of color in Santa Monica. Eventually, Gunnar becomes friends with Nick Scoby, an academically-gifted and athletically-inclined African American classmate, and Psycho Loco, the leader of the gang with which Gunnar becomes affiliated, the Gun-Toting Hooligans.

Despite his comfort level in Hillside, Gunnar still feels compelled to cycle through a series of reductive black identity stereotypes like “basketball player” and “gangbanger” in order to fit in. These stereotypes are his only options if he wants to be acknowledged in Hillside, just as “funny cool black guy” was the only option for him to be acknowledged socially in Santa Monica. The only true connection Gunnar feels with racial identity comes during the Los Angeles riots in which he participates by helping the Gun Toting Hooligans steal a safe from the Montgomery Ward department store.

After he graduates from high school, Gunnar goes off to Boston University as a married man since Psycho Loco uses some of the stolen money to purchase Gunnar a Japanese mail order bride named Yoshiko. When he arrives in Boston, Gunnar learns that he has become a famous poet. His disgust with the emptiness of the political movements he encounters translates directly to his growing disdain for written poetry, which he understands as political propaganda. When asked to deliver a televised speech, he advocates that people without true political conviction commit suicide. Gunnar’s disenchantment with poetry reflects Beatty’s commentary about literary forms that “fossilize thoughts” rather than affording African Americans flexibility to define their racial identities and political motivations (205).

Gunnar’s best friend, Nick Scoby, tags along to Boston University, but unlike Gunnar, who has the support of Yoshiko, Scoby cannot adapt to the college environment

and eventually commits suicide. After Scoby's death, strangers begin sending Gunnar suicide poems. Moved by Scoby's and the suicide poets' commitment to action, Gunnar decides to forsake all his affiliations. He returns to Hillside with his pregnant wife. They hide from the police and become fugitives. Gunnar's father uses a searchlight helicopter to locate and follow them. The searchlight ensures their visibility.

In a surprising turn, Gunnar and Yoshiko enjoy the illumination. They find that the spotlight associated with criminals on the run from the police makes them feel free. They no longer feel bound by the stereotypes projected onto their bodies because the spotlight marks them as delinquent. Therefore, they feel free to live outside all social rules. They enjoy the visibility so much that Yoshiko decides to give birth in Reynier Park under the light of the helicopter. After this episode, people from the neighborhood return to the spot and, under the illumination of the searchlight, regularly perform monologues for the public. They call these events "Bacchanalian Misery Fests" and envision them as the scaffold for a community of individuals rather than a racial monolith.

Re-packaging the Protest Novel

The White Boy Shuffle is a "fugitive form." Beatty structures the novel like a performance in order to resist the codification that attends the centrality of African American literature. Protest has such a distinctive presence in African American literature that some critics go as far as to assert that all this literature is protest literature. The African American literary tradition has changed a great deal since the nineteenth-century when slave narratives were offered as evidence of the humanity of enslaved people. Nonetheless, scholars like Henry Louis Gates insist that one of the primary goals of African American literature is to respond to master narratives that affirm racial

inequality.[18] Resistance to such narratives has resulted in a set of "master counter-narratives" that revolve around a set of stereotypical responses to the more familiar ones. Despite their emphasis on a black protagonist, such narratives underscore and amplify the power of the master narrative. As Beatty illustrates through Gunnar's commentary, the pressure to respond to the concerns of critics has left much African American literature brimming over with stereotypical images as large as the stereotypes they oppose.

Rather than perpetuate stereotypes in his novel, Beatty resists by using language that is active rather than static. Nick Scoby best explains this idea during a conversation with Gunnar about the distinctions between poetry and music. Scoby says, "That's why your poems can never be no more than descriptions of life. The page is finite. Once you put the words down on paper, you've fossilized your thought" (205). Here, Beatty reveals his concern that literature, "words down on paper," freezes black culture into oppressive stereotypes. Instead, Beatty's postmodern novel functions more like a spoken word poem—a performance—than a written poem or a conventional African American novel.

Beatty resists literary categorization by insisting on blurring the lines between literary forms. In his essay, "Paul Beatty's White Boy Shuffle Blues: Jazz Poetry, John Coltrane, and the Post-Soul Aesthetic," Bertram Ashe argues that Beatty employs an "improvisational sensibility" to make "music on the page" (113). Rather than understanding Beatty's improvisational organization as an attempt to mimic jazz, I understand it as a reflection of Beatty's spoken word background. Beatty stages

[18] In his essay, "Talking Black: Critical Signs of the Times," Gates asserts that African American literature is unique because of its relationship to its critics. The scholar discerns, "Few literary traditions have begun with such a complex and curious relation to criticism: allegations of an absence led directly to a presence, a literature often inextricably bound in a dialogue with its harshest critics" (Gates 2428).

performances within the novel in order to make the text an active entity that must be negotiated rather than passively read.

In an effort to resist "fossilization," Beatty includes images, letters, safe combinations, radio recording transcripts, meta-commentary, and, most importantly, poetic performances to draw attention to the failure of traditional literature to reflect the nuances of black identity in the twentieth century. He relies on a variety of representational strategies to capture the complexity of racial identity in the post-civil rights era. *The White Boy Shuffle* is comprised of documents that serve as stage props. Beatty uses a variety of media forms to illustrate that life must be witnessed and experienced rather than simply narrated. When Psycho Loco makes a highly anticipated discovery--the combination to a safe stolen during the Los Angeles riots--Beatty shows the reader the combination. Beatty evokes Gunnar and Yoshiko's first romantic evening by including the chorus of Al Green's "Here I am" (172). Beatty devotes a half page to an inky handprint that Gunnar sends Yoshiko in a heartfelt letter (195). Rather than a conventional protest novel, *The White Boy Shuffle* functions more as a staged production.

From the first sentence of the first chapter, Beatty's protagonist outlines his strategy for countering stereotypical racial narratives. He undermines those narratives with irony. In a dramatic aside more common to a theatrical performance, Gunnar positions himself as an improbable African American hero. He announces, "Unlike the typical bluesy earthy folksy denim overalls noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism aw shucks Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist mojo magic black man, I am not the seventh son of a seventh son. I wish I were, but fate shorted me by six brothers and three uncles"

(5). The character, himself a writer, breaks the fourth wall by acknowledging that his story does not meet literary expectations.

Beatty's choice to alliterate and hyphenate "Pulitzer-Prize-winning protagonist" conflates the protagonist and author and serves as meta-commentary, suggesting that African American authors are rewarded for erasing the line between fact and fiction. Beatty draws attention to the weight that fictional representations place on the lives of real African Americans. The conflation also suggests that Paul Beatty himself feels pressure to conform to the unreasonable standards of the literary canon. Gunnar's sarcasm reveals his contempt for a romanticized African American literary history, as illustrated by his use of sarcastic phrases such as "noble-in-the-face-of-cracker-racism" and "aw shucks."

While the tone denotes concern that Gunnar will not live up to the standards established by the series of superhuman characters that precede him, his actions align him with the African American literary tradition. By noting that he is not the "seventh son of the seventh son," Gunnar recalls W.E.B. Du Bois's description of the black man as a "seventh son born with a veil and gifted with the second sight" (10). Yet, Gunnar's suggestion that even the gift of double consciousness eludes him is ironic because his entire opening monologue is self-reflexive and later confirms that he does indeed experience double consciousness. Despite his double consciousness, however, Gunnar does not feel connected to a supportive racial family. He illustrates this lack with his comment that fate shorted him by six brothers and three uncles. Thus, in the opening lines of the novel, Beatty suggests that the literary tradition that precedes *The White Boy Shuffle* functions only as an anxiety-producing set of racial stereotypes. These stereotypes

haunt black authors rather than establish a racial community united by a literary tradition. As a result of his confusion about his position in the African American literary tradition, Gunnar is resistant. Yet, he feels doomed to repeat old narratives.

Indeed, Gunnar's use of meta-commentary, lengthy sentences, and compounded adjectives reveal the burden that literary history places on both author and character. The mention of "bluesy earthy folksy denim overalls" recalls Richard Wright's imperative in "Blueprint for Negro Writing" to record African American folk practices and quotidian experiences rather than mimic Western literature.[19] The image of the "mojo magic black man" recalls the conjure figures that inhabit some nineteenth-century African American literary texts. [20] Gunnar neither considers himself folksy nor magical. Beatty writes this sentence with only one comma and no conjunctions, thus suggesting that generations of stereotypical images pile one on top of the other in the pages of African American protest novels.

Beatty's concern about the Pulitzer Prize marks his anxiety that he may not be able to live up to his predecessors. Gunnar laments, "The chieftains and queens who sit on top of old Mount Kilimanjaro left me out of the will. They bequeathed me nothing, stingy bastards. Cruelly cheating me of my mythological inheritance, my aboriginal superpowers" (5). Through his comment about the "chieftains and queens on Mount

---

[19] Richard Wright's 1937 essay, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," was published in the literary magazine *New Challenge*. In the essay, Wright condemns his contemporaries for neglecting to produce literature for an African American audience with the explicit goal of preserving black folkloric expressions in favor of "escaping the harsh lot of their race" by producing writing that mimicked the conventions of the Western tradition. In Wright's estimation such literature only functioned to beg the question of "Negro humanity" rather than using literature as a tool in the development of a Black Nationalist identity.

[20] For example, Charles Chestnut's short stories collected in *The Conjure Tales* and *The Wife of His Youth* contain conjure figures who assert supernatural power that disrupts the social power of white authority figures. Even more specifically, we might consider this line as a reference to Frederick Douglass' victory over the brutal overseer Covey that he attributes to a protective "root" he was given by an older slave.

Kilimanjaro," Gunnar expresses bitterness that he has not received a useable "African" heritage. From the outset, Beatty establishes Gunnar as a self-effacing antihero reminiscent of the unnamed protagonists in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and *The Invisible Man.* Like those characters, Gunnar acknowledges his own discomfort with the African American literary tradition that precedes him. In contrast to Johnson and Ellison, however, he mocks the tradition in a way that recalls a staged performance, filled with asides to the audience, rather than the seriousness of Johnson and Ellison.

Despite his disparaging comments about African American literary history, Gunnar Kaufman desires to be part of it. He follows his anxiety-laden first sentence with his "wish" to be a celebrated literary figure. Yet, rather than inheriting a respectable heritage, Gunnar feels "preordained by a set of weak-kneed DNA to shuffle in the footsteps of a long cowardly queue of coons" (5). Beatty uses Gunnar to illustrate African American authors' desires to signify on the African American literary tradition without being confined by it. Yet, Gunnar's comment suggests something more.

Not only does Gunnar feel disconnected from the heroic African American figures he mentions in the first sentence, he also feels burdened by less admirable characters. Gunnar irreverently references literary figures such as Bigger Thomas, the "invisible man," and the "ex-colored man," who cannot be celebrated for their courage, wise decisions, or loyalty to the race. He mourns the loss of a gallant African American identity rooted in shared political goals. Thus, Beatty's protagonist regrets that he is embedded in narrative histories that preclude him from constructing an unencumbered image of self.

Literary Genealogy

As a black writer, Gunnar inhabits the crossroads between creating literature and being created by literature. He understands African American figures of the past only as champions who respond to racism by using their abilities to "strike down race politic evildoers," or cowards who avoid racial confrontations (5). Gunnar cannot relate to either set of characters. In his opinion, the disappointing set of stories that make up the African American literary tradition only emphasizes the differences between his life and the lives of the men in these stories. His life pales in comparison, which accounts for his assertion that he has been "cheat[ed] out of [his] mythological inheritance" (5). The prominence of racial stereotypes and master narratives in African American literature makes this literature useless for Gunnar and his contemporaries.

Beatty underscores the tension between the African American literary tradition and Gunnar's everyday life with his mother's recollection of the Kaufman genealogical history, which reads as a satire of African American literary history. His ancestor, Euripides Kaufman, is a cunning salesman who is able to buy his way out of slavery at the age of nine by charging people to rub his head for luck (8). Further, he saves his own life by betraying other African Americans (10). Thus, Euripides is a character who takes advantage of the commodification of the black body by selling his own body to buy his freedom rather than emphasizing his own humanity. This story suggests that the genre of the slave narrative exploits the black body as much as it functions as a petition for black liberation. In another scene from Gunnar's family history, Swen Kaufman is a free man who travels south and willingly becomes a slave just so he can have the freedom to elevate his experience of slavery to high art. Swen is a dancer who lives and works on a plantation because he finds it a rich source of artistic inspiration (13). His plantation

musicals reify stereotypes of slavery for both his personal pleasure and the pleasure of his white audience. Here, Beatty invites the reader to consider that neo-slave narratives and other art forms dramatizing plantation life celebrate slavery and perpetuate stereotypes. Beatty's tale of Wolfgang Kaufman suggests that literature produced during the Civil Rights era dramatized the struggles of those in the movement and secured a measure of fame for the authors. Wolfgang works as a stencil artist during this period (18). His signs maintain the distinctions between "white" and "colored" facilities for all but Wolfgang, who was known to slip into the white bathroom when necessary (18). As elite leaders of the movement, men like Wolfgang were granted more social access than most African Americans.

All of Gunnar's ancestors are named for famous European artists, and all use their art to negotiate the boundaries between personal freedom and social restriction at the expense of other African Americans as well as their own personal pride. Beatty invites readers to make connections between Euripides's narrative, early slave narratives, Swen's story, neo-slave narratives, and texts that emphasize the distinctions between black culture and white culture during the Civil Rights era. This satirical literary history suggests that such literature has reinforced restrictive narratives rather than offer narratives that protest injustice.

Gunnar's relationship with his father also reflects Beatty's opinions about the influence of the African American literary tradition on black writers. Rolf Kaufman functions as a parody of the black artist who perpetuates damaging stereotypes about African Americans. Rolf is a police officer for the Los Angeles Police Department, known for its association with racial violence. Rolf is Gunnar's only connection to a

genealogical narrative that connects him to slavery, and represents the history of racial violence that penetrates and scars Gunnar's psyche, making it difficult for him to construct his own sense of identity. Rolf's job is to regulate society. Although he has limited interactions with Gunnar, he finds ways to remind his son that he is a "Kaufman" and must act accordingly (92). For example, he honors Gunnar's request for a basketball, but he also sends a book, *Heaven Is a Playground* (92). The book is described as "a sports journalist's treatise on a pack of inner-city Brooklynites who spend the better part of their days scampering around a basketball court known as the hole" (92). Gunnar continues, "Inside my father had scribbled a note: 'Read this and remember you're a Kaufman, and not one of the black misfits sociologically detailed herein'" (92). Gunnar's father uses a literary text replete with stereotypes to warn him against becoming a particular type of black man. Beatty uses almost every character in the novel to reinforce the idea that literature perpetuates stereotypical images of African Americans.

Rolf's assertion of his last name as a standard for Gunnar's behavior represents his role in trying to force his son to conform to social order. Gunnar must fit himself into stereotypical narratives but is not allowed to choose which narrative he must conform to. Instead, Rolf insists on choosing for Gunnar. He is not permitted to become a "basketball guy."[21] Further, Rolf uses the word "sociological" which is similar to the word "anthropological" that appears in the title of the collection of Gunnar's published poetry. Here, Beatty suggests that texts become spaces where humans are converted into scientific objects of study without their consent.

Since Gunnar's mother is an orphan who adopted the Kaufman family history as

[21] For more on the role of basketball and stereotypes in the novel see Tracy Curtis' "Basketball's Demands in Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle*."

her own, Rolf is Gunnar's only connection to black American history (6). Gunnar's abuse at the hands of his father characterizes his relationship to African American history as violent. Gunnar's history derives from his progenitor, an abuser and a police officer who enforces social restriction. Gunnar laments, "His weakness shadowed my shame from sun to sun. His history was my history. A reprobate ancestry that snuggled up to me and tucked me in at night. In the morning it kissed me on the back of the neck, plopped its dick in my hands, and asked me to blow reveille" (21). Beatty uses the homophone pair sun/son to make the point that the shadow of shame is passed through generations from son to son and is felt around the clock, from sunrise to sunset. Even Gunnar's most intimate moments, before falling asleep at night and before rising for the day, are haunted by memories of his father's sexual abuse, which Beatty likens to traumatic stories of African American history.

Gunnar's conflation of those two sources of grief, his father and his familial history, suggests that he believes them to be one and the same. Both his history and his father have molested him. Both demand military-like conformity to racial stereotypes, as indicated through his imagined trumpet playing of a military call to arise. Gunnar simultaneously mourns the loss of a usable past and an accessible caring father, either or both of which could have provided him with a more consistent narrative for his life. Instead, the shame that Gunnar feels casts a "shadow." He has internalized the ghostly specter of genealogy that leaves emptiness at his core. Rather than having a guiding ancestral history that pushes him towards greatness, he has a "reprobate" ancestry that predestines him for damnation. Gunnar must flee this history rather than be emotionally stunted by it. By offering this literary history as Gunnar's genealogical narrative, Beatty

directly connects Gunnar's anxiety as a poet to literary history.

The Canonical Classroom

Beatty suggests that the institutionalization of literary study codifies reading in ways that conflate African American literature and African American life. Such conflations reify restrictive stereotypes. Thus, narratives of racial strife overshadow the contemporary quotidian experience of real African Americans. As Hortense Spillers explains in "All the Things That You'd Be By Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother," in the past African American individuality was overlooked because the African American "individual" operated as a synecdoche for the masses (378). In short, every black person *is* the race (Spillers 378).

This concept informs Beatty's depiction of Gunnar's elementary school family tree presentation. Beatty uses this scene to raise questions about the use of African American literature in the classroom. In his classroom, Gunnar's history, a literary history, is discussed in relation to black history month. This practice ensures that literature will be reduced to racial politics. Although Gunnar is ashamed of the Kaufman genealogy, the reception of his ridiculous family stories clarifies the way African American literary history can seemingly stand in for African American family history. When the students in Gunnar's elementary school class are asked to create "family trees," "most kids could only go back as far as their grandparents" (11). Gunnar's fanciful genealogical renderings make him a classroom star because, as Spillers suggests, Gunnar's stories stand in for the lost history of his black classmates. Beatty uses the Kaufman family legacy as a parody of African American literary history to suggest that African Americans must choose between affiliation with buffoonery, the unreality of the

"poster board Negro heroes," or nothing at all (11). Gunnar must either accept a set of restrictive protocols that force him to sacrifice a part of his own potential—all of the Kaufmans are "cowards" and "race traitors"—or mourn the loss of a guiding identity narrative. Whether he accepts or rejects the genealogical narrative, he loses. Gunnar's dilemma reflects the condition of post-civil rights African Americans who inherit a body of protest literature whose broad strokes reduce their individual lives to political positions. This problem is intensified when literary scholars with political agendas, like Gunnar's teachers in Santa Monica, use literature as a "political marionette" rather than a true celebration of literature for its own sake as Henry Louis Gates asserts in *Loose Canons*.

Beatty suggests that outside the context of political movements for black liberation, African American literature appears to be a series of negotiations between self-sacrifice and cowardice. Just as Gunnar's family history captivated all the African American students in his class because it filled the gaps in their own family trees, African American literature stands in as the representational history of the day-to-day experiences of the race. But, African Americans can no longer turn to African American literary history for a "blueprint." Beatty's text marks the grief surrounding the loss of a unified political movement and suggests that, when taken outside of its historical context, canonical African American literature cannot provide African Americans with a model for developing a black identity and culture.

Gunnar's classroom experiences prove the lie in the fantasy that racial problems can be solved by liberal discourses that embrace "colorblindness"—the assertion that individuals need not see meaning in skin color. Instead, Gunnar's experiences suggest that colorblindness only perpetuates stereotypes by removing the topic of race from day-

to-day conversation, thereby making it impossible for real people to challenge stereotypes. The authority figures associated with Gunnar's formal education in 1980s Santa Monica, California train him to reduce himself to a stereotype rather than to explore the diversity of black identity.

Beatty likely chooses Santa Monica because the city has a unique history of radical politics. Although most leftist political movements are associated with the working class, labor groups, and student movements, Santa Monica hosted a rare group of solidly middle-class citizens who formed a left-leaning political coalition, Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights, and voted members of the coalition into controlling positions on the city council (Kann 18). Unfortunately, as Mark Kann explains in *Middle-class Radicalism in Santa Monica*, the "quiche and Perrier" liberals reverted to more traditional forms of elitism after they rose to power (225). Thus, Santa Monica embodies the tenor of white liberalism behind Beatty's rendering of Gunnar's experience in the classroom.

Whereas the ambivalent middle-class white characters speak of acceptance and empowerment for people of color, their day-to-day practices, like those of the real people in Santa Monica in the 1980s, "gravitated toward the rituals of mainstream 'bourgeois' politics" (Kann 225). Ms. Cegeny, Gunnar's teacher, singles out the non-white students. She opts to wear a t-shirt proclaiming the humanity of ethnic groups while "pay[ing] special attention to [Gunnar], Salvador Aguacaliente and Sheila Watanabe" (28). In addition, "she take[s] care to point out the multiculturalist propaganda of colorblindness "posted above the blackboard" (29). The tension between the pretense of not seeing race and the reality of paying race "special attention" confuses Gunnar. As a result, he is self-

conscious about race but lives in a world that refuses to allow him to discuss it directly. Gunnar, therefore, cannot resolve his concerns.

Beatty uses Gunnar's social life in Santa Monica to dramatize the ways in which the refusal to acknowledge race in meaningful ways results in an environment filled with placeholders that flatten individuals into stereotypes. In the classroom, Gunnar occupies the position of "funny cool black guy" because it alone provides a description approaching his actual identity while "maintaining politically correct semiotics" (27). Beatty describes the multicultural classroom as an environment where "funny cool black guy" erases Gunnar's name, personality, and even physical characteristics. Even Gunnar's doctor turns to Gunnar during his exam to ask, "Oh, you're one of those funny cool black guys aren't you?" (31) The stereotypical identity imposed on Gunnar becomes inextricable from his person. It is so much a part of him that his doctor can diagnose it. Beatty uses the doctor's ironic comment to draw attention to the falsehood inherent in the refusal to "see" color. The rhetoric of colorblindness denies the complexity of difference, which makes it difficult for Gunnar to understand himself as more than a stock character in Santa Monica's multicultural play.

Despite the pervasiveness of colorblindness, Gunnar is aware that he exceeds the boundaries of the identity assigned to him in the classroom. Thus, Gunnar dislikes the confinement of academic spaces and imagines escaping to the colorful freedom of his weekends:

> We'd make plans to spend the weekend at the beach, sunning in the shoreline's warm chromatics and filling in the childhood's abstract impressionism coloring books with our own definitions of color, trying our hardest not to stay inside the lines. (34)

On these weekends, Gunnar enjoys the freedom to shift his color according to his mood.

He revels in the ability to live outside color "lines." He describes the pleasure of his experience of the shoreline in terms of color; "warm chromatics" feature prominently in his fantasy and form a contrast to his colorless classroom. He enjoys the freedom to discard rigidity for impressionism. On the beach, Gunnar is no longer frozen into a stereotype based on the "color" of his skin while people pretend that color does not exist. To underscore the value of color, Beatty connects Gunnar's emotions with each of four colors, "Blue, Psychedelic, White and Black." In doing so, Beatty includes "blue" and "psychedelic," which are not associated with race. These colors, which disrupt racial-political discourse, describe both the concrete pleasures of childhood, "slurpee blue tongues" and splashing in the "blue of the ocean," and disorderly manic feelings associated with childhood: "when you're young, psychedelic is a primary color and a most mesmerizing high" (35). Gunnar's childhood pleasures exist outside of the confinements of racial discourse. The colors are tethered to active moments in his life—his flesh. Thus, his "real" life is placed in opposition to academic discourses associated with literary canonization.

Yet, Gunnar also expresses an acute awareness of the consequences of American life in black and white. He describes white as "the expulsion of colors encumbered by self-awareness and pigment" (35). His thought suggests that whiteness represents the freedom to live without the self-reflexivity that comes from understanding how a person sees another person in a raced body. White is the freedom to live without color. Even more tellingly, Gunnar describes black as a space of abandonment and confusing restriction. He laments, "Black was an unwanted dog abandoned in the forest that finds its way home by fording flooded rivers and hitchhiking in the beds of pickup trucks and

arrives at its destination only to be taken for a car ride to the desert" (35). For Gunnar, being black reduces him to a dog that is unwanted in the only space he understands as home. His attempts at acceptance by the majority are futile efforts since to fight to return home will only result in the creation of an even more daunting obstacle—"a car ride to the desert." Gunnar understands blackness as alienation. Just as his genealogical history imposes an identity on him, his formal education shapes his perception of himself. Beatty connects both experiences to the African American literary tradition.

Gunnar sees himself as both a child and psychedelic rebel, in black and white. Yet, he must live in a world that reduces him to "funny cool black guy." Despite such restrictions, Gunnar had the consolation of being able to color outside of the lines as a "beach bum" who breaks the law on the weekends. Nevertheless, his weekend escapes to live outside the color lines bring him to the attention of the Santa Monica police department for breaking the law (47). The forces that seek social order discipline Gunnar for stepping outside of his boundaries. Regardless, Gunnar performs a variety of active, multifaceted, and sometimes universal cultural practices that he describes as blue and psychedelic. Despite the colorblind academic setting that reduces his life to literary history, Gunnar understands that he exceeds the boundaries of the literary canon and liberal rhetorics that permeate his education.

Poetic Blackness

Beatty strategically positions poems and poetic performances throughout his novel in an effort to illustrate that conventional African American literature does not provide the freedom of expression necessary to represent contemporary African American identity. Gunnar's feelings of confinement, which he associates with the

African American literary tradition, reflect Beatty's own difficulties using traditional forms of African American literature to articulate racial identity in the post-civil rights era. Both Gunnar Kaufman and Paul Beatty are poets.[22] Like Gunnar, Beatty moved from Los Angeles to Boston to attend Boston University. He completed a degree in psychology, eventually earning a master's degree in the subject. He eventually fled the restrictions of his degree program in pursuit of a setting--a creative writing program-- that would provide him freer expression just as Gunnar flees Boston. Performance poetry with the Nuyorican Poetry group provided the avenue through which Beatty's talent first captured the public eye. Thus, like Gunnar Kaufman, Paul Beatty turned to spoken word poetry as a medium for self-expression.

As a result of his educational experiences informed by the literary canon, Gunnar's first poem is constrained and bound to Hillside, the poor neighborhood filled with people of color to which his mother relocates the family. Gunnar produces the poem after being sexually abused by two neighborhood girls (82). Once again, Gunnar's connection to the African American experience is associated with a sexual assault thereby suggesting that violent narratives of African American history are imposed on the character against his will and result in psychological trauma. The poem that Gunnar produces is a concrete poem that appears as a series of staggered blocks reminiscent of bricks or city blocks. To underscore the connection of the poem to the confinement Gunnar feels in Hillside, the poem is spray-painted on the side of a wall with the same

---

[22] Paul Beatty denies the connection between himself and Gunnar Kaufman; nevertheless, it is difficult to overlook the similarities between their lives. Paul Beatty was interviewed twice by BOMB magazine, once by Christian Haye in 1994 and again in 2000 by Rone Shavers. When asked in the second interview if he was similar to Gunnar Kaufman, Paul Beatty responded: "In terms of the more obvious things—mom and two sisters, L.A., New York. But most of it isn't, 95 percent of it is made up. Tuffy is more like me, I think, than Gunnar Kaufman from *The White Boy Shuffle*." Also of note, Beatty admits that the Bacchanalian Misery Fest is a "reflection on the Nuyorican thing."

stencil that his “great-great-uncle Wolfgang used to do his Jim Crow handiwork” (86). Here, Beatty highlights the connections among the segregation that accompanied Jim Crow racism, the segregation of Hillside from the wealthy community at the top of the hill, and the segregated literary canon. The black artist is mandated to have intercourse with the black community and thus produces work inextricable from his local community. This is a difficult situation for Gunnar because it does not reflect the reality of his life since he grew up in Santa Monica rather than Hillside. Gunnar’s “educational experiences” have forced him into a stereotype that does not reflect the totality of his life experiences.

Gunnar’s poem reflects his dilemma. The speaker describes his process of “searching for ghetto muses” (86). Instead of finding the Greek muses that he seeks, he can only find inspiration in his friend who “picked up a jailhouse phone” and says “Yo nigger, you got to come down and get me out.” (86). Gunnar is not moved to celebrate the “concrete” or “s.o.s a.p.b. 911 electronic prayers” (86). Instead, his muse is the person who tries to escape confinement (86). It is important to note that this figure uses vernacular language to articulate his desires, just as Gunnar relies heavily on vernacular language in his poetry. Beatty does not suggest that black writers either adopt or reject vernacular language or black culture. Instead, he advocates that being forced to choose between “Thalia,” the muse or “the rusted barbs of a shopping cart” limits the range of the black poet. Similarly, codifying literature into racially distinct canons does not make sense to Beatty.

Gunnar’s poetry continues to reflect his feelings of confinement. His next occasion for poetry is the funeral of one of his fellow Gun Toting Hooligans. The poem,

"Elegy for a Vicious Midget," emphasizes Pumpkin's diminutive size. His "homunculus casket" denotes that he was not given the opportunity to fully develop. Gunnar's poetry is similarly stunted by external limitations. In the text that follows the poem, Gunnar reflects on the practice of "duel[ing] in impromptu verse; tankas at seven paces or sestinas at noon" (105). This phrase is contradictory since complex poetic structures like tankas and sestinas cannot very well be produced impromptu. Thus, poetry that is supposedly a spontaneous production is actually planned down to the syllable. Similarly, the violence of Hillside appears to be spontaneous and unavoidable, yet it is actually an organized response to social structures as limiting as the structure of a sestina. The confinement of Hillside leads to violence, and it should not be celebrated. Beatty's humorous descriptions of using poetry as a weapon likens poetry to violence and suggests that the arbitrary boundaries around literature do more harm than good. Segregated literature intensifies stereotypes and injures rather than liberates people of color.

Gunnar's description of poetic dueling is immediately followed by a poem that, unlike the one about "ghetto muses" or Pumpkin's elegy is not embedded in the storyline of the novel. The stand-alone poem, "Home Grown," suggests that living in a stereotyped community prevents its members from getting to know themselves or each other. The "young G" in the poem comes to the realization that he does not know what the men "he's grown up with/traded comic books with/been tested for VD with" are "really like" (106). He only knows that they are "niggers who care" (106). Beatty uses the racial epithet to flatten the men. The "care" the speaker describes is not personal affection since the men do not really "know" each other. Instead, they are reduced to an externally defined community that generally "cares" about the same things. They can only access a

superficial understanding of their "cares." The men are described as "asleep under a blanket of smoke" that simultaneously connects them and confines them (105). They are disconnected from the world outside the smoke and prevented from seeing each other. Segregated and stereotyped literature creates a "blanket of smoke" around black writers, which defeats the purpose of black literature to record the quotidian experience of black people and resist injustice. Beatty's satirical use of poetry in gang fights and the "Home Grown" poem suggests that conventional African American literary forms perpetuate stereotypes that efface the individual identities of African Americans.

As the story progresses, Gunnar increasingly loses faith in conventional poetry. After learning about the jury's decision in the Rodney King trial, Gunnar experiences "a rage that couldn't be dealt with in a poem" (131). He goes on to explain, " Even at its most reflective or its angriest, my poetry was little more than an opiate devoted to pacifying my cynicism…the American poet was a tattletale, a whiner, at best an instigator (131). Gunnar is skeptical that poetry can combat racism. Instead, he believes that it functions as an empty discussion much like "colorblindness" in Santa Monica. Scoby pushes Gunnar's skepticism even further. While they are looting a store, Gunnar recites, "What happens to a dream deferred" (134). Scoby answers, "Fuck Langston Hughes. I bet when they rioted in Harlem, Langston got his" (134). So, while Gunnar understands poets as empty mouthpieces, Scoby suggests that the poet is a traitor who deserves to "get his" in revolutionary moments. Again, Beatty characterizes conventional literature as a problem rather than a solution to racism. Langston Hughes, in Scoby's estimation, is someone who deserves punishment rather than celebration. These moments reveal a line of inquiry concerning the relationship between African American literature

and racial politics. Beatty suggests that literature--in this instance poetry--is not only impotent but also misleading. Gunnar does not write any new poems after the Rodney King riots. Instead, the poems embedded in the novel after the riot scenes are, tellingly, poems that Gunnar wrote in his past that readers use to make assumptions about him.

When Gunnar attends the first meeting of his creative writing class at Boston University, he learns that his poetry has been used to erase his individual identity and replace him with a stereotype. Unbeknownst to him, a literary magazine has published his poetry. Outsiders have studied his poetry for years without his knowledge or consent (179). The sight of his classmate's book, *Ghetto-topia: An Anthropological Rending of the Ghetto through the Street Poems of an Unknown Street Poet Named Gunnar Kaufman*, sends Gunnar running from the building (179). Referring to Gunnar both by his name and as an "Unknown Street Poet," the title suggests that both his identity and the significance of his work are lost. Instead, outsiders reduce him to a nameless occupant of an unspecified "ghetto" to be dissected for anthropological study. Gunnar feels exposed by strangers' appropriation of his poetry. Beatty depicts Gunnar's sense of exposure by having him strip naked and run from his Boston University classroom (179). These scenes demonstrate that Gunnar's written poetry reduces him to an agent in other people's life decisions and political positions. African American literature, even when created by African Americans to reflect their contemporary experiences, can be codified in destructive ways through academic study. In Beatty's estimation, African American conventional literature reduces racial identity to a set of flat narratives.

Political Performance

Just as Beatty's novel approximates performance, Gunnar chooses to discard

written poetry in favor of poetic performance. Gunnar is disillusioned by the emptiness of racial politics. He realizes that he is not truly invested in any political movement despite the political life of his poetry. It upsets him that other people insert him and his poetry into their political agendas. Like the young G in “Home Grown,” Gunnar realizes that he is invested in “care” but does not really know about what he cares. He has allowed his life to be reduced to liberal stereotypes of political action that are completely disconnected from his real life. As a result, Gunnar decides to tell the truth when he is invited to give a speech at a political rally in support of black rule in South Africa (200). Rather than supporting the cause, he admits, “I am not willing to die for South Africa, and you ain’t neither” (200). By doing so, Gunnar seeks to kill the unifying stereotypes that adhere to black literature and the black body. Gunnar continues by paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., “I ain’t ready to die for anything, so I guess I’m just not fit to live. In other words, I’m just ready to die. I’m just ready to die” (200). By referencing King, Gunnar recalls an era when African Americans were more united by a political movement than in the contemporary period. This juxtaposition illuminates the truth of Beatty’s suggestion that stereotypical black identities connected to past political movements are incongruous with black identity in the post-civil rights era. Gunnar’s suggestion that he is “ready to die” reflects Beatty’s sentiments that the practice of projecting stereotypical narratives onto black bodies must end.

After Scoby dies and leaves Gunnar a poem as a suicide note, Gunnar begins receiving more death poems. These poems represent the death of the black body that serves as a canvas onto which others paint stereotypical images. The death poems signify the end of literature that pays homage to past political movements. Instead of replicating

counter-master narratives, Beatty advocates that black writers forge new paths through literature that adopt alternative narrative strategies to represent contemporary African American life. For example, Beatty includes the obituary of "Merva Kilgore" a "prolific writer" who kills herself after being asked to sing "one of those old Negro spirituals" (211). The writer eliminates the body limited only to spirituals as a method of representation. Another obituary, for Carlton Malthus, cites that he killed himself after being "accused of being too black" to appreciate a beer that he developed (210). Carlton kills the body that does not represent the entirety of his experience but instead freezes him into other people's expectations. Thus, the death poems are metaphors for writing that resists stereotypes about black people rather than perpetuate them. Beatty proposes that black artists should kill limiting narratives.

Black Fugitive Impulse

In order to disassociate himself from stereotypes, Gunnar decides to completely abandon all attempts to fit into traditional racial, social, and educational frameworks. Gunnar and Yoshiko go into hiding rather than constantly move from stereotype to stereotype and take refuge in the La Cienega Motor Lodge (211). Having no fixed address they enroll in a "correspondence college," thereby eschewing any fixed narratives associated with either local neighborhood or the academy. Although they refuse to fix their bodies in any particular physical location, Gunnar's history finds him when his father begins to follow him around in a helicopter while shining a spotlight down on him to ensure his visibility. Oddly enough, the searchlight provides Gunnar and Yoshiko with more freedom by exposing their hideout. The couple use the light to "take midnight strolls" during which Yoshiko conducts identity experiments. The light from the

helicopter turns the darkness of midnight into a stage upon which Yoshiko pretends to be "a newly discovered blues musician." While such a unique composite identity as a Japanese blues singer might remain unnoticed in the shadow of identity stereotypes, the searchlight makes Yoshiko's performance visible. In darkness, death, or life outside of the codification of the literary canon, there is room to create new identities. Here, Beatty draws attention to the value of performance. Yoshiko's flesh life explodes stereotypes about Japanese women.

Gunnar and Yoshiko become so enamored with the illumination of the searchlight that they decide that Yoshiko should give birth in its glow. When they invite the locals to witness the birth of their baby in Reynier Park, Psycho Loco correctly interprets the public birth ceremony as another identity performance. He inquires, "What kind of black man would let his wife give birth in the park?" (217). The searchlight penetrates the darkness of the fugitive space that Gunnar and Yoshiko occupy—a space outside of all affiliations and laws. By bringing a child and the neighborhood into this space, they hope to make the stage for identity performance available to everyone.

After Yoshiko gives birth, Gunnar's mother instructs him to use his favorite cereal bowl to collect the placenta, a "quivering bloody mass of now useless organ" (219). Gunnar offers the "pulpy organ" to the officers manning the spotlight helicopter and mocks, "Thus behold the only thing mightier than yourself" (219). Yoshiko follows with, "*Roots*, right?"(219) In this moment, Beatty uses Alex Haley's *Roots* to represent a black aesthetic that relies on the body as the locus of identity and authenticity. By offering the "quivering" and "useless" placenta instead of the new baby, Gunnar underscores the death of this aesthetic. Like his favorite cereal bowl, the old aesthetic is comfortable and

juvenile. Gunnar discards it as he transitions from the teenager who loved the cereal bowl into fatherhood. Since his wife gave birth under the illumination of the spotlight, the new baby gets to enjoy the fugitive's freedom. His mocking act makes the officers aware that the body confined by hegemonic authority is dead. Yoshiko's questioning of the origin of the quote implies that the *Roots* framework for understanding identity is a barely legible memory.

Since the birth is such a successful event, Gunnar and Yoshiko use the searchlight as a spotlight during the Bacchanalian Misery Fests, a weekly occasion for members of their community to perform on stage. Beatty marks the Misery Fest as an opportunity for identity performance that disarms the textual constructions of identity that Gunnar has confronted in genealogy, classrooms and, ultimately, African American literature. In an interview with *BOMB* magazine, Paul Beatty connects the Misery Fests in the novel to the poetry slams in the Central Park held by the Nuyorican poets**.** This connection aligns the Misery Fest with the performance poetry scene, a space that, for better or worse, is frequently positioned in opposition to academia. In an article in the journal *Oral Traditions*, Felice Belle, a former host of the Nuyorican Friday night slam, attempts to downplay the division between slam poetry and written poetry. Yet, she validates the logic of the divide with her argument that slam poetry speaks for the common man in a way that other forms of poetry cannot. Belle asserts, "It is this relevance to the lives of everyday people that makes the slam poet an integral part of the genre" ("The Poem Performed"). Annette Saddick takes Belle's contention a step further. She asserts that African American performance arts, particularly rap music, get characterized as "dangerous" because performance has an inherent power to disrupt conventional

discourses of race and class. She explains, “One of the central reasons that hip-hop artists, music, and culture as a whole have been criticized as ‘dangerous’ lies in the power of the performing body to subvert traditional, hence safe, modes of representation in America” (“Rap’s Unruly Body”).

Following course, Beatty designates the Bacchanalian Misery Fest, a neighborhood performance venue, as the only space in which Gunnar can express himself freely. Unlike the confinement of Hillside, a neighborhood constructed by economic factors, the Bacchanalian Misery Fest is a community of choice. People of color from a variety of backgrounds participate in the spectacle. As such, Gunnar can perform an identity that feels “his” rather than attempt to conform to the racial identities and affiliations projected onto him by others. In fact, these performances do not appear to be poems at all. At some point, Gunnar invites children on the stage to sing and local drug addicts on stage to give monologues that explain their behavior. He follows his final poetic performance, a spoken rather than written poem, with action, by reciting the poem and then cutting off his own finger in memory of Scoby. This symbolic castration ensures that Gunnar does not have to be like the Kaufman men who came before him. The “castration” suggests that he is more like his mother, an orphan without a genealogy. This act represents Gunnar’s departure from the literary tradition.

Instead of abiding by racial stereotypes, all members of the Hillside community begin to occupy the fugitive space that Gunnar and Yoshiko have uncovered. Even intergroup stereotypes are dismantled. Gunnar explains, “The neighborhood’s stigmatized groups got a chance to *kvetch* and defend their actions to the rest of the neighborhood” (220). Allowing members of the community who are despised or invisible to speak is yet

another way to demonstrate the complexities that are compressed by mainstream narratives of racial identity. The stage serves as a black imaginary space where all community members perform their complex interiority for everyone to see. In contrast to static images proffered by literature, live performances challenge stereotypical depictions of members of the community. They cannot be disconnected from their speaker or misappropriated by outsiders as Gunnar's written poetry had been because Gunnar restricts access to the Bacchanalian Misery Fest. Anyone who has insider knowledge of the community is permitted to participate, and eventually "colored folks from all over Los Angeles crash Hillside to take part in the spectacle" (220). However, Gunnar is careful to "ensure that Friday nights didn't turn into a trendy happening for whities bold enough to spelunk into the depths of the ghetto" (220). By preventing outsiders from attending, he eliminates the danger of misappropriation.

Although Gunnar denies strangers entry, the performances air on television as a counterpoint to the Rodney King video. Rather than broadcasting an image that freezes the black body into an abusive narrative, Beatty promotes repetition of images of raced individuals performing their diversity and individuality. Rather than betraying members of his community to promote stereotypes for his own benefit, as his artistic forbearers did, Gunnar uses his art to celebrate his community and dismantle stereotypical representations of residents of Hillside. The community that Gunnar and Yoshiko construct with the Misery Fests is a community of individuals who choose their affiliation rather than having it thrust upon them by birth and social position. Gunnar's and Yoshiko's escape from the narratives perpetuated in literature and academic spaces opens a discursive space large enough for the entire neighborhood to occupy.

A space of critique

In "The Idea of Black Culture," Hortense Spillers laments that black culture has become too "mainstream" to function as a position of critique. If, as Spillers suggests, black culture has achieved mainstream status, then the concept of double consciousness that drives Du Bois' critique in *The Souls of Black Folks* can no longer exist in the same form. In short, one no longer feels one's twoness. Instead, Beatty's novel suggests that everyone can now feel multiplicity. As such, it is time to shift attention away from empty stereotypes toward distinguishing the individual realities of racial identity. Thus, Gunnar's escape from his affiliations in favor of a fugitive lifestyle achieves the position of critique that Spillers advocates. This position is now occupied by those who dare perform a multifaceted identity. Only by running away from the mainstream and retreating into a black imaginary space can African American artists usher the nation toward humanity.

Outside of the racial protocols fostered by African American literature, fugitives perform the complexity of their individual identities. In his moment of maturity, Gunnar Kaufman escapes the confines of African American literature and turns inward to create a black identity that enables him to acknowledge all parts of himself. Through Gunnar, Beatty proposes that strategic withdrawal into the black imaginary establishes a position of critique that holds the nation accountable while protecting the black psyche. Conventional African American literature can no longer facilitate this self-absorption because, as Gunnar's educational experiences indicate, even liberal discourses that pretend to be radical are misappropriated by the mainstream. His retreat into the imaginary space is a rejection of double consciousness—a rejection of a life lived

viewing the “self” through the eyes of the “other.” Instead, Gunnar chooses a self-centered existence that celebrates his multifaceted American personality. The Bacchanalian Misery Fest transforms the gaze of the other into a television camera—a one-way lens. Thus, Gunnar cannot see the “other.” Therefore, he cannot read the audience’s faces and register their reactions. Their assessments are no longer important.

This space, away from social pressure and African American literature, is the fugitive’s retreat, an imaginary space. Unlike the other fugitive protagonists, Gunnar’s black imaginary is public and racially exclusive. He is a community leader. Thus, Beatty’s fugitive does not revel in the illusion of autonomy. From his position on stage, Gunnar gains the critical distance from mainstream American identity necessary to offer a national critique.

Chapter Three

Black Literature under Surveillance: Fugitive Identity in Gloria Naylor's *1996*

"We are Americans, not only by birth and by citizenship, but by our political ideals, our language, our religion. Farther than that, our Americanism does not go. At that point, we are Negroes, members of a vast historic race that from the very dawn of creation has slept, but half awakening in the dark forests of its African fatherland. We are the first fruits of this new nation, the harbinger of that black tomorrow which is yet destined to soften the whiteness of the Teutonic today. We are that people whose subtle sense of song has given America its only American music, its only American fairy tales, its only touch of pathos and humor amid its mad money-getting plutocracy. As such, it is our duty to conserve our physical powers, our intellectual endowments, our spiritual ideals; as a race we must strive by race organization, by race solidarity, by race unity to the realization of that broader humanity which freely recognizes differences in men, but sternly deprecates inequality in their opportunities of development." (181).

W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races" (1897)

"I had no choice. I had to struggle and resist to emerge from that context and then from other locations with mind intact, with an open heart. I had to leave that space I called home to move beyond boundaries, yet I needed also to return there…For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance…It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds." (205-207)
bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politic*s (1990)

"Because it was set aside, black culture could, by virtue of the very act of discrimination, *become* culture, insofar as, historically speaking, it was forced to turn its resources of spirit toward negation and critique. But a crisis is now at hand.
And here is the paradox: as black culture in its current avatar unfolds, it moves ever closer toward the poster that complements both democratic principles, at least on the face of it, and the imperatives of neoliberalist practices. As the 'American Dream' is also a gleam in its eye, we experience black social formation today increasingly stressed and strutted toward the 'civilization'…. In a sense, if there is no black culture, or no longer black culture (because it has 'succeeded'), then we need it now; and if that is true, then perhaps black culture—as the reclamation of the critical edge, as one of those vantages from which it might be spied, and no longer predicated on 'race'–has yet to come. (25-26).
Hortense Spillers, "The Idea of Black Culture" (2007)

At the inaugural meeting of the American Negro Academy in 1897, W.E.B. Du Bois delivered an address that was subsequently published as the first of the academy's "occasional papers." My first epigraph comes from that paper, "The Conservation of the Races." In it, Du Bois insists that African Americans develop and maintain their cultural distinctiveness because it serves as a salutary challenge to the harshness of the "mad money-getting plutocracy," the American mainstream (181). Du Bois gave this speech in

the shadow of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and concerns that black blood would eventually be absorbed into the genealogical histories of the white majority population (Du Bois 180). The scholar feared that the possibility for absorption into whiteness might have been more appealing than a black life, as stigmatized and set apart. He, therefore, celebrated black potential and warned against aggressive aspirations towards whiteness (181). To that end, he concludes his paper with the "Academy Creed" which exacts the promise from readers to "maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished" (13). Thus, Du Bois marked black culture as worthy of preservation.

The passage of one hundred years finds African American scholars still arguing for the preservation of a distinctively black identity. In my second epigraph, bell hooks champions the conservation of spheres of black particularity because they "nourish resistance" to hegemony. In hooks' estimation, black culture must be maintained off-center in pockets of cultural exclusion that paradoxically empower and endanger African Americans. She argues that these marginal spaces empower African Americans because they celebrate black distinctiveness even as they endanger African Americans because they may unwittingly furnish the justifications for unwelcome exclusions. These paradoxical and interstitial spaces provide "radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives," and to foster black creativity, precisely because they embody the tension between power and vulnerability (205). Like Du Bois, hooks embraces the risk of straddling the margin and center of American culture.

Unlike Du Bois and hooks, Hortense Spillers writes in 2007 of a post-civil rights era American society that sees itself as successfully integrated. Spillers warns that

African American culture's position of critique, as described by Du Bois and hooks, has been evacuated by the demands of "civilization." She laments the "crisis" of black culture whose disappearance seemingly justifies both maintenance of the American Dream and the neo-liberalist policies that ensure and distract from its failure for the vast majority. If, as Spillers explains, the black cultural formations that occupy the cultural center are no longer useful origins of counter-narratives, then has black culture given up its position of critique? Will the next position of critique be post-racial or non-racial? What is the future for black people and for black literature?

In her autobiographical novel, *1996* (2005), Gloria Naylor thematizes her struggle to produce African American literature while occupying the cultural center in the post-civil rights era. Naylor repositions herself and her literature in the social margins by rejecting the realist framework for her autobiography in favor of a speculative approach. This chapter analyzes Naylor's depiction of herself as a fugitive to further illustrate that post-civil rights era African American authors use fugitive figures to represent their own anxieties about the confining conventions that inhere in the African American literary tradition. In the first section of this chapter, I highlight the ways that Naylor uses her autobiographical novel to challenge the literary conventions established by fugitive slave narratives. I then describe the shift of African American literature from the margin to the mainstream in the 1990's. Here, I contextualize Naylor's radical depiction of black bodies in the center of American culture as likelier to be treated as targets for surveillance by the state than as indices of successful integration. In the final section of this chapter, my analysis of both the novel and Naylor's interviews with *NPR* and *The Investigative Journal* illustrate the author's attempts to decentralize herself and by proxy African

American literature, a fact evidenced by the absence of scholarship that engages the novel. With *1996,* Gloria Naylor seeks to reposition African American literature in the social margins in order to secure the distinctiveness that DuBois and hooks mark as central to African American culture and that Spillers suggests is lost when black culture becomes mainstream culture.

Writing in the Margin

Gloria Naylor employs the conventions of the fugitive slave narrative in *1996*, only to dismantle them by resisting realism in the novel. Like the slave narrative, Naylor recounts her private suffering to the public in an effort to expose a morally-bankrupt social system. She offers, however, a fictional version of herself that is not authenticated by materiality like the body of the enslaved. Instead, she associates her raced body with the life of the mind and the fantastic. She includes authenticating documents in an addendum to the novel, just as slave narratives often included appendixes and prefatory material in support of the author's claims. Yet, the documents that she includes are difficult to take seriously: websites overrun with outrageous claims, one of which is no longer active, summaries of legal documents related to an erroneous lawsuit, and a pseudo-academic report on the subject of mind control. By resisting realism, Naylor explodes the conventions of black autobiography in order to make room for the articulation of black identity in the 21st century. Further, the author expands the potential for writing to function as a radical act of self-creation by reaching beyond the limits of materiality into the impossible.

The black autobiographical tradition begins with the political and aesthetic complexity of the slave narrative. Slave narratives were used as a tool to promote the

abolitionist cause. The political effectiveness of the narratives depended equally on the popularity of the slave narrative as a genre and the ability of the narratives to persuade audiences of their veracity. In order to achieve their political goals, the authors of slave narratives captivated audiences with detailed accounts of the abuse that the black body suffered at the hands of cruel whites. The images of brutality reinforced the link between black identity and materiality, thereby situating black bodies in opposition to the imaginary spaces of the mind.[23] The popularity of the genre ensured that the narratives filled with images of abused black bodies were a central part of American popular culture. [24] Slave narratives exposed even Northerners to the most degrading aspects of American slavery through the first-hand accounts of the slave. Thus, the private space of the slave's personal suffering—evidence of the existence of the enslaved person's interiority—became a shared experience, universalized for the good of the cause. The slave narrative claimed to publicize the innermost thoughts and feelings of the slave to the public.

In *1996,* the first-person narrative begins with Gloria Naylor's decision to purchase a home on the island of St. Helena while doing research for her novel, *Mama Day*. (For the sake of clarity, I will use "Naylor" to refer to the author and "Gloria Naylor" to refer to the character.) She hopes that the house will serve a space to which she can escape the city and write in peace. Yet, Naylor's property rights are ignored by

---

[23] In his essay, "African American Slave Narratives, Literacy, the Body Authority," Lindon Barrett outlines the connection between literacy, Cartesian dualism and the black body. Barrett argues that although African Americans were not uniformly illiterate, the assumption that they were illiterate precluded them from the life of the mind which in the post-Enlightenment nineteenth century imprisoned them in their bodies making them appear less than human in social discourse and lending an "urgency and primacy to the special –material existence in African American lives (421)

[24] As Philip Gould explains, there was a host of reasons why the genre captivated audiences including publishing firms with increased resources to market their products and a "rising tide of abolitionist sentiment" (23)

Orwell, the cat belonging to her neighbor, Eunice Simon. In an effort to defend her garden against Orwell, Gloria Naylor poisons the cat; his death leads to a National Security Agency investigation since Eunice Simon is the sister of the National Security Agency director, Dick Simon.

Initially, the investigation is intended to scare Gloria Naylor and appease Eunice Simon. However, it becomes more intrusive as the agents become frustrated with Gloria Naylor's ability to detect their efforts. After a visit from her friend CJ, Gloria Naylor leaves St. Helena and returns to Brooklyn. In New York, the agents move into her neighbor, Monty's, home and increase their surveillance. In a surprising turn, the agents use a top-secret thought projection device to place ideas in her head in an effort to drive her mad. Eventually, they resort to combining their thought-projection devices with a thought-reading apparatus, which enables them to have conversations with her inside her head. With every possible ally stripped from her life by the NSA agents, Naylor must resort to hiding in the stacks of the Brooklyn Public Library in order to write her story. Naylor presents the novel as Gloria Naylor's first-person recollection of these events and the only "record" of the government's attack on the character in the year 1996.

Every element of the plot of *1996* connects to Gloria Naylor's desire to secure enough privacy, in the form of distance from agents sanctioned by the state, to write. Yet, her expressed desire for privacy must be situated in direct opposition to her choice to pen an autobiographical novel about her experiences. Like the slave narrators that precede her, Naylor makes her private suffering public in support of the greater social good. Yet, the greater good—exposing the government's mind control tactics—is metaphorical, in contrast to the concrete nineteenth-century goal of abolition. Naylor seeks to free her

mind rather than her body from a corrupt, government-sanctioned system, so she draws the attention of her audience to mental enslavement. Naylor rejects the indoctrination that attends American centrality.

Writing and privacy are analogous to freedom in Naylor's novel. Naylor purchases the house in St. Helena because she hopes that the house will serve as a space to which she can escape the city and write in peace. The house thus functions as an extension of the character's psyche, a space that she "emptied out [her] savings account" to occupy alone (10). Here, Naylor denotes the value of privacy to an author whose livelihood, the ability to produce good literature, depends on it. Naylor is willing to trade everything she owns for privacy, distance from intruders and the ability to own and fashion herself. While the notion of what constitutes ownership varies greatly, Naylor's narrative mirrors the desire of the slave narrator in this regard. Indeed, Naylor purchases the plantation house, like some slave narrators purchased their own bodies in order to be free, with the explicit intention to "write in it" (12). However, Naylor's ability to purchase the home does not guarantee her access to the freedom she desires.

Gloria Naylor's plantation house proves a product of her success in the post-civil rights era. She explains, "But this indeed was mine. I looked over at the plantation house and thought about how things had come full circle. My people once worked this land as slaves, and here I was, owning part of it" (11). Even in this victorious moment, Gloria Naylor understands that she only owns "part of" the "plantation house." Things have "come full circle" perhaps suggesting that the post-civil rights era has ushered in another era of oppression. Just as the purchase of freedom did not free formerly enslaved people from social restriction, ownership of the house cannot release Naylor from the defining

racist gaze. Much to Gloria Naylor's dismay, her property rights are completely ignored by her neighbor's trespassing cat, Orwell. Naming the cat after George Orwell, the author of the similarly titled book—*1984*, signals Naylor's interest in exploring the tensions between the individual and the state.

It is also productive to understand Orwell as a representation of white privilege, the assumption that whites have the right to occupy all spaces at their leisure. When Naylor asks her neighbor to please stop allowing the cat to defecate in her yard, the neighbor responds that it will be difficult because Orwell is used to the house being unoccupied; he is accustomed to using the area that Gloria Naylor designated as a garden for a toilet (14). Here we see that Naylor's presence is a disruption of her neighbor's privileges. That is to say, the extension of Eunice Simon, Orwell, prefers to store his waste in the space Gloria Naylor now occupies. Consequently, Gloria Naylor cannot grow things in her new place. Although Naylor has earned her right to occupy the cultural center, as represented by the wealthy neighborhood, it is difficult for her to form roots there because her neighbors do not respect her boundaries. The tension between Gloria Naylor and her neighbor's cat suggests that she is not respected as the owner of the plantation house. Gloria Naylor is such an outsider in the neighborhood that Eunice Simon will not even open the door to her home when Naylor visits choosing instead to speak "through the window"(14). Eunice shores up her own boundaries against Naylor while continuing to allow "her babies," the cats, to trespass against Naylor (14). Despite her literary celebrity, Naylor does not have access to the privacy—the freedom—that the house represents. Like the slave narrators, her choice to occupy the position of a writer, brings outsiders so close to her life that they disregard her boundaries. Just as the

abolitionists exposed the traumatic details of lives of slaves to the public, Orwell moves in and out of Naylor's garden.

It would appear that the major difference between Gloria Naylor and the slave narrators is one of agency. In the post-civil rights era, Gloria Naylor should have the power to articulate her refusal to open herself up to the public and lacks the urgency of the slave narrator's political motivations. Although she has become, like the slave narrator, a central figure in the popular culture of her time, she positions herself as an agent not an object. In short, Naylor need not sacrifice her privacy on a political altar. In an effort to defend her garden against Orwell, Gloria Naylor accidently poisons the cat. The gravity of this offense, her refusal to open herself up to the public despite her mainstream position, is illustrated by an unexpected plot development. The death of the cat leads to a National Security Agency investigation since the cat's owner, Eunice Simon, is the sister of the National Security Agency director, Dick Simon. Gloria Naylor's attempt to protect her writing space, one that undermines white privilege, from invasion, causes her house, an extension of her psyche, to be invaded by the NSA. In *1996*, the raced subject's choice to enforce her personal boundaries is considered a resistant act worthy of intervention by the uppermost levels of the government.

Naylor demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining privacy while positioned in the center of American culture. The NSA agents surveil Gloria Naylor to increase their social power and entertain themselves. Initially, the investigation is only intended to scare Gloria Naylor and appease Eunice Simon. However, it becomes more intrusive as the agents learn more about their subject. The more they watch her and get to "know" her, the more comfortable the agents feel using her for their own entertainment and to elevate

their social standing. They play games with her and make up new ways to torture her to curry favor with their boss. By placing herself in the middle class, at the center of American culture, Gloria Naylor unwittingly increased the access that outsiders have to her private spaces. Thus, Naylor's assessments align with the conclusions that Spillers draws in my third epigraph, when black culture is placed in the center, it is absorbed by mainstream American culture. However, Gloria Naylor resists being consumed by the NSA agents.

The agents enjoy using their surveillance technologies to transform Gloria Naylor into an object for them to consume to enhance their power and pleasure. Like many slave narrators, Naylor flees the plantation house in search of freedom. When she returns to Brooklyn in an effort to escape the agents, they increase their surveillance and, in a surprising turn, begin to use a top-secret thought projection device to place ideas in her head. They hope to drive her mad. When she demonstrates a resilience the agents find admirable, they resort to combining their thought-projection devices with a thought-reading apparatus, which enables them to have conversations with her inside her head. The ability of the agents to produce communication inside of Gloria Naylor's head suggests a corrupted version of Du Bois' double consciousness. In "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," Du Bois describes African American existence as a life lived in "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (11). Naylor's thoughts are actually consumed by others' ideas about her. She can only understand herself through the conversations the agents have in her head. As Gloria Naylor explains,

"Regardless of what the world may say, what you tell yourself is all that matters. And if you tell yourself that you're a failure, then that is what you are" (5). By hacking into her head and providing her with instruction about "what she is," the NSA agents blur the lines between what the "world may say" and "what [she] tells herself." The NSA devours Gloria Naylor's private spaces, making it impossible for her to think and create because she cannot hear her own thoughts.

With every possible ally stripped from her life by the NSA agents, Gloria Naylor, a fugitive on the run, must resort to hiding in spaces that prevent them from accessing her interior. The fugitive protagonist is only able to find peace in the stacks of the Brooklyn Public Library where she retreats to write her story. By establishing the public library as Gloria Naylor's safe haven, Naylor designates the library as a space where Gloria Naylor does not occupy center stage. Only when she is positioned outside of the limelight can Gloria Naylor write her story without disruption.

Naylor challenges the traditional form of the slave narrative by constructing a text that makes a political argument by resisting realism. Rather than attesting to the truth of her narrative, she moves in the opposite direction. She expands her representational possibilities, including herself in a fantastic narrative. She uses the new spectrum of possibility to offer a more nuanced articulation of post-civil rights African American identity. Rather than just overcoming the run of the mill obstacles to become a black literary celebrity, Gloria Naylor was strong enough to resist mind control. Much as the slave narrators included images of bloodied bodies in their depictions, Naylor dramatizes the gory details of mental enslavement. After the agents make her think, "I am the worst bitch in the world. I want to kill myself," the character worries, "Where was this stuff

coming from?...Why was I thinking these things? This wasn't me" (99). Her use of an expletive and the threat of suicide here is meant to invoke the same pathos that the slave narratives solicited. The character exists in a world where she has no defense against people who curse and dehumanize her because they can break directly into her mind. In order to generate compassion for the black body in what appears a position of enormous privilege, Naylor must complicate the universe in which the body is positioned.

The autobiographical narrative makes it difficult to locate the "real" Gloria Naylor in the text. The inclusion of one impossible fact, the agents' ability to control her mind, in the narrative casts a shadow of doubt over the entire text. The inclusion of fantastic elements ensures that the audience cannot mistake the protagonist "Gloria Naylor" with the flesh and blood entity. Rather than surrendering the intimate details of her life to the public in exchange for political support, Naylor fictionalizes a version of herself for political use. By doing so, she also offers herself an additional layer of protection from those who surveil her because she is more difficult to locate in the text.

Indeed, Naylor draws attention to the unreality of the text by including an appendix of "authenticating documents" that denote the instability of the text. Although most fugitive protagonists penned their own narratives, their statements were qualified and verified by prefatory documents and appendixes. The authenticating and contextualizing documents, supplements to the slave narratives, are written by whites to verify events in the novel and attest to the character of the author. Alternatively, Naylor provides a three-part addendum that includes: "Websites of Interest," "Litigation against NSA by John St. Clair Akwei," and "Survey of Evidence regarding Mind Control Experiments by Cheryl Welsh." Of the three websites to which Naylor refers in the first

section, one is currently inactive. The protean nature of webpages on the open Internet generally makes them unreliable sources of information. For example, MLA citation standards require scholars to include the date that webpages are accessed in the works cited section because the content of webpages can change from day to day. Naylor's use of webpages as authenticating documents denotes her interest in highlighting the impermanence of the narrative rather than its authenticity.

In another move to recall the nineteenth-century fugitive slave narrative, Naylor includes a court case in the addendum. The "litigation" section is no more than a summary of the evidence filed in a civil action lawsuit against the NSA. The section reads more like an overview of the pseudo-scientific theories about the existence of mind control technologies written in the style of a government report. The information found in the Akwei section is very similar to the third section of the addendum which has a slightly more academic feel complete with an extensive "Notes" section with copious sources. Together, the three sections offer popular, legal, and academic evidence to support the existence of mind control technology. Despite the amount of detailed information that the addendums provide, they all operate under the premise that mind control exists. Thus, Naylor's "authenticating documents" only function as evidence if the reader already believes her major claim, just as the authenticating documents included in fugitive slave narratives were only persuasive if you were predisposed to believe the text. By including an addendum of "facts" to support her case, Naylor draws attention to the slippery nature of reality in general. As such, Naylor challenges the conventions of black autobiography by refusing to limit herself to the realm of the possible or the material when constructing her identity narrative.

Naylor also does not limit herself to the confines of the novel. Outside of the text, Naylor insists that the NSA did actually surveil her using some of the thought-projecting devices described in the book. As I will discuss later, she made these allegations during interviews on *National Public Radio* and in *The Investigative Journal*, an alternative news outlet that interviews guests who discuss topics such as "the Illuminati" and Barack Obama's "Jesuit connections." Thus, Naylor publically affiliates herself with social fringe movements in an effort to shift her literature and herself from the cultural center to the cultural margins. I argue that Naylor initiates this shift in order to position African American literature, her own literature in particular, in a marginal space to ensure that writing continues as a resistant act for African Americans.

From Margin to Mainstream

Naylor expresses the belief that African Americans will never truly function as mainstream artists. In a 1992 interview with Matteo Bellinelli, Naylor describes African American authors as a distinct class:

> For the black American, whatever the class, that person is writing about the need to struggle. We will never be fully assimilated into this society. An African American will never be considered as being equal to whites in this society, so the vibrant literature will always be there. The literature will continue to manifest the undertone of the blues because the racial duality remains a persistent fact. (110)

By 1992, Naylor was both a critical and popular success. Thus, her feelings about the black writer's marginal position have very little to do with success or acceptance by the literary critical establishment. Instead, she identifies marginality as contingent on racial identification in a similar fashion as when she told NPR's Ed Gordon that she is more aware of the ways that the government could persecute citizens "because she is African American" ("Under the Watchful Eye of the Government").

In the novel, Gloria Naylor understands literature as the space that illuminates marginal spaces. Although the novel is set at the height of her career, the character Gloria Naylor locates the origins of her literary career, during her time at Brooklyn College, in her discovery of books by black authors set apart from, rather than embracing, the majority. Her description of her own writing in relation to those writers is telling**:**

> One of the books we were required to read was Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.* It was my first book by a black woman…It was about my beauty, my right to have a place in the world in spite of dark skin and kinky hair…. I went on to discover…a whole history of black writers even as far back as slavery times, when it was illegal to teach slaves to read or write. It slowly dawned on me that I had a history in America. I yearned to add my stories to the legacy.…That very semester, I began writing short stories about the little street that was walled off from the rest of the town, that was home to several black women who had come there as a place of last resort. (7-8)

Here, Gloria Naylor establishes black literature as a racially-exclusive space of empowerment. Toni Morrison's novel functioned as no novel had before, as a space of safety and validation for Naylor. Gloria Naylor roots her novel in slavery—the ultimate space of social exclusion. Her mention of the restrictions on literacy for African Americans in the nineteenth century serves as a reminder that literature as an imaginary space has not always been an accessible space for black Americans. She describes her own contribution to the "legacy," a collection of stories about black women "walled off" from others. Rather than understanding African American literature as a mainstream phenomenon, Gloria Naylor carefully delineates its distinctiveness. African American literature, her own literature, is set apart.

The character goes on to explain that she wrote because she felt compelled to continue the legacy rather than to seek financial gain. She taught a great deal in the early years of her career because "although my books were critical successes, they didn't

become best-sellers" (9). However, the lack of fame and fortune did not discourage her efforts. She explains, "I threw myself into my novels.… I did whatever my characters and the situation warranted because after all, they had entrusted me with these stories" (9). While it is unclear exactly who "they" refers to here, any reading of the pronoun suggests that Naylor writes because she believes that a force larger than herself compels her to relate stories about the black experience as a public good. That the author "accepted that blessing with grace" suggests that she understands her work as a divine mandate rather than just a financial venture (9). As a new writer, Gloria Naylor was driven by her motivation to expand the distinctive space of African American literature.

African American literature's shift into popular culture disrupts the potential of African American literature to serve as a protective space. The author uses the character, Gloria Naylor, as a proxy for African American literature to dramatize the destructive impact of increased surveillance on the production of African American literature. Gloria Naylor achieves literary celebrity status at the same moment that African American literature enters the mainstream. The novel proposes that mainstream African American narratives are policed by state-sanctioned authority figures. Thus, *1996* operates as a first-person narrative of a literature reduced to an object of popular culture rather than a running record of the quotidian experience of African Americans.

The 1990's proved a watershed decade for African American literature that secured its position in the center of American culture. In 1989, Gloria Naylor's *Women of Brewster Place* aired as a successful mini-series. The television success of *Brewster Place* was followed by a miniseries based on Ernest Gaines' novel, *A Lesson Before Dying,* in 1993. In 1995, both Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* and Terry

McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* were released as feature films. African American authors also won two of the most prestigious academic awards in the 1990's. Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, and Octavia Butler was the first science fiction author to win the MacArthur Genius Grant[25] in 1995. Gloria Naylor's career experienced the same shift as African American literature in the 1990's. The author also transitioned from a new literary talent into a widely-studied mainstream author under an increased amount of scrutiny.

Naylor sets *1996* on the island of St. Helena in order to illuminate the similarities between the commodification of black literature and the experiences of the Gullah. Both African American literature and Gullah culture are invaded by outsiders. The publication of *Mama Day* in 1988, the year before *Brewster Place* airs on NBC, denotes a shift in the protagonist's writing life and motivation. While researching *Mama Day*, Gloria Naylor falls in love with St. Helena, one of the Sea Islands situated off the coasts from North Carolina to Florida. The Sea Islands, where the novel is set, are most notable for the Gullah people, African descendants who have managed to retain much of their African culture mainly because of their distance from the mainland. During the 18th century the Gullah-Geechee people formed a black majority population in the "low country," an area that straddles both South Carolina and Georgia shores. As such, they developed a distinctive black culture closely connected to West African and Caribbean cultures, while still reflecting the Southern American influence. As the settlement of white Americans increased, they imposed upon the privacy of the Gullah people, increasing racial tensions. Consequently, the mid-1990's was a racially-charged and transitional time in the history

---

[25] Charles Johnson also won the National Book Award for *Middle Passage* in 1990.

of St. Helena. As early as 1993, St. Helena became a resort area for wealthy white families. The development of this land presented a threat to the Gullah natives, who were concerned that they would be forced from the island and unfairly compensated for their land.[26] The possibility that the land associated with their culture would be repurposed by outsiders was frightening because it signaled the continued and unwelcome dilution of Gullah culture. Gloria Naylor's description of the Gullah natives of St. Helena as "a dark skinned and regal people, who are trying to hang on to their culture" mirrors her implications about African American literature (10). Both conceptual spaces, African American literature and Gullah culture, have a "distinct language and culture of their own," but both spaces are being invaded and appropriated by outsiders (10). So it is hypocritical that Gloria Naylor's purchases a home on St. Helena, thus becoming one of the outsiders who usurp Gullah land.

Naylor's admiration of St. Helena develops into a desire to possess a piece of the island. Naylor promises herself that if she "makes any money" from *Mama Day* that she will "mortgage [her] life to the bank and buy a retirement home" there (10). Gloria Naylor's use of the profits from *Mama Day* to purchase a Victorian cottage with a view of the coast establishes her firmly both in the debt-ridden American middle class and the center of American culture. In addition, she consumes and romanticizes St. Helena:

> You feel more like you're in the Caribbean than in America. There is a stillness about the place. The sandy soil under your feet, the gentle marsh breezes coming from the east, all seem to speak of eternity. Of quiet. Of calm. I walked those

---

[26] As early as 1993, St. Helena became a resort area, a retreat for wealthy white families. The development of the rural island was perceived as a threat by the mostly African American natives, the Gullah people. The concerns of the natives of the island led to the "Sea Island Preservation Project" intended to empower blacks to purchase and retain their land in St. Helena. St. Helena also functioned as a key retreat area for Martin Luther King and his followers during the civil rights movement. As such, the island has a unique place in African American culture, which according to some locals must be protected from wealthy vacationers. For more on this **see,** "The New Plantations: South Carolina" in the October 16, 1993, edition of the *Economist*.

> dusty lanes, originally in search of a character, but slowly I realized that I had found a place where I wouldn't be afraid to die. (10)

Naylor connects St. Helena to the "Caribbean" and the "east." These connections recall the dangers of oppressive stereotypes against which many Caribbean and Eastern nations struggle. Gloria Naylor folds St. Helena into her personal narrative in the same way that tourists consume foreign nations. The emphasis that Gloria Naylor places on the "stillness," "quiet," and "calm" of the area suggests that she has muted the natural sounds of the environment and replaced them with her own thoughts—her own "search for a character," a search which further indicates her fictionalization of the space. Further, Gloria Naylor's search for character suggests that she has somehow lost sight of her own character. Naylor's desire to consume St. Helena represents a dramatic shift in her motivation for writing. Rather than writing to create a safe haven for women like herself, Naylor writes to own a piece of St. Helena—a piece of St. Helena's local black culture. The shift from margin to center results in a shift in Naylor's intentions.

Naylor sets the purchase of Gloria Naylor's house in St. Helena during the peak period of the author's popularity in 1988. Three years later, in 1993, Henry Louis Gates and K. A. Appiah edited an Amistad Literary Series edition on Naylor, adding her to the ranks of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Richard Wright—all subjects of Amistad literary editions. Thus, within six years, the author has had one of her novels converted to a mini-series, published another successful novel, and served as subject of a critical study by successful scholars. Despite her popularity, the character refers to the house as a "retirement home." The reference marks this moment of promise as a career-ending moment. Thus, the author tethers Gloria Naylor's "retirement house," which serves as the catalyst for the events of the novel, to

her arrival as a consumer at the center of American socio-economic class and popular culture.

The house represents a dream come true for the author who recalls her humble beginnings. She has arrived at the center of American culture and revels in the privileges. Yet, the character's loving descriptions of the house reveal that she is not completely settled into her position:

> I wonder how many people actually get the chance to act out their fantasies. I was one of them, and can say the feeling is one of complete and utter peace. I would sit at the folded card table in a second floor room that I used for a study and look at my twenty by thirty patch of tilled soil, feeling there was nothing more in the world that I needed. Literally nothing. (13)

She sits at a "folded card table" rather than at a desk in her study—perhaps the most important room in the house for an author. The temporary nature of her furniture suggests that her stay might be temporary as well. Perhaps a more direct understanding of Naylor's use of the "folded" table is that she did not have the money to completely furnish the house, since she notes, "That table, with its one chair and that mug, were my only possessions besides a trailer camping bed that I picked up second-hand" (11). This serves as more evidence that the house is not "comfortable" for her. Moreover, she notes that the second-floor room is the one that "she" used for a study. Again, this suggests that her stay in the house will be short-lived. She uses the room as a study—perhaps the previous or next owner will use it differently. She does not assert the authority to repurpose the rooms in the house. That is to say, she doesn't call it "my" study. Another indication of her discomfort is that Naylor is sensitive to her boundaries. She describes her garden as a "twenty by thirty" patch of land. The garden, where she will grow things, has clearly defined parameters, which suggests that this space, despite the privilege that it

represents, confines her. Incidentally, it is this space that Eunice Simon's cat defiles. Although Naylor made peace with having a defined space in which to plant, the cat, representative of white privilege, expects to move freely in and out of her garden. Perhaps Naylor's newness to the space of privilege makes her a target. Eunice Simon explains that Orwell has trouble breaking his habit of defecating in the garden because he could use the space freely before Naylor's arrival (13). Simon's comment reminds the reader that Orwell owned the space first and would have a hard time respecting newcomers. Naylor's choice to enforce her boundaries disrupts tradition and white privilege, making her a target. By moving into a position of social privilege, Naylor places herself in the immediate proximity of people who do not respect her boundaries—they demand access to all parts of her land. Naylor uses Gloria Naylor to illustrate that popularity encourages outsiders to invade and misappropriate black literature.

Interestingly, Naylor's purchase of the home on the island positions her as a wealthy vacationer rather than an advocate for the local community. While tales about gentrification and land theft are a familiar staple of American history, Naylor's choice to use the land battle on the island of St. Helena as the historical backdrop highlights the consequences of making the margins available to the inhabitants of the mainstream. When outsiders are permitted inside, they take over. Placing African American literature at the center of middle class culture facilitates destructive commodification of black culture—the space of black distinctiveness. The commodification of African American literature only benefits American popular culture in the same way the exploitation of Gullah culture benefits wealthy vacationers. In both cases, outsiders determine the value of black cultural expressions without the discerning eye developed by lived experience.

The benefits of the commodification, exposure, and privilege certainly do not outweigh the costs for Gloria Naylor. The character explains, " I soon learned that old houses carry old problems. Over the years, pipes broke, the roof leaked and termites invaded" (11). The "old problem" that she must confront is race, which collapses the distance between public and private. That is to say, race is socially constructed and thus does not leave room for privacy. As a representation of African American literature, Gloria Naylor is labeled disruptive when she enforces the boundaries between herself and American popular culture, which must be understood as rejection of her racial designation in favor of privacy. Since racial identity is a collective construction, everyone can claim to "know" raced bodies. Thus, Gloria Naylor's insistence on privacy and enforcing her boundaries—an insistence on an individualized racial identity—makes her suspicious. By refusing to allow Orwell inside her garden, Naylor asserts a right to exclusive dominion over her property and her "self," her most intimate spaces. This assertion sits in opposition to black literature, which invites outsiders to imagine the black experience.

After Naylor accidently kills the cat, Eunice Simon and the sheriff imagine that Naylor is a criminal undeserving of privacy. Indeed, affording her the privacy to construct a racially exclusive space might be dangerous to them. The invasion of Naylor's home is enabled by racial stereotypes—a denial of Naylor's ability to fashion a "self" outside of racial "norms." Eunice Simon shares her concerns with the sheriff that Naylor is involved with drugs (20). While the sheriff does not think that Eunice is a reliable source, he decides that since "You didn't pay for a place like that on welfare checks," he should share Eunice's concerns with the DEA (21). Eunice successfully

manipulates racial stereotypes to punish Naylor for restricting Orwell's freedom. The sheriff deems Naylor a threat because her presence alone positions her outside of racial stereotypes and her insistence on boundaries makes her even more frightening. In short, she is a threat because he cannot read her. As a representation of African American literature, Gloria Naylor illustrates that black literature can only be a part of the mainstream when it meets the requirements by providing a narrative that is legible and comfortable to outsiders. In *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey supports this claim by taking note of the way postmodern literary scholars are drawn to texts that celebrate the "romance of race" rather than those that offer more complex representations of race (10). In order for Naylor to inhabit the middle class home, she must forfeit the privacy she needs to construct an identity outside of the limited racial understanding of her neighbors.

Thus, Naylor's position as a literary celebrity facilitates her surveillance by putting her in close proximity to people who understand her presence as a threat and mark her as delinquent. Life in the mainstream is a life lived under intense scrutiny. Moreover, such a life distances her from the local African American community, the Gullah, and even facilitates the commodification of local black culture. The center—the middle class—is an uncomfortable space for the author because it alienates her from the margin but does not provide her comfort and belonging. Ultimately, Naylor characterizes the move from margin to mainstream as the shift of African American literature from a black imaginary space to an exploitative commercial entity.

Part 2: Mainstream Consequences.

Not only does the shift from margin to mainstream change Gloria Naylor's intentions from producer of an exclusively black marginal space to a consumer of black

culture, as I illustrated in the last section, it prevents her from developing her craft. Mainstream identity requires the forfeiture of privacy. That is to say, mainstream identity leads to surveillance that consumes Gloria Naylor's private spaces, making it impossible for her to write. Naylor insists on the luxury of privacy because she needs to operate from a critical distance to maintain an imaginary space where she can separate her thoughts and opinions from those that surround her. Naylor attempts to use the house in St. Helena as a black imaginary space—a space where she can reflect on all that she has learned. Gloria Naylor enthused, "I promised myself that one day I would write in [the house]. My chance came seven years after buying it. Almost every writer believes there is a 'big' book in him or her, and mine was to be an historical novel that I had researched for and had traveled as far as Norway and Senegal to prepare myself" (12). The author intends to use the house as a space for a synthesis of lessons learned from history, academic research, and exposure through travel.

Yet, the house, purchased with money earned through centrality, precludes the privacy she needs for such sophisticated thinking. Her occupancy of the house arouses the suspicion of her neighbors and the sheriff. After Sheriff Miller provides the DEA with a tip, the agents break into Naylor's house. The agents try to force open an envelope of garden seeds, leave a flashlight on her mantle after looking up the chimney, and force open the attic (23). To make sure that Naylor knows that the agents accessed her laptop, they fold over the edge of the towel wrapped around the device (73). This act was a psychologically violent act in that it illustrates that these men were in control of Naylor's physical space without her knowledge. That her laptop was wrapped in a towel—an item that invokes intimate contact with the body-- suggests that the laptop in this scene is a

stand-in for Naylor's own body. Leaving the towel gestures toward the intimate access the "boys" have to Naylor's body. Indeed a few pages later we learn that the boys can see Naylor when she is in the shower and have bugged her phones (74). By illustrating their unrestricted access to her intimate spaces, the unwrapping of the laptop functions as a rape. Naylor's metaphors of penetration draw attention to the violence of the trespass. One call from the sheriff results in a troupe of men inspecting Naylor's private spaces, her envelope of seeds, her chimney, and her mantle. The popularity of African American literature results in a familiarity that erodes intimate boundaries. Black literature in the mainstream becomes too familiar to be taken seriously as a position of critique. Black literature becomes the possession of the status quo.

The author connects the government's intrusion on her privacy with the publicity that accompanies her status as an author. Naylor makes clear that there is no distinction between the two types of invasion. When Dick Simon decides that his sister's complaints warrant investigation, he thinks to himself, "Gloria Naylor's life will become, no pun intended, an open book"(33). Naylor likens her protagonist to a book, underscoring the connection between the scrutiny that the character endures and the scrutiny that mainstream status brings to African American literature. The process that Naylor uses to describe Simon's investigation of Gloria Naylor recalls academic analysis of literature. Simon reflects on the procedure,

> All of her books are assigned to readers for a detailed synopsis of each one. Every newspaper article, every book review, is to be read and analyzed. In the field, a low level Code 2 surveillance is to be set up. She is to be followed wherever she goes in Beaufort, with a report to be filed about her destination and whatever groups she speaks to. Files from the FBI and CIA are ordered. And just to be thorough, a background check going to her college days. (33)

While this level of study of a citizen by her government may seem alarming, academics and journalists are expected to conduct research at this level in order to produce a quality article. Reading an author's work, assessing the reception of that work, and tracking her speeches are activities easily categorized as quality research. Indeed, this level of scrutiny exists part and parcel with the life of any celebrity, literary or otherwise. Gloria Naylor narrates, "I had made it in a big way.… I'd received lots of publicity over the course of my career, and I was always of two minds about it. On the one hand, it was flattering to have people pay attention to you. On the other, you can't let yourself get a swollen head and live only with the image of yourself in other people's minds" (31). Naylor's warning against the projections of outsiders into the psyche foreshadows the thought projection that corrupts her psyche later in the text. For Naylor, public images have no place inside private spaces. Indeed, publicity and surveillance are both likened to physical invasions in the text.

Naylor also marks black academics as complicit in the exploitation of African American literature. With CJ, Naylor takes on the black literary establishment who analyze, scrutinize, and consume black literature through their work. Naylor receives a visit from her friend CJ while staying in the house on St. Helena. Although he currently serves as a history professor at Princeton, CJ was a covert operative for the NSA and FBI in the 1960's. Unlike African American literature and Gloria Naylor, CJ has not shifted from margin to mainstream. He was always mainstream, even when he appeared to resist the state. Here Naylor suggests that academic spaces have always been, at least partially, complicit in creating oppressive racial identity narratives. Although he likes to consider himself as a "crusader for rights of the black academic community" who uses his

"scholarship as his sword," CJ is not willing to risk his social standing for loyalty to a black author, his friend Gloria Naylor (66).[5] In CJ's inner monologue, he remembers that Gloria Naylor once loaned him five thousand dollars that enabled him to prevent his mother's foreclosure and never held it over his head (68). Naylor includes this mention of a financial exchange between the academic as the author gestures toward the relationship between the two. The black academic makes his living because of the centrality of black art. He only considers refusing to work with the agents for a second before quickly changing his mind because, "That's what these people could do—make you disappear" (67). Naylor's academic character values visibility too much to resist the commands of the state. CJ has worked to affiliate his body with mainstream narratives to provide himself with certain social advantages. Thus, he hands Naylor over to the sources that seek to consume her in order to secure his position of privilege. Naylor portrays the scrutiny under which the black academic places the black artist as a betrayal.

Naylor juxtaposes the academic's betrayal with her neighbor Monty Swiss's willingness to hand over his private spaces in exchange for social acceptance. After Naylor realizes that she will not be able to find peace in St. Helena, she returns to New York in hopes of escaping the NSA. The agents follow Gloria Naylor to New York and enlist the help of her neighbor to surveil her. Monty, described as a black man who "hates himself," is happy to cooperate with the officers who claim to be from the Drug Enforcement Agency (85). Naylor characterizes Monty's enthusiastic cooperation as evidence of his desire to "play by [white] rules" (85). Rather than feeling connected to Gloria Naylor because of racial affiliation, Monty embraces and embodies stereotypes about black identity. He believes that Naylor is a drug dealer because he does not believe

that "a writer could afford a condo like theirs" (85). Monty embodies African American literature as property of the state. Rather than serving as a space of resistance, Monty willingly submits to the whims of the agents at his door and gladly hands over Gloria Naylor. Moreover, he desires to "help [his] government," even at the expense of the security of his own domestic space since the presence of the agents upsets his wife, fills one of his bedroom**s,** and causes damage to his walls. Monty's forfeiture of his privacy disrupts his interior space, but he willingly makes that sacrifice in order to be accepted as a patriot. Monty's compliance serves as a useful counterpoint to Naylor passionate desire to protect herself from the government. Monty's life choices mark his efforts to appear a part of the American middle class. Naylor describes him as a business administration major and Harvard graduate who "married the only white woman on campus who would have him" (85). Monty, an American businessman with an Ivy League degree and a familial connection to whiteness, is perhaps the antithesis of Naylor, a single black woman artist. Monty does not just desire to collapse his racial identity into his national identity. He wishes to lose his racial identity to his national identity. So, he invites the government into his home. Alternatively, Naylor, who wishes to construct a racial identity independent of the projections of the state, flees from the government. Interestingly, if Monty had refused to allow the agents to camp out in his spare room, they might not have had as much access to Naylor. Yet, Monty believes that his mainstream identity must come at the expense of Naylor's. The pursuit of mainstream American identity negates racial affiliation.

Monty's cooperation enables the agents' attempts to surveil Naylor when she returns to New York. Naylor uses Gloria Naylor to illustrate that African American

literature that occupies mainstream spaces does not function as a site of resistance. Instead, that which is positioned in the mainstream is consumed by the masses. Surveillance of the author's private spaces, conversations, and movements makes her individual identity the property of the state. Her private mental spaces, her friends, the content of her novels, and her neighbors— all the things that make her who she is—are reduced to a line in a NSA weekly report (55). She becomes data to be curated and controlled by the hegemony. Thus, Gloria Naylor represents African American literature that has been collapsed into the mainstream American narrative in the post-civil rights moment and thus cannot function as a space of critique. The agents obsess over her and even begin to develop a "grudging respect for her strength" (104). They follow her from place to place and fixate on her habits, practices, friends, thoughts, and resilience to their efforts (127). Essentially, they consume her culture while simultaneously making her normal habits and pattern unavailable to her. Instead of moving about the city as usual, she begins to spend extensive periods of time in the library, the only space where they cannot reach her.

Initially, the surveillance of her body prevents her from getting any writing done. Gloria Naylor's centrality prevents her from producing the type of literature that made her a literary celebrity in the first place. Gloria Naylor reflects, "I simply couldn't take it anymore. I definitely was not writing. Most of my waking moments were spent thinking about surveillance: the drive-bys and the noise. It was a funny thing about the noise. I grew up in New York City and had probably written through more noise than they were able to create; but here it seemed magnified" (83). Gloria Naylor grew up in the 1950's and likely blended into the noise of the city as part of an African American community.

Now, singled out as a literary celebrity, the intense gaze of outsiders seems "magnified." The noise crowds her interior space. Thus, she cannot produce African American literature from her contemporary position. Instead of writing about what she terms "cultural issues," Gloria Naylor is distracted. Her comment that she spends her "waking moments thinking about surveillance" brings Du Bois to mind once again. Gloria Naylor is consumed with her position of "two-ness," meant here as the way others see her. Thus, the surveillance, the way others see her, worries her more than how she sees others. If she is not paying close attention to the world around her, then she is not producing social criticism. The position of social critique that was once occupied by black literature collapses under the weight of the NSA's intense scrutiny. When she is being watched, the author cannot write a word.

When Naylor manages to continue to function normally despite the agents' attempts to disrupt her life with relentless noise and surveillance, Dick Simon becomes angry. In particular he expresses outrage that Naylor manages to prompt someone at the CIA to inquire about his investigation. Despite their efforts to control Naylor by criminalizing her as a "drug dealer," Naylor maintains her credibility enough so that "someone is listening to her and believing what she says" (95). Thus, her individual identity exists in excess of the narrative that they have created for her. She still functions as an independent and credible artist. In response, the agents increase the level of surveillance to include an apparatus that enables them to place thoughts in Naylor's mind (97). Thus, surveillance functions as consumption of the most private part of the body—the mind. The agents use technology to fill her mind with their opinions of her. After thinking, "I am the worst bitch in the world. I want to kill myself," the character worries,

“Where was this stuff coming from?... Why was I thinking these things? This wasn’t me” (99). Naylor uses the agent**s’** thought control apparatus as a plot device to suggest that Naylor’s position in the mainstream results in a corrupted double consciousness. Rather than Naylor simply imagining how others see her, she can actually hear their thoughts in her mind. This prevents her from enjoying any sense of peace or confidence. Indeed, the character comes to believe that she is mentally ill and seeks a psychotherapist. The two-ness that was a normal part of her consciousness heightened by the surveillance becomes debilitating. In the same way that her proximity to Eunice Simon’s home resulted in her investigation, her centrality has also invited agents into her mind. They are so close, inside her head, she cannot think independently. She cannot write. Her position in the American mainstream prevents her from being able to distinguish her own thoughts and ideas from those of the state. When African American literature occupies the mainstream, it reiterates mainstream racial narratives.

Part 3: From Mainstream to Marginal

The world that Naylor creates in *1996* resembles the marginal space that hooks describes in my second epigraph. Rather than accepting an oppressive position in the literary mainstream, Naylor characterizes that space as hostile. In *1996*, Naylor seeks to reclaim her literature as a space of resistance. Paradoxically, Naylor proposes that writing literature, the very activity that subjected her to one psychologically scarring attack after another, can protect her. By making herself a character in her literary universe, Naylor escapes into a world of her own creation, thus reestablishing her literature as a black imaginary space. The black imaginary operates as a space between beings and reality—an interstitial space for contemplation and resistance. The black imaginary permits the

construction of an indeterminate racial self, subject to change without notice and yet solidly racially identified. Literary texts are alternate realities. Authors write with hopes of influencing or escaping the world in which they live.

Naylor names the protagonist in her speculative novel "Gloria Naylor." This act of naming ensures that her audience will understand the stakes of her novel about an author whose mind is invaded by the National Security Administration. Much like William Faulkner, she connects her novels geographically. Naylor uses her novels to create an entire literary universe—a space of escape. Characters that live in Brewster Place, the setting of Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place*, can look out of their apartment windows to see Linden Hills, the upper middle class neighborhood and setting for Naylor's second novel, *Linden Hills*. Mama Day, the title character for the author's third novel, visits her relative Willa Prescott Nedeed in Linden Hills. Following a similar pattern, Bailey's Café, the title location of Naylor's fourth book, is located on the fictional Sea Island where *Mama Day* is set. Naylor's autobiographical novel represents her effort to "write" herself into a world of her own creation. The novel *1996* becomes a space of escape.[27]

Books, those she writes and those she reads, are identified from the outset as an extension of her interior. The character explains her reason for penning *1996*: "I didn't

---

[27] Also noteworthy is Naylor's choice to rely heavily on George Orwell's classic novel, *1984.* Her most recent novel, *1996,* mimics patterns established her oeuvre. In her 1997 interview with Virginia Fowler, Naylor explains the very close relationship between her second novel *Linden Hills* and Dante's *Inferno*[27]. In addition, many argue that *Mama Day* operates as a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*[27]. By recasting Orwell's major themes, Naylor highlights the parallels between Orwell's dystopic vision and the quotidian experience of life in the post racial age. In *1984,* the "party" diminishes the agency of its citizens by surveilling them in traditionally private spaces, employs an army of people to frequently rewrite history, and consistently devalues the relationship between language and reality through paradoxes and the elimination of ambiguous language.

want to tell this story, It's going to take courage…I am in a battle for my mind. If I stop now, they'll have won" (3). She attempts to protect herself through reading and writing. The library is the only space where Gloria Naylor feels safe. She continues, "The library became, to me, a sacred place that I used like a shrine, to read, to think and to dream" (4). She elaborates on writing as a means of "moving out of slavery and moving towards my freedom. And to leave was to go back to bondage again" (127). In this direct discussion of the power of literature to protect her, Naylor recalls pre-emancipation fugitive protagonists' use of literature to recount their move from slavery to freedom. Like the first black American fugitives, literature remains Gloria Naylor's black imaginary despite the threat popular culture presents to the sanctity of that space. Unlike the other fugitives studied here who attempt to escape the restrictions of African American literature, Gloria Naylor attempts to recoup literature as a position of critique. She attempts to retreat to African American literature, in an effort to reclaim it from the forces that seek to co-opt it as a part of mainstream American culture.

As a figure on the fringes of society, Naylor can acknowledge all parts of her identity. Naylor's disturbing interviews on *National Public Radio* and *The Investigative Journal* suggest that the author also hopes to distance herself from the national and literary establishments and embrace a more radical and marginal community. By associating herself with the fringes of society, Naylor comes to occupy the position of critique that Hortense Spillers argues has been lost to black culture. The position in the social margin is a desirable position because it enables Naylor to escape the intense scrutiny that intrudes on her private mental spaces.

Indeed, Naylor's novel and interviews about the novel function as a single piece of performance art. Performance art is "art in which the medium is the artists' own body and the artwork takes the form of actions performed by the artist" ("performance art"). Thus, Gloria Naylor's choice to perform in interviews functions as an extension of the narrative she explores in her text. Rather than positioning herself as a literary celebrity, Naylor performs to position herself as a victim on the fringes of society. The author intentionally constructs an alternate and perhaps slanderous alter ego. Perhaps the curious relationship between the author and the protagonist of Naylor's fantasy novel explains why the novel published in 2005 has received little scholarly attention.[28] No major academic journals have published critical articles that focus on the text. Outside of the NPR interview and an additional interview with the *Investigative Journal*, an alternative news website, there is no indication that Naylor herself has done very much to promote the book. This is unusual for a novel by a National Book Award winning author.

The NPR interview is uncomfortable to witness. The book's cover announces the book as a "novel by the author of The *Women of Brewster Place.*" Yet, Ed Gordon of NPR refers to the book as part of the "ambiguous category some call fictionalized memoir" and goes on to call it a "somewhat true personal story" in his 2006 interview with Naylor on National Public Radio. Naylor follows Gordon's comment with more ambiguity: "Since many of these things did happen to the real Gloria Naylor, by using myself as a protagonist, I was able to have the book act partly as catharsis" ("Under the Watchful Eye of the Government"). Naylor explains that the book is about the loss of

---

[28] The novel, *1996,* was reviewed by Vanessa Bush in *Black Issues Book Review* 7.4 (July/Aug 2005): 44; and an excerpt was included in the following issue of the same magazine (7.5 (Sept/Oct 2005): 56-58. In addition, John Jackson mentions the novel in his 2012 book *Racial Paranoia*. However, he does not provide an in-depth analysis of the novel.

privacy in the nation and then initiates a line of discussion that might be easily characterized as paranoid: “They [the government] have moved well beyond just the simple following of people, and the tapping of their phones. But they now have technology that is able to decode the brain patterns and to detect what people are actually thinking” (“Under the Watchful Eye of the Government”). At first glance, Naylor’s comments are disquieting. Rather than grounding her comments in academic or technical discourse, in an effort to substantiate her claims and put her audience at ease, Naylor ensures that the audience will continue to be uncomfortable. She assumes the role of a victim. In the face of Gordon’s skeptical questioning, Naylor likens herself to an “abused child” whose parents doubt the veracity of her tale of sexual abuse. She challenges, “it's the same thing that happens when a child is abused by a trusted adult. Now, that child will go to some parents and tell them these things…. Some of the parents will never believe that Uncle George could be doing these things to their little girl. So, it's either that you're gonna believe me, or you're not going to believe me, it’s the same thing” (“Under the Watchful Eye of the Government”). The strength of this response to doubts that the government possesses and employs mind control technologies aligns the character Gloria Naylor and the author Gloria Naylor. The author intentionally positions herself as a conspiracy theorist on the fringe of society.

Comparing Naylor’s performance in her NPR interview with her performance in the interview with the *Investigative Journal* most clearly illustrates her positional shift. The *Investigative Journal* website maintained by Greg Syzmanski features articles that focus on a variety of topics that fall under the category of conspiracy theories. In addition, Syzmanski hosts an internet talk radio show every Friday. It is difficult to

discern if the website intends to entertain or inform. In his biography posted on the website, Syzmanski adds to the confusion by describing himself as “satirist, writer and journalist” as well as a “stand-up comedian and actor.” In addition, Syzmanski’s talk show has aired both on First Amendment radio, an alternative news outlet run by the First Amendment Media group, an organization whose primary goal is to inform, and *Onion* talk radio, an organization whose primary goal is to entertain. This ambiguity places the reader in the same ambiguous position suspended between fact and fiction that the audience experiences in Naylor’s novel.

Naylor’s demeanor in this interview is much different. She is relaxed, factual, upbeat, and chuckling as she relates her story, filling in details left out of her novel. The interview fills forty-nine minutes with only a few short breaks for commercials. In contrast, the NPR interview was a brief five minutes. Much of the difference between the two interviews has to do with the journalist. Ed Gordon challenges Naylor by “playing devil’s advocate,” while Syzmanski listens without interruption, only encouraging her to tell more of her story without challenge. A comparison of the interviews makes clear that Naylor, an intellectual who at one time would have been most comfortable and accepted on National Public Radio, relates an identity narrative only appropriate on the fringes of society. NPR is federally funded and must abide by rigid schedules, scripts, and regulations. Naylor cannot properly represent herself in the oppressive format. Instead, she operates more comfortably in the loosely constructed world where time matters less. The *Investigative Journal* interview opens with Syzmanski’s apology, explaining that while they were supposed to begin the conversation with Naylor at the top of the hour, there was some “phone number” confusion that caused a substantial delay. He promises

that they will talk to Naylor for an hour or maybe longer. This disregard for schedule sets the tone of passive acceptance that dominates the interview. The *Investigative Journal* permits Naylor to offer a critique of the government without judgment. The tone of the interview makes it clear that "Gloria Naylor" is in a space where she can be comfortable with her story.

In the Syzmanski interview, Naylor laments the "deafening silence" surrounding the book. She explains that publishers warned her and her editor not to publish the book because it would "ruin her career." At the mention, Syzmanski asks, "Has it ruined your career?" Naylor answers without hesitation, "No, I don't think so." Naylor goes on to explain that the material in her novel is controversial but has been received well by those who have prior knowledge of covert operations of the government. She continues on to say that as an African American, she had some prior knowledge of the covert operations of the government such as COINTELPRO, although she herself is not political. She relates the same message in both interviews. Naylor asserts that she does not understand why she was targeted by the government because she is a cultural rather than a political writer. Her emphasis on this division functions as a bit of irony since the cultural writer will always be a political writer if she asserts a culture defined by opposition to the mainstream. Naylor mentions that her book was given positive reviews by the American Library Association and *Black Book Review*.[29] Naylor goes on to mention that a "friend of hers" met resistance when she tried to write a column about the novel for the *Chicago Sun Times*. Naylor immediately contextualizes the silence surrounding the book by explaining that the *New York Times Book Review* presents fewer fiction books, and thus

---

[29] I believe she means *Black Issues Book Review*.

her small independent publisher is not able to compete to get her novel reviewed. Here Naylor displays just enough outrage to maintain a marginal position but at every turn asserts her sanity.

Naylor's choice to publish *1996* with Third World Press illustrates her desire to shift into a space of black independence and distinctiveness. Third World Press founder and president, Haki Madabuti, describes the organization as "the oldest, continuously operating independent black publisher in the country" (42). Indeed, the publishing company began in 1967 in a basement on Chicago's Southside with a used mimeograph machine. The press is closely connected with the Black Arts Movement because of Madabuti's connection to figures like Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez. Naylor's choice of a publisher whose roots are so firmly planted in the Black Arts Movement suggests that Naylor hopes to ground her novel in a historical moment that celebrated black distinctiveness and perhaps even black separatism. Further, the name of the press denotes an interest in a space of alterity. "Third world" is a term used to refer to poor nations outside of the west. Even Naylor's choice of publisher marks her departure from the American mainstream.

Restoring literature as a space of critique

In *Signs and Cities*, Madhu Dubey argues that to locate black culture in "pockets of sheer alterity" will "inevitably primitivize this culture" (9). Yet, does the marginal space have to be a space of "relative powerlessness" as Dubey asserts? To the contrary, Naylor uses her novel to argue that placing African American culture in the center of American consumer culture diminishes black culture. When African American literature

is absorbed by American popular culture, the complexity of black identity is often overlooked.

Gloria Naylor notices the spies because of her natural suspicion that she connects directly to her knowledge of African American history. Her presence as the owner of the plantation house draws attention to her raced body not simply because her presence is out of order, but because she enforces the boundaries of that property out of a dogged sense that she must fight for her entitlement, which she connects to a racial sensibility. The NSA agents continue to monitor Naylor because of her ability to detect their presence, which infuriates and makes them feel incompetent. They understand Naylor's wit and ability to detect them as evidence of her rebellion against them. Without trying, she occupies a rebellious position. Naylor's ability to detect the agents is an indication of racial awareness. Because of the struggles her parents faced, she imagines a society that constantly doubts her position. Her ability to detect the threat is the result of her raced body.

By identifying the NSA as the perpetrator of these crimes against Gloria Naylor, the author places the black body at the center of American privacy discourse to elucidate the relationship between politics and culture in the post-civil rights moment. The black imaginary space, a necessarily private space, collapses under the weight of the high levels of surveillance endured by black bodies. Naylor is a fugitive who retreats to her own mind, the textual universe that she created, in order to protect her individual sense of racial identity.

Chapter 4
Embracing and Escaping History: The Fugitive Turn in African American Historical Writing

What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life (6)

W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Conservation of the Races," 1897

This social condition pictured itself gradually in my mind as a matter of education, as a matter of knowledge; as a matter of scientific procedure in a world, which had become scientific in concept. Later, however, all this frame of concept became blurred and distorted (5).
W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, 1940

In his 1897 essay, "The Conservation of the Races," W.E.B. Du Bois confidently asserts that blood, history, impulses and "striving together for the accomplishment of certain….ideals of life" serve as the foundation of the racial "family" (6). Yet by 1940, as my second epigraph illustrates, Du Bois describes the uncertainty, the dusk, that precedes the dawn of a brighter racial future and questions the definition of race he outlined in 1897. In *Dusk of Dawn An Essay Towards the Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois details the transition in his thought process. He reflects,

"It was for me as I have written first a matter of dawning realization, then of study and science; then a matter of inquiry into the diverse strands of my own family; and finally consideration of my connection, physical and spiritual, with Africa and the Negro race in its homeland. All this led to an attempt to rationalize the racial concept in its place in the modern world" (133).

In *Dusk of Dawn,* Du Bois, the historian and sociologist, records his self-reflexive journey that led him to turn inward and rethink racial concepts that had become "blurred and distorted" (5). In this chapter, I analyze the work of three literary historians, who, like Du Bois, turn to autobiography in attempts to create new scholarly forms capable of clarifying the blurry lines surrounding race and culture in the post-civil rights era.

In the previous chapters, I explained the difficulty of self-fashioning for the African American novelist embedded in a literary tradition shaped by the commodification of black literary culture. Here, I consider self-fashioning from the perspective of the black literary critic who engages in the creation and maintenance of the collective African American historical narrative. Like Du Bois, these critics create both the discourse and the interpretive apparatus through which it is understood. They too have experienced the anxious pleasure of watching the racial concept, which they have each had a part in developing and interpreting, blur around them in the post-civil rights era. In response, each writer has, like Du Bois, modified the autobiographical form in order to stabilize an ever-changing narrative of black identity.

I call these three pieces of historical scholarship autobiographies because the authors use research to create historical narratives around racial families that account for the contemporary existence of the authors themselves. These scholars seek to relate the history of their particular identities in a climate that does not consistently acknowledge the complexity of black identity. Henry Louis Gates recalls searching for "not just the names of [his] ancestors but for stories about them" because he wanted to know more about the people who "produced …the person [he] had become and was becoming" (5). After detailing her fruitless efforts to learn about her family history from older relatives, Carla Peterson admits that she had become "frustrated by the lack of historical accounts about the black elite prior to the Harlem Renaissance" (17). Saidiya Hartman imagines that she found her great-great-grandmother's slave testimony in the "dusty tiers of the Yale library" only to be unable to locate the testimony in a subsequent visit (15-16). Like Gates and Peterson, she was not able to capture a sense of who her family members were

through traditional historical narratives. In response to their frustrations and desires, these scholars turn to scholarship to fill very personal voids. Like every autobiography, these narratives tell the life stories of the scholars in question.

Redefining the Racial Family

Each author studied in this chapter uses an alternative form of scholarship to interrogate and reconstruct the racial family. In an innovative and interdisciplinary approach to African American history, Henry Louis Gates marries science and historical research to restore more conventional ideas of the racial family. Constructing family in the most traditional sense of the word, as a group of blood relations, Gates turns to blood, to DNA analysis, to underscore the commonalities among the African Americans he features in *The African American Lives Project* in partnership with Public Broadcasting Corporation in 2006. Its success spawned a second documentary, *African American Lives 2,* in 2008, as well as a third special, *Discovering Oprah's Roots*. In 2007, the first of two companion books, *In search of Oprah's Roots,* was published. The comprehensive *In Search of Our Roots* followed two years later in 2009. My analysis in this chapter will focus on the latter work. [30]

In Search of Our Roots functions as a primer for African Americans seeking to interpret genealogical and biological data. Gates establishes nineteen African Americans as models for those interested in learning how to incorporate genetic data into their own genealogies. In each entry in the anthology, Gates presents the subject, an African American at the top of his/her respective field, a professionally researched family history.

[30] Shortly after the publication of these books, PBS launched yet another documentary with Gates as the host, *Faces of America,* in which a team of researchers unearth the genealogy of Americans from many different backgrounds.

Gates provides the subjects with an analysis of their genetic material. In each case, the DNA analysis permits Gates' team of researchers to draw conclusions about the African origins of the participants' ancestors and their ancestors' route to the United States. Although each family story stands alone, Gates carefully underscoring the narrative pillars of the traditional African American historical narrative. Gates places emphasis on slavery and the Middle Passage as well as each family's ascent from slavery to economic success. His attention to the similarities among the participants' stories gives the reader the impression of a unified racial family.

Gates opens *In Search of Our Roots* with an introductory section titled "family matters" in order to underscore his abiding interest in maintaining a unified racial family narrative. He opens the section by describing his grandfather's habit of collecting obituaries of local African Americans to illustrate that preserving historical narratives and exploring genealogy is, indeed, a family matter (3). He continues by expressing his consternation that he could not recover as much information about his family history as some white Americans. Gates laments that genealogical research is a "fraught process, always a mix of joy, frustration, and outrage as the reconstruction of their history—individually and collectively—must always be for any African American" (5). For this reason, Gates expresses excitement about the ability to augment traditional research with DNA analysis. Throughout his introduction, Gates progressively extends his desire to learn more about his own family history to his desire to learn more about the day-to-day experiences of "members of our extended families." He hopes that this knowledge will "change the official narrative of American history itself"(12). Gates suggests that all African Americans are part of one large family. In his estimation, the African American

historical narrative can be shaped by a collective interest in filling in gaps with genetic data.

Like Du Bois and Gates, Carla Peterson places herself at the center of the racial family in *Black Gotham A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth Century New York City* (2011). Yet, Peterson seeks a social narrative not clearly defined in Gates' anthology. Her interest lies in an African American community so small that it has only left behind traces of information. In her pioneering work of scholarship, she turns to what her relative Maritcha Lyons calls the "fugitive scraps" of information about her ancestors to imagine lives that were situated outside of most assumptions about black life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Peterson historicizes the small pieces of information that she was able to recover about her ancestors by turning to public documents such as newspapers, convention proceedings and meeting records. This represents a unique approach to researching and reporting African American history. Building upon Lyon's concept of scrap, she uses a scrapbook format to organize her book. She explains that in contrast to Toni Morrison, "I'm not a novelist, however, and I can't compensate for my family's silences by writing fiction. Instead, I've turned to the archives" (27). Peterson uses the archive to help her connect the dots.

In opposition to the corporatized approach to black identity formation embodied in the PBS funded *The African American Lives Project*, Peterson takes a personal approach. She explains in the "Quest" section of her prologue that her exploration of a family heirloom, a desk, containing scraps of information about two of her ancestors—photographs of Phillip White and Peter Guignon and some of White's library books—led her to the archives (18). The scraps of information, tucked away in desk, illustrate how

academic study of African American history has not accounted for the pieces of information that do not fit into the widely accepted African American identity narrative that Gates confirms with DNA research. Indeed, Peterson's genetic information would bypass the object of her quest, given that she seeks insight into the social legacy she has inherited. By placing emphasis on a new version of the racial family, one that does not depend on tracing African roots or the history of slavery, Peterson challenges the uniformity of the narrative put forward in *In Search of Our Roots*. Her desire to understand her own family led her to construct a more nuanced image of the racial family at large.

Like Peterson, Saidiya Hartman challenges Gates' blood-based system of affiliation in *Lose Your Mother* (2007). Instead, Hartman identifies experiences of resistance as the ties that bind the racial family. Her narrative opens with her arrival in Elmina, Ghana where she hopes to research the contemporary memory of the African slave trade while on a Fulbright Fellowship. Despite her academic funding, Hartman does not harbor any illusions about her true intentions. She wants to know if the people of Ghana feel the pain of the slave trade as acutely as she does. She wants to test the theory that slavery unites black people. She explains that much like the "slave and the ex-slave," she wants "what had been severed: kin" (6). Essentially, she hopes to align her life experiences with the theoretical frameworks that suggest that she *belongs* to an African diasporic community—a racial family.

Hartman's desire to align experience and theory leads her to narrow her definition of the racial family. Over the course of the narrative, she rejects the traditional ideas of a racial family connected by blood and trauma that Gates espouses. Disappointment leads

her to abandon her search for those who share her experience of racial trauma in favor of those who share her experiences of resistance, fugitives who secret away to liminal spaces to escape oppression. Her hybrid text, equal parts travelogue, personal essay, genealogical history and archival notes, reflects her fugitive status. Refusing to conform to standard formats, Hartman uses her text to establish the fugitive impulse as the thread that connects the racial family.

The African American Lives Project

Henry Louis Gates' *The African American Lives Project* responds to the impact that *The Human Genome Project* had on the cultural production of race. *The Human Genome Project*, as it was popularly interpreted, gave credence to the idea that we live in the age of post-identity politics, a term meant to describe the contemporary moment when race does not function as a solid epistemological grounding for claims of social inequality. Launched in October of 1990, the explicit goal of *The Human Genome Project* was to produce a complete map of the human genome by 2005. Scientists hoped that such a map would enable them to prevent or cure diseases with genetic origins and construct personalized treatments.[31] Managed by The United States Department of Energy and the National Institute for Health, the well-funded project was completed two years ahead of schedule in 2003. In addition to the significant medical advancements linked to the project, the data produced by *The Human Genome Project* was welcomed as evidence of

[31] In "The Age of Biology and the Responsible Ancestor," Martha Krebs and Daniel Drell explain that the HGP will enhance the ability of scientists to predict the development of diseases and provide patients with broader opportunities for early diagnosis" (17).

the falsity of enduring concepts of race that are grounded in biology[32].

Gates undertook *In Search of Our Roots* to restore the classic Du Boisian racial family that *The Human Genome Project* findings disrupt. In my first epigraph, Du Bois asserts that "common blood," "common history" and shared "traditions and impulses" define the racial family (6). Gates uses blood analysis to link African Americans to Africa and the slave trade. In his narrative, blood is history. The entries in the anthology emphasize similarities among his selected individuals' histories and traditions. For example, in his entry on Morgan Freeman Gates explains, "Almost 1 million slaves were moved from the Upper South to the Lower South along with Morgan's ancestors (among them were also the ancestors of Tom Joyner, T.D. Jakes, Don Cheadle, and Linda Johnson Rice, who will be discussed later in this book)" (69). By pointing out commonalities, Gates connects the genealogical histories collected in *In Search of Our Roots* to one another. He arranges the stories to give the impression of a unified racial family.

In a preface to the anthology, Gates includes what he identifies as the most salient elements of African American history as well as an explanation of his use of DNA to cement the connection between blood and history. A section titled "Prefatory Notes on the African Slave Trade," is designed to give the audience "historical background" to help them "more fully appreciate the stories in this book" (15). By narrowing the reader's focus to slavery at the outset, Gates suggests that the most important moments in African American history are the years prior to emancipation. This same section details the DNA

---

[32] For more about the explicit efforts that the corporations and agencies funding HGP made to reach out to minority communities see *The Human Genome Project and Minority Communities: Ethical, Social, and Political Dilemmas.*

analysis process,[33] which he describes as a "miracle" that allows African Americans to "symbolically reverse the middle passage" (10). He provides a tutorial covering the African Slave Trade to cultivate an appreciation for blood analysis as a tool for understanding African American history. By doing so, he magnifies the relationship between blood, history, and racial identity in the present.

Gates' anthology of celebrity biographies, complete with DNA test results, revisits the highly political collective narrative forged during and immediately after the civil rights movement. In his entry on Quincy Jones, Gates reveals that he envisions *The African American Lives Project* as a "*Roots* for the twenty-first century, using all the most up-to-date research techniques" (41). The popularity of Alex Haley's *Roots* franchise in the 1970's was evidence of popular culture's turn towards slavery during a period when more historical information about African Americans and people of African heritage became available to the general public.[34]In the 1970's, slavery served as an important symbol for African Americans because it so clearly illustrated the black suffering at the center of America's racial drama. By connecting his project with Haley's

---

[33] In "The Informationalization of Race: Communication, Databases, and the Digital Coding of the Genome," Peter A. Chow-White's discusses the ways that genomic coding impacts our understanding of racial culture.

[34] *Roots* is only one example of the slave narratives that permeated the popular culture of the period. In 1969, John O. Killens' novel *Slaves* was published. *Slaves* was Killens' novelization of the 1969 movie adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Keith Gilyard notes in his biography of Killens that *Slaves* functioned as a response to William Styron's novel of slavery, The *Confessions of Nat Turner (1967)* for which Styron won the Pulitzer Prize (247). Killens was not alone in his objections to the novel. Some African American authors expressed disdain for Styron's interpretation of the Turner story in the essay collection, *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968). The authors felt that William Styron misappropriated the slave narrative in his novel. Also a representation of slavery in the 1970's, Kyle Onstott's pulp fiction novel about slavery, *Mandingo* (1954) was turned into a poorly reviewed movie in 1975.

Roots, Gates suggests that *The African American Lives Project* can also serve as a unifying force for African Americans. Genetic genealogy connects African Americans to each other through the black body, thereby restoring a lost sense of collective identity. By linking race and DNA, Gates attempts to centralize the narrative of racial identity, just as it was centralized in the early years of the post-civil rights period.

Like Haley's *Roots*, the narratives collected in *In Search of Our Roots* elaborate the connection between the subjects and the trauma of slavery. Hence, Gates reestablishes the Middle Passage as the most significant thread that connects members of the racial family. Gates relies heavily on information collected in the Transatlantic Slave Database, an archive containing information about 35,000 slave ship voyages, to provide participants with a personalized rendering of their ancestor's Middle Passage experience. Indeed, the final pages of each family story in *In Search Of Our Roots* detail a Middle Passage journey that provides the year the subject's ancestors were abducted from African countries and the route they took into North America. This data adds depth and specificity to the general narrative of forced migration. For instance, in his entry on Quincy Jones' DNA, Gates reveals that Jones' ancestors likely were abducted and sold into slavery by the "warriors of the Lunda Empire" and then sold to members of the Zombo tribe and various African middle men. When they reached the port, they were likely traded to Europeans for about "fifty dollars' worth of cloth, salt, or alcohol and then loaded on an English ship specially designed for slave cargo" (56). These details bring the Middle Passage to life for both the subject and the reader, thereby making trauma a constitutive part of the collective African American identity narrative that Gates creates.

In the same vein, *In Search of Our Roots* also reinforces the connection between Africa and African American identity. The text exemplifies what Saidiya Hartman calls the "romance of return," meant here the lofty assumption that African Americans can feel at home in Africa. Such assumptions collapse the chronological and spatial differences between contemporary African Americans and contemporary inhabitants of the continent of Africa. For example, after delivering a very detailed history of Chris Tucker's American family, Henry Louis Gates presents the actor with his DNA analysis. Tucker is so moved, that he decides to visit Angola with Gates to visit the site of the kingdom of Matamba from which his ancestors were taken. When Tucker arrives in one of the "oldest villages in the area" he is greeted by a celebration that includes everyone from village elders to children. Gates himself expresses his "*Roots* envy" at the greeting that Tucker receives (413). While not every celebrity member of the *African American Lives Project* chooses to record his/her "return" to Africa, Tucker's visit, as well as the specificity of the information provided by the show's research, reinvigorates the fantasy that African Americans can regain some of what was lost during slavery by reversing the Middle Passage.

Tucker's is the final entry in the anthology, suggesting that his is the ideal end of the quest the text initiates. Tucker relies on Gates and his team of researchers and scientists to interpret the historical information and construct a family history for him, and he dutifully enacts the script he is provided through his visit to Angola. As a character on a reality television show, he performs the fantasy of return to Africa and concretizes the possibility of enacting DNA results. In this way, the project recalls Alex Haley's visit to Juffre in the 1970's, one of many moments in African American history

that African Americans turned to "back to Africa" movements in search of escape from the oppressive conditions fostered by the American racial system. *In Search of Our Roots* exemplifies the conventional understanding of the relationship between African American identity and the romance of return to Africa.

Gates' choice to supplement more traditional genealogical narratives with blood analysis makes *In Search of Our Roots* fugitive in form. Despite the significant role that DNA analysis plays in Gates' historical research, the science is simply used to support a traditional narrative of African American identity. While Tucker had a genetic test result that was specific enough to allow a scene of return reminiscent of *Roots*, the results of the other participants were not as specific. For example, Ben Carson's DNA results are some of the most "complicated" in the book (198). Gates narrates Carson's results,

> "We found matches with tribes all over the African continent: with the Bamileke in Cameroon; the Bassa, Yoruba, and Edo in Nigeria; the Mende in Sierra Leone; the Turkana in Kenya; and with Bantu-speaking representative of the Cabinda enclave in west-central Africa….Of course, with so many matches, it is impossible to say for certain. And Ben seems very happy just to know that his genes are dispersed so widely across Africa" (198).

Carson's results reveal the conventionality of the project's narrative about the connection between African Americans and Africa. His results, in a sense, confirm what he already knew. His ancestors were abducted from somewhere in Africa and arrived at some point during the American slave trade. Carson's satisfaction with this narrative supports Keith Wailoo's claim that DNA results are best received when they confirm what we already know about ourselves (14). *The African American Lives Project* relies on DNA to stabilize conventional narratives about the African American relationship to Africa.

Whereas discussion of the lost connections to Africa informs the "African" part of African American historical narrative in the text, the success narratives that Gates

includes in *In Search of Our Roots* stabilize the "American" part of African American identity. All the subjects in the text are "leading figures in the African American community" (15). With this choice, Gates aligns the collective African American historical narrative with the American "bootstrap narrative," meant here the idea that Americans live in an environment that does not present obstacles to citizens who are willing to work hard to advance socially and economically.

The stories focus on African American success. For example, Gates opens his entry on Oprah Winfrey, by stating, "Oprah Winfrey is one of the most famous people on earth…I am dying to know how this woman, a descendent of illiterate slaves in Mississippi, dirt poor scratchers of the soil, became the inimitable 'Oprah'"(200). In the introduction, Gates notes both Oprah's fame and her ancestor's poverty to draw attention to the slavery-to-freedom narrative she embodies. Gates also makes connections between African Americans and American narratives of self-creation and exceptionalism in his entry on Whoopi Goldberg. He describes Goldberg in terms reminiscent of Fitzgerald's Gatsby, reflecting that she is "essentially… her own creation—a product of her own brilliant imagination, sui generis, her own branch on her extended family tree (229). His description of Goldberg, who jokes that her family came in on the Mayflower, points to a spirit of independence that is quintessentially American (241). Thus, the collective identity narrative that Gates asserts is classically doubled—African through slave trade, American through spirit.

The Du Boisian scholar goes out of his way to emphasize African American connections to Africa via the Middle Passage while including language that underscores the American success narrative as a part of black culture. Perhaps Tom Joyner best

expresses his sentiments about the project with his correction of Gates' comment that Joyner has a "remarkably compelling African American story" (177). Joyner responds, " It's not an African American story—I have an American story, don't I?" Every story that Gates includes in the anthology is necessarily an American story of success since all of the participants are accomplished citizens whose DNA suggests that their families rose from slavery to financial success in little more than 150 years.

Black Gotham

In *Black Gotham*, Carla Peterson puts names and faces on a community of people who were previously footnotes and exceptions and thus extends the racial family. Yet, the very form of her work defies the unifying myths perpetuated in *In Search of Our Roots.* Since there are gaps in the narrative that she cannot fill, Peterson organizes the text like a "scrapbook." The form allows her to historicize fugitive scraps of information recovered from the archives with hopes of bringing the quotidian experiences of black Gothamites alive for the reader in much the same way that Gates uses the data from the Transatlantic Slave Database to animate the narrative of the Middle Passage. Peterson describes the world that her ancestors inhabited in great detail—the churches, the schools, the streets, clubs and societies, their friends, neighbors and political beliefs. The information she offers disproves conventional beliefs about black identity such as: all nineteenth-century African Americans were victims of enslavement and forced migration, and an elite class of African Americans did not exist until the contemporary moment (Peterson 6). *Black Gotham* shines light on an overlooked black community.

Rather than only relating a story about the social stigmas associated with slavery, Peterson also tells the story of free people who chose an "African" affiliation. In the first

part of her book, she details the lives of free people of color in Lower Manhattan from 1795-1865" (33).[35] Many members of the community on "Collect Street" identified themselves as "African," although they hailed from a variety of geographic spaces, "Netherlands, Spain, Morocco, and Sierra Leone," and represented a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds (43). Unlike the story that Gates tells about African Americans who have no choice but to be united by blood, Peterson illumines a community that preferred to be designated as "Africans." Quite the opposite of being shamed by their differences, these black Gothamites adopted racial identities in order to organize themselves into a political unit (44). Thus, for a minority of African Americans in the years before emancipation, "African" identity served as strategic decision rather than a racial trauma.

This information does not challenge the veracity of Gates' claims that most African Americans suffered under the burden of slavery prior to emancipation. Instead, it complicates our understanding of the constructed nature of racial identity in this period. The assumption is, generally, that prior to 1865 agents of the state set the parameters of racial identity in order to justify slavery and maintain control of the black body. Yet, Peterson's narrative suggests that the black Gothamites set the parameters of their racial identity locally. In this marginal community made up of fugitives from across the globe, "African" identity was a social advantage rather than a social stigma.

In another departure from Gates' unifying narrative of forced migration, Peterson examines the benefits of the cosmopolitan attitude adopted by many black Gothamites. The emotions surrounding forced migration are made clear in *In Search of Our Roots* with the expressed desire to "reverse the Middle Passage" (10). Indeed, *The African*

---

[35] *In Search of Our Roots* includes a discussion of free blacks in Gates' entries on Peter J. Gomes and Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot.

American Lives Project stands as what Alondra Nelson calls a reconciliation project, a project that uses DNA to mend "broken ties within a community, nation-state, or diaspora" (21). Forced migration fosters a sense of loss of and longing for a *true* culture that has been displaced by the oppressor's culture.

Cosmopolitanism, the appreciation of and, often, affiliation with multiple cultures, contrast sharply with forced migration. Peterson's narrative suggests that cosmopolitanism empowered New York's African American elite to operate from a position of belonging rather than a position of overcoming. Instead of fixating on losses incurred during migration, black Gothamites were able to, as Peterson explains, "negotiate double consciousness" by "imagin[ing] an ideal world—a world without borders, a global community of voluntary citizens hungry for open cultural and intellectual exchange" (130). She continues, as "citizens of the world they could without contradiction claim to be both African-descended *and* citizens of the United States" (130). Rather than placing emphasis on an African American identity that straddles two spheres, Peterson suggests that many nineteenth-century black New Yorkers understood themselves as global residents. By doing so, she calls for the reconsideration of the broader cultural influences that inform the resistance and striving that define black culture.

Instead of offering a definitive perspective about the African American connection to Africa rooted in the machinist processes of the body, the scrapbook format of *Black Gotham* allows the juxtaposition of a variety of ideas about African origin that circulated during the nineteenth-century. The diversity of the black Gothamites' attitudes about Africa reflects their cosmopolitan identities. Peterson describes the pride that

Alexander Crummell felt when he told the story of his father, Boston Crummell, who although stolen from Sierra Leone, "could not be a slave" and, as such, left his captor's service (38). Alternatively, Peterson explains that New York blacks named themselves "colored Americans" in order to publically assert their American identity while understanding their African connection to Africa as "their special heritage" (121). The author includes a discussion of the prominence of Ethiopianism, the belief that Africa would eventually reclaim the powerful position that it attained in the ancient world (121). She notes that Alexander Crummell and Henry Garnet "began to think diasporically" and subsequently worked in support of organizations that promoted collaboration between black people on different continents (202). She highlights James McCune Smith's understanding that his African blood connected him to a "history of racial oppression," that provided African Americans a "special destiny of suffering and redemption" and positioned them to "purify" the government of their birthplace (124 and 131).

In contrast to Gates' "Prefatory Notes on the African Slave Trade" that, necessarily, provides only a small window into the historical narrative surrounding African Americans and Africa, Peterson provides a diverse overview of nineteenth century attitudes towards Africa. Instead of a racial family created through blood, Peterson outlines a racial family created through historical and cultural affiliation. The cosmopolitan black Gothamites understand their origins in a variety of ways. When juxtaposed with the consistency of Gates DNA infused historical narrative where all blood connects the subjects to Africa, the form of Peterson's text illustrates her fugitive status.

Peterson does not limit herself to the discussion of the Gothamites' attitudes towards Africa, like Gates she tells quintessentially American stories. Rather than emphasizing the transition from slavery to contemporary economic success, she highlights the educational achievements that elevated some African Americans to the top of the social hierarchy in the nineteenth century. Peterson observes that the "elite held education to be the key to black advancement" (139). Some of the black Gothamites received the best education possible for a person of color in that period. Peterson devotes an entire chapter to the Mulberry Street School and follows, in subsequent chapters, some of the schools more accomplished graduates through their educational endeavors such as Isaiah DeGrasse's, Alexander Crummell's, and Charles Reason's fights to receive fair treatment at New York's General Theological Seminary, and James McCune Smith's trek to Glasgow for a M.D. Peterson also explores the trade apprenticeships of several of the elite New York blacks. Thus, *Black Gotham* illustrates that the African Americans who had access to formal education in the nineteenth century used those opportunities to elevate their socioecomic standing.

In a departure from narratives that boast of a unified collective racial identity, Peterson reveals the "sharply defined" class distinctions between African Americans in the period and explains the upper-class African American decision to "wall themselves off" and "retreat into the privacy of their homes and clubs" to protect themselves from white contempt incurred by the presence of lower class blacks (322). The black Gothamites used a variety of literary societies, the Philomathean Lodge, Free Masonry and Odd Fellowship in the years before the war and The Society of Sons of New York and the New York and Newport Ugly Fishing Club in the years after the war to reinforce

boundaries around their community (133 and 317). Peterson also discusses the various political organizations and causes that featured prominently in the community including segregated associations like The New York Association for the Political Elevation and Improvement of the People of Color, and The New York Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children, as well as integrated organizations like anti-slavery societies and the Whig party (203 and 199). Thus, black Gothamites maintained their affiliations through a carefully managed network of social and political organizations. These organizations, some of which only accepted members on an invitation only basis, illuminate the significance of class distinctions between African Americans in the nineteenth-century.

In *Black Gotham*, Peterson highlights the contributions of an elite group of African Americans. Instead of DNA, Peterson fills in the gaps with her "memory work," her research in the archives, and her own desire to know (27). The author makes her experience of collecting and considering a central component of the narrative. Thus, Peterson's text not only accounts for a forgotten past, but also accounts for her own presence as a black scholar in the present. She explains, "On a personal level, I want to claim a form of belonging I've never had" (17). With *Black Gotham*, Peterson seeks to diversify the collective identity narrative in order to find herself within it.

Lose Your Mother

In *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman connects the racial family through experiences of individual resistance rather than the experience of collective racial trauma that Gates relies on in *In Search Of Our Roots*. Hartman's narrative vacillates between recollections of her experiences in Ghana, her interpretation of stories found in the

archives, and memories of her family life since all of these are essential components in Hartman's family fashioning process. As such, she relies on the unifying trope of the fugitive to symbolize a racial family whose members are affiliated and, yet, can stand alone—much like the chapters of her hybrid work of scholarship.

In opposition to the romantic story of Chris Tucker's "return" to Angola, Hartman's trip to Ghana shatters her hopes that the shared history of slavery would enable her to experience kinship in Africa. As an academic, and as one of the creators of the collective black identity narrative, Hartman is invested in the theoretical frameworks that suggest that she should, like Tucker, feel a connection to Africa. Yet, she experiences distance rather than acceptance. The author explains her isolation while traveling with other Fulbright scholars in Ghana,

> I had been alienated from my peers as far back as I could remember. Even in the first grade, I had played alone in the schoolyard, wrapping my head in my red sweater, pretending it was a nun's habit and that I was Sister Madonna. In whatever group I found myself, I usually felt like an outsider. What was different this time was that everyone else made it apparent that they considered me an outsider too. (214)

This experience of stigmatization cuts more deeply than the self-imposed isolation of the schoolyard not only because Hartman does not have the option to be the "same" as the others, but also because it proves the lie of the Pan-African identity that would enable intellectuals to build a bridge over the Middle Passage. Instead of being able to connect with other academic members of the diaspora, Hartman discovers that she is not considered "African," and her academic credentials are not enough to garner their respect. Hartman likens moments spent with the other Fulbright scholars to time spent in the schoolyard because her peers taunt her with comments like, "We will conduct the interviews, while you try to figure out who you are" (212). Just as the first grade

schoolyard was a formative experience for Hartman, this rejection from African scholars shapes her identity. Hartman opines, "For my colleagues, my self-proclaimed African identity, albeit hyphenated, was fanciful and my Swahili name an amusement. They could hardly manage to say it without snickering" (218). Her pursuit of "African" identity based on blood and theory reduces her to childlike helplessness with no possibility of inclusion. Hartman's experience of feeling like an outsider while traveling with African scholars in Ghana illustrates that theoretical frameworks that assume a connection between members of the African diaspora are no longer realistic.

Hartman openly questions the value of DNA analysis as a path to constructing a racial family. She describes herself wandering through Elmina Castle darkening the already dark chambers with her disappointment over her reception by the locals in Ghana. In this moment, the docent on duty in the castle chimes, "It is no longer the door of no return, because now you are back" (90). Hartman leaves her reader to decide if the comment was meant to provide comfort or to mock her. In this moment, Hartman's reflections on genetic genealogy and her own aspirations to find kinship in Ghana underscore the irony of the docent's statement:

> "*I later read an article in The New York Times about African Americans attempting to fill in the blank spaces of their history with DNA tests. By matching Y-chromosomes and mitochondrial DNA with that of contemporary Africans, they had hoped to get closer to an African home than a slave dungeon. History had failed to solve the mystery of an unknown past, so they had put their faith in science despite the ambiguous and inconclusive results of the test. One man's words stayed with me. Having discovered that his ancestors were from Cameroon, he remarked that he felt more lost than before. Now he was estranged from an ancestral tribe as well as the country of his birth. "It's like being lost and found at the same time, he said. Being in Elmina Castle was like that too."*(90)

As a member of an elite class of producers of knowledge about African American history and culture, Hartman cannot find comfort in either the rich history of Elmina Castle or genetic data. Scientifically, it is without question that African Americans share some measure of genetic data with people who inhabit Africa. Yet, attempts to connect African American identity and culture to the continent make feelings of loss more acute for Hartman. Her experience does not align with theory. Although scientists have managed to map the human genome, scientific knowledge cannot account for the losses experienced by the descendants of those who endured the Middle Passage. Hartman's attachment to "one man's words" that he was "more lost than before" illustrates her dismay that the closer she gets to the raw data, the genetic science, and contemporary Ghanaian lives the more certain she is that the losses are unquantifiable and thus irreparable.

Although the "romance of return" to Africa and blood analysis do not form a stable foundation on which Hartman can build a racial family, she does feel connected to those who share her experiences. As a result of her archival research, Hartman has a proprietary interest in the traumatic aspects of the collective African American identity narrative. Like the fugitive slave who transports slavery into lands where there is no slavery, Hartman feels that she carries the emotional burden of slavery and comes to rely on it as a constitutive part of her racial identity. She expresses this sentiment in her description of arguments she has with her brother:

> No matter how vehemently he and I disagreed, what we both accepted was that the experience of slavery had made *us* an *us*, that is it had created the conditions under which we had fashioned an identity. Dispossession was our history. That we could agree on. The solidarity that I felt with other black people depended largely on this history. (74)

Hartman's sense of loss binds her to other black people, but only those who share her local American experiences. Despite her longing to understand herself as a part of a diasporic racial family, she has difficulty feeling connected to the people in Ghana because their quotidian experiences differ greatly. She recalls an "octogenarian" asking if it was most appropriate to refer to her as "negro or nigra" (56). This moment is particularly painful to her because the old man with whom she desires a kinship bond eliminates any possibility of a connection between them by admitting that he does not know what to call her. Further, he only understands her through the narrow and dated lens of "negro and nigra." His question suggests that he has no understanding of the day-to-day experience of American black life. Hartman uses this moment as an opportunity to reflect on the painful reality that in Ghana she is "obruni," stranger and foreigner.

Hartman's response to the man is also telling, as she "caught [herself] before Brooklyn rushed out of [her] mouth in a string of profanity" (56). In that moment, she identifies herself not even as an American but as a resident of Brooklyn, a local identity. Here she ties identity ever closer to local experience and further away from blood and slavery. She is Brooklyn rather than black. This represents a sharp departure from the narrative espoused by Gates. Ultimately, *Lose Your Mother* mourns the loss of the fantasy of an African diasporic family as it argues for local and particular notions of racial identity.

Unlike reconciliation projects that seek to recover lost histories, Hartman suggests that losing parts of histories, families and identities is part of the cost of freedom. In the final pages of *Lose Your Mother,* Hartman declares the necessity of moving beyond

previous articulations of African American identity. “Old identities,” writes Hartman, “sometimes had to be jettisoned in order to invent new ones. Your life just might depend on this capacity for self-fashioning. Naming oneself anew was sometimes the price exacted by the practice of freedom” (233). Thus, *Lose Your Mother* is a text about creating a new way of understanding racial affiliation, or to put it differently, reconfiguring the racial family.

Hartman chooses to shift her focus from shared experiences of racial trauma to shared experiences of resistance. She relies on the fugitive figure as a representative of resistance. She finds the trope of the fugitive in the experiences of people in Ghanaian villages, in the archive, and in her own family stories. Like her narrative that refuses traditional narrative form in favor of abrupt shifts between travelogue, historical scholarship and family memoir, Hartman’s racial family is comprised of a variety of people collected from a variety of different spaces in her life. Nonetheless, they are all bound by their commitment to resistance.

Although she is not greeted as enthusiastically as Chris Tucker, Hartman feels at home in Gwolu, a community that was founded by Ghanaians who ran away from their communities of origin to avoid being captured and sold into slavery. In this place, she is called “sister” (235). Only in this fugitive village does she have the opportunity to hear what she describes as “my song, the song of the lost tribe” (235). Although Hartman was invited by the chief of Salaga, the location of the largest slave market in Ghana, to build a home there, she feels a genuine connection only in Gwolu. The difference between the two villages for Hartman is the difference between forging the ties of racial affiliation through trauma, or as she puts it, “building a home in a slave market,” or forging ties

through resistance, being called “sister” by the descendants of fugitives.

Hartman feels a similar connection with a fugitive figure she locates in the archives. When compared to chapter six, a chapter filled with personal recollections, chapter seven initially reads like a traditional piece of scholarship. Yet, the end the chapter takes a surprising shift into fiction. The chapter focuses on Hartman’s archival research. She recounts the story of an unnamed girl who was hung from the mast of a slave ship. The ship’s captain was subsequently tried for her death. Hartman locates multiple versions of the story in the archive. After working her way through several versions of the “facts” of the story, Hartman imagines the incident from a third person omniscient perspective that provides insight into the girl’s thoughts. In her fictionalization of the incident, Hartman understands the girl as a fugitive who believes that “She had discovered a way off the ship” through starvation (152). By re-telling the girl’s story, imagining her as a person with the will to resist, Hartman inducts the unnamed girl into her racial family of fugitives.

Rather than anchoring her racial identity in her blood, Hartman, who had for much of her life felt like an outsider within her family, finds a new connection with her family through the fugitive’s narrative of resistance. She recalls envying her brother for being the “rightful heir” of the family name and so decides to keep the name after she marries for that reason (82). She is surprised when her archival research reveals that her “grandfather wasn’t a Hartman at all” since the name does not actually appear on his birth certificate. Instead, the name is evidence of her grandfather’s resistant act of defying conventions and using his white father’s name against the wishes of the family (82). Thus, Hartman finds that she has more in common with her grandfather than she imagined.

Rather than connecting with her family members through blood, Hartman's family ties are forged with resistance.

Hartman's visit to Ghana changes her understanding of the racial family. She writes, "If after a year in Ghana I could still call myself an African American, it was because *my Africa* had its source in the commons created by fugitives and rebels, in the courage of suicidal girls aboard slave ships, and in the efforts, thwarted and realized, of revolutionaries intent upon stopping the clock and instituting a new order, even if it cost them their lives" (234, my emphasis). The conditional nature of the first sentence reflects the pensive academic's uncertainty about the nomenclature that has been one of the most consistent pieces of her identity up to this point. She has decided to break away from the old racial family. The possessive pronoun placed in front of Africa illustrates the new family that she has created. With the phrase, "my Africa," the scholar draws attention to the differences between an archival Africa of her own creation—the seat of her racial family—and the actual geographical spaces in Ghana that she visited. The stories of "fugitives and rebels, courage of suicidal girls… and revolutionaries" that Hartman references are stories that the author constructs through archival research and folds into her narrative in *Lose Your Mother*. Hartman's Africa is more than just the literary image of Africa that has captured the imagination of so many African diasporic authors. Instead, her Africa is a personal creation forged out of "the commons," and further enabled by her access to the archives, which allows her to construct a historical narrative with which she can identify. Just as *Lose Your Mother* is forged from a variety of sources, Hartman imagines that her black identity is similarly formed. Rather than focusing on the shared experience of trauma, Hartman decides to construct a racial family connected through

shared experiences of resistance.

Fugitive History

All three texts examined here serve as examples of hybrid forms of scholarship. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the concept of a racial identity is deeply embedded in African American literature and has been subsequently codified by the canonization process. As such, the literary historians here, much like African American authors since the beginning of the tradition, have created alternative narrative forms in hopes of articulating the particularities of their understanding of the racial family. Thus, Gates uses "genetic genealogy" to supplement the family histories of nineteen African Americans. Peterson adapts a scrapbook format to expand our understanding of nineteenth century black life, and Hartman embeds archival research, family history, and self-reflection in a travel narrative. Each author presents a "fugitive form" of historical writing. Gates, one of the original editors of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), produces scholarship that confirms traditional understandings of African American history. Peterson's and Hartman's narratives, on the other hand, depart from typical understandings of African American history. Thus, Hartman and Peterson play fugitive to Gates' renewed hegemonic position. They rely on fugitive forms to tease out the complexity of the racial family in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior*. Saint Paul, Minn.; Enfield: Graywolf ; Airlift, 2004. Print.

Alondra Nelson. "Reconciliation Projects: From Kinship to Justice." *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012. Print.

Alondra Nelson, and Jeong Won Hwang. "Roots and Revelation: Genetic Ancestry Testing and the YouTube Generation." *Race After the Internet*. New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Ards, Angela. "Haki Madhubuti: The Measure of a Man." *Black Issues Book Review* 4.2 (2002): 42–46. Print.

Bailey, Julius. *Race Patriotism: Protest and Print Culture in the AME Church*. 1st ed. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012. Print. Christian Recorder.

Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Salt Eaters*. 1st Vintage contemporaries ed. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1992. Print. Vintage Contemporaries.

Barrett, Lindon. "African-American Slave Narratives: Literacy, the Body, Authority." *American Literary History* 7.3 (1995): 415. Print.

Beatty, Paul. *The White Boy Shuffle: A Novel*. 1st Picador USA ed. New York: Picador, 2001. Print.

Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987. Print.

Belle,, Felice. "The Poem Performed." *Oral Tradition* 18.1 (2003): 14–15. Print.

Beverly, William. *On the Lam: Narratives of Flight in J. Edgar Hoover's America*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003. Print.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Chicago, Ill. (P.O. Box 19355, Chicago, Ill. 60619): David Co., 1987. Print.

Brown, Elsa Barkley. "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14.4 (1989): 921–29. Print.

Bush, Vanessa. "Review of 1996." *Black Issues Book Review* 7.4 (2005): 44. Print.

Butler, Judith. "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia." *Reading Rodney King Reading Urban Uprising*. Ed. Robert Gooding-Williams. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Butler, Octavia E. *Kindred*. 25th anniverary edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003. Print. Black Women Writers Series.

Chaney, Michael A. *Fugitive Vision: Slave Image and Black Identity in Antebellum Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. Print. Blacks in the Diaspora.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Print.

Chesnutt, Charles. "The Negro in Books." *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett. N. p. Print.

Chesnutt, Charles W. *Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line*. New York: Penguin, 2000. Print. Penguin Classics.

Christian Haye. “Paul Beatty.” *BOMB--Artists in Conversation* 1994.

Crummell, Alexander, and Southern Texts Society. *Civilization and Black Progress: Selected Writings of Alexander Crummell on the South*. Charlottesville: Published for the Southern Texts Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1995. Print. Publications of the Southern Texts Society.

Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis--an Autobiography*. New York: International Publishers, 1988. Print.

Douglas, Christopher. *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009. Print.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. Print.

Dozier, Raine. “Young, Jobless, and Black: Young Black Women and Economic Downturns.” *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* 39.1 (2012): 45–65. Print.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. Print. A Norton Critical Edition.

Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

Duboin, Corinne. “Confronting the Specters of the Past, Writing the Legacy of Pain: An Interview with Phyllis Alesia Perry.” *Mississippi Quarterly* 62.3/4 (2009): 633–53. Print.

DuBois, W.E.B. “The Conservation of the Races.” *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. WW Norton & Co, 1999. 176–186. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 2nd Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

Elsley, Judy. *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting*. New York: P. Lang, 1996. Print. Berkeley Insights in Linguistics and Semiotics vol. 16.

Everett, Anna. *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009. Print. Suny Series, Cultural Studies in Cinema/video.

Fiedler, Leslie A. *The Inadvertent Epic: From Uncle Tom's Cabin to Roots*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982. Print. A Touchstone Book.

Gaines, Ernest J. *A Lesson before Dying*. N. p., 1993. Print.

Gates, Henry Louis. *In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past*. 1st ed. New York: Crown Publishers, 2009. Print.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Anthony Appiah, eds. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad : Distributed by Penguin USA, 1993. Print. Amistad Literary Series.

---, eds. *Gloria Naylor: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad : Distributed by Penguin USA, 1993. Print. Amistad Literary Series.

Gates, Henry Louis, and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004. Print.

Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of DNA, Race, and History. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012. Print. Rutgers Studies in Race and Ethnicity.

Gilyard, Keith. *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Print.

---. *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010. Print.

Gooding-Williams, Robert, ed. *Reading Rodney King/reading Urban Uprising*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.

Gordon, Ed. 1996: Under the Watchful Eye of the Government. 23 Jan. 2006. Radio.

Gould, Phillip. "The Rise of the Slave Narrative." *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

Haley, Alex. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. 30th anniversary ed. New York, NY: Vanguard Books, 2007. Print.

Hansen, Mark B. N. *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*. New York ; London: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Harmon, Karen Bennett. "Jet." Ed. Colin A. Palmer. *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History* 2006 : n. pag. Print.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008. Print.

Hayles, Katherine. *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.

Hayles, N. *How We Became Posthuman : Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.

Herron, Carolivia. *Thereafter Johnnie*. 1st ed. New York: Random House, 1991. Print.

Hijiya, James A. "Roots: Family and Ethnicity in the 1970's." *American Quarterly* 30.4 (1978): 548–556. Print.

Holloway, Karla F.C. "Cultural Narratives Passed On: African American Mourning Stories." *African American Literary Theory A Reader*. Ed. Winston Napier. New York: New York University Press. Print.

Hooks, Bell. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990. Print.

Hopkins, Dwight N., and Sheila Greeve Davaney, eds. *Changing Conversations: Religious Reflection & Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 1996. Print.

Hopkins, Pauline E. *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

"Hortense J. Spillers - The Idea of Black Culture - CR: The New Centennial Review 6:3." Web. 13 May 2010.

Jackson, John L. *Racial Paranoia the Unintended Consequences of Political Correctness: The New Reality of Race in America*. New York: Basic Civitas, 2008. *Open WorldCat*. Web. 11 Apr. 2014.

Jacobs, Harriet A. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2001. Print.

Jarrett, Gene Andrew. *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. Print.

Johnson, James Weldon. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. Print.

Jones, Gayl. *Corregidora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986. Print. Black Women Writers Series.

Kann, Mark E. *Middle Class Radicalism in Santa Monica*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986. Print.

Keizer, Arlene R. *Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. Print.

Kelley, Robin D. G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002. Print.

King, Rodney. *The Riot within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption*. 1st ed. New York: HarperOne, 2012. Print.

Klotman, Phyllis Rauch. *Another Man Gone: The Black Runner in Contemporary Afro-American Literature*. Port Washington, N.Y: Kennikat Press, 1977. Print. Kennikat Press National University Publications : Literary Criticism Series.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanlytic Experience." *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. Ed. Bruce Fink and Héloïse Fink. New York: W.W. Norton, 2006. Print.

Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand ; And, Passing*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1986. Print. American Women Writers Series.

Lipsitz, George. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011. Print.

Lubet, Steven. *Fugitive Justice: Runaways, Rescuers, and Slavery on Trial*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

Martha Krebs, and Daniel Drell. "The Age of Biology and the Responsible Ancestor." *The Human Genome Project and Minority Communities*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001. Print.

Massaquoi, Hans J. “Alex Haley: The Man Behind Roots.” *Ebony* Apr. 1977 : 33–41. Print.

McDowell, Deborah E. “Telling Slavery in ‘Freedom’s’ Time: Post-Reconstruction and the Harlem Renaissance.” *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Ed. Audrey A. Fisch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

Mitchell, Angelyn. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Print.

---. *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women’s Fiction*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2002. Print.

Modesto, Kevin. “‘Won’t Be Weighted down:’ Richard R. Wright, Jr.’s Contributions to Social Work and Social Welfare.” *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* Vol. 31.Issue 2 (Jun2004): 69–89. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

---. *Song of Solomon*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

---. *Sula*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

---. *The Bluest Eye: A Novel*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International, 2007. Print.

---. *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. Print.

Murch, Donna Jean. *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Print. The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture.

Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. N. p., 2002. *Open WorldCat*. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.

Naylor, Gloria. *1996*. Chicago: Third World Press, 2007. Print.

---. *Bailey's Cafe*. 1st Vintage contemporaries ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1993. Print. Vintage Contemporaries.

---. *Linden Hills*. New York, N.Y., U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1986. Print. Contemporary American Fiction.

---. *Mama Day*. 1st Vintage contemporaries ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. Print. Vintage Contemporaries.

---. *The Women of Brewster Place*. New York: Penguin Books, 1983. Print. Penguin Contemporary American Fiction Series.

Naylor, Gloria. "Close Encounters." *Black Issues Book Review* 7.5 (2005): 56–58. Print.

Orwell, George, and Erich Fromm. *1984: A Novel*. New York, N.Y.: Signet Classic, 1961. Print.

"Performance Art." *Tate Glossary of Art*.

Perry, Phyllis Alesia. *Stigmata*. 1st ed. New York: Hyperion, 1998. Print.

Peterson, Carla L. *Black Gotham: A Family History of African Americans in Nineteenth-Century New York City*. New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

---. *“Doers of the Word”: African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998. Print.

Richard Wright. “Blueprint for Negro Writing.” *New Challenge* 11 (1937): n. pag. Print.

Rone Shavers. “Paul Beatty.” *BOMB--Artists in Conversation* 2000.

Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print. Race and American Culture.

---. *Remembering Generations: Race and Family in Contemporary African American Fiction*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Print.

Saddik, Annette. “Rap’s Unruly Body: The Postmodern Performance of Black Male Identity on the American Stage.” *The Drama Review* 47.4 (2003): 110–127. Print.

Shange, Ntozake. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide, When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem*. 1st Scribner poetry ed. New York: Scribner Poetry, 1997. Print.

Singh, Nikhil Pal. *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2005. Print.

Smith, Valerie. “Neo-Slave Narratives.” *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.

---. *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Print.

Spillers, Hortense J. "'All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother': Race and Psychoanalysis.'" *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

---. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

---. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

---. "The Idea of Black Culture." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6.3 (2007): 7–28. *CrossRef*. Web. 12 Sept. 2013.

Spillers, Hortense. "The Idea of Black Culture - CR: The New Centennial Review 6:3." N. p., n.d. Web. 13 May 2010.

Strachey, James, ed. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. N. p. Print.

Szymanski, Greg. Gloria Naylor. 2 May 2006. Radio.

Tate, Claudia. *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print. Race and American Culture.

"The New Plantations." *The Economist* 16 Oct. 1993 : 33. Print.

"The New Plantations: South Carolina." n. pag. Print.

The Southern Workman. Hampton Institute., 1917. v. 46.

Touré. *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What It Means to Be Black Now*. 1st Free Press hardcover ed. New York: Free Press, 2011. Print.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. 1st Harvest ed. Orlando, Fla: Harcourt, 2003. Print. A Harvest Bok.

Walker, Margaret. *Jubilee*. Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999. Print.

Warren, Kenneth W. *What Was African American Literature?* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011. *Open WorldCat*. Web. 23 Feb. 2014.

Washington, Mary Helen. *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1987. Print.

Woolfork, Lisa. *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Print.

Wright, Richard, and Herman Finkelstein Collection (Library of Congress). *Native Son,*. New York; London: Harper & Bros., 1940. Print.

X, Malcolm. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. 1st Ballantine Books ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992. Print.

Zilinskas, Raymond A, and Peter J Balint, eds. *The Human Genome Project and Minority Communities: Ethical, Social, and Political Dilemmas*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001. Print.