1-1-2020

Carceral Matrix: Black Women's Writing In Response To Mass Incarceration, 1963-2019

Allison Michelle Serraes

CARCERAL MATRIX: BLACK WOMEN'S WRITING IN RESPONSE TO MASS INCARCERATION, 1963-2019

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfilment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Department of English
The University of Mississippi

by

ALLISON SERRAES

May 2020

ABSTRACT

This dissertation broadens the definition of confinement literature, a critical and developing subfield in African American literary studies. It argues that contemporary Black women writers are the early theorists of the complex and insidious reach of the U.S. prison-industrial complex. Through their probing representations of Black female characters' interactions with state-sanctioned social control and patriarchal violence, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Suzan-Lori Parks, and DaMaris B. Hill expand critical understandings of confinement and imprisonment. This dissertation contends that these writers' depictions of sexual and reproductive control as part of the developing carceral state reveal how confinement and imprisonment operate on intersecting oppressions of race and gender. As a purposefully interdisciplinary endeavor, "Carceral Matrix" merges African American literary studies, Black feminist theory, and critical prison studies to 1) document the rich but often overlooked literary history of Black women's responses to confinement, state surveillance, and violence and 2) theorize how Black women writers have used their respective genres to explore these methods of social control.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are so many people to be grateful for in the process of completing this project. First, I owe so much of my growth, perseverance, and future to my dissertation committee members, Leigh Anne Duck, Patrick Elliot Alexander, Jay Watson, and Shennette Garrett-Scott. Dr. Duck's tireless encouragement and sharp editorial eye made the research and writing feel possible. Dr. Alexander's breadth of knowledge, endless optimism, and the desire to push me toward new creative and critical horizons are a gift that I will forever be grateful for. He generously opened the door to this field and guided me along the way. Dr. Watson and Dr. Garrett-Scott brought continual support and bibliographic genius to this project.

This dissertation would not be possible without a dissertation completion fellowship from The American Council of Learned Societies. Their support provided me with the time and resources to not only research my subject but give it the care I felt it deserved. I am grateful to *African American Review* for publishing an article version of chapter three. Thanks to the University of Mississippi Department of English that has taken care of me intellectually, socially, and financially through this journey. Also, I owe many thanks to the English and History department faculty for words of encouragement and advising, including Lindy Brady, Cristin Ellis, Jaime Harker, Erin Drew, and Garrett Felber. Lindy and Erin's writing boot camps kept me writing when everything else in me wanted to stop. I am grateful for Garrett's class on the history of the carceral state, but ever more grateful for his revolutionary spirit and his dedication to fearlessly practice abolition on the UM campus.

I owe so much of this dissertation to the Prison-to-College Pipeline Program and the incredible people with whom I worked and learned, Patrick Alexander, Otis Pickett, and Julia James. I owe even more to the Prison-to-College Pipeline students, whose conversations, writings, humor, and care inspire me every day to measure up to the capable teachers and scholars they model for me.

I thank my friends and family, who were and continue to be my community of care. I am grateful for all of my graduate student mentors before me—Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder, Isadora Wagner, Brian Cook, and Ryan Charlton—whose patience, checking in, and advice sustained me. For my writing group Anne Spear and Izzy Stern: thank you, thank you, thank you. I am thankful my friends who kept me well, in-check, and fed throughout this process: Anna Grace Usery, Elise Abbas, Jared O'Connor, Kaleena Rivera, Juyeon Jang, Eli Portella, Laura Wilson, and Ashley Jones. A special thanks to Molly McCully Brown and Helen Davies, who remind me daily how friendship and love operates in the world. I owe a big thanks to Kate Leland who was there for me in the home stretch. Your presence filled my writing breaks with renewed spirit, endless laughs, and healing. Your support means everything to me (and Bert!). To my parents, Martin and Sheila, and siblings Brandon, Glen, and Katie, who remind me that I have a foundation of love from which to spring forth and return to.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

In 1963, a Black woman, sharecropper, and activist named Fannie Lou Hamer was jailed and brutally beaten by state officials in Winona, Mississippi for attempting to exercise her right to vote. Her televised account of this moment at the Democratic National Convention in August 1964 assisted the Civil Rights Movement's endeavor to prove to the nation that systemic white supremacist terror tactics kept Black people under constant threat and out of a vote. Hamer's testimony was so revolutionary that President Lyndon B. Johnson had its live coverage interrupted, which made clear the government's interest in hiding its own complicity in anti-Black violence in the Deep South. News stations later re-aired Hamer's testimony, and her subsequent speeches accelerated efforts in securing voting rights in the south, yet Hamer's speeches before and after her convention testimony exposed other underrepresented forms of white supremacist and gendered state terror. In June 1964, Hamer testified in Washington D.C. that she had undergone a forced hysterectomy without her knowledge or consent when she received medical care for a uterine tumor in 1961. She later testified in 1965 that she was among 60 percent of the Black women in Sunflower County, Mississippi who had undergone sterilizations without their permission (Roberts 90). This practice of forced sterilization—sterilization without consent nor knowledge of the procedure among predominantly Black women in the south—became so frequent that the practice gained the nickname, "Mississippi appendectomy," to connote the experience of going to seek medical attention for one ailment and leaving with a full hysterectomy or sterilization. Hamer's activism sought to secure Civil Rights for Black people on several fronts, not only political representation but also access to food,

employment, and nondiscriminatory healthcare. Hamer's oratory and activism signal a critically broadened approach to civil rights, one that imagines freedom for the citizen and for the body.

I think about Hamer's life work as I had the opportunity to lecture on her "We're on Our Way" speech to a group of incarcerated students at Mississippi State Penitentiary (formerly known as Parchman Farm), just 15 miles from Hamer's hometown in the same county, as part of the University of Mississippi's Prison-to-College Pipeline Program, a program dedicated to offering college-level courses for credit to incarcerated men and women in Mississippi. From the inside, the state's demarcations of unfreedom are usually explicit: uniform shirts with the word "MDOC CONVICT" in big letters on the back paired with striped pants; tall, barbed wire fences around the perimeter; entrance security checks; and a sprawling plantation-style premises of nearly 28-square miles. But, as Hamer teaches us, I also think about how in this same county hundreds, if not thousands, of Black women experienced a different, less visible form of unfreedom, one in which the state was complicit in denying the reproductive rights of people based on their intersecting statuses of Black and woman and, more often than not, poor.

This dissertation begins at these intersections of gender, race, and class. It responds to a rapidly expanding subfield in African American literary studies, African American confinement literature, by centering the confinement experiences of Black women in its examination of mass incarceration in various forms. With legal studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's analytical framework in mind, in "Carceral Matrix," I argue that a more explicitly "intersectional" approach to literary works produced by Black women about social and institutional confinement throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveals an illuminating aesthetic engagement with the ways in which state-sanctioned surveillance, incapacitation, and

reproductive control is raced *as well as* gendered and classed. I study the works of Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Suzan-Lori Parks, and DaMaris B. Hill to demonstrate how, like Hamer, many Black women writers develop aesthetic modes of representation to expose the often less apparent intersectional dynamics of white supremacy and resistance to them. I seek to reveal how Black women writers of this time period provide a complex model for exploring confinement—one that attends to the coworking components of race, class, and gender—predominantly through Black female characters, often mothers who experience these intersectional modes of oppression, surveillance, and imprisonment. With attention to these dynamics, this project seeks to expand further the way in which scholars conceptualize contemporary African American literature by looking to these figures as models for reading 1) coworking gendered, raced, and classed modes of oppression within an age of mass incarceration 2) how aesthetic representations of confinement and incarceration can inform narrative, dramatic, and poetic structures, and 3) potential approaches to rewriting or deconstructing these carceral practices.

In "Carceral Matrix," I center Black women in African American confinement literature to shift scholarly attention to a critically underdiscussed facet of contemporary imprisonment: how women, especially women of color, have been subjected to particular and various forms of state-sanctioned harm that reveal the multilayered nature of confinement. I focus especially on the practice of reproductive control and Black women writers' reimaginings of capture, confinement, and carceral spaces both inside and outside of the prison. In so doing, my project concentrates on one thread within the much larger, comprehensive web of white supremacy at work—the thread of state-sanctioned sexualized violence as a means of maintaining social control—in order to illuminate how sexual harm and reproductive control have operated in the

past and continue to operate as constitutive parts of a racialized, gendered, and classed social order.

The act of creatively representing carceral spaces and configurations of confinement, I argue, not only makes the prison site—which is often marked by its imperceptibility and institutionalized secrecy, as we can never really *know* what happens within its walls—more widely accessible; it can also engage in critical work that necessarily opens to imaginative re-conceptualizations of the prison-industrial complex's structural functionings and highlight how to undermine or *rewrite* those structures. As Megan Sweeney comments, literary scholars can significantly contribute to the broader field of prison studies by "exploring the tropes, symbols, images, narrative patterns, language forms, affects, and structures of feeling that characterize historical and contemporary representations of prisons and prisoners" (702). Examining the ways in which confinement is literarily conceptualized, imagined, and understood among those who directly and indirectly experience it shifts the conversation about prison and its function from an institution to an ideology. I contend that the ways in which Jones, Walker, Parks, and Hill attend to linguistic, conceptual, and spatial representations of confinement outside of the prison space highlight the overlooked social and political dynamics that may not have always outright incarcerated women but have confined them nonetheless. Re-viewing these Black women writers' works critically broadens our foundations for understanding carceral dynamics within a society that has only within the last forty years started to incarcerate women *en masse*. These fictional modes of representation point to this dynamic, and the ways in which these authors defy convention and manipulate form within their chosen media—novel, drama, and poetry—also work to expose the structural and ideological registers at work within the project of racial confinement.

Paired with these fictional texts, I use the nonfiction accounts of formerly incarcerated women to point to how their language regarding their own confinement and experiences with state violence carry over into confining institutions that point to the ways in which Black women's bodies are relegated to negotiations of reproductive labor, domestic service, and sexual deviance to perpetuate a racist/sexist model of social control. The works of Fannie Lou Hamer, Angela Y. Davis, Assata Shakur, and Safiya Bukhari-Alston, in particular, show reproductive control and sexual harm as pillars of disciplinary harm that are both racialized and gendered within jail and prison spaces. These nonfiction works thus guide my readings of how the imaginative literature of Jones, Walker, Parks, and Hill show these disciplinary logics bleeding out of the prison and into the larger system of raced, gendered, and classed social control in so-called free society.

Jones, Walker, Parks, and Hill inventively tap into Black women's confinement experiences, but they also push the limits of their narrative, dramatic, and poetic forms to call attention to the structural qualities of social control; in other words, these writers in their imaginative renderings use the tools of character, structure, and genre to expose the social and ideological factors that maintain a complex web of white supremacist social control on multiple levels. I push for critical re-readings of canonical and non-canonical texts in Black women's literature through the lens of Black women's responses to confinement to show that these writers are theorizing an intricate and complex system of confinement that stretches well beyond the prison's walls. Within this framework, my term "carceral matrix" is both a nod to Patricia Hill Collins' concept, "matrix of domination," which offers a way of reading intersecting identities within the hierarchy of power relations, and it also etymologically zeroes in on the relationship between confinement and biological reproduction in the U.S., as the *OED* relates "matrix" to

both "womb" and "cell" or "enclosure." I argue that attentiveness to the ways in which repeated revocation of Black women's reproductive liberty has been an enforced economic, social, and political imperative of the state can help us understand better the relationships between racist practices in the U.S.—chattel slavery and forced sterilization—and the economic and gendered dynamics that also shape these forms of institutional harm.

In conversation with recent scholarship uniting African American literary studies, literary theory, and critical prison studies, this project produces the first book-length study on Black women's multi-generic literary responses to systemic modes of social and reproductive control both inside and outside the prison. It expands the work laid out in Dennis Childs's field-defining monograph, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary*, in which he provides the first book-length literary and cultural analysis of what he calls "the racist capitalist misogynist imprisonment in the United States as it has morphed from the slave ship holds…to the cells of today's prison-industrial complex" (2). Patrick Elliot Alexander's *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* (2018) further defines the field of African American confinement literature by theorizing the continuity of racial terror, gendered social control, and capitalist greed from the slave ship to the twentieth-century prison as expressed in prose fiction and nonfiction by Black men and women. In so doing, Alexander redefines the neo-slave narrative to include the specific ways in which the contemporary U.S. prison manifests the carceral disciplinary logics of slavery. In introducing the new neo-slave novel—what he terms the neo-abolitionist novel—Alexander conceptualizes the expressive modalities through which African American writers resisted slavery's vestiges in post-emancipation carceral spaces, specifically through survival testimony, rehabilitative address, and revivifying narrative. My first two chapters expand Alexander's definition of the

neo-abolitionist novel by introducing two new aesthetic modalities through which Black women writers resist slavery's gendered racial control models in a post-emancipation moment: anticarceral feminist blues and Black radical epistolarity.

Particularly influential to the development of "Carceral Matrix," Alexander's work links the long history of sexualized state violence from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the gendered social control practices of the twentieth-century prison through his literary examinations of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Angela Davis's autobiography, among others. His siting/citing of the prison as the recodification of the state-sanctioned sexual violence characteristic of the slave ship hold in Black women's literature in his second chapter invites an expanded reading on Black women's experiences with and responses to state-sanctioned gendered violence both inside and outside the penitentiary. In its book-length examination of literary responses to gendered racial violence throughout the era of mass incarceration, "Carceral Matrix" offers readings of carcerality that expand beyond prison walls, as Black women's experiences with state-sanctioned punishment varied throughout the twentieth century to include forced sterilization, sexual violence, psychiatric institutionalization, debt peonage, and prison labor. Additionally, this dissertation offers new theorizations on the impact of drama and poetry in the field of literary resistance to the carceral state. I argue that including readings of anticarceral poetry and drama reveals social and political dynamics of carcerality that are less apparent or even absent in prose counterparts.

Black Women's Confinement and Resistance

My centering of Black women falls in line with recent historical accounts of Black women's experiences with and responses to mass incarceration as it developed throughout the twentieth-century in works by historians. "Carceral Matrix" not only adds the literary component

to these histories of Black women's resistance; it also explains the characteristics of an anticarceral feminist literary tradition that operated as a mode for both theory and praxis against state and interpersonal harm. It is a timely project at a moment in which news stories about women, such as Cyntoia Brown Long,[1] who experience state harm rather than protection in the face of sexual abuse appear to the public as examples of aberrations within the criminal justice system rather than the norm. "Carceral Matrix" reveals that Black women have been experiencing the connections between these two forms of harm for centuries, but it also shows how Black women's literature has been making these links legible for the public through fiction, performance, and poetry. This work also contends that literary resistance to the carceral state is a multi-generic endeavor, and therefore importantly introduces poetry and drama as a means through which writers provide nuanced perspectives for how racialized social control operates systemically.

Dennis Childs concludes his monograph on narratives of neo-slavery by pointing his readers in the direction of the specific ways in which incarcerated women experience particular forms of harm at higher rates than their male counterparts. Childs remarks that the writings by and about contemporary neoslaves

> represent a collectively authored spectral demand on the perilous now as much as they serve as revelations of America's neoslavery past—a living, open wound, history that

[1] Cyntoia Brown Long and her story went viral on social media in 2017. In 2004, when Brown was sixteen, she defended herself against 43-year-old Johnny Michael Allen who was paying her for sex and threatened her life. When her self defense resulted in Allen's death, Brown was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and theft. The 2011 documentary *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story* and subsequent documentaries up through 2017 including the Netflix original *Murder to Mercy: The Cyntoia Brown Story* led to social media campaigns that were shared by high-profile celebrities in an effort to get Brown Long's sentence commuted. Much of the media coverage centered on Brown's involvement in underage sex work as a means of survival, which placed a spotlight on a larger systemic criminal justice complicity in the sexual exploitation of underage girls. In 2019 a judge commuted her sentence and she was released eight months later. Cyntoia Brown Long published a memoir about her time in prison shortly after her release called *Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System*.

> finds one out of every nine black men between the ages of twenty and thirty-four currently entombed within today's carceral Black Bottoms, while black, brown, and poor women prisoners endure modern versions of the Middle Passage carceral model and colonial genocide ranging from ritualized rape and sexual assault, to shackled childbirths, to mass forced sterilization. (172)

By ending his monograph in this way, Childs opens the door for further investigation into the sexual and reproductive harm perpetuated through white supremacist social organization in the post-emancipation era. Specifically, he points to the need for further investigation into the particular ways incarcerated women have particular experiences of slavery within the contemporary prison that their male counterparts may not. In women's prisons, there are countless examples of rape, shackled childbirth, forced sterilization, and medical neglect that operate as the routine conditions of confinement. As critical prison studies scholar Victoria Law has pointed out, "Women in prison face different circumstances during their incarceration and thus have different priorities—and different ways of challenging their conditions—than incarcerated men" (5-6). Law outlines some of the reasons why women's challenges to prison conditions are less legible to the outside world by stating that more women face the threat of sexual violence as retaliation for resistance, they "lack a commonly known history of resistance," and many fear writing about their organizing or resistance efforts in fear of jeopardizing their chances at early release (6-8).

Former member of the Black Panther Party and political prisoner, Safiya Bukhari, has written about her particular experiences with intense medical negligence in prison. In "Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary," she recalls

> In December 1976, I started hemorrhaging and went to the clinic for help. No help of any consequence was given, so I escaped. Two months later, I was recaptured. While on escape a doctor told me that I could endure the situation, take painkillers, or have surgery. I decided to use the lack of medical care as my defense for the escape to accomplish two things: (1) expose the level of medical care at the prison, and (2) put pressure on them to give me the care I needed.
>
> I finally got to the hospital in June 1978. By then, it was too late. I was so messed up inside that everything but one ovary had to go. Because of the negligence of the "doctor" and the lack of feeling on the part of the prison officials, I was forced to have a hysterectomy. When they brought me back to this prison in March 1977, because of the escape, they placed me in Cell 5 on the segregation end of the maximum-security building. (13-14)

Bukhari's autobiographical narrative tells a rather common story about medical neglect in the tradition of women's writings from prison. The ways in which their health issues are largely ignored and misdiagnosed—especially if the issues are related to women's health—points to one of the many ways the state injures, dehumanizes, and violates incarcerated women's bodies. Bukhari's story radically turns to testimony, however, when she points to her escape from prison to get proper medical treatment as well as her explicit use of the fact of medical neglect to expose the conditions of the prison and put pressure on authorities. Bukhari outlines her direct form of radical resistance and praxis to show how an escape can be used to spotlight abusive prison practices and to the public on record. When she finally receives medical attention, Bukhari points out how the system's abuses lead to further violation, as her situation got so bad she had to receive a hysterectomy. Bukhari highlights the fact that this medical violence is part

of the routine of the prison and not an aberrant episode. Her narrative testimony of her experience as well as her documenting how she turned that experience into radical prison praxis is an example of one way in which confined women resist.

Many scholars have noted, however, a general lack in resources and narratives concerning women's prison organizing. Law suggests that this lack might stem from the fact that we only think of explicit and often male-coded forms of resistance, such as riots and strikes, as organizing. This has created what Law calls an "invisibility of organizing" among incarcerated women, suggesting that we must learn to see the nuances in the ways women resist and not assume that because we cannot see it, it isn't there (9). Law's work reveals examples of the ways women collectively resist harm in prison through both "tactics traditionally employed by male prisoners, such as lawsuits and disruptions, and strategies that women have devised to challenge gender-specific injustices such as maintaining contact and custody of their children and combatting sexual abuse" (16). Law points out our need as scholars to be attentive to the ways in which women in prison experience particular modes of harm that are less frequently deployed in men's prisons as well as how to use this attentiveness to look for new ways to see and imagine resistance.

In this way, "Carceral Matrix" seeks to broaden our conceptual definitions of carceral harm and organized resistance. To be clear, most of the literary texts in this dissertation do not take place in a prison. Instead, my readings use critical prison studies scholarship to read how—for Black women in particular—slavery's vestiges certainly manifest in the contemporary prison, but they also organize state-sanctioned institutions of harm outside of the prison as well. To this end, I push for a broadened definition of confinement and African American confinement literature that reads harm against Black women operating systemically in the home, street, and

prison. While the Thirteenth Amendment's exclusionary clause—"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States"—secured slavery's afterlife through the criminal justice system, many of the conditions and practices of slavery operated as *de facto* organizing logics of the domestic sphere, Jim Crow-era sociality, and post-civil-rights welfare reform. It is my contention that Black women writers point us to these modes of confinement operating outside of the plantation and prison in order to highlight a broader conception of gendered racial harm as a constitutive feature of white supremacy in the U.S.

My use of the term "gendered racial harm" is indebted to the terminology put forth in Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* (2016), as her work examines "the mutually constitutive role of race and gender in constructing subject positions, technologies of violence, understandings of the social order, and the construction and application of the law" (4-5). "Gendered racial terror," as Haley names it, operates in the criminal legal system at the beginning of the twentieth century by presenting Black women as inverts of white, normative, heteropatriarchal norms. She notes, "carceral understandings of Black women…positioned [them] as…social, cultural, and political invert[s]. Through policing, legislation, and judicial enforcement, Black women were made juridical inverts: perverse, primitive, and pathological, and therefore unentitled to protection or freedom" (6). I opt for "harm" rather than "terror" in many instances because I think it broadens the discourse to include reading neglect (by state or by community) as part of this framework.

This project conceptualizes "violence against women" as defined by anticarceral feminists. Anticarceral feminism understands that *violence against women* is a broad definition which includes "the structural violence of social inequalities, the violence of state institutions

and agents, and interpersonal forms of violence, including rape, battering, and sexual coercion" (Thuma 2). The project of anticarceral feminism is to combat the development of responses to this violence that simultaneously expand state and carceral power. As Victoria Law has put it, "carceral feminism describes an approach that sees increased policing, prosecution, and imprisonment as the primary solution to violence against women" (1). This approach often causes subsequent harm to the women involved as well as overlooks issues of racism, classism, and heterosexism that have historically influenced police action or neglect. Continuing with this definition, Law explains, "This stance does not acknowledge that police are often purveyors of violence and that prisons are always sites of violence. Carceral feminism ignores the ways in which race, class, gender identity, and immigration status leave certain women more vulnerable to violence and that greater criminalization often places these same women at risk of state violence" (1). Accordingly, anticarceral feminism seeks alternative, inclusive, and community-sensitive solutions to violence against women.

Further, the definition of "violence against women" is broadened to not just mean domestic violence. According to Joshua M. Price, "Women at the margins experience violence generated by structures, institutions, and histories, which make their experiences irreducible to the commonsense notion that violence against women is basically a question of 'domestic violence'" (*Structural Violence* 2). Price's research on the necessity to broaden the definition of violence against women, he asserts, results in understanding harm structurally, institutionally, and heterogeneously. His work urges us against reducing "violence against women" to the narrow definition of "battering," as this understanding barely scrapes the surface of how identity, history, and economics shape forms of violence different women experience. Price cautions:

> Taking "domestic violence" as a stand-in for all violence against women is to take violence against monogamous (implicitly heterosexual) women as the *prototype*, to borrow Joy James's phrase (1996), and see all violence based on that prototype. The prototype is an abstraction…It distorts accounts by women whose home does not conform to the normative model. (3)

Price helpfully builds toward a heterogenous understanding of violence against women to include structural inequalities and therefore resist the binary of "victim" and "perpetrator," which, as anticarceral feminists suggest, leads carceral feminists to call on the power of state intervention for resolution, an approach which more often than not compounds/reproduces violence.

In applying this broad definition of violence against women developed by anticarceral feminists, this project seeks to frame the harm that Black women characters experience in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literature as an exploration into how networks of violence operate along the intersecting lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality and through structural, institutional, and interpersonal methods. In so doing, "Carceral Matrix" offers a literary documentation of anticarceral feminist theorizing; it illustrates how Black women writers were critically reading race, gender, class, and sexuality alongside the growth of the prison-industrial complex while also pushing to define confinement, discipline, and harm in broader terms. Mainly, their depictions of harm against Black women take into account the racist, sexist, and classist structures and institutions that promote or curate environments of violence. These writers offer nuanced understandings for how racial patriarchal domination requires forms of racial, gender, class violence. By placing Black women at the center, these writers argue for the

necessity of an intersectional analysis of harm as a form of carcerality/maintenance of white supremacy.

Methodology

This project is interdisciplinary. It links legal scholarship with literary studies centering Black women's ongoing pursuit of bodily integrity in and against white supremacist social structures. A central study that frames my argumentation in this project is Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, a foundational legal and sociohistorical text documenting the ways that the state, through the intersections of race, gender, and class, has regulated the reproductive rights of Black women in American history. Roberts examines a long history that exposes the bonds between race and reproduction "from slave masters' economic stake in bonded women's fertility to the racist strains of early birth control policy to sterilization abuse of Black women during the 1960s and 1970s to the current campaign to inject Norplant and Depo-Provera in the arms of Black teenagers and welfare mothers" (4), which provides the theoretical framework from which begins my thinking through Black women's literary responses to such modes of intersectional social control. By drawing from Roberts's pivotal conceptualization of white supremacy as a mode of not only racial control, but also racialized gender and class control, "Carceral Matrix" centers Black women's intersecting personal and literary histories and thus renders more clearly their narratological, dramatic, and poetic responses to sexualized state violence and mass incarceration.

"Carceral Matrix" ultimately advances the growing body of twenty-first-century scholarship on African American confinement literature in that it produces the first book-length study on Black women's literary responses to systemic modes of confinement, especially social and reproductive control, both inside and outside the prison. In her introduction to the first edited

collection of literary criticism on the continuities between slavery and mass incarceration, *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature* (2008), Tara T. Green uses the term "confinement" not only to describe the spatially designated institutions of racial difference throughout slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the penal system but also to designate a particular racialized social and political status of Black men and women throughout these time periods (3). In doing so, Green's introduction and edited collection speak to both the "physical" and "spiritual" or experiential states of confinement within plantation, segregation, and prison life, and she aptly titles the literature depicting and responding to these dynamics, "confinement literature" (4). The subsequent and ongoing conversations about the continuities between slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration as they appear in literature are taken up in Dennis Childs' *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary* (2015), which cites/sites the slave ship as the prototype for institutionalized white supremacist bodily and social control from which all other forms of institutionalized racism followed suit. His "Middle Passage carceral model" traces a lineage between the slave ship and the contemporary prison to illustrate what he calls the "racial capitalist patriarchal state" (59), one that acknowledges the deeply entrenched gendered, classed, and raced dynamics at work within the project of white supremacy. Foundational to his thinking are the co-operating technologies of race, gender, and class as they operate through and by the state (as well as constitute it) to enforce and maintain social hierarchies. Patrick Elliot Alexander's *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner, Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* (2018) also analyzes state-sanctioned incapacitation and violence through a lineage of slavery through the lens of a necessarily gendered, raced, and classed conception of white supremacy as it operates in what he calls "new neo-slave narratives," which are literary depictions of prisoner abuse or

carceral violence that represent the continuities of state-sanctioned racialized terror from past to present. Alexander's work not only focuses on the ways in which these scenes are represented in these works, but he theorizes the modes through which imprisoned people and those depicting imprisoned people write against and resist these systems of social control, a practice that he terms, "antipanoptic expressivity." His first and second chapters, in particular, center on Black women's voices in James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could* Talk and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, revealing the continuities between prisoner abuse and the organizing logic of the slave ship. Childs's and Alexander's expansions of African American confinement literature employ necessarily intersectional and interdisciplinary inquiries, especially within the discipline of critical prison studies, which paves the way for my book-length focus on Black women writers' responses to the prison-industrial complex as a technology of gendered, raced, and classed social control.

This dissertation also advances interdisciplinary work on imprisonment in conversation with critical prison studies scholarship, as, like Alexander's book, it employs the methodology and analytical frameworks for reading systems of state-sanctioned social control and incapacitation within the discipline of literary study. "Carceral Matrix" continues discussions across disciplines on how the prison-industrial complex and its related forms can be analyzed, represented, and resisted, particularly within the history of Black women's literature. Critical prison studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez's conception of white supremacy is foundational to this study, for he defines it as "a *logic of social organization* that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized 'human' difference, enforced through coercions and violences that are structured by genocidal possibility (including physical extermination and curtailment of people's collective capacities to socially, culturally, or

biologically reproduce" ("I Would Wish…" 4). Accordingly, this logic of social organization is "layered" and "intersectional" (2), for it (re)produces modes of racialized, gendered, classed hierarchies through its routines of punishment. In this light, my dissertation focuses specifically on Black women within this framework of social control to read how writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries depict the intersections of oppression and punishment both inside and outside the prison in their fiction, drama, and poetry. It is my contention that these writers are not only depicting individualized representations of interpersonal discrimination, but they are also attempting to reproduce through their narrative, dramatic, and poetic techniques an aesthetic that speaks to an entire logic of social control, one that reads gender, class, and race not as mere targets of oppressive violence but as *a means through which to (re)produce* violence and hierarchy.

Therefore, centering Black women's struggles within the "racial capitalist patriarchal state" (to refer back to Childs' term), "Carceral Matrix" excavates the critically underdiscussed intersections operating to maintain white supremacy. Victoria Law's groundbreaking critical prison studies work on the struggles of incarcerated women also frames this project's concerns with overrepresentation of women of color in the prison system as one iteration of the many ways the state criminalizes women on the basis of race, class, gender identity, sexuality, and ability. Her comprehensive readings of how women are underrepresented in conversations concerning mass incarceration and how their struggles within and against state power often go unrecognized lay the groundwork for being more attentive to the particular ways in which women are affected by confinement both within prison walls and outside of them. It is through this critical framework that Law draws attention to the multi-layered gendered, raced, and classed formations of state-violence that may be less frequent (but definitely not absent) among

incarcerated men—sexual abuse, shackling pregnant women, forced sterilizations, medical negligence, familial separation, and loss of parental rights and visitation—as well as women's various responses to such practices. Following Law's example, this dissertation is attentive to both the overt and covert modes of resistance to state-sanctioned violence against women, as it looks both to literary content of resistance and to each writer's stylistic modes of response. Like Rodríguez's conception of "radical prison praxis" as the ways in which imprisoned intellectuals respond to and undermine the logic of social control and Alexander's concept of "antipanoptic expressivity," my project explores the ways in which Jones, Walker, Parks, and Hill write combatively in depicting women of color who experience, theorize, and resist continuities of carceral logics from past to present and use narratological, dramatic, and poetic style to expose and oppose carceral regimes. In this way, they not only attend to the many physical and biological methods of state-sanctioned sexualized and reproductive violence but also the more discreet experiential practices that are part and parcel of the web of white supremacist social control.

Organization of the Dissertation

The chapters in this dissertation are organized chronologically from Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* in 1975 to DaMaris B. Hill's *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland* in 2019. The first two chapters outline two types of Black women's neo-abolitionist novels, while the remaining two chapters offer theories of neo-abolitionist drama and poetics, respectively. The reasoning for this genre-based organization is two-fold. First, I start with the novel form to further develop the foundational work that has been laid out in the field of African American confinement literature by Dennis Childs and Patrick Alexander. Beginning on the familiar

ground of the neo-abolitionist novel, my first two chapters add new lines of inquiry into the specific ways writers depict how Black women experience and resist slavery's recodified gendered racial harm in a post-emancipation moment. Then, my final two chapters open toward the genres of drama and poetry to examine and theorize how neo-abolitionist aesthetics work in these expressive and literary modes. The second reasoning of organization is temporal, in that while the first two chapters engage with prison and state violence, the novels on which the chapters are based emerge from just before or in the early years of the U.S. prison boom beginning in the 1980s. Parks's and Hill's works—the focus on chapters three and four, respectively—appear in a cultural and historical moment (1990s-2010s) in which the U.S. public is gaining critical language and modes through which to describe and critique the prison-industrial complex. With this in mind, it is important to note that anticarceral/neo-abolitionist novels do not stop at 1982 with *The Color Purple* and neo-abolitionist drama and poetics don't begin with Parks and Hill. Instead, the works I have chosen operate as exemplary models for the tenets of Black women's neo-abolitionist literature that can be applied to works beyond the temporal parameters of this work. For example, the tradition of the neo-abolitionist novel is seen in works such as Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986); Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which has been read as such by Childs and Alexander; Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018); and Jesmyn Ward's National Book Award-winning 2018 novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. Examples of Black women's neo-abolitionist drama also continue throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with Parks's continuing dramaturgic and filmic oeuvre as well as works such as Shay Youngblood's *Square Blues* (from the mid-nineties), and Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Lynn Nottage's *Sweat* (2017). The dissertation's final chapter most explicitly brings together time-spanning anticarceral poetic

praxis in DaMaris B. Hill's expansive poetic response to Black women's confinement from Tubman to Sandra Bland in her 2019 collection. It is also the first work with explicit reference to critical prison studies scholarship. This final chapter perhaps makes the strongest case for developing neo-abolitionist literary aesthetics, as it points to a contemporary literary moment in which scholars are applying critical prison studies lenses to literature, but poets are also composing in response to scholarship.

In chapter one, I argue that Jones's depiction of trauma—specifically gendered racial trauma against Black women—can be read as an early fictional exploration of anticarceral feminism, a theory and praxis of understanding violence against women on both interpersonal and state levels as interrelated and deeply entrenched within a system of white supremacist heteropatriarchal social control. Critical prison studies scholarship guides my exploration of Black women's confinement along a spectrum of containment and violence from slavery to the twentieth century in *Corregidora* as I situate Jones's depictions of trauma and resistance alongside the historical development of Black feminist resistance to state and partner violence. I read Jones's depictions within this broadened discourse on Black women's confinement through the blues. This chapter sets the foundation for the definition of anticarceral feminism and its explanation for linking interpersonal and state harm within a broader discussion of gendered racial harm that will be necessary for the following chapters. It also contextualizes the social and historical movements contemporaneous to Jones's anticarceral fiction.

In chapter two, I show how Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* is a neo-abolitionist novel through Celie's and Sofia's intersecting relationships to state and domestic violence. I argue that Celie's recordings of Sofia's run-in with the white mayor and her subsequent beating and imprisonment provide Celie with an analysis to read her own domestic confinement in an

abusive marriage to Albert. While both characters experience forms of confinement from the state and through patriarchal dominance, they help one another develop tactics for survival and resistance. Following the anticarceral feminist model I outline in chapter one, chapter two shows how the gendered racial harm developed in plantation slavery carries into post-emancipation southern households, public spaces, and the prison. This chapter develops these concepts through an analysis of Walker's epistolary style, which I connect to the African American literary tradition of the jail/prison letter as developed by Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin.

The third chapter marks the shift into developing a neo-abolitionist aesthetic by means of critical attention to intersectional state oppressions as they relate to the prison-industrial complex in a neoliberal/late liberal era. Suzan-Lori Parks's turn-of-the-century plays, *In The Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000), remix Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne to examine ways in which women—particularly poor, illiterate women of color—are surveilled, policed, and reproductively controlled within a carceral matrix that seeks to push the plays' protagonists to their economic and emotional limits and to ultimate criminalization or violence. I argue that Parks's depiction of state surveillance and oppression of women informs her plot as well as staging techniques in ways that develop a neo-abolitionist dramatic aesthetic, a visual, gestural, oral, and aural attentiveness to the state-sanctioned and socially-complicit structures perpetuating confinement and struggle. This chapter shifts in focus from prose fiction to drama in order to begin the exploration of how genre provides limits and possibilities for exposing the mechanisms of the carceral state, a focus of the entire dissertation but one that becomes central to the second half.

The final chapter introduces the concept of neo-abolitionist poetics through DaMaris B. Hill's 2019 collection of poetry *A Bound Woman is A Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland*. I argue that it is the first work

to feature a section of poetry in explicit conversation with critical prison studies scholarship. As chapters one through three in the dissertation apply critical prison studies perspectives to African American literature in order to better conceptualize and broaden our understandings of African American confinement literature, this final chapter and conclusion demonstrates an example of literature responding to critical prison studies developments. As a section of the work titled "bound.fettered." poetically imagines the lives of women mentioned in Kali N. Gross's *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*, the rest of the work as a whole conceptualizes black women's confinement in many iterations and across generations. This text, I argue, poetically performs the radical political and historical work of #SayHerName, by providing a catalog or a gathering of black women who both struggled and resisted confinement.

CHAPTER ONE: GAYL JONES'S *CORREGIDORA*: RESTRICTION, RELATION, AND RESISTANCE

Introduction

In part three of Gayl Jones's debut novel, *Corregidora* (1975), the protagonist Ursa recalls a story that haunts her throughout childhood. While describing her friendship with May Alice—a girl a few years older than Ursa who teaches her about menstruation, sex, and pregnancy—Ursa also tells of becoming obsessed with the news of a local young woman who commits suicide seemingly for no reason. Ursa is about ten when she overhears news of this occurrence from her mother and grandmother, who are both convinced that a woman does not take her own life unless a man or pregnancy is involved. Mr. Deak, the local store owner, also hypothesizes that a man must be involved. Ursa eavesdrops as he tells a customer that the woman's father, Mr. Melrose, is heading to the town where her body was found to find the man. When the customer does not believe that Melrose could possibly find anything out when the police could not, Deak responds with an indicting explanation of the relationship between Black women and the protections (or certainly the lack thereof) of the state:

> A daddy got ways the police ain't. Anyway, she wasn't nothing but a nigger woman to the police. You know they ain't gon take time to find out nothing about a nigger woman. Somebody go down there and file a complaint, they write it down, all right, while you standing there, but as soon as you leave, they say, "Here, put it in the nigger file." That mean they get to it if they can. And most times they can't. Naw, they don't say put it in

> the nigger file, they say put it in the nigger *woman* file, which mean they ain't gon never get to it. (134, emphasis Jones's)

The story of the Melrose woman keeps coming back to Ursa as she goes through early adolescence and witnesses May Alice's increased sexual development and relations with a boy named Harold until she gets pregnant. Ursa visits May Alice in the hospital after she gives birth, but unsettled by May Alice's assertions that Ursa too will feel the simultaneous pains and pleasures of sex and eventually childbirth, she is immediately filled with urgency to find out the truth about the Melrose woman. In the moment that Ursa leaves the hospital and refuses to be friends with May Alice anymore she runs directly to Deak's store to ask what happened to Mr. Melrose, but Deak meets her inquiries with "Honey, that ain't nothing for you to hear" (144), suggesting that the knowledge of gendered violence inflicted upon young Black women is to be kept from them. Ursa obsesses over this story and recalls that when she is fifteen she researches the back papers in the school library to find out Mr. Melrose is in jail for murdering a man he thought was involved in his daughter's death. She desires to visit him and ask what really happened but decides against it for fear of getting in trouble from Mama or offending Mr. Melrose. The last mention of the Melrose woman is when Ursa draws a direct connection between her friendship with May Alice and the woman found in the alley: "I don't think anything ever worked me up so much as that woman…but somehow I'd kept tying her and May Alice together. I don't know why I did. And it was always May Alice laying up there in that alley" (145).

Ursa's connection of this woman she did not know to her friend—also a young Black woman—provides a framework for thinking about sexuality, trauma, and premature Black death. It is also the only moment in the novel that explicitly describes police relations to Black women.

Black *women*'s lives as specifically emphasized by Deak are disposable to the police in such a way that violence against them is filed away and never to be investigated. Deak's suggestion that the intersection of gender and race compounds Black women's disposability in the eyes of the state is notable for young Ursa in thinking through what it means to mature from a Black girl to a Black woman and what that life is worth to others. For Ursa, May Alice's pregnancy and tumultuous relationship with Harold are psychically linked to the Melrose woman's death. May Alice verbally educates Ursa about menstruation, sex, and desire, but Ursa also witnesses the less explicit gender power dynamics between May Alice and Harold when she gets pregnant, Harold disappears, and May Alice adopts a language of personal fault in regard to her child. This part of the novel links sexual coming-of-age with death, particularly through the lens of police disinvestment in serving those who are victims of what the novel implies to be partner violence.

For Ursa, learning about sex, how it is both pleasurable and painful, how blood marks the moment of sexual maturity through menstruation, and how childbirth is met with similar pleasure, pain, and potential partner neglect is deeply linked to the woman who *may* have been pregnant, who *may* have killed herself, who *may* have had a partner involved, but who *definitely* does not have the support of state investigation or the potential for justice. Ursa isn't clear as to how or why she keeps associating the dead woman with May Alice. Perhaps both women experience varying levels of death in relation to men. Perhaps the way in which the Melrose woman's death was seen as unimportant to police—placing her in the "nigger *woman* file" to never be touched again—is not wholly disconnected to the ways in which Harold completely abandons May Alice when he finds out she is pregnant. Perhaps for Ursa learning the interconnected pleasure and pain of sexual maturity is always linked to learning gendered racial

violence including neglect on a sliding scale, from interpersonal relationships to relationships with state enforcers.

Within the larger context of *Corregidora*, Ursa's memory of this moment is brief, but it importantly fits within the novel's preoccupation with intergenerational psychic and sexual trauma. *Corregidora* focuses on four generations of women, interweaving a narrative of slavery, sexual exploitation, and the urge/task to procreate as a means of preserving that history, which is under threat of disappearing because of the dominant colonial cultures' erasure of the evidence. This novel, often categorized as a neo-slave novel in the most general sense—a full-length fictional work written in the post-emancipation era about slavery or its afterlives—questions how bloodlines in the institution of slavery and its aftermath carry conflicting notions of property relations via procreation and sexuality. Great Gram and Gram pass on their stories of sexual violence and trauma while enslaved to Corregidora, urging Mama and Ursa to make generations so the evidence of the way their bodies and lives were harmed could not be erased. This biological imperative to create, carry on, or present (a body of) evidence of the enslaved past is troubled when Ursa learns she can no longer bear children after a violent altercation with her husband. Ursa connects her trauma with other Black women's traumas across classes, sexualities, and generations in such a way that the novel forces sex slavery on the Brazil plantation into conversation with gendered racial violence of the post-emancipation twentieth century.

In this chapter, I argue that Jones's depictions of trauma—specifically gendered racial trauma against Black women—constitute one of the earliest of Black feminist fiction's engagements with anticarceral feminism, a theory and praxis of understanding violence against women on both interpersonal and state levels as interrelated and deeply entrenched within a

system of white supremacist heteropatriarchal social control. I use critical prison studies scholarship to explore how Jones conceptualizes gendered racial harm in *Corregidora* as critically developing alongside Black feminist organizing to resist state and intimate violence. I contend that an anticarceral feminist framework highlights the importance of reading gendered racial harm—violence, abuse, or neglect—as part of the ongoing project of white supremacist heteropatriarchal dominance in post-emancipation U.S. culture. Moreover, this lens elucidates how *Corregidora* provides a Black women's communal blues testimony that calls attention to as well as subverts these modalities of carceral power.

Most critical readings of carcerality in Jones's oeuvre consider works that attend to incarceration or medicalized captivity explicitly, such as Jones's second novel, *Eva's Man* (1975) or her short story "Asylum" (1977).[2] However, what I am arguing for here is a broader conception of confinement, as outlined in anticarceral feminist and prison abolitionist circles, that can be applied to works that engage with the intergenerational afterlives of slavery. This chapter offers three major readings: 1) Abolition and anticarceral feminism provide frameworks for understanding carceral power operating outside of explicit institutions of incarceration. This framework reveals how harm and trauma operate in *Corregidora* across time and place, so that the sexual and racist terror of slavery on the Corregidora plantation is not

[2] Both *Eva's Man* and "Asylum" are first-person narratives from women who are held in captivity in the asylum for either a crime they committed or because society deemed them "unfit." A lot of critics of these works point to the carcerality of these spaces as well as the relationship between women's captivity in mental institutions for nonnormative behavior as well as racist, misogynist, or heterosexist modes of criminalization in the twentieth century. One such reading occurs in Megan Sweeney's "Prison Narratives, Narrative Prisons" in which she applies a reader-response lens to *Eva's Man* by framing the reading of the novel through the perspective of incarcerated women's responses to it at North Carolina Correctional Institution. She shows how "imprisoned women underscore our ongoing pressing need to develop cultural and legal frameworks that remain absolutely attentive, rather than 'absolutely blind,' to the systemic, socially sanctioned forms of violence that lead women to become violent themselves" (197). She insists that these pairings "draw attention to the role that fictional representation can play in challenging reductive legal frameworks for reading law-breaking women's experiences" (197).

wholly separate from gendered, racial, or partner violence occurring in a post-emancipation moment. 2) *Corregidora* illustrates the ways that the carceral logics that organized the plantation master-slave relation perpetuate through violence and language in post-emancipation settings. Language, logic, and narrative structures are bound up in oppressive practices that continue to harm, violate, or neglect Black women. 3) Jones's novel disrupts narrative structure through the blues/blues novel form to imaginatively resist the perpetuation of master-slave relations. The categories of (new) neo-slave novel and blues novel each provide tools for reading Jones's novel within the abolitionist framework of "imaginative disruption."

What is Abolitionist/Anticarceral Feminist Reading?

In this chapter, I am setting the foundations for reading with an abolitionist lens or framework. These foundations will be utilized and expanded upon throughout the subsequent chapters of this manuscript. By "abolitionist" or "neo-abolitionist," I am referring to the contemporary analytic and social and political practice that is associated with but not limited to the prison abolition movement. Prison abolitionists see their current project as generating from the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement in the U.S. It proposes a broad-scope analysis of racial, gender, class, colonial, and sexual domination as the impulse through which modalities of violence, death, harm, and confinement have been institutionalized, recodified, and implemented over time. Such a broad-scale analysis allows for institutions of slavery, Jim Crow, Native American genocide, U.S. Western colonial expansion, and mass imprisonment to be seen as technologies used to uphold a white supremacist heteropatriarchal status quo.[3] According to

[3] Dylan Rodríguez broadly defines incarceration to include difference "methodologies" or "technologies" that maintain social, racial, gender, and class difference: "Incarceration takes the form of narrative, juridical, spatial, and sociopolitical processes through which criminalized or otherwise (ontologically and socioculturally) pathologized populations are rendered collective targets of state-sanctioned social liquidation and political neutralization…Incarceration, understood as a systemic logic and institutional methodology, materializes through *numerous regimes of dominance*, from apartheid, military occupation, imprisonment and compulsory schooling to Native American reservations, environmental racism, and normative sexual categorizations" (1589)

Dylan Rodríguez, a critical prison studies and abolitionist scholar, the maintenance of this status quo is central to the U.S. and Western colonial narrative of "civilization" and nation-building.

Abolitionists focus on the structures of oppression, suggesting that the modality of a particular instance of harm often emerges from a larger impulse toward subjection, incarceration, or annihilation of populations that pose a threat to a white heteropatriarchal Western social and political structure. Unlike reformists, who tend to see prisons or other institutions of harm as working in excess of their intended purpose (as broken systems that need repair), abolitionists see prisons and other institutions of harm as working exactly how they were intended: as disruptions or eradications of threats to the social or political status quo. While Rodríguez's analysis offers a rich and thorough understanding of how prisons are contemporary iterations of the historical, social, political, economic, and colonial project of white supremacy, I am particularly interested in his inclusion of "narrative" in his understandings of carceral power and dominance. He contends that abolitionist work is not merely a project of negation—the over-simplified understanding that prisons are bad and therefore should be done away with.[4] Instead, he categorizes abolition as a

> creative, imaginative, and speculative collective labor: while liberal-to-progressive reformism attempts to protect and sustain the institutional and cultural-political coherence of an existing system by adjusting and/or refurbishing it, abolitionism addresses the historical roots of that system in relations of oppressive, continuous, and asymmetrical violence and raises the radical question of whether those relations must be uprooted and

[4] Rodríguez links the contemporary abolitionist movement to Frederick Douglass's statements after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Rodríguez and other abolitionists are likewise attentive to the ways in which "the racial carceral power of the slave relation would survive the (non)abolition of the plantation chattel regime" ("Developments" 1581-1582).

> transformed (rather than reformed or 'fixed') for the sake of particular peoples' existence and survival as such. ("Developments" 1578)

As such, Rodríguez demands that abolitionists engage in a project that is both radically political and imaginative. In his foreword to the April 2019 issue of *Harvard Law Review* on Prison Abolition, Rodríguez asks the following questions of possibility for abolition and abolitionists: "What concepts, terms, and languages are introduced by such abolitionist work, and how do they challenge, redefine, or productively replace an existing reformist lexicon (for example, 'police brutality')? How does such abolitionist praxis produce useful counternarratives of the historical present tense?" (1603). In this analysis, he attributes reformism to a neoliberal narrative of progressivist change that aims to maintain institutions of dominance overall but make them seemingly more tolerable, a project that Rose Braz has mocked as "kinder, gentler…cages" (87). He gives as a counter-example the work of the abolitionist group We Charge Genocide, noting that it generates "a site of creative, collective narrative genius that disrupts and transforms liberal commonsense languages while contributing to a long-term abolitionist praxis that recognizes the long historical present tense of ordinary peoples' normalized encounters with state-facilitated and state-condoned social evisceration" (1606).

What I am pointing to here is a discourse on narrative opening-up within abolitionist theory and praxis that ought to be explored further. The project of abolition is engaging in a project of language, counter-narrative, and radical imagination that intends to displace, uproot, or undermine a heretofore white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, and colonial dominant narrative. The notion that matrices of domination are bound up in narratives, language, and logics is hardly new; however, pairing Rodríguez's structural analysis of carceral power with readings of power in language and narrative broadens our understanding of how literature can maintain dominant

discourse or disrupt it. I argue that combining the abolitionist practice of viewing violence/harm within a broad conceptual framework over time paired with an attention to how Gayl Jones linguistically and narratologically depicts intergenerational gendered racial harm provides a new reading of the novel that 1) more accurately situates post-emancipation gendered racial intimate violence within the context of white supremacist heteropatriarchy and 2) reframes our understanding of the novel from Ursa's individual trauma and familial history to a broadened community discourse on Black women's post-emancipation experiences.

Anticarceral Feminism

Anticarceral feminism fits into this abolitionist linguistic and narrative critique because it provides a historical record of Black women's responses to gendered racial harm contemporaneous with Gayl Jones's literary productivity in the 1970s.[5] The decade in which Jones published her first two novels, *Corregidora* (1975) and *Eva's* Man (1976), was filled with national political attention to Black women's fight against police and sexual predation. In response to these events, several coalitions of Black feminists emerged to theorize and resist the sexist, racist, and heteropatriarchal systems that harmed Black women's bodies and lives. This chapter—like the subsequent chapters in this manuscript—uses the critical perspectives of anticarceral feminism to read literature where the prison is not always explicitly present. Put simply, anticarceral feminism seeks out community-based responses to or solutions for violence against women that do not ultimately expand elements of the carceral state: racialized criminalization, police or judicial interference, incarceration, etc. It rejects the idea that the only

[5] Throughout the early part of the twenty-first century, the abolitionist movement and the feminist anti-violence movement were often seen at odds with one another. See Rodríguez, "Locked Up, Beat Down: The Anti-Prison Movement Leaves Out Women, While the Anti-Violence Movement Criminalizes Men" (*Colorlines* 2001). However, the development of "anticarceral feminism" as a category for a split in the anti-violence movement bridges this gap by showing how many feminists were creatively generating community-based solutions to gender violence that did not give more power to state intervention: police, courts, jails, or prisons.

way to reduce gender violence is to "get tough" on it through police action. In her historical account of feminist coalitions against the carceral state, Emily Thuma defines anticarceral feminism and anticarceral feminists as such:

> Anticarceral feminist politics grew in the cracks of prison walls and at the interfaces between numerous social movements, including those for racial and economic justice, prisoners' and psychiatric patients' rights, and gender and sexual liberation. Through the processes of building coalitions that transected these social justice struggles, [anticarceral feminist activists of the 1970s and 1980s] produced a broad and layered understanding of "violence against women" that encompassed the structural violence of social inequalities, the violence of state institutions and agents, and interpersonal forms of violence, including rape, battering, and sexual coercion. (2)

A few key elements stand out in Thuma's definition: first, that even if anticarceral feminism originated within carceral spaces often explicitly attending to state violence, its politics encompass many forms of social restrictions and confinement that range from interpersonal relations to state relations. Second, spatially, the prison and psychiatric facility are important for deconstructing the most explicit forms of confinement, but anticarceral feminism understands that violence against women at state and interpersonal levels exists within both social and state spaces, spanning from the home to the prison. Third, the range of violence against women from interpersonal relations to state relations is not unrelated; rather, anticarceral feminism theorizes how racialized gendered violence and subjugation operate along a spectrum of enforcers. The ways in which anticarceral feminist coalitions outline the nature, spaces, and networks of violence are central for understanding how intergenerational trauma operates across intersections

of identity, and, most importantly, maintains that resisting this violence should not entail giving more punitive power to the state.

Thuma locates the beginnings of formal coalitional models of anticarceral feminisms in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but its first major eruption on the national stage occurred in 1974 with the organizing and advocating around the Joan Little case. Precursors to this case are Rosa Parks's legal advocacy for Recy Taylor, an African American woman from Alabama who was kidnapped and gang raped while she was walking home from church in 1944, as well as the civil rights oratory legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer, whose testimony of the sexual abuse and brutality she experienced from Mississippi state officials was aired on national television at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Joan Little's case brought similar questions of bodily autonomy and a right to self-defense for Black women to a national debate.

As Thuma argues, "antiviolence initiatives that focused on the lives of marginalized women were generative of an interwoven analysis of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism that pointed to the carceral state as a source of further harm rather than safety and redress" (4). In this case, women gathering around the plight of Joan Little and others in the 1970s produced women-led coalitions theorizing violence both inside and outside the carceral spaces of the prison and mental institution. Joan Little's case brought to the national stage questions of Black women's self-defense against state sexual violence and considered the intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, and criminalization that presumed Little guilty of murder rather than rightfully carrying out self-defense. According to Little, Clarence Alligood, a sixty-two-year-old white jailor, entered her cell at Beaufort County Jail in August 1974 and demanded she engage in sexual relations with him. In self-defense, Little stabbed Alligood with an ice pick and escaped the facility, leaving his dead body in the cell, exposed from the waist

down (McGuire 246-7). The issues spotlighted in Little's case sparked conversations considering the rights of incarcerated women, the rights of Black women to defend their bodies against white sexual predation, and the negative effects of the 1972 Equal Employment Opportunity Act/Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act opened the door for women to work inside men's penal facilities, but it problematically also allowed for men to work in positions of power over incarcerated women, making them particularly vulnerable to state harm.

The national coverage of the Little case also called for the critique of the way Black women were criminalized and portrayed by the media. Criminalized Black women faced physical and sexual harm from the state while incarcerated, and also at the hands of the media who framed them as deviants, seductresses, or deserving of harm. As Andrea J. Ritchie points out, support of Joan Little entailed combatting stereotyped language and images about Black women:

> Predictably, Joan's prosecution focused on old familiar tropes, framing her alternately as "a prostitute," "a madam," diseased, and lesbian, and always as a conniving seductress who had lured Alligood into her cell to kill him and escape, rather than recognizing him as a sexual predator supported by the full weight of white supremacist patriarchy and unfettered access to Black women's bodies. (*Invisible No More* 212)

The ways in which the prosecution relied on stereotypes to portray Little as guilty met with fierce resistance from coalitions of feminist, Black feminist, and African American and Black Power organizations. As historian Danielle L. McGuire notes, "Movement magazines and newsletters, like the feminist periodical *Off Our Backs*, helped spread Little's story through feminist circles before the mainstream media picked it up. Angela Davis's article in *Ms.* Magazine brought national attention to the trial and introduced thousands of activists and

institutions across the nation not only to Joan Little's plight but to Black women's long battle against sexual violence" (260-261).

The year that Jones's novel *Corregidora* was released was the same year that Little's trial began. The language of a Black woman's right to defend herself—to assert sexual and bodily autonomy and preservation against a white male state official's enforcement of sexualized state violence—exposed the still-deeply set racist beliefs and practices of gendered racial terror in the United States, not only on the level of Alligood's abuse of power, but also in the prosecution's reliance on the ready-made grammars of the Jezebel stereotype alongside Black criminality.

What is fascinating about Jones's novel is that, like the organizations that published and spoke out for the Little defense fund, she was theorizing a form of anticarceral feminism—but in the genre of fiction. *Corregidora* looks at generations of sexual violence against Black women and not only posits how violence gets recodified through new systems of power, but also how language operates within these systems to criminalize, control, and confine women. *Corregidora*, like the anticarceral feminists of the 1970s and 1980s, insists that gender and racial violence cannot be divorced from one another; instead they work concurrently within a system of social control. To be clear, Gayl Jones has never identified as an anticarceral feminist, nor is there record of her participation in anticarceral feminist organizing; however, her early novels are certainly preoccupied with the spectrum of violence against Black women. They theorize Black women's confinement from slavery to the mid-twentieth century, from the streets of Kentucky to the psychiatric facility (*Eva's Man*). Reading *Corregidora* in this way urges readers to link contemporary iterations of violence against Black women and women of color to slavery, settler colonialism, and the varying modes of exploitations that come with those traditions. Moreover, reading Jones's work through an anticarceral feminist lens places Black women at the

center of critique of the systems that perpetuate harm, revealing how their voices create a network of community resistance against the dominant discourse.

New Neo-Slave Narratives and Neo-Abolitionist Novels

In literary studies, African American confinement literature examines the relationships between state violence/carceral power and narrative. Taking a cue from Tara T. Green's call to "open new avenues of inquiry into confinement literature," recent scholarship has developed critical explorations of African American confinement literature by linking the fields of African American literary theory and critical prison studies. Patrick Elliot Alexander contributes to studies of African American confinement literature in *From Slave Ship to Supermax* (2018) by proposing ways for examining a "heretofore untheorized Black carceral aesthetic" (5). His work shows how novelists who have not experienced incarceration themselves write fictional accounts that expose and oppose the development of state-sanctioned gendered racial violence and sexual harm within carceral spaces, and he links this violence and harm to social control practices that organized the Transatlantic Slave Trade and plantation slavery (5). In examining fiction by African American writers, Alexander proposes a new form of the neo-slave novel that attends to the racial-historical continuities in logics of discipline structuring life from slavery to the contemporary U.S. prison regime:

> Neo-abolitionist novels are prisoner-abuse narratives in extended fictional form. They are Black fiction's centuries-spanning, first-person testimonial accounts of institutionalized suffering. They are stories of Black repression and Black resistance. They are narratives that profoundly link racialized state violence in the contemporary prison with slaveholding U.S. society's disciplinary use of terror on Black captive bodies during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery…[N]eo-abolitionist novels also illuminate the

> suppressed political-intellectual thought, unforeseen resistance, and literary genius of abuse-surviving men and women behind bars who literarily strive, often clandestinely, to end mass incarceration as the reflexive mode of response to the unresolved social problems that mass-produce prisons and prisoners. (26-27)

Here, Alexander points to a specific late-twentieth-century iteration of the neo-slave novel—a fictional work written in post-emancipation U.S. culture about slavery or its afterlives—that explicitly links Black incarceration/captivity to the organizing logics of the slave ship and slave plantation.[6] This "neo-abolitionist" or "new neo-slave" narrative features the use of this lineage of Black captivity to critique the development of state-sanctioned gendered racial violence, imprisonment, and harm throughout the twentieth century as expressed through fiction and in conversation with testimonies by actual imprisoned radical intellectuals who were or are critiquing the state in similar ways. Moreover, Alexander introduces "survival testimony" as one method for reading resistance in the neo-abolitionist novel. Survival testimony is the first-person narrative radical documentation and resistance to the social control models of gendered racial harm (88). It provides a useful tool for reading the linguistic modes through which Black women characters create community through an expression of harm, voice reclamation, and survival in spite of abuse, a point I will apply to *Corregidora* later in this chapter.

In the ensuing sections of this chapter, I argue that *Corregidora* can be read as a new neo-slave narrative using a combination of 1) contemporary abolitionist practices of thinking about violence/harm structurally and narratologically, and 2) anticarceral feminism's broadened discourse on the relationships between interpersonal and state harm that is always gendered and

[6] Alexander's description of the relationship between his use of the terms new neo-slave novel and neo-abolitionist novel is as follows: "because neo-abolitionist novels implicitly (and, at times, explicitly) push for the abolition of slavery's vestiges in the criminal justice system, they are the new neo-slave novels" (27).

racialized. While Alexander's definition primarily attends to novels that explicitly concern the prison or spatially designated sites of captivity (e.g. 124 Bluestone Road in *Beloved*), *Corregidora* provides the opportunity to read carceral power operating within the same framework but in sites not always explicitly carceral.[7] Through his examinations of the Black women in *Beloved* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Alexander points to how Black women's and men's writing can depict a carcerality beyond the prison space by "expos[ing] how unchecked sexual violence functions as a tool by which white men maintain racial hierarchy and patriarchal dominance during the Middle Passage and slavery and after its ostensible abolishment" (67). *Corregidora* not only provides a survival testimony through Ursa's blues, which implicitly critiques misogyny, but its blues narrative style doubly disrupts the linear, spatial and temporal organizing logic that aligns with progressivist and reformist understandings of social, political, or institutional change. The novel offers a first-person testimony of transgenerational gendered racial violence, and comments on a particular category of Black women's confinement and harm that is not always explicitly state-sanctioned. To this end, my readings of *Corregidora* add another element to survival testimony in that Ursa's blues 1) produce a two-fold parallel structural critique of narrative and violence, and 2) reveal the networked dynamics of gendered racial harm to ultimately argue that *Corregidora* is not just about Ursa, but about all of the women included in the novel. Gayl Jones depicts the carceral organizing logics at work in a post-

[7] To be clear, Alexander's analysis does not *only* attend to moments in fiction with explicitly carceral settings. Within his larger analysis of James Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*, Alexander offers a reading of Tish's run-ins with a sexually predatory white police officer whose surveillance of her in public (as opposed to a distinctly carceral space) is linked to the historical racialized and sexually terrorizing historical practices of white overseers who had unfettered access to Black enslaved women's bodies (53-56). In his readings of *Beloved*, Alexander claims that "by foregrounding the voices and critical understandings of her enslaved and formerly enslaved Black female characters through their first-person accounts of unchecked sexual violence, [Toni Morrison] undermines a long history of underrepresentation and misrepresentation of sexualized state violence, a history that includes our contemporary epoch" (105). Certainly Morrison's text as well as many other (new) neo-slave narratives written by Black women document the continuities of unchecked physical and sexual violence from the slave ship to the contemporary criminal justice system or policed public space.

emancipation moment through her attention to language and narrative structure in ways that echo the imaginative and disruptive intentions of the abolitionist project. As I will explore in the following sections, Ursa is often trapped by language and narrative structures that no longer fit her current situation. As Jones stated in an interview with Charles H. Rowell, "History affects Ursa's personality—the history of the women before her—their conflicts, frustrations, etc. She wants to make sense of that history in terms of her own life. She doesn't want to be '*bound*' by that history" (45, italics mine). She struggles to find a "new world song," a new structure or lexicon for meeting the demands of a post-emancipation world that is deeply connected to her family's traumas, yet also separate from it.

Carceral Relations/Language/The Hold

> "The *hold* is the slave ship hold; is the hold of the so-called migrant ship; is the prison; is the womb that produces blackness" (Sharpe 27)

Anticarceral feminism and abolition encourage a radical departure from thinking about punishment as operating within a singular institution. Rather, they contend that institutions of domination—slavery, Jim Crow apartheid, incarceration, etc.—emerge from the centuries-spanning nation-building project to maintain gendered, racial, and class difference and hierarchy. Radically, they also point to the fact that the maintenance of this hierarchy involves networks of harm that are not as easily visible as institutions of domination, but likewise work toward maintaining difference. These networks of harm include modes of state and state-complicit surveillance and violence as well as legislation to maintain imperial-colonial borders and race, class, and gender difference. With particular attention to *Corregidora* as it relates to anticarceral feminism and abolition, I focus on networks of gendered racial harm to illustrate how intimate

violence, reproductive control, and misogyny operate concurrently with more explicit forms of institutional harm in order to maintain social, political, and economic hierarchies.

Corregidora's layering of temporalities, locales, and voices clarifies this relationship between institutions and iterations of harm, what I call in this section "carceral relations." The novel also importantly links language, space, and time to reveal how post-emancipation discourses on Black women's lives and bodies—recall the easily accessible grammars used to criminalize Joan Little as prostitute or madam—operate ontologically to perpetuate gendered and raced categories of difference. In this section, I examine how Jones's novel links institutions and iterations of harm by tracing the logics of carcerality through language. My approach is two-pronged: (1) to explain how *Corregidora* is an exposition of networked relations/methodologies of harm that are not always explicitly carceral in the spatial sense, but nonetheless rooted in Black captivity, and (2) to describe how Jones's language and narrative structure both reveals and resists these logics of harm through form. In this section, I examine how language and anticarceral feminism operate to expose gendered racial harm, whereas in the following section I will show how the novel partakes in resisting these structures.

Central to my approach is a relational model of carcerality that takes into account the ways in which confinement reaches individuals beyond the spatial limits of the prison. To clarify this premise, I offer an examination of "relation" on several levels. I examine how relation, as in familial and interpersonal relationships, circulates trauma and pain, but also creates bonds for testimony and resistance. As I formulate in this section, communal bonds or connections (relations) also have linguistic, social, and legal implications that organize the logic of the plantation hierarchy and its post-emancipation afterlives. One such logic that extends beyond the seemingly closed unit of the plantation in a post-emancipation moment is the distinction between

filiation and property; namely, the way in which Simon Corregidora as slave master is legally and linguistically bound to Gram as slave, but also as his daughter by blood. Ursa carries Corregidora's name, and her mother's, grandmother's, and great grandmother's stories of trauma. She also experiences post-emancipation gendered harm that is certainly linked to the plantation slavery hierarchy. What is perhaps less apparent are the ways in which the physical, emotional, and reproductive harm that Ursa and her mother experience in a post-emancipation U.S. context is also linked to the organizing logic of the slave plantation captivity, which I seek to make clear through a relational understanding of carcerality.

An entry into thinking through carceral relations in *Corregidora* is to start at the site of captivity—Great Gram and Gram's experiences of rape and trauma on Corregidora's plantation in Brazil—and expand outward to its post-emancipation afterlives in Cincinnati and Kentucky with Mama and Ursa. Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies* provides a framework for my conceptual work, in this regard. Sharpe argues that the afterlife of slavery materializes in normalized violences that are often unacknowledged as violence. They are a "set of known and unknown performances and inhabited horrors, desires and positions produced, reproduced, circulated, and transmitted, that are breathed in like air" (3) which "account for the long psychic and material reach" of the explicit and subtle violence and trauma (often sexualized) of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery (9). With this aim in mind, Sharpe introduces what she calls the "Corregidora Complex[,] an Oedipus Complex for the New World" (29) that considers the fundamental inseparability of kinship and property relations within the patriarchal plantation order that reads amalgamation/miscegenation and incest as the same taboo (28). The patriarchal institution of plantation slavery provided the conceptual and legal necessity to be able to separate the white male patriarch's offspring resulting from his unchecked sexual access to enslaved

women and his white offspring, the former receiving the legal status of *property* and the latter *kin* (29). Sharpe argues that the afterlife of slavery in the New World is likewise marked by the vestiges of these semantic, legal understandings, which affect Ursa, her mother, and grandmother, who are all born in a post-emancipation era, yet experience shifting sexual violences that echo from the plantation model.

Within this framework, *Corregidora* and the biological imperative to "make generations" becomes enmeshed in a matrix of race, property, bloodline, and memory to the point where the assertion that "Procreation…could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking" (22) carries significance in trying to understand the recodification of "making generations" in a post-emancipation moment. This assertion occurs after Ursa returns from the hospital, moves in with Tadpole, and he asks her what she wants, to which she responds "What all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations" (22). The verbal association of a post-emancipation procreation imperative with the organizing logic of chattel slavery exposes a conundrum that the novel attempts to work through: the language through which Ursa and other characters attempt to process trauma always circulates back to logics of sexual, racial, and gendered property relations.

Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* connects these biologics not only to the social and legal relations of the plantation patriarch to his human property and offspring, but also to the spatial and linguistic implications of this relationship. Glissant defines the Plantation as a closed system, in which the (white) patriarch plays both father of his white children and proprietor of his Black children/property. This relation of blood that makes one kin and the other property is grounded in that spatially bounded system. What Glissant, Sharpe and many other scholars point out, however, is that these relations that sprout from this closed system transmute after emancipation,

the seeming legal end to the closed plantation autarky as such. Further, Glissant contends that this closed system comes from the same impulse that structures Western thought and language, characterized by "root" identity as opposed to relational identity. Root identity, in its most simplified form, is grounded in understanding identity and the world as *acquirable*; the conception of "territory"—that land can be conquered, bounded, and rooted in a mythology privileging a genealogical (filiation through blood) connection to a founding narrative—is not an a priori or ontological given, but rather a constructed system perpetuated through the domination of Western thought via colonial imperialism. Under this system, the privileging of filiation (blood relations) is connected to the impulse toward "discovery" and "conquest," a world that is "knowable" in terms of the French/Latin (*comprendre/comprehendere*) meaning "to seize" or "take" (Translator note xiv). In introducing relational identity—an alternative to root identity that is coexistent and responsive to root identity rather than in binary opposition to it—one not only comes to see the ways in which root identity has materialized in Western, colonial, and postcolonial spaces, but also how its shaping force in a post-emancipation moment can be disturbed through the tenets of relationality: circularity, an attentiveness to cultural contact, an errantry (purposeful wandering) of land (*not* territory) (Glissant 143-144). To be attentive to the relationships between knowledge, language, and conquest as they were disseminated in colonial imperialism, we can then connect the closed space of the plantation to the borders of knowledge and language that legally and socially define and demarcate the statuses of freedom and enslavement.

Corregidora's explanation of the Melrose woman's neglect alongside the ready-made stereotypes that presupposed Joan Little's criminality certainly fall within the "grammars"—organizing logics—outlined by Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An

American Grammar Book." Spillers announces that Black women's identities are determined through stereotyped conceptions, "overdetermined nominative properties" that "demonstrate a sort of telegraphic coding…markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (203). Published before Glissant's *Poetics of Relation,* Spillers exposes these terms—Jezebel, Sapphire, Mammy, and others—for what they are, an organizing logic standing in for or reinscribing the captive body in a post-emancipation era. To be placed in "the nigger *woman* file" is a gesture affirming civic nonpersonhood—similarly reinforcing the civic and social death that marked people who were enslaved.[8] For Spillers these grammars are boundaries, they are *rooted* in a conceptual system connected to a spatial locale [the Plantation] that does not only *conceptually* confine Black women, but leads to very real and oppressive systems of violence.[9] Glissant later develops a version of Spillers's assessment into what he calls the linguistic and colonial operative power of "root" identity. Through the remainder of this chapter, I argue that Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* operates to deconstruct a sort of root identity through its narrative by displaying the temporal and spatial continuities between the plantation and post-emancipation U.S. culture; exposing the relationship of language, harm, and the (post)plantation; and creating a communal anticarceral protofeminist testimony via the blues.

[8] In Patterson's conception of social death as it pertains to slavery, the master-slave relationship is historically defined as a "conditional commutation" of a death sentence, reserved for prisoners of war, criminals, and social outsiders (5). Patterson notes, "[t]he execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer.… Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson" (5). I provide a thorough reading of Patterson's concept as applied to literature in chapter two.

[9] In Sharpe's Acknowledgments to *Monstrous Intimacies*, I think she iterates it best by thanking "Hortense Spillers and Dionne Brand for each, in different ways, giving me a 'grammar' and a 'map'" (xi). Grammars and maps under the framework that Glissant puts forth are entirely rooted in the same system. The ways in which the plantation space and system spatially and logically operated are enmeshed in the social and linguistic parameters of society so that even after the spatial/legal institution of the plantation is done away with, the social, economic, and political aspects remain.

To consider *Corregidora* within the subfield of African American confinement literature, as is the intention of this chapter, I am arguing for an expansion of conceptual frameworks for the operation of confinement in the literary imagination. As a neo-slave narrative, Jones's novel certainly incorporates the oral histories of Gram and Great-Gram, who were enslaved in Brazil on Corregidora's plantation. This literal, legal, and spatial confinement placed alongside Ursa's contemporary struggles with intimate violence, the loss of a pregnancy, and sterilization, I suggest, urges for a nuanced reconceptualization of contemporary confinement in the twentieth century, one that considers the social, legal, and economic limitations that Black women face in Jones's narrative. For many contemporary African American literary critics, this broadened understanding of confinement begins with reconceptualizing "the hold." As Sharpe elucidates in the epigraph of this section, the hold manifests confinement spatially—the slave ship, the migrant ship, the prison—but her last example of "the womb that produces blackness" presses for thinking about the hold in new ways. How is the womb like the hold of a slave ship? How is Black motherhood likewise a designation of captivity? What are the social, legal, and linguistic enclosures at work? It is with these questions that I turn to thinking about mobility and confinement in both their physical and social senses.

In this section, I argue that the hold, the plantation, and the prison cell provide the physical site in the literary imagination through which other subsequent, less tangible forms of confinement become legible.[10] The passed-down memories of the Corregidora plantation create a

[10] Considering the hold in terms of mobility assists in conceptualizing a broader understanding of gendered racial harm. *In Turning South* Again, Houston A. Baker Jr. has called this concept a "tight place," concluding that modernism—based on mobility—had not yet reached African Americans until moments of revolutionary upheaval such as the civil rights and Black Power movements because of the legal, social, political, economic, and disciplinary restraints they faced. The latter half of his work calls these restraints a "tight place": "The psycho-social figurations of the sexually forbidden, whether the white (maiden?) woman in southern planter class economies of honor and desire, or, the Black male body in disciplined or incarcerated 'posture of appeal' before a strong white arm's lordship and allure. In sum, the always ambivalent cultural compromises of occupancy and vacancy, differentially effected by contexts of situations: that is, Who moves? Who doesn't?" (69).

framework for Ursa to think through her own experiences that are less clearly tied to an institution of captivity or confinement. It allows her in the last scene of the novel to posit, "[it] was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora—like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other" (184). These relational understandings of gendered violence rooted in a system of Black captivity, exploitation, and premature death reveal confinement operating beyond explicit spaces of captivity.

Considering the hold in terms of mobility assists in conceptualizing a broader understanding of gendered racial harm. *Corregidora* meaningfully traverses geographies and time—pre- and post-emancipation Brazil, post-emancipation Cincinnati, and post-emancipation Kentucky—pointing to the fact that while the Corregidora women's gendered racial traumas are not the same, their effects and connections to the past echo across generations exposing how carceral logic recodifies. This "hold" is grounded in the ever-continuing presence of anti-black violence in the United States. For Sharpe, the hold is not relegated to a specific time and place; rather, she characterizes "the wake"—all the iterations of the afterlife of slavery—as the ways in which "the semiotics of the slave ship continue" (21). Sharpe reads the hold as a state to be imaginatively avoided (recall Rodríguez's call for imagination in abolition). The difficulty is that the hold is an integral part of what she calls the weather or a climate of antiblackness:

> But slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness. (106)

What is particularly helpful in Sharpe's theorization of the hold is that it divorces Black captivity from the spatial understandings of confinement. The hold—although rooted in the slave ship hold—moves beyond physical confinement and rather reconsiders how antiblackness substantiates in networks of control including physical captivity, but also incorporating language, power, and broader understandings of (economic, social, sexual, expressive) mobility. To think of the hold anew means reconsidering how neo-slavery and neo-slave narratives operate in relation to the past and present.

In *Corregidora*, Ursa also experiences the hold through the re- and de-valuing of her body. Mutt and Tadpole in many ways reduce her body to sexual property while the women in her family see her potential to make generations as an imperative to carry on the evidence of her family's experience in sexual slavery. While coming to terms with the loss of her pregnancy and the emergency hysterectomy resulting from Mutt's violence, Tadpole, Ursa's next lover, engages in language reminiscent of old man Corregidora's treatment of her great grandmother and grandmother: "When we were together, he said, 'I want to help you, Ursa. I want to help you as much as I can … Let me get up in your pussy…Let me get up in your pussy, baby…Damn, you still got a hole, ain't you? As long as a woman got a hole, she can fuck" (82). On this same page where Tadpole has sex with Ursa, he not only views her as property, but importantly also views her sexual performance as "work." The doubled meaning of "work" in referring to sexual labor and labor discourse more broadly reframes the demands made on Ursa into a discourse of sex work, work that her maternal ancestors were forced into in Brazil's sexual slavery under Corregidora. The devaluing of Ursa's body into a "hole" contrasts with the body reduced to monetary values as with Mutt's earlier nickname "little gold piece" for her genitalia, or "Dorita," the nickname given to Great Gram by Corregidora (61, 10). Ursa's sex post-hysterectomy is

devalued in terms of her generational imperatives to carry on the tradition and documentation of trauma through childbirth, and her body is sexually relegated to the territory of "work." The language of labor continues through their sexual encounter. Tadpole demands Ursa "to work" to which she struggles and finally admits "I can't, I can't" (83). Ursa seems caught between two related conceptual frameworks: one being how the men (and some women) in her life objectify her body as sexual property and labor and the other being the imperative to make generations to preserve the evidence, even though—to repeat the phrase that comes to Ursa's mind—it "could also be a slave-breeder's way of thinking" (22). In this regard, the hold in *Corregidora* operates less on spatial terms and more on social or relational ones, the practices of captivity that occurred on the plantation transmute in post-emancipation spaces and times.

Critical prison studies scholarship offers new ways for thinking about the spatial relations of confinement. Previously, the physiospatial tracing of the slave ship hold to the prison cell has often been oversimplified because it is easily visualized and there are concrete parameters of confinement. However, using the scholarship of Deborah Gray White, Patrick Elliot Alexander points to how Black women complicate this relationship, noting that as enslaved women were often not held within the cargo hold as men were, but were often unshackled and kept on the quarter deck, their confinement was carried out through gendered subjection—their "freedom of movement" undoubtedly meant they were "easily accessible to the criminal whims and sexual desires of the [white] seamen" (White as quoted in Alexander 92). These alternative parameters of confinement also open to alternative modes of resistance, which Alexander theorizes as the radical, collective narration of trauma through testimony, a point I take up in detail in the following section. In this sense, neo-slave narratives that do not explicitly consider the prison

still consider Black captivity, subjection, and gendered racial terror that exist in relation to the prison itself but not always sited within it.

In a new world context, Ursa's procreative imperative creates a narrative problem that is also wrapped up in signification. Simon Corregidora did not sexually violate nor father Ursa, but she carries his name as part of the mission given to her by her foremothers to reclaim her family's history. Ursa's desire to want "what all us Corregidora women…have been taught to want" is problematic for many reasons. One such reason is that her desire does not fit her physical circumstances post-intimate violence. However, Ursa's constant shifting to different circumstances of not having a choice echoes the long social and linguistic conceptualization of Black women's bodies in the United States. Dorothy Roberts's *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* explains the long history of "how the denial of Black reproductive autonomy serves the interests of white supremacy" (5). She describes how Black women's forced reproduction during chattel slavery to serve the economic and labor goals of white slave owners was driven by the same impulses to slow or deny Black women's reproductive autonomy in post-emancipation America through methods such as forced sterilization, punitive birth control measures, and reduced state-assistance for struggling mothers. Roberts's revision of the development of the maternal-fetal conflict—a concept often understood as the backlash to the 1960s/1970s women's movement—to begin during slavery is crucial for understanding slavery's aftermaths at work. The maternal-fetal conflict is contemporarily understood as the conceptual separation of mother and fetus, often used in pro-life legislation to delineate the mother and fetus as separate entities and therefore capable of placing legal culpability on the mother for neglecting or terminating the fetus. While most situate this conflict to have arisen in the wake of *Roe v. Wade* and the women's movement, Roberts suggests that the

clearest examples of maternal-fetal conflict occurred during slavery when slaveholders would whip pregnant enslaved women but protect the fetus by digging a hole into which the woman could place her belly to protect it from the lash. That way, the slave economy could continue to benefit from biological reproduction during chattel slavery while enacting the racial terror and brutalization that kept the labor force in subjection (41). This maternal-fetal separation was crucial for antebellum U.S. society to deem Black children as labor property rather than belonging to the mother, making it legally and economically possible to separate families.

Reproductive autonomy is a central concern for *Corregidora*. As Roberts suggests, "domination of reproduction was the most effective means of subjugating enslaved women, of denying them the power to govern their own bodies and to determine the course of their own destiny" (55). Simon Corregidora certainly exercised his power to exploit Great-Gram and Gram sexually and reproductively. Their post-emancipation response to this denial of autonomy was to create a counternarrative through blood relations, to conceive and raise women who would know the truth of what happened. However, in a post-emancipation context for the Corregidora women, liberty as equated with bodily and reproductive autonomy is met with the unattributed statement that interjects in Ursa's thoughts that a procreative imperative is logically linked to the procreative pressure placed on enslaved women to replenish a labor force serving white supremacist economic interests. Within the larger contexts of ownership and bodily and reproductive autonomy, both Ursa and her mother Irene attempt to make the procreative imperative fit in a post-emancipation moment. For Irene, this means getting pregnant with Martin, a man who is rarely referred to as Ursa's father, whose last name is not given to Ursa, and who leaves after feeling that Irene had only used him to fulfil her imperative to make generations. Irene's retelling of Ursa's conception and its aftermath reveals the slippery

discourse on the possibility of reproductive autonomy for the Corregidora women in a post-emancipation moment. She tells Ursa that her relationship with Martin was not exactly a choice because "… something had got into me. Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man… It was like my whole body knew it wanted you, and knew it would have you, and knew you'd be a girl" (114). Irene repeats throughout her story that she didn't want a man, but her body had other motives. She also attributes her relations with Martin as directly relating to Corregidora: "Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened that part of my life never would have happened" (111). Irene's separation of mind and body as well as her locating the need to procreate with Corregidora reveals the tangled relationship between slavery, its aftermaths, and how the maternal-fetal conflict transmutes after Simon Corregidora's death and the women's migration to the U.S. Irene's retelling depicts her struggles through a discourse of doubling that regardless of time and place, Irene does not feel she has autonomy over her womb – she separates her mind and her body as if she wanted one thing, but her womb wanted another, namely, to carry on the tradition of her family's history.

This narrative imperative still exists with Ursa in the next generation, but after she discovers she can no longer bear children, her relationship to her body and the family history shifts. On the one hand, she is trapped within a narrative imperative to procreate that is simultaneously an echo of the system of chattel slavery and result of the project to uproot the system's remnants by perpetuating the truth. On the other hand, Ursa's post-emergency hysterectomy forces her to re-narrativize her life outside of this imperative. In a sense, her sterilization has broken a cycle. But in another sense, it also operates as a recodification of the sexualization, commodification, and reduction of Black women's bodies.

Corregidora retheorizes the limits of Black women's captivity by expanding the scale of sexual violence from Corregidora's plantation in Brazil to contemporary intimate violence occurring in the Kentucky sphere. The work of anticarceral feminism within critical prison studies provides the tools for conceptualizing carcerality beyond the clear symbols of the slave ship, the plantation, the jail cell, and the run-in with state officials. In *Corregidora*, the post-emancipation iterations of the hold are less visibly carceral. Harm occurs in the public sphere on the street when Mutt pushes Ursa outside the night club as well as in seemingly intimate or "safe" spaces like the home or a friend's home. Those who harm Ursa are also Black men, who, as Joanne Lipson Freed importantly notes, also experience post-emancipation trauma that often appears through their treatment of women, namely Ursa, as property.[11] Harm also registers through police neglect of Black women who are harmed. *Corregidora*, in this sense, broadens conceptions of gendered racial violence to include violence that results from those also harmed by white supremacy, partner violence, sexual—including same-sex—violence as seen with Cat and Jeffy's relationship, and neglect. These modes of harm are perhaps less legible as tools that reinforce white supremacist heteropatriarchal hierarchies, but they nonetheless operate in this way.

To imagine carceral power operating through sexual or partner violence expands our understandings of confinement and social control, allowing room to read power functioning through multiple modes including the social, economic, and relational. Jones's novel insists on

[11] In Joanne Lipson Freed's "Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*," she argues that "Unlike Ursa Corregidora and the other women in her family, who actively embrace the task of memorializing their sexual exploitation through the traumatic narratives they pass down, men like Tad and Mutt reject the importance of the past and attempt to distinguish themselves from male relatives who lived through slavery. Instead, by producing narratives that depict themselves and their forefathers as the owners of material and sexual property, the men in Jones's novel attempt to counteract slavery's logic of commodification. This discourse of ownership, which fills the silence left by the men's unspoken stories of sexual victimization, is their traumatic legacy, and as such it is intimately interrelated with the women's legacy of sexualized commodification" (411).

looking at social relations across time, from intergenerational traumas occurring on the Brazil plantation, to the degradation and violence that Ursa's mother experiences from her father, to her current experiences of partner violence. While none of these examples seem immediately related to the easily imaginable sites of captivity central to progressive understandings of "mass incarceration," each is grounded within systems of heteropatriarchal racist social control. The groundbreaking work of prison abolitionists Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore provides a critical rereading of spaces that are not explicitly involved in incarceration but are carceral nonetheless. Jones's attention to the excesses of slavery that continue to thrive in post-emancipation spaces urges us to focus on the methodologies by which these excesses are *produced* and reproduced.

Every Woman in *Corregidora* is a Blues Woman: (New) Neo-Slave Narrative, Anticarceral Feminist Coalition, and the Blues

As the previous section concerns the ways in which Jones reveals pre- and post-emancipation networks of harm operating through language, this final section takes a similar understanding of the relationship between language/logics/narratives and power, but applies it to how the women in *Corregidora* resist these networks of harm. The structures of the neo-slave novel as well as its recent outgrowth, the new neo-slave narrative, offer ways for understanding the temporal, spatial, and linguistic iterations of harm in *Corregidora* as well as the ways the women in the novel push back against this harm. Critics who have outlined the relationships between trauma and temporality in the neo-slave novel have created a fascinating foundation on which anticarceral and neo-abolitionist perspectives can extend toward a broader, networked, and intergenerational understanding of gendered racial harm.

This chapter examines how *Corregidora* highlights the temporal, spatial, and experiential continuities of Black captivity rooted in slavery throughout the twentieth century. Given this thematic and narrative focus, many scholars have read the novel as belonging to the category of neo-slave narrative. Coined by Bernard Bell and developed by Ashraf H.A. Rushdy in the 1980s and 1990s, the neo-slave narrative as a genre and the scholarship that has followed works through the utility of bi-temporal models of understanding a post-emancipation present that is inextricably bound to or configured from the past. However, critical prison studies scholarship and its recent interdisciplinary pairing with African American literary studies as evidenced in Alexander's work can provide an opportunity to reread modalities of Black confinement and captivity. I posit that neo-abolitionist lenses—with their particular focus on processes that lead to confinement—allow us to revise our understandings of how neo-slave novels work in their spatiotemporal figurations of confinement to reveal captivity operating outside of a distinctively prison space. To this end, *Corregidora* loosely fits within the recent categorization of "new neo-slave novel" that Alexander puts forth in *From Slave Ship to Supermax*. To revise the way we look at space and time ultimately revises the way in which we understand temporal and spatial depictions in neo-slave novels that are seemingly attending to the past/present binary model. Abolitionist discourse troubles this model—I argue—in ways that help us redefine confinement and confinement literature.

According to Rushdy, neo-slave narratives are post-emancipation imaginings of, depictions of, or responses to enslavement. Rushdy considers Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975) as a "contemporary novel dealing with the ongoing effects of slavery" ("NeoSlave Narrative" 534). Under this designation, *Corregidora* is certainly concerned with the preservation of history. In the novel, the protagonist, Ursa is charged by her mother, grandmother, and great

grandmother to "make generations" to be able to pass on the story of how a Portuguese slave master in Brazil raped and sold the Corregidora women into sex slavery and begot children by them. They need to preserve this story because "when they did away with slavery down there they burned all the slavery papers so it would be like they never had it" (9). For many scholars, Ursa's imperative to give testimony for the intergenerational trauma transubstantiates from her body as a site of biological reproduction to the blues after her emergency hysterectomy. Her sterilization as a result of intimate violence halts the process of passing on the story through the body and blood and instead turns into musical production. Her songs both operate as a way to work through the matrilineal stories that she has inherited while and a way of asserting her voice and her experience as the primary author.

This narrative imperative to get the record straight becomes clear throughout the novel. The historiography of suffering in its mid-twentieth-century context also reveals the systematic silence surrounding the trauma of slavery, which perhaps perpetuated the continuities of abuse in post-emancipation U.S. culture. In this sense, the neo-slave narrative is always in conversation with the power relations of narration—who speaks, who has "authority" to speak, who gets to tell their story and why.[12] As *Corregidora* engages in these conversations concerning the power of history, memory, and narration, I contend that narrative power is informed by hierarchical structures of discipline. I am interested in how narrative voice, time, and space operate in resistance to these power structures. Moreover, I am examining how Black women's subject positioning in *Corregidora* as well as other corresponding neo-slave novels written by Black

[12] Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986) is a neo-slave novel that explicitly takes up this historiographic problem of narration/systematized silence. The novel opens with Dessa, a Black woman imprisoned for her participation in a slave uprising, refusing to speak with Dr. Nehemiah, a white doctor who obsessively wants to study her and publish the story. Nehemiah's limited, racist, pathologizing perspectives of Dessa offer a critique of the racist limitations of white reporting on Black life and experience.

women produce alternative means of reading and understanding that counter white heteropatriarchal perspectives, narrative structures, and meaning-making.

As previously noted, Ursa's primary modes of income and expression are the blues. The blues provide her with a means to live as well as a way to speak truth to power through song. In his conception of the new neo-slave novel, Patrick Elliot Alexander outlines the role of testimony as "socially disruptive speech" with the capability to expose Black women's experiences with state-sanctioned sexual violence. In Alexander's conception, survival testimonies

> are *not* narratives of victimization…they emphasize abuse survivors' will to survive by attending to (1) the political significance of abuse survivors' assertions of bodily reclamation or desired community while confined within male supremacist social orders; and (2) abuse survivors' critical understandings of how institutionalized sexual violence functions within an overarching system of dehumanization. (88)

In his figuration of the survival testimony as it constitutes an important element of a new neo-slave and neo-abolitionist novel, the testimony has both indicting and healing properties. It allows for bodily reclamation and community as well as a strong critique of the systems that harmed Black women in the first place. For *Corregidora*, the means of counternarrative are twofold: the biological imperative to make generations given to Ursa by Gram and Great Gram, and Ursa's use of the blues to sing through pain but also to bring the collective experiences of the women in the novel together.

For the latter purpose, Jones traverses narrative space and time. She disrupts narrative linearity, and instead opts for temporal and spatial entanglements. The narrative weaves throughout the experiences, memories, and stories of the women in Ursa's life, such that time, as

it is often understood in narrative relations between the past and present, gets unclear. This entangling of time and voice often allows for doublings or even triplings in signification. Voices appear in between Ursa's memories and it is often unclear whether the voice is speaking in relation to a memory on the plantation or the current events that Ursa is working through. In reading the novel through the lens of tracing "intersubjective relations," Rushdy considers how language and trauma work conspiratorially for and against Ursa, so that the name "Corregidora" is triggering and traumatizing—as it is both the enslaver's name and Ursa's last name—through time via its long narrative associative discourses (275). The "long narrative associative discourse" at work in the novel creates both slippages and linkages that I contend *entangle* the temporalities rather than straddle them as many binary conceptions of past and present within the neo-slave tradition posit.

If considered alongside the interlocking ways in which gendered racial harm is conceived within the tradition of anticarceral feminism, *Corregidora's* preoccupation with slippages in time, space, voice, and memory may also point to new understandings of how harm operates but also how those who experience it resist. Neo-slave novels that center Black women's voices consider how intersections of identity—gender and race—reframe how the slaveholding past shapes the post-emancipation present. As Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu demonstrates in *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*, the canonization and theorization of the slave narrative (and subsequent neo-slave narrative) were initially focused on male authors which shaped the definition of these genres—first-person protagonist, linear narrative toward emancipation, focus on individual escape, and importance of literacy. However, by looking at woman-authored slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, these conventions do not always neatly fit. Beaulieu argues that there is less of an emphasis on the individual in woman-penned

narratives because the operation of gender and oppression within the institution of slavery explicitly created networks of violence to women beyond the self—usually through biological reproduction, natal alienation, and rape—as well as featuring an emphasis on internal freedom to be "whole women" (14) rather than emancipated slaves. I agree with Beaulieu that this focus on network relations and motherhood should change the way that we view and understand slave and neo-slave narratives. Black women writers point to how violence operates relationally and generationally to reveal a much broader system of confinement at work.[13] I point to neo-slave narratives to expose this emphasis on networked violence – violence that operates on explicit and implicit levels, that informs social relations inter- and intraracially, that demands a reconceptualization of how power operates within and outside of confined spaces. I also contend that the necessarily testimonial and polyvocal form of these novels points to a rewriting of the slave/neo-slave genres in a way that focuses on how violence operates systemically rather than individually.

What Rushdy calls a play of "discontinuous voices…and parodic metafictional gestures" in neo-slave narratives (*Oxford Companion* 535) takes on more serious weight when considering how Black women's neo-slave narratives work through the ways in which violence operates relationally. Thinking back to how Ursa is haunted by the Melrose woman's suicide, "tying her and May Alice together" and thinking "it was always May Alice laying up there in that alley" (145), provides us with new ways of understanding how documenting violence and trauma in relational and layered ways can point to new conceptions of how modes of violence against

[13] Jones has stated something to this effect in interviews as well: "I find that with many women writers relationships within family, community, between men and women, from slave narratives by women writers on, are treated as complex and significant relationships, whereas with many men the significant relationships are those that involve confrontations—relationships outside family and community…In the slave narratives by women, for instance, one often finds the relationships treated by women are the personal, particulate, 'intimate' relationships, whereas those by men are the 'representational relationships'" (Interview with Claudia Tate, 144).

women are connected to one another across space and time. In *Corregidora*, if we consider trauma in Beaulieu's terms as operating relationally, time isn't presented as something to be straddled or alternatingly traversed bi-temporally; it in some sense circulates—or moves in waves, as in Christina Sharpe's conceptions of wake and wake work. For Sharpe, the afterlives of slavery can be understood as, to repeat a quote from earlier, "the semiotics of the slave ship" still operating in a post-emancipation moment. To produce wake work, Sharpe calls for an attentive sense of care and "enfleshing" to disrupt the semiotics that regulate contemporary Black life. The reclamation of body, of flesh, often requires a rupturing of the semiotics of the slave ship that socially and ontologically bind and reduce Black life. This reclamation happens across temporalities for Sharpe, as she notes that often "in the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). The relationship of time, trauma, and semiotics, then, represents structures that bind, structures that Ursa struggles to move beyond and occasionally rupture.

Within the genre of the novel, Jones creates one such rupturing of semiotics by disrupting linear narrative structure. Many of the critical conversations about Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* discuss the possibility, effects, and experiences of intergenerational trauma in relation to slavery. In particular, many are interested in how the idea of recurring trauma through intergenerational storytelling and the after-effects of slavery in theories of antiblackness actively shape the narrative. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argues "that by structuring her novel in a pattern of traumatic repetition, Jones offers neither the satisfactory closure of a linear narrative (of either progress or decline), nor the redemptive healing of a circular narrative recalling ancestral strength" (446). Goldberg conceives of a narrative temporality of the "pained present," explaining that "Ursa exhibits the behavior of a person *still in* pain, rather than a person

traumatically re-experiencing a past pain (which is indeed not always strictly her own)…" (447). Slightly differentiating from scholarship that aligns Ursa's experiences as reliving past trauma, Goldberg asserts that the pained present allows readers to come to terms with Ursa's real and present-lived trauma that is not divorced from the trauma that her matrilineal family members experienced, but rather contextualized within a larger conversation of the (im)possibility of Black female desire. The "pained present" is certainly useful for thinking through the narrative structure of *Corregidora*. On the one hand, there is continuity, as Madhu Dubey claims: "the novel's structure so thoroughly fuses Ursa's story with the history of her foremothers that any distinction between past and present becomes inoperative" (251). On the other hand, this continuity can only be achieved through interruption: "Ursa's fragmented memories of the stories told to her by her maternal ancestors repeatedly erupt into her narrative, stalling her attempt to transcend history and to create a new story for herself" (Dubey 251-2). The relationships between trauma, time, and narrative structure shift when understandings of trauma move from the individual to the communal. When understood as individual, intergenerational trauma operates in the realm of the subjective and the pathological, often conceptualized as an (inherited) psychological condition. When trauma is understood as operating communally, a re-emphasis on the relational and the external occurs, which resituates trauma as resulting from recurring systems of oppression or harm that operate externally to the self but nonetheless affect it.

What I am trying to zero in on here is a necessity to shift our perspectives of trauma and narrative temporality from the individual and pathological to networks of gendered racial oppression at work that are not of a singular institution but operate as singularities that shift through time. This conception of time and trauma is helpful for re-reading *Corregidora* and

resituating Black women's neo-slave narratives in the framework that Beaulieu outlines as exposing networks of violence rather than trauma centered on an individual (usually male) narrator. The conception of the neo-slave narrative that is focused on the individual often leads to the pathologization of trauma placed upon the subject both within and outside of networked relations.[14] However, Black women's neo-slave narratives that place relational networks and traumas at their center force us to reconsider how trauma operates through/across temporalities in ways that most certainly affect narrative structure.

Time as such becomes simultaneously attached to and detached from historical institutions of slavery, Jim Crow, post-civil rights: it becomes representative of different modalities of a climate of antiblackness (using Sharpe's terms), yet its particularities target Black women's lives, communities, and bodies. Understanding violence against Black women in neo-slave narratives as relational provides new ways for understanding trauma and time.

The way in which time operates in regards to the subtle yet important differences between trauma, pained present, and wake is further complicated when delineating what exactly differentiates Ursa's trauma from other past traumas. In "Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity," Avery Gordon contends that "in the classic psychoanalytic conception, trauma not only misaligns our perception of time, it is, one could say a misalignment of the temporality of experience since trauma is characteristically experienced belatedly…a traumatized person or society is stuck in a past that repeats as a present that can never end" (4). According to this definition, Ursa does not exactly experience trauma because the past doesn't exactly repeat as

[14] Jones thoroughly explores this pathologization explicitly in *Eva's Man*, in which Eva's incarceration in an institution for the criminally insane sets the stage for her reflections on a life of sexual harassment, coercion, assault and rape alongside her present-day criminalization in the media for killing her controlling lover. The work provides a meditation on trauma and harm, making explicit how sexual harm against Black women warrants no communal or state intervention; however, her violent response to years of misogynistic terror does.

present. Instead it operates through her present traumas, constantly linking her present pain to past pain of her ancestors and also of other women around her. However, according to Gordon's hauntology, Ursa isn't exactly haunted either because "haunting is an emergent state: the ghost arises carrying signs and portents of a repression in the past or the present that's no longer working. The ghost demands your attention. The present wavers. *Something will happen*" (italics mine 3). Certainly, it would seem Ursa is haunted by her mother's, grandmother's, and great grandmother's traumas, as they are a part of an internationally repressed past, the information of which these women seek to exhume and pass on. Their traumas also have the capability to create fissures in Ursa's present, or at least they reframe—to use Gordon's term, "re-narrativize"—the way in which she engages with her present trauma, her intimate violence with Mutt and Tadpole and her emergency hysterectomy. However, Ursa is not left with a "something-to-be-done," like other characters who are haunted such as Toni Morrison's Sethe in *Beloved*. As Dubey and Goldberg have pointed out, *Corregidora's* ending does not provide us with a conclusion toward a linear end nor a cyclic reconnection to an ancestral past (Goldberg 446). In other words, there does not seem to be an end, nor a solution, nor a return—there is perhaps briefly a reconnection in the moment at which Ursa realizes the "unspeakable" deed that Great Gram performed on Simon Corregidora while she engages in oral sex with Mutt. The "something-to-be-done" is a clear marker of separation between haunting and trauma, which leaves us to consider that *Corregidora* engages in both or neither. If we think about re-narrativizing on a broader scale, rather than focusing on Ursa's individual trauma or personal history, the novel's turn toward memory, semiotic, and psychic slippages makes more sense.

To bring Ursa's story to the forefront in relation to her matrilineal ancestors' stories, we do not see much that Ursa can do or does in regard to her past. The "problem" with the ending of

Corregidora is that there are no explicit instances of resolution or resistance, but the novel ends in a realization that Great Gram's action to make Simon Corregidora hate her was a threat of castration during oral sex. The last scene mingles violence and intimacy. During oral sex with Mutt, Ursa thinks of the violence her foremothers endured and thinks "I could kill you." In the repeated bluesy lines on the last page, she admits that she would hurt him: "'I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you,' he said. / "Then you don't want me'" (185). Mutt shakes her until she cries, she admits she "don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" and he holds her tight (185). Claudia Tate has mentioned this troubling ending, noting it "is not a conventional novel in that it does not revolve around a chronological sequence of dramatic scenes. It has, in fact, so little sense of time and action that it seems to exist entirely without plot structure" (139). Tate further asserts that "Jones consciously employs the blues idiom as a structural device to guide Ursa's psychological development, give the intricate plot dramatic continuity, and shape the entire narrative within a cohesive expressive mode" (141). The novel certainly uses the repetition and circularity of blues style to mirror Ursa's mental meanderings through the past in response to her present. As I argue in the following section, the blues, in its idiomatic refusal of narrative closure as well as the musical genre's historical utility in communal testimony, provides the resistance or response to slavery's haunting in a post-emancipation moment.

Anticarceral Feminism and Ursa's Blues

Anticarceral feminism as it emerged in the 1970s and 1980s aimed to provide alternative solutions to carceral responses to violence against women. As Thuma explains,

> during the 1970s a loosely linked collection of ad hoc groups, organizations, and coalitions helped forge a feminist politics that indicted the carceral state for racialized and gendered violence. This activist current influenced social movement debates about

> the parameters and sources of violence against women, the politics of self-defense, the policing of gender and sexual expression, the significance of multi-issue and coalition-based organizing, and the possibilities of prison abolition. (162)

However, as many scholars and activists have acknowledged, these anticarceral approaches stem from histories of women publicizing and responding to intimate violence in a communal manner well before the 1970s, particularly through women's blues. *Corregidora*'s categorization as a "blues novel" provides a framework for understanding the shifts, repetitions, and polyvocality present in the narrative, but it also reveals how blues operates to conceptualize harm relationally in a similar vein to Beaulieu's conception of communal history and harm in the Black woman-authored neo-slave narrative.

Angela Davis's *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* articulates these early protofeminisms at work within the women's blues tradition, when she states, "Violence against women was always an appropriate topic of women's blues. The contemporary urge to break the silence surrounding misogynist violence and the organized political movement challenging violence against women has an aesthetic precursor in the work of the classic blues singer" (25). Davis makes three important points in regard to the power of blues women for this discussion of *Corregidora*: 1) the blues provided a space to explore freedoms of movement, sexuality, and individuality in a post-emancipation moment, 2) blues women brought topics of violence against women out from the predominantly private sphere into the public one, and 3) in doing so, blues women created a working-class women's response to gendered and racialized systematic oppression that opposed the middle-class respectability politics of African American clubwomen of the twentieth century. Ursa's blues woman identity certainly speaks to each of these points; to be a blues woman in Davis's

framework is to express, examine, and occasionally challenge sexual/gender violence in ways that warrant a variety of responses including but are rarely limited to state intervention. Noting that, in the first half of the twentieth century, police rarely interfered in domestic violence unless it was a "life or death" situation, Davis highlights that blues women's responses to partner violence only occasionally mentioned police but more typically included responses such as leaving, self-defense, retaliation, or returning to the abusive partner but only after having named the violence through song. She links this testimony of abuse through song to the consciousness-raising practices adopted in the 1970s feminist movement, stating that "to sing the song at all was to rescue the issue of men's violence toward women from the silent realm of the private sphere and reconstruct it as a public problem" (32) and in doing so, the blues' "participatory character…affirms women's community without negating the individual" (57).

Jones's novel does not need to explicitly state that the blues are beyond a mere occupation for Ursa. They instead embody an imperative not completely separate from the biological imperative passed down to her by her foremothers but with distinction. As Tate has suggested: "the blues is Ursa's finest creation; it is the surrogate daughter who bears witness to both Corregidora's legacy and Ursa's indomitable will to free herself from the tyranny of historical oppression" (141). Inhabiting the position of the blues woman relates to the political, practical, and social implications that Houston A. Baker and Clyde Woods have theorized as the blues matrix and blues epistemology, respectively. Both define the blues beyond its often narrow emotional generic depictions, and imagine the genre in terms of examination and critique. For Baker, the blues operate in a deconstructionist manner, in that they "defy narrow definition. For they exist, not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself" (4). The blues matrix, accordingly, "is a point of ceaseless input and output, a

web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" (3) that allows for an expressive examination of what Baker terms the shifts in the "economics of slavery" from an aristocratic patriarchal plantation system governed by "economic paternalism" (27). The blues responds to the echoes, aftermaths, and recodifications of this system through its discourse on movement/mobility, space, labor, and freedom, exploring its potential and critiquing its limits. Woods thinks about the epistemological possibilities of blues for the generations of African Americans who experienced emancipation and post-Reconstruction segregation. Woods pushes his readers to consider the blues as a means of explanation and orientation to one's world: "The blues became the channel through which the Reconstruction generation grasped reality in the midst of disbelief, critiqued the plantation regime, and organized against it" (ebook, ch 2). This blues epistemology is "embedded, necessary, and reflective. It is a self-referential explanatory tradition among working-class African Americans in which development debates occurred" (ch2). In both Baker and Woods, the blues—whether explained in ideological or epistemic terms—respond not only to social and political regulations and practices that shape Black life but also attend to the ways in which space is embedded in these social and political relations.

Although Ursa's blues are connected to her inability to make generations, she sings them before Mutt pushes her in the altercation that results in her lost fetus and emergency hysterectomy. The blues stem from her connection to the intergenerational traumas passed down through her family, as evidenced by her statement, "They squeezed Corregidora into me, and I sung back in return. I would have rather sung [Mama's] memory if I'd had to sing any. What about my own?...Oh I don't mean in the words, I wouldn't have done that. I mean in the tune, in the whole way I drew out a song. In the way my breath moved, in my whole voice" (103). For Ursa, singing the blues is an embodied experience: while it features language, that is not the

primary means to communicate and pass on the memory and experience. Her breath and embodied performance of the blues measures her method of telling the story that will make sure the evidence would not be erased. To recall Sharpe's terminology, Ursa's singing takes part in a mode of "enfleshing," breathing air into her blues testimony that in a sense, ruptures "the semiotics of the slave ship." Her songs as well as the very act of singing brings together the enfleshing project of wake work that was initially placed in the Corregidora women's biological imperative to procreate. As the Corregidora women remind Ursa, "they can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious" (22). For Sharpe, wake work includes "inhabiting a blackened consciousness that would rupture the structural silences" as well as the semiotics of the slave ship that "produce and facilitate Black social and physical death" (22). Through this lens we see consciousness develop for Ursa through a different mode, while it meets the requirements of "wake work," as her blues singing seeks to rupture, re-narrativize, and re-imagine her life through the "new world song."

In interviews, Jones has repeatedly referred to *Corregidora* as a blues novel. She cites Johnheinz Jahn to describe her understanding of the blues in narrative by stating that the blues are, in Jahn's words, "subjective testimony." She states, "there is a relationship between the 'I' storyteller and the blues singer, though…with the early 'blues stories' this connection wasn't consciously made" (Rowell 37). Though stating that this connection between the storyteller and blues singer was yet to be consciously made in her early works—*Corregidora* and *Eva's Man*—Jones associates the effects of her narrative style with the music that her blues women characters sing. Both Jones's narrative style and the blues characters' music create the disruptions, slippages, and entanglements necessary for visualizing and challenging the "semiotics of the slave ship" at work.

Ursa sings popular blues songs as well as ones she composes herself. The songs that Ursa sings in the novel, "See See Rider," "The Broken Soul Blues," and "Trouble in Mind" are classics about lost lovers and sorrow. However, the two songs she sings that she composes herself are telling, especially when considering the blues as matrix in Baker's terms as "a point of ceaseless input and output." Ursa recalls,

> When I first saw Mutt I was singing a song about a train tunnel. About this train going in the tunnel, but it didn't seem like they was no end to the tunnel, and nobody knew when the train would get out, and then all of a sudden the tunnel tightened around the train like a fist. Then I sang about this bird woman, whose eyes were deep wells. How she would take a man on a long journey, but never return him" (147).

The subjects of both of these songs are interesting in relation to what we know about Ursa up to this point. When this memory is revealed, readers already know the tumultuous relationship that results from her and Mutt's meeting, her mother's personal history with Ursa's father, Ursa's encounter with Jeffy and her learning of Cat's queer sexuality. When Ursa sings these songs while meeting Mutt, she apparently does not know of her father Martin accusing her mother of luring him/trapping him/using his body to fulfil her imperative desire to procreate. She also has yet to experience the moment of sexual assault and resulting phrase "I'll give you a fist to fuck" that Cat threatens Jeffy with and Ursa in turn directs toward Vivian, the woman Tad begins to see on the side. Yet, these seemingly fictional blues songs have topical and linguistic resonance with the reader who has these stories in mind. Ursa also describes her mother's reluctance to speak about her father by saying "She was closed up like a fist" (101). The image of a fist is pervasive throughout the novel, as Jones broadens its associative possibilities by using it to describe Ursa's mother keeping her memory to herself, the sexual violence that Cat threatens on

Jeffy, and her description of the train. As Davis describes in her study on blues women, blues about traveling were more popular among male blues performers because of the gendered restrictions on women to adhere to expectations of domesticity; however, blues women did sing about travel and were afforded mobility through their occupation, performing with traveling troupes and shows throughout the north and south (67). The train, a symbol in both blues and songs from slavery of freedom of mobility and escape, operates as a sign of potential in Ursa's song, but that potential is quickly foreclosed by the tunnel which squeezes the train "like a fist." With the blues matrix in mind, the echoing image of the fist is one such blues inscription of endless input and output that Jones weaves through her narrative. It links same-sex sexuality, sexual violence, silence surrounding trauma, and constrictions of mobility (a hold) all seemingly before these events occur in the chronology of the plot. The associative discourse at work in the blues song obscures the chronological constraints of linear narrative in such a way that the image of a train squeezed in the tunnel "like a fist" brings all the women in the novel into focus—Ursa, Mama, Gram, and Great-Gram, but also Jeffy, Cat, May Alice, and the Melrose woman.

Ursa's singing of the blues creates a working-class woman's response to networks of harm that span time, borders, and individual experiences. In a sense, the novel's rejection of a linear arc—the rejection of a storytelling logic "comprehendible" in a Western tradition of plot as characteristic of "root" identity in Glissant—creates a contact zone, an opportunity for relation but also rupture. The blues exposes harm operating outside of their chronologically designated times and how the carceral moves through public and private spaces. By ruminating on harm and tight places like the train in the tunnel, Ursa sings about women's collective experiences before she experiences Mutt's violence and its resulting trauma. Every woman in *Corregidora* is a blues woman: the Melrose woman dies of suicide in a way that echoes the lyrics of "Trouble in Mind"

that Ursa sings when she returns from the hospital and stays with Cat. May Alice's man, Harold, left her after finding out she was pregnant. Cat and Jeffy's lesbian relationship is often volatile. The Corregidora women make generations to tell the story of Simon Corregidora's sexual violence, and Mama closes up like a fist about Ursa's father Martin, who beat her and made her walk down the street naked. Ursa's songs, though not explicit, perform a broad conception of harm embodied through her presence on stage.

Conclusion

Gayl Jones's work explores the complex systems of oppression that confine women—particularly working-class Black women—in the twentieth century. Before carceral and anticarceral feminism as we know it, Jones was illustrating the ways in which the law and society harm women via exclusion. Mr. Deak's assertion that the police ignored complaints from African American communities, especially African American women, is prescient in light of contemporary anticarceral feminist critiques of the Violence Against Women Act. Originally developed and promoted by anticarceral feminists, the act was altered in the hands of conservative lawmakers making women's access to services in certain districts limited. Some examples of these limitations include not being able to receive state services if under eighteen years of age, if needing state services outside of a legal marriage therefore excluding lesbian relationships before marriage equality legislation, and unable to receive state services if they had a criminal record. These exclusions marginalized women who are often the most vulnerable to intimate and partner violence; and while anticarceral feminists are against these exclusions and mandatory arrest practices paired with it, they are also unsettled by recent efforts to defund the programs altogether.

In this way, we can see the exclusions of race, class, gender, and sexuality at work to create harm and reinforce both white supremacist heteropatriarchal status quos and the prison-industrial complex. Jones, in her associative discourses on time, confinement, violence, and resistance outlines a continuum from the Brazilian plantation to the Kentucky nightclub. *Corregidora* explores and deconstructs networks of harm in post-emancipation era. It is a neo-slave novel because it engages in an inquiry of the afterlife of slavery. It is an anticarceral feminist novel because it links state violence and interpersonal violence rooted in the mutually constitutive dynamics of misogyny and racism. It is a blues novel in both content and form, for it deconstructs language and narrative linearity as well as provides communal testimony through song to expose systems of harm at work. These three categories of novel engage in work toward the abolitionist practice of deconstructing carcerality by pointing readers outside of the plantation and prison cell and toward the complex network of power relations that propagate incarceration, intimidation, neglect, and violation in order to maintain the white heteropatriarchal status quo. The following chapter will more explicitly take up these understandings of carcerality in regard to Black women's labor in Jim Crow-era fiction as evidenced in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

CHAPTER TWO: *THE COLOR PURPLE* AND BLACK RADICAL EPISTOLARITY

"I am a slave, [Sofia] say. What would you call it?" (103)

Like the anticarceral feminist tenets of *Corregidora* that I outlined in the previous chapter, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) draws comparisons between interpersonal gendered racial harm and white supremacist state-sanctioned violence. While both novels are set in the first half of the twentieth century in the U.S. south, unlike *Corregidora*'s references to police neglect for situating the relationship between white supremacist violence on the Brazilian plantation to post-emancipation interpersonal violence, *The Color Purple* explicitly depicts the relationship between interpersonal violence and the Jim Crow-era prison cell when the character Sofia is beaten by police and imprisoned. Walker's novel emerges during a pivotal decade for critical prison studies scholars' understandings of women's incarceration in the United States, as the 1980s marks the beginning of the oft-cited statistic that between 1980 and 2017, U.S. women's incarcerated populations increased by over 750% ("Incarcerated Women"). In other words, the 1980s marks a starting point for what many scholars consider the turn toward mass incarceration for women. However, the 1980-2017 statistic should not lead us to assume women were not incarcerated *en masse* until this point; in contrast, we ought to keep in mind the fact that the prison was just not the primary means through which women were disciplined, held captive, or "corrected," as evidenced in Gayl Jones's example of the mental hospital for the criminally insane in her 1976 novel, *Eva's Man*. As historians Sarah Haley and Talitha LeFlouria argue, women were incarcerated and worked on southern chain gangs and, later, were held captive through the convict leasing system before the explicit prison turn of the latter half of the

twentieth century. The works of historians and writers alike show that post-emancipation "captivity" included many forms before the 1980s turn. With this in mind, this chapter examines depictions of carcerality spanning from the home to the prison cell in Walker's *The Color Purple*.

As aforementioned, *Corregidora* and *The Color Purple* have a lot in common. They are 1970s and 1980s novels set in the 1920s-1940s U.S. south. They both feature blues women who intervene in either their own or other women's traumatic experiences with interpersonal violence. Both novels tend to focus on harm within Black communities rather than highlight the white-on-Black harm that marks the Jim Crow-era periods in which both novels are set. And, finally, both novels center around a Black woman protagonist who attempts to find her voice amidst trauma. Certainly, the mode of blues reading I posit in chapter one can be applied to Walker's novel.[15] However, one distinction is worthy of note: while *The Color Purple* features blues women—Shug and later Squeak—who use their craft to liberate themselves and Celie from the self-effacing pressures of patriarchal society, the blues idiom—the relational, intergenerational, and repetitive blues style narration—that I examine at work in *Corregidora* is not the organizing narrative logic of *The Color Purple*. Instead, *The Color Purple*, as I examine in this chapter, achieves an anticarceral aesthetic through the material and stylistic form of the

[15] Courtney George's article "'My Man Treats Me Like a Slave': The Triumph of Womanist Blues over Blues Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" provides an excellent reading of the blues in relation to interpersonal violence and white supremacy using a blues studies lens. In line with some of the ideas I outline in chapter one, George argues that "Through Celie's memory of not just Shug, but also Sofia, Squeak, Pa, Albert, and Harpo, Walker creates a collective story about blues violence—a memory that displays the cultural trauma of racism and sexism and simultaneously proposes a womanist solution of cooperation and love" (129). As I argue in the previous chapter the ways each woman character in Jones's novel align with a blues trope, George likewise links these tropes to the women and men in Walker's text. The major distinction, however, is my focus on the blues idiom within carceral studies as an expressive mode of neo-abolition. For more readings on the blues in *The Color Purple*, see Jerry Wasserman's "Queen Bee, King Bee: *The Color Purple* and The Blues." *Canadian Review of American Studies,* vol. 30, 2000; Marlon Rachquel Moore's "God is (a) Pussy: The Pleasure Principle and Homo-Spirituality in Shug's Blueswoman Theology." *Alice Walker's* The Color Purple, edited by Kheven LaGrone, Rodopi 2009; and Thomas F. Marvin's "'Preachin' the Blues': Bessie Smith's Secular Religion and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *African American Review*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1994.

letter, as the novel is organized as a series of letters that Celie writes to God and then to her sister, Nettie, with a section that also includes Nettie's letters to Celie.

As this chapter will ultimately link Walker's epistolary novel style to the tradition of the late twentieth-century open letter written by African American political prisoners, the first part of the chapter necessarily focuses on linking three concepts: 1) Sofia's incarceration in a Jim Crow-era prison as the result of white supremacist violence 2) Celie's domestic captivity within a physically, psychologically, and sexually abusive household, and 3) the gendered racial harm that is the constitutive logic of plantation slavery and its aftermath. These critical carceral links are often mentioned in passing by scholars, and usually build from their readings of the metaphorical capacity of the word "prison." For example, Gloria Thomas Pillow notes that "in *The Color Purple* a man examines a possible wife like a slaveholder considering purchase at a slave auction; wives are treated like children; marriage is like a prison and, importantly, gender discrimination is like racial discrimination: Black women are to Black men as Black people are to White society – demeaned, disenfranchised, there to serve" (112). Pillow's examination of Celie's predicament as "like a prison," and linked to the objectifying practices of the slave auction block and the white supremacist master-slave relation is apt for reading the ways in which the carcerality embedded in the institution of plantation slavery haunts the post-emancipation carcerality of patriarchal violence against women. I contend in this chapter, however, that a full understanding of these carceral linkages must begin with the novel's depiction of the prison itself through the character of Sofia.

The Color Purple follows the journey of Celie, a poor Black woman in early twentieth-century Georgia, whose life has been filled with sexual violence, emotional and psychological abuse, and tragedy. Held captive in a home by her domineering and abusive husband Albert,

whom she refers to as Mr. _____, Celie eventually self-liberates her body and spirit with help from family members and Shug Avery, a blues woman and Celie's lover. Celie documents this self-liberation by writing letters to God and her long-lost sister Nettie about her and her family's struggles. About a third of the way into the novel, Celie visits her stepdaughter-in-law Sofia, who is in prison for physically defending herself when the white mayor slapped her for "sassing" his wife. Celie recounts that after Sofia defended herself, she was brutally beaten by police and sentenced to twelve years. Sofia—a once large, tough, and strong-willed character—has been subdued through her time in prison. She has suffered physical and psychological injuries that would affect her for the rest of the novel, and she lives in a rat-infested cell. Surprised by Sofia's shift in spirit, Celie asks her how she manages the poor working and living conditions of prison life, to which Sofia responds, "Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (88). A few moments later Sofia continues, "I'm a good prisoner… Best convict they ever see. They can't believe I'm the one sass the mayor's wife, knock the mayor down" (88). Sofia's characterization of Celie as a submissive and unquestioningly obedient wife aligns with the ways in which both Sofia and Shug, Mr. _____'s love interest, have characterized her to this point in the novel. They pity her commitment to donning a docile demeanor and unswerving allegiance to Mr. _____. For Sofia and Shug, Celie's behavior stems from fear and years of physical and sexual abuse from Mr. _____ and her stepfather Pa; as such, Celie's responses to patriarchal violence become the characterization of state-sanctioned docility that Sofia then links to her attempts at becoming the perfect prisoner. In other words, Sofia and Shug see Celie as a victim. These traits, when brought up by Sofia or Shug to Celie throughout the novel, are insults, but the insults take on new meaning with Sofia's incarcerated invocation of appropriating Celie's behavior as a means of survival. Sofia makes

clear that while her behavior models Celie's subservience, the carceral violence and living conditions she has endured have also led her to "dream of murder sleep or wake" (89); she acknowledges that her behavior should not be confused for complicity in her incarceration.

Sofia's linking of her own behavior to survive a white supremacist prison cell to Celie's seemingly unquestioning subservience to patriarchal dominance reveals a heretofore understudied relationship between state and patriarchal violence at work in Walker's text. If Sofia's being a "good prisoner" can be compared to Celie's being a subservient housewife under conditions of routine and unpunished patriarchal violence, then Sofia's quip and her statement, "Miss Celie, I act like I'm you," expose a deep critique of not only the racist nature, but rather the distinctly gendered racial nature of state violence and imprisonment. Simultaneously, this indictment also highlights the prison-like conditions of Celie's marriage to Mr. _____ in which he treats her like property, abuses her, and forces her to work the land, have sex with him, and care for his children. Celie and Sofia use each other's experiences to contextualize and identify the harm they experience as well as how to survive that harm.

Later in the novel when Celie discovers Mr. _____ has been hiding dozens of letters that Nettie, her long-lost sister, had been writing to her, she responds with a rage comparable to Sofia's rage against white supremacist state violence. After seeing the first letter, Celie remarks, "All day long I act just like Sofia. I stutter. I mutter to myself. I stumble about the house crazy for Mr. _____ blood. In my mind, he falling dead every which a way" (120). Celie is so set on killing him that when she acquires Mr. _____'s razor with intent to use it, Shug must intervene. Celie's invocation of Sofia's rage post-police beating and incarceration as a match for her own rage over Mr. _____'s forced separation between her and her sister Nettie furthers this conception of Celie and Sofia using one another's distinct forms of captivity to analyze their

own. After Sofia was leased from prison to the mayor's family to serve the rest of her sentence performing domestic labor, Celie notes, "Three years after she beat she out of the wash house, got her color and her weight back, look like her old self, just all time think about killing somebody" (100). Sofia's brutalization, confinement, and post-prison forced labor outline the white supremacist violence that has stripped her from participating in social and civic life. In connecting this to her own experiences of abuse, forced labor, and captivity, Celie's desire to murder her captor is an imagined radical fugitive act. As I explain in greater detail later in this chapter, the radical potential of imagined or real resistance operates in relation to Fred Moten's understanding of fugitivity as moments in which "the object resists" (*In the Break* 12). Celie and Sofia, who have both been objectified and brutalized by different iterations of white supremacist patriarchal dominance, imagine, speak, write, and act out against those systems of oppression in ways that align with both anticarceral and Black feminist praxis.

Moreover, Celie's recognition of her own confinement as well as her radical response to it relates to the letters that have been kept from her. Nettie, who was Celie's only family and lifeline had been forcefully cut off from her through Mr. _____'s emotionally and psychologically abusive withholding of that lifeline. In other words, the withholding of Nettie's letters helped maintain Celie's conditions of captivity. An epistolary novel, *The Color Purple*, I ultimately argue, invites readers to re-conceptualize domestic confinement and radical resistance through the form of the letter.

In this chapter, I read the stories of Celie and Sofia as meditations on the interaction between domestic and state harm. Moreover, I read this interaction within the narrative of the development of the carceral state throughout the twentieth century. Both Celie's and Sofia's (through Celie's retelling) conceptualizations of "good behavior," discipline, and gendered racial

domination help form a clearer picture of the interactions between state discipline and patriarchal violence, which ultimately get depicted in the novel as two forms of neo-slavery. This conceptualization of violence is communicated through Celie's letters—addressed to God and then her sister, Nettie—that both document and resist state and domestic structures of captivity at work in the novel. Sofia constructs a neo-abolitionist methodology for reading her own incarceration, which Celie relays through her letters, but also arguably uses to explicate the nuances of her own distinct gendered racial confinement within the early twentieth-century domestic sphere. As carceral historian Sarah Haley has traced, "After 1908 imprisonment in Georgia continued to be a hybrid public/private regime; it was intimately connected to another institution principally responsible for southern 'progress' but historically unseen as part of the public, political sphere: the home" (189). While Haley's predominant discourse of the domestic sphere concerns the ways in which Black women were forced into domestic convict labor in the first part of the twentieth century, she also remarks that many women entered the criminal justice system in Georgia because of intraracial and intracommunal harm they experienced in the home.[16] Following Haley's historical account of the carceral fluidity between public and private spheres, this chapter also traces the role of the literary tradition of epistolarity—known for its paradoxical public/private narrative utility—as a neo-abolitionist writing style.

Sofia and Celie's relationship as relayed by Celie in her letters describes two different experiences of living death and resistance to the conditions that perpetuate gendered racial domination. Their development not only shows the relationship between these two forms of domestic and white supremacist state violence, but also exposes the ways in which women work

[16] Haley notes that many of the women who arrived at the prison had been "criminalized, convicted, and imprisoned for self-defense against domestic or sexual violence. Imprisoned women's lives reflect the extreme brutality of familial, intraracial, and intracommunal violence" (189).

coalitionally to create radical communities of care in resistance to these networks of harm. As Tara T. Green states in one of the few scholarly articles that focus on Sofia, "[Celie's] transformation/growth depends greatly on the actions of Sofia who changes her own ideas of freedom. Sofia's larger than life personality that is broken by her incarceration and revived at the moment of Celie's self-proclamation is instrumental in our understanding of Celie's movement from the girl who only knows how to survive to the woman who learns how to fight—her own way" (26). In her tracing of Oprah Winfrey's portrayal of Sofia in the Spielberg film adaptation of the novel as a Black feminist representation of the radical transformative power of love, Green also locates the relationship between Sofia and Celie as interconnected, their growth and development symbiotic. This relationship, as relayed through the letter form, reframes the novel as an anticarceral feminist rendering of the ways in which women document and resist enduring and interlocking systems of gendered racial oppression.

In the following sections, I demonstrate how Sofia's neo-abolitionist reading of her own confinement produces a strategic analysis of the ways in which post-emancipation white supremacist state violence relates to the institution of slavery. Using two of Orlando Patterson's major contributions to studies on slavery—social death and natal alienation—I outline, in the following section, how Sofia's experiences of harm, incarceration, state violence, forced labor, and parole represent a distinct genealogy of confinement, a centuries-spanning project of gendered racial domination. I also outline how Sofia's analysis of this confinement informs Celie's understanding of her own domestic carceral conditions. The relationship between Sofia and Celie not only provides a way to read the relationships between domestic and state-sanctioned gendered racial harm, but it also offers examples of how both women resist these modes of harm through language, self-defense, cursing, and letter writing. All of these elements

make up a form of neo-abolitionist novel, in the sense of the term used by Dennis Childs and Patrick Elliot Alexander, who have developed conceptions of neo-abolition within the tradition of African American confinement literature. Using critical prison studies scholarship, Alexander redefines the definition of the subgenre of the neo-slave novel to "highlight even more ways in which slavery's *carceral* contemporaneity shows up" in twentieth-century African American literature (emphasis mine 28). With this definition in mind, I argue that Walker's text achieves the characterization of neo-abolitionist novel through its organization in the tradition of Black radical epistolarity.

"The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot": Neo-Slavery, Social Death, and "the Prisoner's Curse"

Celie's letters document her own conditions of patriarchal dominance, but her retelling of Sofia's and other women's suffering at the hands of the state provide parallel experiences through which Celie later gains a language through which to communicate her own harm. Many early critics of the novel read Walker's portrayals of Black male violence as particularly damaging. Walker's depictions of Black men's performance of patriarchal dominance led some to characterize Walker as a race-traitor, and others to consider her representations as acts of female-chauvinism.[17] As Mel Watkins asserted, "Those Black women writers who have chosen Black men as a target have set themselves outside a tradition that is nearly as old as Black American literature itself" (36). Watkins comments on the role of the writer, perhaps even the

[17] Jacqueline Bobo's "Sifting Through the Controversy: Reading *The Color Purple*" outlines the negative responses Walker's novel and Spielberg's adaptation of the novel garnered in the 1980s. The article traces how both the novel and the film became subjects of intense criticism, with critics claiming the different ways "both works present a negative portrait…of black men in particular and the black family in general" (332). Bobo notes that these particular kinds of criticisms of the novel accelerated after the film was released, perhaps because of film's access to wider (and presumably whiter) audiences. She notes that many of these harsh criticisms come from the mainstream media and Black men, whereas, generally speaking, Black women viewers and readers seemed more welcoming of complex depictions of Black families, including depictions of domestic violence.

responsibility of the Black writer, to promote certain images of Black families and identities while combating others. In the early pages of the novel, Celie describes her incapability of putting her experience into words—either referring to the literal threat Pa gives her at the beginning of the novel to "tell no one" or that she has yet to acquire an analytical language for reading intraracial patriarchal modes of confinement. By the end of the novel, however, her letters about Sofia, Squeak, Nettie, and Shug have provided her with experiences through which to reframe her own. In particular, Celie writes Sofia's carceral experiences and then uses them to examine her own confinement. The details of her arrest, subsequent beating, and imprisonment are telling for using an anticarceral feminist/neo-abolitionist lens to read the novel.

Sofia's confinement and confrontations with white supremacist state violence are characterized by Jim Crow-era social codes. *The Color Purple* highlights how these social codes, while operating in a post-emancipation moment, recreate particular conditions of slavery: anti-Black disciplinary violence, unfree labor, and unfettered (sexual) access to Black women's bodies. Sofia's storyline documents an explicit iteration of neo-slavery that is historically grounded in the early twentieth-century Georgia convict leasing system. Her initial beating and subsequent incarceration, convict labor, and parole are all geared toward re-instituting the white supremacist patriarchal social order via Black women's subjection. This subjection is characterized by Orlando Patterson as social and civic death. Adopting key terms from Patterson's seminal work, *Slavery and Social Death*, critical prison studies scholars articulate how the imprisoned are likewise positioned within a power relationship that restricts and repositions them as legal and social nonpersons. In Patterson's conception of social death as it pertains to slavery, the master-slave relationship is historically defined as a "conditional commutation" of a death sentence, reserved for prisoners of war, criminals, and social outsiders

(5). Patterson notes, "[t]he execution was suspended only as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness. The master was essentially a ransomer…. Because the slave had no socially recognized existence outside of his master, he became a social nonperson" (5). Accordingly, the enslaved (and the incarcerated) bear no social and legal rights in regard to their engagement in unregulated communal interaction, economic exchange, or legal participation. Likewise, both groups experience varying degrees of what Patterson calls "natal alienation," which is a forced loss of ties from one's family lineage of the past, present, and future as well as any rights or claims within that lineage (5). Natal alienation and social death work together to generate a condition of nonpersonhood within society and family so that the master (or state) can surrogate those positions within a network of power and control. Applied to incarceration, the state stands in for the master, claiming the position of owner, patriarch, labor overseer, and caretaker of those held in captivity.

In this chapter, I am highlighting the ways in which slavery lives on in the Jim Crow era in multifaceted ways for Black women. Sofia experiences the conditioning of social death at work through enforcers of the white supremacist state. A close look at the moments leading up to her incarceration, as well as Sofia's spirit after she is brutally beaten, confined, and "leased" into labor servitude to the mayor and his wife produce a historically accurate rendering of neo-slavery and social death at work in the post-emancipation south through the now-famous loophole in the Thirteenth Amendment that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*" (emphasis mine). Sofia's "crime," however, is her refusal to acquiesce to the white supremacist patriarchal social order. A close look at the scene in which Sofia is brutally subjected to Jim Crow social control logics reveals interlocking gendered, racial, and economic systems of dominance at work:

Sofia and the prizefighter and all the children got in the prizefighter car and went to town. Clam out on the street looking like somebody. Just then the mayor and his wife come by.

All these children, say the mayor's wife, digging in her pocketbook. Cute as little buttons though, she say. She stop, put her hand on one of the children head. Say, and such strong white teef.

Sofia and the prizefighter don't say nothing. Wait for her to pass. Mayor wait too, stand back and tap his foot, watch her with a little smile. Now Millie, he say. Always going on over colored. Miss Millie finger the children some more, finally look at Sofia and the prizefighter car. She eye Sofia wristwatch. She say to Sofia, All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid?

Sofia say, Hell no.

She say, What you say?

Sofia say, Hell no.

Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. Girl, what you say to Miss Millie?

Sofia say, I say, Hell no.

He slap her. (84-85)

This scene points to the multiple ways in which Jim Crow's gendered, racial, and economic dominance operates in a manner eerily reminiscent of the slave auction block. The first is Miss Millie's belief in her free access to young Black bodies to be fondled, appraised, and gifted at her choice. Her insistence on touching the children without Sofia's or the prizefighter's permission is the first assertion of gendered, racialized, and classed power dynamics held within the historical

frameworks of slavery and segregation, the belief that African Americans are made available for white people to touch, appraise, and indenture upon whim. A white woman's free and unfettered access to young Black bodies and Sofia and the prizefighter's silent waiting for it to pass is the first social maneuvering of Millie's attempt to establish a power dynamic in their exchange. She objectifies the children by reducing them to body parts in her inspections of their teeth, a practice that should call readers' attention to the auction block practices of slavery that appear to be still alive in the twentieth century in this scene.

After Millie "fingers" the children, she glances at their car and Sofia's wristwatch. It is only after Millie makes an economic appraisal of the couple's "worth" that her attention moves to a second instance of Jim Crow disciplinary logic: the belief that Black people should not—within this framework—be economically independent, without indebtedness to white society, a belief that often fueled lynching and other racially charged intimidation strategies throughout the twentieth-century south. Therefore, despite key indicators that Sofia and the prizefighter are doing well for themselves because they are "looking like somebody," Millie instead offers employment to reinstate a sense of Black indebtedness. Sofia's response "hell no" and Millie's subsequent questioning as if she didn't hear—the request to repeat a statement of defiance is common in these scenes of "Jim Crow education" narratives—momentarily shifts the power dynamics of the exchange, but ultimately allows Millie to transform her actions of racialized aggression into a scene of white female victimization, which then, in turn warrants a response from the state: the mayor's slapping Sofia across the face for "sassing." To be clear, Millie is not just asking Sofia to work for her. In a sense, she is asking Sofia to come be her mammy—to fulfill a racist stereotype perpetuated by slaveholders in which an antebellum Black (enslaved) woman performs docility and domestic servitude to promote the economic and social stability of

the white family unit, as historians like Deborah Gray White have discussed. Sofia's response, "Hell no," is a performative rejection of what Dennis Childs calls the "chattelization" of post-emancipation free Black people.[18] From Sofia's standpoint, the worst thing that could happen to her in a post-emancipation moment is to be made a mammy, a slave—and a gleefully submissive one, at that. Her direct and recalcitrant response results in the Mayor stepping in with state violence. The last blow before the Mayor's disciplinary act is his appropriation of the oft-used designation "girl" juxtaposed with the proper name "Miss Millie" to reassert his hierarchical dominance. The Mayor's calling of Sofia "girl" operates to likewise mark a Black female carceral body, as the term's gendered racial and infantilizing connotations appear frequently in writings by jailed and imprisoned Black women, where their expression is understood by all as a verbal enforcement of state-sanctioned gendered racial control.[19] This scene then escalates into Sofia taking a further stand of asserting her economic and personal autonomy by pushing the mayor down, an act that is read by the state as an assault rather than lawful self-defense, as she is arrested, jailed, and brutally beaten by state officials afterward.

---

[18] In *Slaves of the State*, Dennis Childs points to the ways in which the Thirteenth Amendment that was supposed to have "performed the miraculous conversion of 'chattel into man' actually facilitated his *and* her re-chattelization through imprisonment" (64). The Thirteenth Amendment, through its clause outlawing slavery "except as a punishment for a crime," allowed the state to legally re-enslave millions of free Black people. Dennis Childs makes clear this "re-chattelization" through the Thirteenth Amendment "allowed the courthouses of Jim Crow apartheid to function as virtual auction blocks in which criminally branded black people were either disappeared to the public profiteering venues of the chain gang, the levee camp, and the state prison plantation, or…they were submitted to the designs of enterprising white planters and industrialists who could literally purchase, lease, or sublease the bodies of black men, women, and children through the publicly brokered 'private' machinations of convict leasing, peonage, the 'fine/fee system,' and criminal surety" (8).

[19] This rumination on the ways in which the prison attempts to misname or rename incarcerated women is prevalent in the writings of Black women political prisoners and prison abolitionists. For instance, in Angela Davis's autobiography, she outlines the paternalistic structure of the women's prison, noting "All prisoners—whether they were sixteen or sixty—were referred to as 'girls'" (30). Davis later describes that this infantilizing and de-subjectivizing language operated within the larger project of the prison to make everyone incarcerated completely dependent upon prison authorities—a relationship not unlike the ways in which slave masters attempted to make enslaved people wholly dependent upon the master—when she states, "Like dependent infants, each time we wanted to use the toilet, we had to call the officer to bring us [toilet] paper" (31).

Sofia suffers in jail, and her sentence is "commuted" to a form of convict leasing, as she is confined to labor in the form of domestic servitude to the mayor's family. This commutation of punishment to domestic labor is crucial for reading modes of gendered and racialized state responses to challenging the status quo. Walker attends to the subtle ways in which the state constructs and complies with de facto Jim Crow through a form of "behavior policing" enforced by both citizens and state. These policing methods often target and criminalize certain actions as "disrespectful" or "overly aggressive," which may be read as "unbecoming" of women but especially "intolerable" for Black women in the Jim Crow South. Jim Crow education, as Richard Wright aptly reminds us in his autobiographical sketch, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," is rarely, if ever, about the law at all: it's about the seemingly quotidian social moments that in their very normalness have serious social and political implications. In drawing our attention to these moments of intersecting oppression, Walker reveals new angles from which to approach a Jim Crow legacy in terms of the particularly gendered iterations of racist domination. Walker exposes the ways in which racialized segregation and oppression informs and can be informed by other intersections of identity and provides examples of women resisting the state or status quo narrative of inferiority through their chosen "dis-respectability" and defiance of these dynamics.

In the context of the novel's release, the 1980s was likewise undergoing a particular recodification of "behavior policing" reminiscent of Sofia's Jim-Crow exchange. In 1982, the same year as the novel's release, George Kelling and James Q. Wilson introduced their theory of "broken windows policing" in an *Atlantic Monthly* article. According to Andrea J. Ritchie, this style of policing "proliferat[ed] 'quality of life' regulations criminalizing an ever-expanding range of activities in public spaces, including standing or walking (recast as 'loitering'), sitting,

lying down, sleeping…making noise, and approaching strangers, as well as a number of vaguer offenses such as engaging in 'disorderly' or 'lewd' conduct" (54). As Ritchie notes, Kelling explicitly draws connections between "broken windows policing" and Black Codes, but maintains that their theory would do a better job at "maintaining order" (56). With the impulse to broaden the powers of police discretion in the 1980s, *The Color Purple* emerged in a world in which policing the public in the name of "maintaining order" actually operated as a maintenance of race, gender, and class boundaries.

After Sofia's brutal beating by police, the Sheriff remarks to Celie, "she lucky she alive" (86); however, after this moment, Sofia arguably never recovers. She becomes ghostlike throughout the rest of the novel, obsessed with murdering her captors, and a stranger to her family and children. Paired with her prison sentence as a "lucky" alternative to a death sentence, Sofia's state-enforced negation of self is likewise met with forced labor and enforced gendered racial conceptions of behavior.[20] This shift in Sofia's spirit aligns with sociologist Avery F. Gordon's applications of Patterson's social death to incarceration: "Social death refers to the process by which a person is socially negated or made a human non-person as the terms of their incorporation into a society: living, they nonetheless appear as if and are treated as if they were dead" (10). Importantly, Sofia's suffering at the hands of the state (and the resulting social death sentence) continues through different iterations of her captivity: prison, domestic convict labor, and parole. As Nettie, who does not know Sofia at this point in the novel, recalls in a letter to Celie:

[20] Played by Oprah Winfrey in the 1985 film adaptation of the novel, Sofia's character likewise takes on a ghost-like demeanor, haunting letters and scenes through both the novel's and film's conclusions. Winfrey's performance strengthens this reading about Sofia's living death sentence post prison release. Spielberg has Sofia move almost hauntingly through town with Miss Millie and she is reduced to a zombie-like, not-quite-dead but not-quite-alive, presence at the dinner table. Her will to assert and fight back is visibly gone, until the scene of her powerful laughter when Celie talks back to Albert.

> One day I was in town with Corrine and we saw the mayor's wife and her maid. The mayor's wife was shopping—going in and out of stores—and her maid was waiting for her on the street and taking the packages…And there was her maid looking like the very last person in the world you'd expect to see waiting on anybody, and in particular not on anybody that looked like that.
>
> I spoke. But just speaking to me seemed to make her embarrassed and she suddenly sort of erased herself. It was the strangest thing, Celie! One minute I was saying howdy to a living woman. The next minute nothing living was there. Only its shape. (131)

Nettie's observations in her letter speak to the condition of social death in Sofia's post-prison incarceration. Nettie describes her as a disappearing, erased self that only takes the shape of what once was. To see a person and assert "nothing living was there" is to illustrate social death at work in a post-emancipation setting. Sofia's disappearance into the "shape" of a person relates to Nettie's observation of Sofia's social/political/disciplinary relationship to Miss Millie. The shift in Sofia is marked by Nettie's social recognition of the situation. Initially noting that Sofia looked like the "very last person in the world you'd expect to see waiting on anybody," it is only in Nettie's recognition of Sofia's subjection that brings forth the process of self-erasure that Nettie witnesses.

Sofia's social and civic death sentence is exacerbated by a second condition illuminated by Patterson's work, which is the role of forced separation from familial bonds, what he calls natal alienation. In Walker's construction of a Georgia system of neo-slavery, Sofia, like many women who were enslaved during the U.S. institutionalization of slavery, is separated from her children during her sentence. Forced away from her bonds—children that Miss Millie appraised

as being well cared for—Sofia is forced to assume the role of caretaker for the Mayor's white children as part of her punishment. As Celie recalls, "they kept her eleven and a half years, give her six months off for good behavior so she could come home early to her family. Her bigger children married and gone, and her littlest children mad at her, don't know who she is. Think she act funny, look old and dote on that little white gal she raise" (198). The continuation of Sofia's story beyond the timeline of her release from prison points to the ways in which her sentence is never over. Even after the eleven and a half years, Sofia is still on parole and obeys Miss Millie's daughter for fear that they might use her refusal to serve as a way to re-imprison her. Celie's relaying of "good behavior" as the commutation of the sentence echoes Sofia's statements from when she is first in prison, noting, "Good behavior ain't good enough for them, say Sofia. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder, she say, I dream of murder sleep or wake" (89). In this context, Sofia's sentence reduction on the basis of good behavior is called out as a mere formality. The irreversible damage to her family has already been done. Her children are estranged from her, and her family thinks she is crazy. Sofia's statement about good behavior provides a conceptual model for thinking about the relationship between behavior, racialized criminalization, and white supremacy. Sofia states clearly that notions of "good behavior" in terms of crime are a mere farce in comparison to what "they" (the white supremacist state) want, which is domination.

Sofia's particular sentence of servitude reflects what Sarah Haley has called "Domestic Carcerality," a type of "parole" system developed after the 1908 legal abolition of the chain gang. Understood as a type of "reform," the Georgia General Assembly pushed forward legislation that created parole for prisoners who served a minimum number of years in their sentence (175). Haley notes that on the basis of this sentence minimum, "Instead of being

released after their minimum time was up, imprisoned women and men would serve additional time outside the penitentiary, but they would 'remain within the legal custody and under the control of said prison commission and subject at any time to be taken into custody on order of said commission'" (175, quote from "Act to Create a System of Parole"). Haley continues that "In rare cases Black women on parole worked on white-owned farms, but the majority were paroled into domestic servitude" (175). She outlines that further legislation and reform allowed the judge discretion in assigning sentences, probation, and parole, in which the historical record shows that white women were more likely to be sentenced with misdemeanors and put on probation (no work mandated), and Black women were more likely to receive felony convictions that led to longer sentences, work-mandated parole, and longer parole sentences. As Haley states, "Paroled Black women who performed domestic service for white employers were always under the threat of being sent back to the chain gang or state farm if they broke a rule or failed to work up to their employers' standard…Therefore the 1908 Parole Act brought convict labor for private profit into the territory of the white home" (176). Haley's historical account underscores how the history of incarceration—particularly the history of Black women's incarceration—is incomplete without attention to the various ways in which captivity and unfree labor developed outside of the walls of the penitentiary throughout the twentieth century. One example is the way in which "parole undermined Black women's economic and social advances, creating a carceral world outside of the state farm and chain gang in an attempt to guarantee white satisfaction with their domestic servants" (178).

Sofia explicitly outlines her condition of (neo)slavery for Celie to later document. She communicates and defends her analysis of her status as a slave when retelling a story to Celie about teaching Miss Millie to drive. Sofia recalls that while she is "slaving away cleaning" a post

at the bottom of the stairs, Miss Millie asks Sofia if she knows how to drive. Sofia's son breaks into the story to correct her language, "Don't say slaving, Mama," to which Sofia offers an analysis of her status as Black stolen laborer under a white supremacist system:

> Sofia say, Why not? They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa's porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I'm at they beck and call all night and all day. They won't let me see my children. They won't let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I'm a slave, she say. What would you call it?
>
> A captive, he say.
>
> Sofia go on with her story … (103)

Like Patterson, Sofia "interpret[s] slavery as a relation of domination rather than as a category of legal thought" (Patterson 334). When ruminating on her labor relationship to the Mayor's family post-release, Sofia engages in the analysis of her Jim-Crow-era prisoner status in relation to slavery. Sofia's analysis of her neo-slave status as an imprisoned laborer—by means of her various "commutations" of sentence—is crucial for reading the ways in which Walker attends to the relationship between slavery and Jim Crow imprisonment. Sofia defends her choice in phrasing by pointing to her living conditions, her labor conditions, and her conditions of natal and communal alienation. Thus, when considered in the context of Patterson's conceptions of slavery and social death, Sofia's analytic produces a nuanced articulation of slavery operating anew in the Jim Crow era. Sofia's critical understanding of her confinement as a multifaceted reincarnation of slavery is also in line with Haley's readings of Georgia's post-1908 parole system: "The domestic carceral regime served the interest of middling and wealthy whites who could afford to pay for the services of a domestic worker but instead enjoyed the benefits of

unfree labor" (178). To note that middle and upper-class whites—which certainly would include the Mayor and Miss Millie—were capable of affording Black domestic labor, yet enjoyed the potential for free Black women's convict labor, further defines the relationship between the Mayor, his wife, and Sofia as one of domination. It holds true that if Sofia would not go willingly into domestic servitude for whites, they would force her. It also relates to what Pa tells Celie about the reasons for her real father's death, noting "Your daddy didn't know how to git along…Whitefolks lynch him" (181). Celie's learning about her father's and Sofia's altercations with white supremacy ultimately communicate the same message: if free Black people do not willingly operate within the white dominant social order, they will be forced to do so or killed.

As the prison cell and the Mayor's house in the novel represent locations of white supremacist gender dominance via the gendered racial labor distinctions Sofia must perform, Walker also makes clear that the prison is a space of sexualized state violence, to call to mind the work of critical prison studies scholar Patrick Elliot Alexander. Sexualized state violence denotes the racial-historical conception of gendered harm as an instrument of state-sanctioned social control that has been experienced by Black women from the era of the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the present. Alexander points to the ways in which the "[legal] and institutional indifference toward the sexual victimizers of imprisoned women of the current epoch…resumes the uncontested impunity enjoyed by sexually abusive male slave owners of centuries past," as contemporary male prison guards have legal protections to oversee all operations within women's prisons and thus unfettered access to incarcerated women's bodies and intimate spaces with little-to-no consequence (82).[21] When Sofia is first incarcerated, Harpo, Celie, Shug, Albert,

[21] Alexander clearly defines his term in *From Slave Ship to Supermax*, stating, "Sexualized state violence is a disciplinary holdover from the Transatlantic Slave Trade whose proliferation in women's correctional settings has resulted from the passage of Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964" (21). Alexander continues that "Because of the systemic, unpoliced, and mostly unpunished nature of this state violence, I conceptualize it…as a legally sanctioned

and Squeak try to devise a plan to get her sentence commuted. In discovering that Squeak, Harpo's light-skinned girlfriend, has distant blood relations with the white warden, they send her to try to reason with him. The scene quickly turns to sexual brutality when the warden denies relation to her and rapes her. While Squeak's retelling of the rape is spare in explicit details of the act, Celie's recounting through the letter documents the brutality, noting "Poor little Squeak come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe" (95). In recalling my discussion in the previous chapter of Joan Little's case in 1974 in which she went on trial for murdering a white prison guard who attempted to rape her while she was imprisoned in North Carolina, Walker's inclusion of Squeak's attempted intervention and subsequent rape adds literary context for Black women's analogous real-world relationships with white prison wardens and state violence. Again, the sexual abuse that Squeak endures at the hands of the state echoes a growing concern in the latter half of the twentieth century in which male prison guards have legally sanctioned oversight of even the most intimate aspects of women's and girls' lives in women's prisons. Moreover, Squeak's blood relation to the white warden draws an implicit, but rather direct, link between the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Jim Crow era through the centuries-spanning routine practice of white men's sexually exploitive relationship to Black women. When asked if anyone knew who warden Bubber Hodges's Black kin were, Squeak reveals that Bubber's brother, Jimmy is her father. She calls him Mr. Jimmy and confirms that he is married to "that Quitman girl," but Bubber had visited once with Mr. Jimmy and gave all the children quarters, saying they "sure do look like Hodges" (91). This linking of her blood relation to the warden who then rapes her points to a larger systemic practice

instrument of white supremacy—as a contemporary iteration of what Saidiya Hartman has insightfully identified as an entire 'discourse of seduction' that legitimated the sexualized subjection of enslaved women for centuries" (64).

within white supremacist ideology that considers Black women's bodies sexually and physically exploitable without social or legal recourse.

It is important to note that in each of these moments of white supremacist state violence against Black women in Walker's novel, there is always a response of resistance. In the novel, the scene of Squeak's brutal rape by a state official leads her to assert herself within the domestic sphere. At the end of telling her story, she demands to be called Mary Agnes from this point forward instead of Squeak. She also begins a career in singing the blues. Squeak's horrific experience of sexualized state violence compels her to reframe her own status in the household. Before this incident, Squeak is a small and rather subservient partner to Harpo, but her return from the prison having experienced one mode of systemic sexualized state harm compels her to defy her own subjected status in the home. Her testimony of what happened in the prison, which is then written down by Celie, can be considered what Alexander terms a prisoner abuse narrative, as it points to the centuries-spanning practice of state-sanctioned sexual violence against Black women as a routine element of gendered racial domination. By way of Celie's writing, Squeak's testimony reframes the way in which sexual harm is understood as part and extension of systems of racial domination.

Celie's Letters, Social Death and the Prisoner's Curse

Sofia's and Squeak's gendered and racialized confrontations with distinctly anti-Black state violence provide a metric for understanding Celie's confrontation with intraracial patriarchal violence and harm in the domestic sphere. In the criticism of the novel, Celie's condition of neo-slavery operates as an open secret, rarely the focus of a full-article or chapter, but eerily slipped into critical understandings of Celie's condition or her epistolary style as background. A quick survey of scholarly assessments of *The Color Purple* reveals references to

the novel as a record of "[Celie's] bondage and her freedom" (Gates 247). Others note Celie is "reduced to virtual bondage by her husband" and refer to "her status as slave" (Henderson 68, 69). And while some outright state that there is a critical impulse to read the novel as a contemporary slave narrative (hooks, Norman) and cite others who have read it in this way (Lysik, Rascher), many hesitate at the prospect of aligning Celie's confinement within intraracial patriarchal dominance to the institution of white supremacist legal, social, economic, and sexual exploitive dominance. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson gets the closest to outlining this relationship by stating, "For Walker, it is the institution of slavery and its legacy which are largely responsible for setting into motion the oppressive mode characterizing relations between men and women, white and Black, powerful and powerless" (69). Celie's particular condition of neo-slavery, although perpetuated by Black male patriarchs, operates as another iteration of white supremacist violence in that its intended result is to maintain hierarchized distinctions in gender and race.

From beginning to end, *The Color Purple* traces the journeys of Black women whose spirits, families, and futures are supposed to be brutalized, separated, and subdued by patriarchal *and* state violence, but the power of the novel resides in the ways in which many of these women embody the characteristics of a recalcitrant slave. Sofia's dreaming of murder and Squeak's turn to the blues in the way of Shug Avery are documented by Celie who seeks her own forms of self-liberation. To reiterate, it is important to remember that the patriarchal violence that Celie and other characters endure has ties to white supremacist state violence despite the fact that the enactors of that violence are Black men. As Courtney George aptly notes, "By juxtaposing the histories of Celie's step-father and real father, Walker simultaneously discloses the two consequences Black men faced in a white-controlled South: the threat of becoming like the white

oppressor or being lynched for fighting for freedom and individuality" (131). But the novel is also an exercise for reading the social death sentence "across the razor wire." Celie provides life-affirming care—an act that disrupts the socially isolating logic of the prison—by attending to Sofia's wounds, but also through documenting Sofia's struggle. This documentation is doubly beneficial, as Celie is later able to use Sofia's experience as an example through which to recognize and rebel against her own confinement.

By critically reexamining Black women's confinement through Walker's depiction of the relationship between Sofia and Celie, then, we gain an analytic for reading *The Color Purple* as an anticarceral work. Walker's novel analyzes the nature and various iterations of Black women's confinement through domestic and state violence. It reads the process through which African American male and female characters can be co-opted into and deputized by white supremacist patriarchal and state systems of harm. Although Walker is criticized for what many consider negative and harmful depictions of Black men, what she ultimately offers us is an examination of harm. Almost all instances of harm in the novel are contextualized through a lens of patriarchal or racist patriarchal inheritance. She also illuminates how often harm is reproduced by depicting moments in which characters who are affected by systems of harm become deputized to enact harm on others. For example, when Harpo and Sofia first marry, Harpo—who has endured years of physical and emotional abuse from his father—attempts to recreate a household of gendered domination by trying to make Sofia "mind." Mr. _____ tells Harpo to beat Sofia in the same way that he beats Celie. Celie, who has lived a life of abuse, also tells Harpo to beat Sofia. Celie's reasoning for telling Harpo to beat her is in relation to her own status in marriage to Albert. She prefaces her conversation with Harpo with what she has already overheard between Harpo and Albert: "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got

the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a sound beating" (35). Celie ruminates on this before expressing that she likes Sofia, but that they have different responses to patriarchal systems of control. Celie notes,

> If she talking when Harpo and Mr. ____ come in the room, she keep right on…I think about this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to her to make her mind. I don't mention how happy he is now…I think bout how every time I jump when Mr. ____ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me.
>
> Beat her. I say. (36)

As one who is repeatedly subjected to physical and sexual violence, at the beginning of the novel, Celie also deputizes herself in the project of patriarchal dominance. Harpo, likewise subjected to his father's brutal violence as well as emotional and parental neglect, inherits a logic of patriarchal dominance. In this way, the systemic harm of the domestic sphere relies heavily on the deputization of harmed people to perpetuate hierarchies of difference. As Celie seems to know no other example of familial relationships beyond physically abusive patriarchy, she imagines herself in the correct social place in that community and therefore able to encourage Sofia's discipline.

When Sofia confronts Celie about telling Harpo to beat her, she is forced to tell the truth and Sofia offers a reading on her experiences with harm and resistance: "All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain't safe in a family of men. But I never thought I'd have to fight in my own house" (40).[22] For Sofia, patriarchal harm begins with family relations, but her response is to

[22] For the men, Walker provides lineages of harm, but as George points out, this emerges from a gendered racial context, which she—using Adam Gussow's *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*—reads through the novel's use of the blues.

fight, unlike Celie who notes that fighting has only brought the separation between her and her sister. Fighting guaranteed Sofia's survival and maintained sense of self, whereas for Celie, not fighting guarantees her survival: "What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (21). Beyond a rumination on differing and sometimes contradictory tactics for types of survival against patriarchal violence, the novel also serves to show that another means of resistance is the refusal to co-operate as enforcers or complicit bystanders in that system.

In viewing Celie's and Sofia's experiences with domestic and state violence in conversation with one another, relationships between their individual praxes for survival and resistance emerge. As with Sofia's choice to fight and Celie's choice to perform subservience to lessen the blows, Celie's letters provide testimonies as well as examples of communal care. When Celie visits Sofia in prison, she is so shocked by how brutalized Sofia's body is that she recounts it: "Scare me so bad I near bout drop my grip. But I don't. I put it on the floor of the cell, take out a comb and brush, nightgown, witch hazel and alcohol and I start to work on her. The colored tendant bring me water to wash her with, and I start at her two little slits for eyes" (86-87). Celie attends to Sofia in prison, noting that she and the rest of the family were permitted to visit "twice a month for half an hour" (88). Celie also visits Sofia at the Mayor's house while Sofia watches the children. The inclusion of these moments in the letters not only points to the ways in which systems of gendered racial dominance aim to limit or even cut off communal ties altogether through visitation restrictions, but also how Celie's repeated visitation insists on maintaining the communal bonds institutions of neo-slavery seek to destroy.

This understanding of resistance to natal alienation is crucial, then, for understanding Celie's particular form of confinement, which is partially maintained through Mr. _____'s—later

revealed to readers as *Albert*'s—withholding of the letters Nettie sends Celie throughout her life. When the sisters are separated at the beginning of the novel, Celie recalls,

> I say, Write.
>
> She say, Nothing but death can keep me from it.
>
> She never write. (18)

As Celie's Pa has already separated her children from her, Albert's withholding of the letters from her sister enforces a full separation of Celie from her familial ties. As Celie does not receive the dozens of letters from Nettie, she often assumes she is dead. As I will outline in the following section, the letter itself (and therefore the epistolary novel form) has the capacity to assert life through and across presumed social and literal death. The letters that Celie pens to God operate as a reclamation of a living self despite a social death sentence, and they also document Sofia's re-emergence from social death. Once Celie discovers the withheld letters, she recognizes Albert's patriarchal domination as part of a system of gendered racial control and thus reconceptualizes her condition as an individual victim of repeated violence. This moment marks a turning point in the novel. It is a moment in which Celie begins to speak out against her own confinement. As Gloria Thomas Pillow observes, the important moments in the novel are those in which Celie realizes, "It is her *world*—and not Celie" that is responsible for her daily living conditions (114). In other words, Celie's transformation marks the moments at which she begins to see her conditions as part of a system of harm, rather than as a consequence of her own actions or shortcomings.

The conditions of Celie's confinement are formed by her forced removal from her sister when Albert throws Nettie out and his subsequent withholding of her letters to Celie, which leads to Celie's intense feelings of isolation. The withheld letters from Nettie become the catalyst for

Celie's explicit rebellion against Albert and the domestic sphere shaped by his systematic, repeated gestures to maintain dominance. Celie's rebellion in response to the withheld letters marks the turning point in the novel where Celie leaves with Shug, begins a life in Memphis, and starts her own business. Beginning with the withheld letters, Celie responds to Albert's systemic patriarchal violence with a curse:

> Any more letters come? I ast.
>
> He say, what?
>
> You heard me, I say. Any more letters from Nettie come?
>
> If they did, he say, I wouldn't give 'em to you…
>
> I curse you, I say.
>
> What that mean? he say.
>
> I say, Until you do right by me, everything you touch will crumble.
>
> He laugh. Who you think you is? he say. You can't curse nobody. Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.
>
> Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees.
>
> Whoever heard of such a thing, say Mr. _____. I probably didn't whup your ass enough.
>
> Every lick you hit me you will suffer twice, I say. Then I say, You better stop talking because all I'm telling you ain't coming just from me. Look like when I open my mouth the air rush in and shape words.
>
> Shit, he say. I should have lock you up. Just let you out to work.
>
> The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot, I say. (206)

The impetus for Celie's curse is Albert's open admission to cutting off her familial ties by withholding her sister's letters and his intent to continue to do so to maintain control of the household. Her verbal challenge is a clear example of what Patrick Elliot Alexander calls "antipanoptic expressivity," which is a "confined person's unanticipated act of speaking truth to power while he or she is dispossessed of voice and contained within any site premised on a white supremacist disciplinary logic, authoritarian rule, gendered social control, or premature death" (19). Celie opens her moment of speaking truth to patriarchal power with her unforeseen articulation of a key methodology of her confinement—the withholding of letters—and ends with a direct declaration to Albert: "The jail you plan for me is the one in which you will rot." Her latter statement is a response to the threat that Albert makes to lock her up, but also a reflection on the planned conditions of the domestic jail she already exists in. Celie's powerful indictment echoes what Avery F. Gordon has theorized as "the prisoner's curse." According to Gordon, "The prisoner's curse is a most assuredly a form of literacy, a subjugated knowledge, and a methodology of imprisonment" ("Methodologies" 655). The curse, "is the learned language of the accursed themselves. It is an angry, demanding, sometimes vengeful language, registering the recalcitrance, the indifference, the venality that prompted it. It is a reply to the social death sentence, a stepping back into the stream of time, a demand on the world *in front of history*, a hurling of a heavy burden carried back across to them. The curse confiscates the authority to speak in a context in which communication is utterly impossible" (655). Celie's curse is recalcitrant, and hurdles her "back into the stream of time" when she states that "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (207). To declare "I'm here," is to affirm life and mobility against the individuals that seek to confine her. Celie's curse is delivered in front of the family. They bear witness to her assertion of

presence and self while they also bear witness to Celie's acknowledgment of the conditions of her confinement. The dual nature of the curse—to document the means of confinement and profess a radical sense of self despite a social and civic death sentence within the domestic carceral space—takes on even more power when Celie renders the conditions of her confinement back to Albert, the one who confines her.

Read through a carceral lens, Celie not only delivers a prisoner's curse that calls attention to her conditions; her curse also compels the orchestrator and enforcer of her confinement to confess to his establishment of these conditions. Albert admits his intent to extract from and exploit Celie through his noting that he should have locked her up and only released her to work. Celie's attribution of the words coming from outside of herself—the trees and air—also point to the external and communal aspect of the curse and testimony. Albert characterizes his understanding of Celie as an embodiment of living death when he says, "You can't curse nobody…you nothing at all." He sees her in ways similar to how Nettie's and Celie's letters have been describing the Mayor's family's view of Sofia. Gordon states that the prisoner's curse, 1) "asserts the life world and life force, the anticipatory afterlife, of the ones whose existence has been forgotten" 2) "demands to know what the captive has done to deserve the reduction in and deprivation of personhood to which he or she is subject," 3) "calls for reparation," and 4) "declares that, contrary to appearances, the social death sentence obtains, belongs to the ones who maintain and enforce its brutal reality and gratuitous fictionality, the ones who negate, deny, abandon their fellow human beings" (655-656). Celie's famous lines that call out the same reasons Albert concludes that she is nothing with "But I'm here" certainly assert her own life force and futurity in spite of her social death sentence, which has been legally and financially determined by her marriage to Albert. Celie demands reparation, stating that until Albert does

right by her, he will suffer; and lastly she reflexively highlights that the social death sentence he attempts to enforce on her is in fact his own, stating that the jail he plans for her is the one in which he will rot. This curse is powerful, and plays out through the rest of the novel to catalyze Albert's transformation of character. The distinct power of the curse comes from its emergence from within a carceral condition, and from its reach across the social, legal, economic, and political boundaries to affirm life and futurity through recalcitrance. Using Sofia's insight that "good behavior ain't good enough for them," then, becomes a metric through which Celie also reads her particular experience within and against patriarchal dominance.

Celie's ultimate resistance to her domestic imprisonment takes part in an abolitionist project. It operates as what Gordon, using the words of Toni Cade Bambara, calls "becoming unavailable for servitude" (8). Gordon states,

> Needless to say, being or becoming unavailable for servitude takes a certain amount of time and trouble and one reason why is that, among other things, being or becoming unavailable for servitude involves cultivating an indifference, an ability to be in-difference to the system's own benefits and its own technologies of improvement. This kind of in-difference is an important form of political and individual consciousness and it is also a conceptual measure of abolition itself. It's key to anticipating, inhabiting, making the world you want to live in now, urgently, as if you couldn't live otherwise, peacefully, as if you have all the time in the world. ("Some Thoughts" 8)

Celie's curse and the subsequent imaginative ending of the novel follow an abolitionist praxis for worldmaking. While many critics have called the ending unrealistic and problematically fairy-tale-like,[23] Walker's ending engages in the possibility for structural change through both

[23] In a critique of Walker's novel and its popularity, Trudier Harris is skeptical of Walker's fairy-tale-like or fantastical elements. She observes, "From its opening in that paradoxical, nightmarish, fairy-tale vein, the novel

recalcitrance and radical transformation. Celie's curse inhabits a spirit of transgression. It is her formal verbal resignation, a becoming unavailable for servitude that coincides with becoming of the self. Celie's curse relates, in this regard, to my discussion of Dylan Rodríguez's definition of abolition in chapter one. Abolition is certainly a becoming unavailable for servitude that operates on the two-pronged approach of scaling down modalities of human incapacitation *as well as* participating in radical re-imaginings of community. From this point forward in the novel, Celie leaves her home to live with Shug, begins a lucrative business making pants, and returns to heal herself and community by reuniting with Nettie and developing a filial relationship with the transformed Albert. In a sense, the end is fairy-tale-like, but it ought not be dismissed as unbelievable or resisting reality. Instead, the ending that emerges from Celie's curse radically imagines transformation from confrontation and depicts perhaps unfamiliar ways in which communities facilitate and support encounters that catalyze this transformation.

In the context of neo-abolition studies and its connection to the aftermaths of slavery, Celie's "becoming unavailable for servitude" is a fugitive act. The concept of fugitivity that I employ in this chapter develops from the Black radical tradition that links the experiences of escaped slaves to post-emancipation modes of Black resistance to white supremacist dominance. An example of fugitivity within this tradition appears in former political prisoner and current prison abolitionist Angela Davis's 1974 autobiography in which she describes her involvement in the Black Panther Party, her subsequent targeting by the FBI, and ultimate arrest and incarceration. The political autobiography opens with a scene of fugitivity, as Davis has gone

---

moves through improbably events to the traditional passing out of presents in that contrived 'happily ever after' ending. All the good guys win, and the bad guys are dead or converted to womanist philosophy…The fabulist fairy-tale mold of the novel is ultimately incongruous with and does not serve well to frame its message" (160). Harris's point is that fairy tales and happy endings do nothing more than re-affirm the status quo; they "affirm passivity" (160). While I certainly see Harris's point in the problems of framing the novel via fairy-tale, I would suggest the seemingly happy ending serves a more active, radical, and practical purpose than the affirmation of passivity. Instead, I opt to read the seemingly unrealistic ending as a call toward imaginative communal transformation.

"underground" and is running from FBI and police encroachment, an experience she links to runaway slaves escaping to freedom. Davis explains, "Living as a fugitive means resisting hysteria, distinguishing between the creations of a frightened imagination and the real signs that the enemy is near…Thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps…the very teeth of the dogs at their heels" (5-6). Davis's linking of her own fugitive status to the experiences of runaway slaves exceeds the physical status of being on the run. While her physical move underground is important, she also highlights particularly critical psychological and imaginative work needed to sustain the run toward freedom. This concept of fugitivity as it developed throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first also relates to Fred Moten's definition of the term as "a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed" (*Stolen Life* 131). With these two complementary understandings of fugitivity at hand, the remainder of this chapter is interested in the ways in which both Sofia and Celie radically imagine and enact escape within their respective forms of captivity. Celie's curse offers a verbal and performative contestation to the structures of her own confinement, but the next section examines radical fugitivity at work where Black captivity is marked by disappearance or distance. In other words, the next section examines the power of the epistolary as it materially operates to transcend spaces of confinement.

"And no matter how much the telegram said you must be drown, I still git letters from you": Epistolarity As Neo-Abolitionist Literature

One of the most overlooked radical potentials of Walker's *The Color Purple* appears in the epistolary form itself. Many critics have analyzed the letter form in the novel in relationship to eighteenth-century epistolary fiction written by white men and women with the position that Walker is writing to make space at the table for "the black and female idiom within a

traditionally Western and Eurocentric form" (Henderson 80). They read Walker's choice in the epistolary as a literary intervention that challenges the presumed white male or white female authority centered in eighteenth-century epistolary novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), or Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778). bell hooks cautions readers against such easy categorical thinking regarding the novel when she writes, "to say as even some critics do that it is a modern day 'slave narrative' or to simply place the work within the literary tradition of epistolary sentimental novels is also a way to contain, restrict, control" (215). This warning is warranted given that feminist readings of the novel have all too quickly looked to Richardson in particular for a point of comparison, listing the tropes of the tradition—a woman who is being held against her will seeking salvation from a sexually, physically, and emotionally dominating man and her only reprieve is to steal away to write her experience through letters—and matching them to Walker's early1980s text. While turning to Richardson for assistance in his analysis, Henry Louis Gates Jr. is the only critic to also look to the African American literary tradition as well, stating "While I am not aware of another epistolary novel in the Afro-American tradition, there is ample precedent in the tradition for the publication of letters" (244). Gates refers to the published letters of Ignatius Sancho and Phillis Wheatley, but his comparisons stop there for outlining Walker's epistolary novel in relation to a Black epistolary tradition.

The Color Purple was released at a time in which feminist and women's studies were becoming institutionally recognized as legitimate disciplines in literary criticism. In particular, foundational feminist readings of the eighteenth-century epistolary novel were emerging and applied to the letter-forms of works like *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, *Evelina*, and *The Coquette*. Alongside this emerging scholarship were popular works in the 1970s such as Judy Blume's *Are You There, God? It's Me Margaret* (1970) containing epistolary/prayer-like elements—Blume intermittently

begins chapters with Margaret's questions to God—that are quickly linked to critical readings of the epistolary and feminist understandings of self-making under patriarchal dominance. The many critical applications of Walker's text to a predominantly white (proto)feminist Western literary tradition, then, seem timely with the novel's release alongside these developments in women's studies criticism. And many critics theorize that Walker's choice for the epistolary is a way of writing herself into that particularly white literary tradition.

I would argue that while we should connect Walker's novel to feminist discourses on the tradition of the epistolary, we should also hesitate at wholesale additive models of feminist discourse. One reason is because this model limits the critical and discursive ways in which Walker's *The Color Purple* operates as a text in relation to both feminist and African American literary traditions. In other words, much of the novel's reception from its release through the turn of the century was concerned with how this Black women's novel fit within the tradition of the white women's literary canon, a problematic yet well-practiced additive model of canon inclusion. As hooks warns readers against this impulse, many, like hooks, only take this hesitation as far as understanding Walker's use of the epistolary form and tropes as "serv[ing] only as a background for deviation, for subversion" (216). These additive or repurposing models serve a problematic literary assimilationist project, and they also foreclose understanding the works within their own right.

This particular additive reading of Walker's text within the epistolary tradition ignores the Black radical literary tradition of the open letter, a different epistolary tradition emerging contemporaneous to white feminist discourse on the epistolary novel in the latter half of the twentieth century. Emerging from the civil rights movement and accelerating through the post-civil rights/Black Power 1970s and 1980s, the open letter form operated as both a literary and

radical response to racialized violence and oppression. To a greater degree, the open letter form specifically became popular in relation to social critiques from and of jail and prison confinement, as seen in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (1963) and James Baldwin's "An Open Letter to my Sister, Miss Angela Davis" (1970). Prison letters as a Black radical literary form also appeared in George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1970). This tradition in letters is omitted from (white) feminist conceptualizations of the epistolary tradition, which, in turn, lends itself to scholars' oversights of the radical fugitivity expressed in Walker's chosen form. I argue that the Black radical epistolary tradition, which is exemplified through Walker's novel, *The Color Purple* 1) highlights the conditions of confinement; 2) offers doubled and often metadiscursive commentaries on the public/private performance of the letter; 3) often materially reaches across the boundaries of confinement and social death, acting as a lifeline; and 4) insists on readings of individual/community commentary for the state of terror enacted daily against Black lives. The radical prison letter—open or individually addressed—creates the literal and material means through which social life vibrates through social death spaces. It affirms life contradictory to knowledge of death: the letter stands in for the absent body or the body made absent, as Celie initially notes that she assumes Nettie is dead because she hasn't received any letters.

The Black radical open letter form provides a literary historical precedent for reading carcerality in *The Color Purple*. Critical prison studies scholar Sharon Luk's *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity* theorizes the utility and radical social praxis of the letter partly through her examinations of letters penned by Black radical imprisoned intellectuals. The political open-letter or letter-essay is part of what has since become a rich contemporary genre of U.S. nonfiction often emerging from the African American tradition. In

an *Atlantic* review of Carolina De Robertis's recent edited collection, *Radical Hope: Letters of Love and Dissent in Dangerous Times*, Emily Lordi attests that "Though almost no one writes letters anymore, plenty of people write open letters…the open letter has also become a powerful form of literary activism, especially for writers of color who have used it to protest racism and to build community in the Black Lives Matter era." Lordi notes that open letters from the civil rights era to the present "balance two aims: to enlighten the outside world and, perhaps more importantly, to share tactics of survival and resistance with kin and whoever else might need them." As Lordi points to James Baldwin as popularizing the open "letter-essay as a personal-political form," it is important to acknowledge that one of his most important open letters is the one he wrote to Angela Y. Davis while she was incarcerated. The Black radical prison letter has played a distinct role in shaping the now contemporary African American letter-essay tradition practiced by writers such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kiese Laymon, and Edwidge Danticat.

In applying this tradition to the late twentieth-century fiction of Alice Walker, I compare the radical possibility that Luk locates in the prison letter to Celie's and Sofia's anticarceral radical transformations. Luk's work examines the radical and political efficacy of the letters written by racialized groups of people who have been forcibly confined through occupation, internment, and incarceration in the U.S. Conceptualizing the prison as a space of social and literal death, Luk considers the letter "as a material sign of living potential" (168). In what she calls "the life of paper," the epistolary operates as a way to reach through the bounds of social and civic death. Following the ways in which the material and transmittable force of the letter can document a living person on the other side of the prison wall threatens the social and political death space of the prison's disciplinary operations. Where Luk specifically theorizes the life of paper circulating across prison walls, I am broadening this discourse to consider the utility

and radically transformative power of the letter in forms of Black people's confinement that reveal the ordinariness of racial and gendered discipline, but extend beyond the carceral geography of the prison proper.

In heeding hooks's warning against simple relegation of the novel to neat categories such as the "neo-slave" or "sentimental epistolary," my linking of Celie and Sofia to different forms of neo-slavery at work in *The Color Purple* aims to show how a re-situation of Walker's text in relation to Black radical epistolary and neo-slavery offers broadened conceptions of confinement outside of the prison in the post-emancipation south as well as reflexively comments on the 1980s moment of publication in which the United States invested in one of the largest prison booms in history. This conception of Celie's confinement as a condition of neo-slavery is, in this sense, in conversation with Gates's assertion that "Nettie's unreceived letters to Celie appear, suddenly, almost at the center of the text and continue in what we might think of as the text's *middle passage*" (244, emphasis mine). The letters mark a transfer, a journey literally across the Atlantic from Africa to the U.S., but their disappearance also marks the space between as a lacuna, the space in which Celie assumes her sister to be dead.

One way in which Black radical epistolarity operates in the novel is through the prison letter's essential quality of calling attention to the carceral conditions from which it emerges. As Luk points out, the open letter often partakes in a metadiscursive process that highlights the conditions under which the letter was written (202). In her analysis of King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Luk points to how the letter opens pointing to King's current conditions of captivity—"While confined here in the Birmingham city jail"—and closes noting "I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think

long thoughts and pray long prayers?" This pointing toward the conditions of confinement operates to highlight the doubled discourse in the letter that serves as a public indictment of the systemic social injustice that generates the conditions of confinement—Jim Crow and racially discriminatory law—as well as a performed invitation into the intimate space of the prison cell in which King is writing. Celie's letters call attention to her own conditions of confinement in a similar way.

For example, in the novel's famous opening, Celie writes what most critics call an act of self-erasure, when she states: "Dear God, / I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl" (1). Gates and hooks separately point to the fact that the actual first words of the text are not a letter at all, but a command from Pa stating "You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (1), and therefore Celie's letter response is the "text's self-justification of its own representation of writing" (Gates 245). Pointing to the fact that the letter form is necessitated by Pa's command that Celie tell no one about his raping her and her resulting pregnancy, Gates, hooks, and others suggest that Celie's self-erasure is the point from which the rest of the novel takes on her project of "writ[ing] her story and herself into being" (Henderson 74). Though a subtle deviation from these conceptions, I would suggest that instead of viewing the "~~I am~~" as a moment of self-erasure, one should read it as a statement of the carceral conditions of erasure. While the personal "~~I am~~" stands to represent a foreclosed self to be re-asserted through the act of writing, the act of writing the erasure in itself points to a paradoxical authority of the writer writing oneself out. If viewed through the lens of the prison letter, however, Celie's "~~I am~~" inhabits the discourse of those deemed socially dead (or socially negated) writing against those conditions anyway. Therefore, the act of "erasure" is not only calling attention to the fact of her conditions, but is itself an act of resistance. Pa tells her to "tell

no one but God," but Celie's choice to write to God rather than *tell* God produces a record. As Gates states, "Celie places her present self ("I am") under erasure, a device that reminds us that she is writing, and searching for her voice by selecting, then rejecting word choice or word order, but also that there is some reason for why" (247).

To *write* the record of one's confinement that must be kept secret resists the public/private binary of the information even if no one reads her letters to God. I contend that Celie's letters to God—although seemingly private within the world of the novel—serve as open letters operating within the Black radical epistolary tradition. Deborah McDowell suggests that "The Celie letters addressed to God indicate that she is a writer without an audience, without a hearing" (144). As hooks states, "Celie and Nettie's letters testify, we as readers bear witness" (226). But the "private" letter in novel form serves the same purpose as the letters circulated from imprisoned members of the Black Panther Party in newsletters to "blend the formal expression of political grievance with the rhetorical appeal of familiarity" (Luk 201). Celie's letters to God ask for intervention in a condition of oppression that she cannot quite yet express in words, except that these conditions encourage a negation of self. Her imploring of God to "give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me" (1), mirrors the open letter form to encourage communal solidarity and intervention across the razor wire. Celie's conception of the God she writes to through her spiritual transformation also moves from the private, intimate and individual to the public and open when she addresses her last letter to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear everything. Dear God" (285).

Under a system of patriarchal dominance, Celie experiences a forced lack of mobility, silence, brutal beatings, sexual violation, and forced labor. These conditions stress and express the methodologies of social death at work within her particular form of captivity. These

conditions also point to what I highlight as a key relationship in the novel for conceptualizing carcerality: that between Celie and Sofia within Orlando Patterson's conceptions of social death, resistance is possible through the letter. If we recall the importance of contextualizing Sofia's domestic carceral captivity in relation to Georgia's early twentieth-century parole system, then, in this regard, Haley's work is again instructive: "Women who wrote requests for pardons or commutations clearly envisioned parole as captivity; they were writing from the inside, from the position of prisoners in a domestic carceral sphere whose location in a space outside of traditional camp boundaries did not at all represent liberty" (186). Celie's letters to God, in other words, serve to tell both women's (and many other women's) stories in the novel and outline the carceral relationships within the Jim Crow South prison cell and the patriarchal cell of Celie's domestic imprisonment/enslavement.

In engaging in the letter form, Celie not only produces a record of her own conditions of social death; she also testifies to the conditions of others. It is Celie's letters to God and later her sister Nettie that document the conditions of Sofia's confinement. *The Color Purple* offers a difficult reading of neo-slavery in Jim Crow-era Georgia that highlights the ways in which gendered harm serves the white supremacist project of racial dominance even when that harm operates outside of white-on-Black violence. In other words, intraracial gendered harm benefits the hierarchies outlined by white supremacy at work in the novel. Celie writes to stay alive. She writes to avoid the living death sentence that Sofia has endured, while also documenting those conditions for God to bear witness to. Yet it is also important to note how the conditions enforcing Sofia's living death sentence mutate throughout the novel from prison, to domestic labor, to parole, to post-parole. Each of these iterations marks the state of living death, but with altered conditions. We do not get to see Sofia's letters, if she wrote any. Sofia fights and we see

her disciplined, we see her brutalized, and we see her stripped from her children in order to raise the Mayor's white children. The most direct and thorough reading of Sofia's position as recalcitrant neo-slave is when hooks asserts:

> Sofia's self-affirmation, her refusal to see herself as victim is not rewarded. She is constantly punished…Unlike Celie or Shug, she is regarded as a serious threat to the social order and is violently attacked, brutalized, and subdued. Always a revolutionary, Sofia has never been victimized or complicit in her own oppression. Tortured and persecuted by the State, treated as though she is a political prisoner, Sofia's spirit is systematically crushed…Her suffering cannot easily be mitigated as it would require radical transformation of society…Given all the spectacular changes in *The Color Purple*, it is not without grave and serious import that the character who most radically challenges sexism and racism is a tragic figure who is only partially rescued—restored only to a semblance of sanity. (221-222)

hooks's reading is worth quoting at length because it is the only reading that contextualizes Sofia's radical and political challenges to racism and sexism (and therefore the State) within a Black Power consciousness by explicitly comparing her plight to that of a "political prisoner." Following hooks's line of thinking, to think of Sofia as a political prisoner is to recontextualize her Jim Crow-era incarceration in relation to the perceived threat that proponents of Black Power posed to white civil society by their very existence and commitment to mass-based social transformation. To consider the fictional character Sofia in relation to an actual political prisoner is to resituate the state violence and patriarchal violence unleashed to subdue her within the 1980s context in which the novel was published: *The Color Purple* was published just a decade following the FBI's (under J. Edgar Hoover-established) COINTELPRO, the counterintelligence

organization charged with an aim to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist, hate-type organizations and groupings, their leadership, spokesmen, membership, and supporters, and to counter their propensity for violence and civil disorder" (COINTELPRO). Of course, Sofia is not working for a radical organization targeted by the government, but her sass and individual acts of defiance against state-sanctioned white supremacist racial, gender, and economic domination are similarly categorized as dangerous to social order.

James Baldwin's open letter to Angela Davis while she was jailed performs a similar act of calling attention to her carceral conditions; however, Baldwin links these conditions to a larger discussion of U.S. investment in Black subjection. Baldwin opens his 1970 letter to political prisoner Davis by drawing attention to the cover of *Newsweek* on which she is featured on the cover in handcuffs:

> One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses.

Like King's open letter, Baldwin begins by pointing to the conditions of incarceration, but then connects these conditions to broader understandings of American history and identity. Baldwin's use of the conditional perfect "one might have hoped that" to then shift into an analysis of systemic incarceration and public-complicit state violence is not only an expression of the conditions of Davis's confinement in relation to the long history of Black captivity in the U.S., but also a prison-abolitionist response to the foundational functioning of Black captivity for the

conceptualization of white "American" tenets of freedom. While Baldwin points to the publicly circulated images of Davis in handcuffs as a signification of the American will to punish, he is also calling attention to the condition of her incarceration in which she will be reading his letter. In open letter form, this association between Davis's incarceration and the media's portrayal of her in handcuffs are circulated and celebrated alerts the public to a discourse on broader Black captivity in relation to Davis as one of many examples.

Celie's open letters to God also testify to the conditions of Sofia's incarceration. Once imprisoned, Sofia experiences brutality at the hands of police. In recounting her first visit with Sofia, she relays that she has been beaten so badly that she "do[esn't] know why she still alive" (87). Celie follows up with a detailed testimony of Sofia's injuries, the sources of them, and then her attempts to alleviate some of Sofia's pain: "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swole from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant" (86). Celie's recounting of this scene balances brutality and care. It takes the form of a detailed testimony that exposes the police brutality Sofia has undergone, using the anaphoric formula of "They + transitive verb + Sofia's body part" to emphasize their role in her injuries. Then the sentences shift to emphasize the sight of Sofia's wounds and swelling resulting from the blows. She is the color of eggplant, purple. Celie's account of this horrific scene is followed by her tending to Sofia's wounds. Her account of the wounds and Celie's subsequent act of care take part in the open-letter's efficacy to return to Lordi's reading, "to enlighten the outside world and, perhaps more importantly, to share tactics of survival and resistance with kin and whoever else might need them." It models anticarceral praxes of communal care. It privileges gendered modes of communication as creative and radical

testimonial resistive practices to these systems of harm. It centers Black women as the catalysts for radical transformative change.

Luk also explains that because the letter has the radical capacity to affirm life within a living death space, the letter can also be a reactionary site of surveillance and punishment through letter withholding and tampering by guards, or retribution for the nature or content of the letters. In other words, the specific radical potential that the life of paper holds simultaneously sparks an urge to disrupt from prison officials to maintain dominance. Mr. ____'s withholding of the letters from Celie is a clear point here for conceptualizing her carceral status within the home. When Celie finds the letters she notes that Nettie continues to write despite potentially thinking Celie may be dead. Learning that her sister is alive, Celie also comes back to life, remarking, "Now I know Nettie alive I begin to strut a little bit" (148). When Mr. ____ gives her a telegram that Nettie and Celie's children may be dead, Celie writes, "And no matter how much the telegram said you must be drown, I still git letters from you" (276). The letter that Celie receives despite conflicting information, is the material body through which Celie maintains a communal bond. This bond with her sister, who turns out to be alive despite the telegram, operates as an antidote to a condition of social death that rests on the breaking of familial bonds. In other words, Celie emerges back into life and radically maintains independence through the bond of the letters with her sister. As Luk attests, "as much as the life of paper involves the production of letters, it is also the letter that produces *us* and, in doing so, nurtures the materialization of all our politics, literatures, histories, and places in the world as such" (218). Nettie's and Celie's letters become literal lifelines for one another, as they are a means to reaffirm familial bonds and therefore recreate the conditions for social and civic life against a sentence of social death.

Conclusion

After the conclusion of the novel, Alice Walker adds a message of thanks: "I thank everybody in this book for coming / —A.W., author and medium" (289). A medium is an intermediary, someone who can channel communications from the spirit world to our earthly one. A medium can communicate with the dead. The prison letter in the Black radical tradition likewise serves similar intermediary duties. Black radical epistolarity is life force. As Luk asserts, it engages in a project of social reproduction in spite of the carceral spaces that seek to inflict social death. The letter operates as a medium between sisters, between the living and those experiencing the conditions of social death, between Africa across the Atlantic and the U.S., and between author and reader. The epistolary in *The Color Purple* is Walker's invitation to follow the letter as medium, to peer into the private domestic carceral sphere and the prison cell, but to also to see that the letter reaches its final destination of familial reunion and radical transformation.

Walker's thanking of "everybody in this book for coming" curates a sense of ambiguity about whether she is referring to the readers or the characters. This line of ambiguous presence in the novel likewise amplifies the life of paper as a means to reach within and across imagined and real populations. The uncertainty of whether Walker is referring to the presence of characters or readers also somewhat highlights the limitations of the novel form for analyzing certain aspects of confinement. The next chapter picks up on this question of presence in the genre of drama and the ways in which Suzan-Lori Parks's use of audience incisively utilizes stage and audience presence in the project of neo-abolition. In the theater, those who attend are part of the performance in their embodied presence as spectators and witnesses to the Black women characters' struggles against state carceral powers.

CHAPTER THREE: PERFORMING THE PRISON BOOM IN SUZAN-LORI PARKS'S *IN THE BLOOD* AND *FUCKING A*

The two novels that I examine in chapters one and two offer new expressive modalities at work in the neo-abolitionist novel by applying a Black feminist sensibility to the blues idiom and Black radical epistolarity. Black women writers continued challenging the gendered racial organization of the prison-industrial complex in novel form throughout the rise of mass incarceration to the present. Other novels that do this work are Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Jesmyn Ward's recent National-Book-Award-winning novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing*. In working toward a broader conception of a neo-abolitionist aesthetic, the rest of this dissertation will depart from the novel form and propose neo-abolitionist readings in 1990s and 2000s drama and poetry. These theorizations of dramatic and poetic neo-abolitionist aesthetics also depart from the first chapters in that their subject/content more directly addresses incarceration as a central feature of the state-sanctioned gendered, racial, and class control of Black women. In this chapter, I explore the possibilities that drama offers to the analysis of how prisons operate in what is known as the peak years of the U.S. prison boom.[24]

[24] By "peak years" I am referring to the moment in which U.S. incarcerated populations rose to bypass the incarceration rates of all other countries, as supported in H. Bruce Franklin's introduction to *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998). He states that incarcerated populations tripled between 1980-1995, disproportionately affecting African American men who were incarcerated at the rate of "seven times that for white males" (15). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, these numbers continued to steadily increase until incarcerated populations slightly decreased in 2009, a shift which arguably marks the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century as a pivotal moment for examining mass incarceration.

At the turn of the century, the Pulitzer Prize-winning contemporary African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks released two "sister plays" that riff on Nathaniel Hawthorne's well-known novel *The Scarlett Letter*. *In the Blood* (1999) and *Fucking A* (2000) tell the tragic tales of Hawthorne-inspired women named Hester struggling against multiple systems of oppression. In interviews, Parks interestingly describes the plays as emerging from a sort of monstrous birth:

> I was rowing in a canoe with a friend, and I said, "I'm going to write a play called *Fucking A"* … Ha ha ha, we laughed. We got back to shore and I thought, "Not a bad idea." … I had trouble writing the play at first…At one point, I decided to change all the characters' names and cut Hester out. I'm like, "Yo, bitch, you're outta here. You're standing in my way." I cut her and pushed her off to the left. Dangerous, dangerous…But I thought, "Now I'm free, I can go about writing my *Fucking A*." Then Hester said, "So what about the play I'm in?" and I'm like, "Bitch, you're not in a play." And she said, "Oh yes I am!" Then it was like, *bleahugh*! *In the Blood* was my alien baby, because it leapt out of my chest, you know—the writing of it was strong, painful, and scary. (Hannaham interview 62)

In this interview with James Hannaham in 1999, before the premiere of *Fucking A*, Parks describes her process as one of a strange, painful, and unexpected birth. *In the Blood* emerges from her initial idea of *Fucking A* as if the Hester character possessed Parks and needed her to write her story.[25] As Parks later states in 2017, "It was as if they were twins in the womb of my

[25] In her essay, "Possession," Parks writes about her process, noting that she "write[s] for the figures in the plays" and not herself or the audience. She states that her writing process is a bit like possession, and in many interviews, she has credited her learning to write "in the presence of the spirit" to a writing class she took with James Baldwin. In recounting that Baldwin noticed her animated reading and writing of characters and suggested she write for theater instead of fiction, she notes, "The most important thing Mr. Baldwin taught me was how to conduct myself in the presence of the spirit. I wouldn't say he taught me any writing tricks. The writing comes from the spirit, and you must be attentive to its presence, as if you were in the presence of a powerful volcano, as if in the presence of a lover" (Variety). While Parks maintains Baldwin may not have formally marked the language of her work, his influence operates in the broader "spirit" of her work. This concept is important for understanding the African

consciousness, twins in my mind. And one couldn't get out because they were entangled together…They're sisters, these two plays" (Signature Theater). Parks's sister plays, more popularly known as *The Red Letter Plays*, come from the same "womb" or idea—initially a joke about "fucking" with Hawthorne's iconic protagonist; however, her story of a monstrous "alien" birth through which *In the Blood* emerges is telling. *In the Blood* is a tragedy about Hester La Negrita, a poor and illiterate Black woman who struggles while caring for her five children, each fathered by a different man. Hester La Negrita is abused by multiple state and social "service" representatives who claim they want to help her out of poverty when, in actuality, they exploit her labor, take advantage of her sexually, and father her children. As many critics have noted, Hester's character serves as a critique of how the stereotype of the "welfare queen" in the late twentieth-century U.S. context has encouraged the shrinking of social programs under the guise of welfare reform. Hester Smith, the protagonist in *Fucking A*, is also poor and illiterate. Struggling in a fictional "otherworldly" society, she is forced to work as an abortionist in order to make enough money to pay for the freedom of her son, who has been incarcerated for over thirty years. Both Hesters are ultimately driven by these social forces to murder their sons either out of rage (*Blood*) or out of mercy (*Fucking A*).

While often read alongside one another, these sister plays had never been produced together until 2017, when the Signature Theater in New York produced them concurrently as part of Suzan-Lori Parks's tenure at its Signature Residency One program. With this production, the theater promoted the plays as working in concert to "form a haunting and powerful indictment of the way we live now," telling "powerful stories of parenthood, class, and systemic

---

American literary influence of Parks's particular postmodern intertextual style that I take up later in the chapter. For more on Parks and possession, see Rena Fraden's "Suzan-Lori Parks's Hester Plays: *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*."

injustice" (Signature Theater). Parks commented that for the first time, these plays that were "conceived from the same idea but went on to live very different lives" would be in conversation with one another (Signature Theater).

Critics usually read the relationship between the plays and the two Hesters along their plot lines: two women experiencing poverty, illiteracy, and extreme systemic oppression are driven to kill their children. They read these Hesters in relation to Hawthorne's prototype, Hester Prynne (Fraden; Champagne); in terms of literary histories of oppressed women murdering their children (Foster; Black); as symbols of postcolonial global women's struggles (Diamond; Elam); or in response to the effects of social control practices in late capitalism (Buckner; Dietrick). However, there is a striking absence in the criticism of these plays in relation to the co-development of the social, political and economic *carceral* systems at work throughout the late twentieth century that carry into the twenty-first. It is my contention that these "sister plays," when viewed together, point to the specific continuities between the oppressive systems the Hesters struggle against. I contend that these plays *must* be read together in order to fully understand a twinning or concurrent relationship of systemic economic and carceral harm that is most easily understood through the struggles of their Black women protagonists.

As *In the Blood* ends with an explicit carceral space of prison bars lowering over Hester La Negrita's head, *Fucking A* begins in a world overrun by incarceration. It is through these continuities that I suggest we return to the models of oppression in each and view them along what Michel Foucault has called a carceral continuum, which denotes the ways in which "the authority that sentences" people in physical sites of imprisonment also "infiltrates all those other authorities that supervise, transform, correct, [and] improve" (303). Parks's sister plays not only illustrate the various ways in which the state infiltrates other authorities, but also how multiple

and diverse exercises of supervision, transformation, correction, and improvement operate to maintain gendered racial dominance. In other words, when viewed together, the oppressive forces at work in these plays highlight how it has become nearly impossible to disentangle the gendered, economic, and racialized components that make the carceral state run as a normalized part of U.S. society.

In this chapter, I argue that Suzan-Lori Parks's *Red Letter Plays* provide a nuanced critique of the gendered, economic, and racial development of incarceration throughout the twentieth century, an understanding that further highlights how carcerality operates in the so-called free world outside of the prison bars. I make this argument by focusing on how 1) Parks's postmodern and intertextual style centers Black women's experiences as the primary lens through which to read the worlds of the plays; 2) her staging techniques for marking boundaries between sites of captivity point to the ways that carcerality operates inside and outside the prison; and 3) Parks's focus on motherhood, reproductive autonomy, abortion, and infanticide offers a reflection on how Black women's bodies have been one battleground for carceral regulation, supervision, and "correction." I make this three-part argument by focusing on Parks's intertextuality and staging techniques contextualized alongside turn-of-the-century social and political critiques of the United States' shrinking social programming and growing police force and prison boom. These elements combine to make what I call neo-abolitionist drama, which is a genre-specific conception of Black radical performance that depicts the embodied, sonic, visual, and spatial elements of carcerality. It emerges from an African American literary tradition in both its depiction of carcerality as a state-sanctioned network of institutional and interpersonal modes of white supremacist domination with roots emerging from the Transatlantic Slave Trade and plantation slavery and its emphasis on the radical and oppositional embodied, sonic,

linguistic, and visual response from its captives. Expanding from the concept of the neo-abolitionist novel as theorized by Patrick Elliot Alexander, neo-abolitionist drama likewise traffics in the elements of survivor testimony and other iterations of antipanoptic expressivity, concepts which I have referenced in the introduction and previous chapters. Neo-abolitionist drama, however, also offers a privileged medium through which to explore the spatial, aural, and embodied elements of carcerality on stage; moreover, the stage offers a medium through which testimony's complement—witness—becomes part of the radical communal tradition of anti-carceral praxis and aesthetics. In the following sections, I show how Parks's *Red Letter Plays*, when read together, are exemplary models for neo-abolitionist drama.

The Prison Door and The Blood-Stained Gate: Parks's Intertextuality and New Neo-Slave Drama

Parks's postmodern intertextual style calls us to reimagine who or what appears on stage—and why. From her Lincoln impersonators in *The America Play* and *Topdog/Underdog* to her revision of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* in her novel *Getting Mother's Body*, Parks asks us to play with, consider, question, and rewrite history (including literary history) as we know it. In "Elements of Style," an essay Parks wrote about her writing techniques, she describes her "Rep & Rev" style, stating, "'Repetition and Revision' is a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised. 'Rep & Rev' as I call it is a central element in my work; through its use I'm working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score" ("elements" 8-9). Reading *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* together offers turn-of-the century readings on gendered racial harm through a Rep & Rev of Hester(s), with Black women at the

center of their analyses. Since Parks explicitly notes in her origin story that *The Red Letter Plays* were riffs on Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, scholars understandably gravitated to explorations of adaptation and compared Parks's "updates" with the source text's Hester Prynne.[26] However, to take Parks's understanding that "Repetition and Revision is an integral part of African and African-American literary and oral traditions" ("Elements" 10), I highlight the limits of Hawthorne's Hester as the *only* prototype from which Parks's Hesters emerge. While most critics of these plays insist that Parks's adaptation of Hawthorne's Hester is an updated feminist statement for the late twentieth century, the particular carceral readings that I put forth in this chapter rely on the ways in which Parks's works update a specifically *Black feminist* adaptation for turn-of-the-century audiences, one that includes Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester in Parks's Rep & Rev conceptions. Certainly, scholars such as Lisa Anderson, Harry Elam, and Harvey Young align Parks's *Red Letter Plays* with Black feminism's specific attention to the intersections of race, gender, and class, but none have zeroed in on the African American literary figure of Aunt Hester in conceptualizing these plays. In this section, I build on these scholars' readings of Black feminism for the stage. I argue that a definitively gendered racial lens and an African American literary perspective are needed to read the complexity of carcerality in *The Red Letter Plays* because they offer a means through which to understand Parks's Hesters' particular struggles that meet at the intersections of gender, race, and class. Through Parks's stylistic layering of (literary) history, her Hesters' carceral struggles ought to be read alongside, through, against, and in conversation with Aunt Hester's performative, embodied, visual and phonic subjection and resistance. In so doing, I contend that Parks's centering of the struggles of

[26] For examples of critical comparisons between *The Red Letter Plays* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, see Lenora Champagne's "Outside the Law: Feminist Adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter,*" Rena Fraden's "Suzan-Lori Parks's Hester Plays: *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*," and Deborah Geis's "Hawthorne's Hester as a Red-Lettered Black Woman…"

Black women highlights the multiple and complex networks of encoded behaviors that aim to confine, coerce, and control Black women. Parks situates these encoded practices within a lineage of white supremacist domination from the Transatlantic Slave Trade to the present. Additionally, such a reading of Parks's sister plays opens up critical understandings of Black women's confinement—and opposition to it—as simultaneously racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed, which is a point that becomes more apparent in Parks's post-*Red Letter Plays* drama, as well as in her screenplays of the novels of canonical African American writers like Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright.[27]

As riffs on a work about a white colonial settlement written by Hawthorne, a white male author, Parks's renditions baffle scholars on two points that are noteworthy for this chapter. First, many scholars note how Hawthorne's Hester and her daughter are seemingly redeemed by the

[27] *Venus* (1996)*, In the Blood*, and *Fucking A* are most often grouped together by critics to mark a segment of Parks's dramaturgy in which she primarily focuses on the struggles and confinement of Black women protagonists. *Venus* specifically focuses on the eighteenth-century carcerality of Saartjie Bartman, popularly known as the Hottentot Venus, whereas *The Red Letter Plays* imagine carceral structures in post-emancipation worlds. Nevertheless, Parks's dramatic explorations of confinement begin with these plays in which she centers Black women struggling against gendered racial exploitation and harm, and extend into her post-*Red-Letter-Plays* oeuvre. Her screenplay for the 2005 film production of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* maintains and expands her focus on a Black woman protagonist, Janie Crawford, who struggles against patriarchal dominance to assert a sense of self through her romantic relationships. Her most recent works continue the gendered racial readings of white supremacist state violence, as in her screenplay for the HBO adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (2019) and her play, *White Noise*, which won a 2019 Obie Award. Both works poignantly depict relatable instances of racially charged police violence against young Black men. Bigger, in Parks's updating of the novel, is gunned down by police when he begins to pull his empty hands from his pockets. Leo, the Black male protagonist in *White Noise*, is recovering from a traumatic, racially charged violent encounter with police, and in order to gain a sense of protection and safety, asks his white best friend to enslave him so that his objectification would ensure the protection of a master. These recent works—while certainly rich in their own rights with their depictions of white supremacist police violence as a part of a system of gendered racial social control with roots in the Transatlantic Slave Trade—I would suggest emerge from Parks's initial examinations of gendered racial harm and carcerality beginning with *The Red Letter Plays* at the turn of the century. In other words, Parks's ruminations on anti-Black violence and gendered racial harm in relation to confinement have become a distinctive feature of her artistic output as a whole beginning with her examinations from the perspective of a Black woman protagonist.

end of *The Scarlet Letter*, whereas Parks's Hesters are doomed to tragedy.[28] As Lenora Champagne states,

> *Fucking A* is further from Hawthorne's novel in terms of plot and character… Hawthorne's tale has a happy ending for Pearl. She inherits Chillingsworth's wealth when he dies, as he was her mother's legal husband. Pearl travels with Hester back to England, marries, and, as is implied in Hester's embroidering of baby garments, has a child of her own. But Parks's Hesters were never married; they are poor single black women with fatherless children. There is no way out, no possible happy ending for Hester's offspring in the Parks plays. (185-186)

Champagne's observation falls in line with other scholars' contentions that Parks' updated worlds are harsher on scorned women, especially when those women are Black and poor. She asserts that in the world of *The Red Letter Plays* "the will to punish wins out" (Champagne 186). This is certainly true for both plays in that each Hester struggles in a world that seemingly wants to see her suffer. In *Blood*, the Chorus wants Hester to pay for her "burden to society," and when she does not, they ultimately see her pay through her time with a jail sentence. The world of *Fucking A* indebts Hester to labor as an abortionist to save enough money to pay for her son's eventual freedom from prison. Unlike Hester Prynne and Pearl, Parks's Hesters experience compounding pain up to the point that they kill their sons. There is no redemption, but rather a sense that the Hesters have merely moved from one state of oppression to another.

The second point is the gap between the plays' critical treatments and production histories. Most scholars assume Hester Smith in *Fucking A* is a Black woman, yet there is no

[28] As Elin Diamond suggests: "Published together, Parks encourages us to read *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* as a diptych – or a triptych. Constellated in mimetic and ironic relation to Parks's plays is another text of sexual coercion, Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, *The Scarlet Letter"* (16).

explicit text in the play to designate it. Hester La Negrita in *In the Blood* is designated as Black via her name as well as the fact that when she tells Welfare that "I don't think the world likes women much," Welfare replies, "I am a woman too! And a Black woman too just like you. Dont be silly" (59-60). While *Fucking A*'s casting does not give racial designations to its characters—the most recent production at the Signature Theater cast Hester as white (Christine Lahti) and Boy/Monster as Black (Brandon Victor Dixon)—its presentation of lynching as a routine practice in the world of the play is haunted by historically racially charged violence as performative, symbolic, and literal maintenance of white supremacy as status quo and "law and order." I contend that these scenes where racially encoded violence is operated on subjects, even when they are white, point to the particular brand of white supremacist domination that supports the prison system. It operates on practices of white colonial heteropatriarchal domination. Parks's Hester Smith, whose casting can be open, is nonetheless physically marked with an "A" that relegates her status to the margins, which, in turn, opens her up to violence strategically designed for similarly marked bodies.

I further contend that if we take Parks's intertextual style seriously with Hester Prynne, Hester La Negrita, and Hester Smith, then we must grapple with a fourth Hester who emerged slightly before Hawthorne's Prynne and likewise serves as a foundational figure in U.S. literary history: Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845, five years prior to the release of *The Scarlet Letter*.[29] In the first chapter of the narrative, the violence that Captain Anthony enacted on Aunt Hester, which young Frederick witnessed, was racial, gendered, and sexual in nature. Douglass remembers how, as a boy, he overheard his aunt's screams as Captain Anthony forced her to strip to the waist while he

[29] Dr. Patrick Elliot Alexander brilliantly pointed me in this direction at the very beginning of this project, so he certainly deserves credit for this added reading of Parks's Hesters.

(Anthony) repeatedly whipped her. Douglass points out the sexual nature of the beatings by detailing the ways in which she is exposed, the level to which Captain Anthony gains pleasure from these beatings, and the reason she is beaten: for visiting another enslaved man she was forbidden to see. Douglass states that his witnessing of this scene was his entrance through "the blood-stained gates…to the hell of slavery" (4). Saidiya Hartman contends that "the terrible spectacle [of Aunt Hester's beating] dramatizes the origin of the subject and demonstrates that to be a slave is to be under the brutal power and authority of another" (3), and this spectacle of subjugation resonates in Parks's *Red Letter Plays*, as explicit violence against racialized, gendered, and sexualized subjects performs simultaneous acts of objectivization and humanization. The African American literary history of Douglass's Hester refocuses our attention to gendered racial terror and captivity, the sort that Parks's Hesters experience, but other critics have noted Hawthorne's Hester absolutely does not, as she becomes a redeemed woman character.

Again, one way to better understand the tragedies of *The Red Letter Plays* is to keep Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester in mind just as much as one might consider Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. In doing so, we get the sense that the societal oppressions and pressures Parks's more contemporary Hesters experience share disciplinary lineage with the gendered racial terror that organized the slave plantation. Douglass's key statements and remembrances in the first chapter of his 1845 narrative provide us with four major points of contact between Parks's plays and their interactions with such histories of gendered racial terror: 1) that "it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant"; 2) that "it is a common custom…to part children from their mothers at a very early age"; 3) that "slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the

condition of their mothers"; and 4) that the violence Captain Anthony unleashes on Aunt Hester at the end of the chapter is gendered, racial, and sexual terror (Douglass 1-4). It is my contention that Parks's *Red Letter Plays*, when viewed alongside Douglass's narrative as an intertext, operate as complex narratives of neo-slavery in their illustration and critique of the aftermaths of slavery on Black women's lives and bodies. In this regard, my ensuing reading of Parks's plays, by emphasizing in the field of drama, racial-historical continuities between the social control logics of slavery and the contemporary U.S. prison, builds on what scholars of African American confinement literature like Dennis Childs and Patrick Elliot Alexander conceptualize, respectively, as "narratives of neoslavery" and "neo-abolitionist novels" in their work on Black women's confinement in African American fiction.[30]

As for the first point of Parks's intertextual contact with Douglass's opening chapter, we would do well to consider how Parks's plays extend in the context of contemporary U.S. culture Douglass's argument that slaveholders benefit from and make a practice of keeping enslaved people ignorant. At this point in the narrative, Douglass is referring to not knowing his own age, but he later uses this same concept to describe the practice of slaveholders who keep enslaved people illiterate. Parks's characterizations of Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith function similarly, with Parks placing particular emphasis on patriarchal power in her characters' illiteracy. As Deborah Geis has remarked, this concern resonates through Parks's works as well: "Parks is interested in the historical sense in which women have been kept in their place by being

[30] As I have outlined in previous chapters, my use of the neo-abolitionist novel as a foundation from which I develop my conceptions of neo-abolitionist drama, relate to the recent contributions of scholars who bring together critical prison studies and literary study to advance African American confinement literature. These reconceptions of the neo-slave narrative reveal the ways in which "enslavement persist[s] in contemporary U.S. prison life" (Alexander 27). Moreover, they promote the purpose of neo-abolitionist novels, which, according to Alexander, "push for the abolition of slavery's vestiges in the criminal justice system" (27). My conceptions of neo-abolitionist drama likewise point to and push against slavery's vestiges in the criminal justice system, but my understanding of that system is expansive in that it includes specific modes of confinement that are likewise attributed to state powers but not always clearly marked as operating within a criminal justice system.

denied the right to literacy; the image has even further resonance if we consider the way in which African-American slaves in this country were also denied access to education in order to prevent them from acquiring knowledge which could lead to their rebellion" ("Hawthorne's" 83).[31] Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith are both illiterate. Their systemic undereducation marks them as vulnerable in their respective societies. Hester La Negrita in particular suffers from systemic undereducation, as her struggle to learn to write the letter "A" marks the beginning and end of the tragedy. She cannot hold a job and the jobs given to her by Welfare, a character who represents a state assistance program that ultimately exploits Hester, are equally unsustainable, difficult, or pay less than minimum wage (what her friend Amiga Gringa calls slave wages) (66). In *Fucking A*, Hester Smith's "skilled labor" as an abortionist operates as both a punishment and necessary service to society. She pays Scribe to write letters to her son and asks Canary Mary to read letters to her. Both worlds benefit from their respective Hester's illiteracy or systemic undereducation. Every character charged with "helping" Hester La Negrita—Doctor, Amiga Gringa, Welfare, and Reverend D.—takes advantage of her situation and sexually exploits her. And Hester Smith, in order to communicate with her imprisoned son, must pay to correspond with him. In this way, both women's illiteracy becomes a characteristic of their subjection.

Fucking A also participates in the dramatic rendering of Douglass's second point: that it is customary for children to be separated from their mothers early in childhood. Douglass summarizes that because of this practice he was barely able to create a relationship with his own mother who would occasionally walk the twelve miles at night after a long day of field labor just to lie alongside him while he slept. This experience demonstrates what Orlando Patterson has defined as one key mechanism of oppression that operated to maintain the institution of slavery:

[31] Geis even quotes Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to make this point about literacy in Parks, but does not link the Hester characters.

natal alienation. According to Patterson, the enslaved bear no social and legal rights in regard to their engagement in unregulated communal interaction, economic exchange, or legal participation: they are socially dead (5). Likewise, both groups—enslaved and imprisoned—experience varying degrees of what Patterson calls "natal alienation," which is a forced loss of ties from one's family lineage of the past, present, and future as well as any rights or claims within that lineage (5). Natal alienation and social death work together to generate a condition of nonpersonhood within society and family so that the master (or state) can surrogate those positions within a network of power and control. Applied to incarceration, the state stands in for the master, claiming the position of owner, patriarch, labor overseer, and caretaker of those held in captivity. In *Fucking A*, Parks recreates a post-emancipation version of natal alienation through her representation of mass incarceration. The play primarily exemplifies natal alienation through Hester's son, Boy/Monster, whose identity is split between Hester's idealized memory and the state's impulse to recast his fugitive body as monstrous. The scenes of the play loosely alternate between Hester's desperate attempts to save enough money to buy Boy's freedom and the adult Boy/Monster's efforts to evade the hunters after escaping prison unbeknownst to his mother. Parks's use of dramatic irony allows viewers to see the functions of social death and natal alienation from dueling perspectives. During these rotations of Hester's struggle and Monster's escape, the audience witnesses how the carceral regime interacts with Hester in the staged social world of the play as well as how those interactions reinforce the practices that have kept Boy/Monster in prison for thirty years. Although the inside of the prison is never staged, the audience glimpses both the prison and the outside by following Hester's pain and the loss of her son through his incarceration, fugitivity, falsely declared death, and actual death.

The punitive practice of natal alienation as performed on stage is most explicit in Boy/Monster's renaming. Hester's struggle to reclaim her son is a sort of tug-of-war with a state that seeks to alienate him from social and familial ties by renaming him, losing his paperwork, and substituting him with another incarcerated man during visitation. While Hester's body and bloodline become a contested site of discipline and futurity in the social world of the play—she is not incarcerated, but she is confined, surveilled, and marked—her son is explicitly conscripted into a system of incarceration that is geared toward dehumanization and incapacitation. Boy Smith, a name that might suggest a generic every-boy, goes to prison as a child for stealing food from the rich family Hester worked for. Hester only refers to her son as Boy, and the name Monster is given to him after he escapes. One of the key tenets of imposing the condition of social death, according to Dylan Rodríguez, is the attempt to dehumanize incarcerated people by marking them as criminal: "The bodies warehoused within are rendered *subjects in absentia*: juridical designation and the state's doubled discourse of security/endangerment generate a thick political grammar in which knowing 'inmates' as (human) subjects is impossible" (193). Through his renaming, this particular application of social death in the play attempts to render Boy anonymous and absent, and upon his fugitivity, it attempts to brand him monstrous, an enemy of the state.

In the Blood highlights Douglass's third point concerning the ways in which slaveholders seized upon sex as an instrument both to exercise disciplinary power over enslaved women's bodies and to benefit economically from the children they were made to produce. Douglass states, "slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires *profitable as well*

as pleasurable" (2 emphasis mine). In Parks's *In the Blood*, the people in Hester La Negrita's life who claim they are there to help her—Doctor, Welfare, Reverend D, Amiga Gringa, and Chilli—all lure Hester into sexual encounters that result in her five children, each inheriting her impoverished status and receiving no financial assistance from the biological fathers. Each of the five characters gives a "confession" in which he or she tells of their sexual encounters with Hester that for many are *profitable as well as pleasurable*. Hester's so-called friend Amiga Gringa explains that she once coaxed Hester into "the very lucrative business" of "girl on girl action" for "an invited audience for a dime a look" (72). The business is initially profitable, Amiga explains, until "one day some of the guys took advantage. Ah, what do you expect in a society based on Capitalizm. I tell you the plight of the worker these days—" (72). Doctor and Welfare confess that they took advantage of their paid positions to care for and help Hester to receive sexual favors (Doctor) or engage in a threesome (Welfare). Reverend D, remarking that "suffering is an enormous turn on," pays Hester with a "crumpled bill" for sex after she asks him to help support their child, Baby. Reverend D convinces Hester to not report him to Welfare who would garnish his wages, thereby ensuring larger profit from his soon-to-be-built church while leading Hester to believe he will pay her more under the table. Chilli, her oldest son's father, abandons Hester to "get clean" and make a life for himself. He returns with the intention of marrying her until he finds out that she has had more children and is living in squalor. All of these figures highlight the ways in which the contemporary system operates to exploit Hester.

The final and perhaps most explicit link between Frederick Douglass and *The Red Letter Plays* is the oft-cited bloody scene of Aunt Hester's beating. The excessive amount of blood in *The Red Letter Plays* has been a frequent point of observation in the criticism. The amount of blood and the shift in endings compared with Hawthorne's Hester begin to make sense when

considering Aunt Hester in Douglass. Douglass remarks that Captain Anthony "took great pleasure in whipping a slave" (3) and recalls being woken to the sound of "an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose" (3-4). Douglass explains that the reason for this beating was sexual in nature, noting that Captain Anthony "had ordered her not to go out evenings, and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man, who was paying attention to her belonging to Colonel Lloyd…Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form…" (4). When Hester is found with Lloyd's Ned, Captain Anthony strips her neck to waist and beats her calling her a "d— —d b— —h" until "the warm, red blood…came dripping to the floor" (4-5). This bloody scene is what Douglass has called his entrance "through the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery" (4). The gendered, racial, and sexual harm he witnessed performed on his aunt Hester marks the beginning of his understanding of a system that "doom[s] [him] to be a witness and participant" (4). Douglass's understanding of the quotidian brutality of slavery begins with violence enacted on a Black woman's body. The violence is sexual in nature as Douglass details the stripping of Hester from neck to waist to expose her to the lash.

Fred Moten's reading of this primal scene in *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* highlights the physical, sexual, and exemplary nature of the violence Aunt Hester endures that young Frederick witnesses, but he also emphasizes the performative and phonic resistance that occurs through Hester's scream. Hester's scream out and against a horrific visual scene of subjection, Moten argues, provides an opportunity to witness the ways that "the object resists, the commodity shrieks, the audience participates" (12). Moten's (re)reading of this

primal scene perfectly recasts Hester for performance, highlighting the visual, oral, and audience elements necessary to fully read a Black woman's embodiment within and against subjection. For my analysis of how Parks adapts this performative Hester to her contemporary Hesters in the *Red Letter Plays*, I point to Moten's insistence on the power of the Black woman's body, voice, and resistance in such moments. He states,

> there occurs in such performances a revaluation or reconstruction of value, one disruptive of the oppositions of speech and writing, and spirit and matter. It moves by way of the (phono-photo-porno-)graphic disruption the shriek carries out. This movement cuts and augments the primal. If we return again and again to a certain passion, a passionate response to passionate utterance, horn-voice-horn over percussion, a protest, an objection, it is because it is more than another violent scene of subjection too terrible to pass on; it is the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation—the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation—of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value. It's the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of the birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performance(s). It's the offset and rewrite, the phonic irruption and rewind, of my last letter, my last record date, my first winter, casting of effect and affect in the wildest possible angle of dispersion. (14)

Moten points us to the fact that with Aunt Hester's scream comes a point of revaluation, one that disrupts the objectifying logic of dominance. More importantly, for my own conceptions of Aunt Hester in relation to Parks's plays, Moten points to Aunt Hester's presence in this visually,

aurally, and sexually violent scene as an "ongoing performance" moving through time before and after the demarcated textual moment. The scream phonically resonates. It participates in a jazz aesthetic that improvises, revalues, and records. If Parks's work indebts its style to the African American musical and oral traditions that also influence jazz, Moten observes that Aunt Hester is the ongoing event, the melody that repeats and revises, the resistance that undergirds all literary, performative, and phonic outpourings of Black women's subjection and response, a sort of ur-Hester from which Black radical resistance and Black performance emerge and return. In other words, Moten's reading of Aunt Hester hauntingly echoes Parks's conceptions of Rep & Rev. And although Parks calls to Hawthorne in interviews about the origins of the play, Aunt Hester haunts Parks's Hesters in her origin story as well as the resulting plays. When Parks performs the story of the plays' origins stating her plans to write Hester out, Hester talks back and persists. She inquires "what about the play I'm in?" and when Parks says she isn't in a play, her response, "Oh yes I am!" leads to the monstrous birth from which *In the Blood* emerges. I take up Hester La Negrita's verbal resistance in more detail later in this chapter. But for now, it is important to note how Hester Le Negrita's linguistic and performative resistance from *In the Blood*'s genesis in relation to Frederick Douglass's primal scene reframes our understanding of Black performance and theater as a whole.

The centrality of women characters suffering similar forms of gendered, racial, and sexual violence in *The Red Letter Plays* thus promotes further interrogation when considered in intertextual conversation with Douglass. Like Douglass's powerful and graphic image of the blood-stained gate in relation to his witnessing of Aunt Hester's bloody beating, Parks's tragedies also rely on visible markers of excessive violence through blood. Hester La Negrita rarely has the power to fully consent to the sexual acts and violence enacted on her. Hester

Smith, likewise forced to expose the mark of her servitude—she must keep the "A" for abortionist branded on her skin in view at all times—also experiences sexual, systemic, and what I later argue to be re-codified racialized violence. Both plays' final scenes, with their excessive amounts of blood, also re-center Black women in the analysis of gendered oppression. When the building oppressions Hester La Negrita faces in *In the Blood* reach their boiling point, her oldest son Jabber tells Hester of the "bad word" that was written on the bridge under which they lived. He repeats the word "SLUT" over and over until Hester snaps. The stage directions until the final scene of the play paint the bloody scene:

> Hester quickly raises her club and hits him once.
> Brutally. He cries out and falls down dead. His cry wakes Bully,
> Trouble and Beauty. They look on. Hester beats Jabbers body
> again and again and again. Trouble and Bully back away.
> Beauty stands there watching.
> Jabber is dead and bloody.
> Hester looks up from her deed to see Beauty who runs off.
> Hester stands there alone—wet with her sons blood.
> Grief-stricken, she cradles his body. Her hands wet with
> blood, she writes an "A" on the ground. (106)

The final moments of the play include Hester's final confession as prison bars lower over her head. While she is still covered in blood, the stage directions have Hester repeatedly place her hands in the blood before finally raising her bloody hands to the audience. This is perhaps the most explicit instance of Parks's linking her play to incarceration in that it seems that Hester's path was predetermined to end up there, but it also links Hester La Negrita to Hawthorne and

Douglass. As Carol Schafer has noted, one of the few elements Parks retains from Hawthorne's text—aside from the Hester character and other loose character adaptations (Reverend D/Reverend Dimmesdale; Chilli/Chillingsworth)—is the name of the final scene "The Prison Door," which is also the title of the first chapter in *The Scarlet Letter*. The play's adaptation of this, when considered alongside Hawthorne's first chapter, is telling for thinking through literary expressions of the relationship of the prison to the nation. In this regard, the second sentence of *The Scarlet Letter* is condemnatory, for it states, "The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison" (33). Hawthorne's attention to the prison door as a seemingly necessary function of American civilization is haunting. The distinction between Hawthorne and Parks is that The *Scarlet Letter* is a rumination of the communal exiling and ostracizing aspects at work after Hester Prynne emerges from the prison in the first chapter, whereas Parks is interested in the criminalization that predetermines guilt, deserving of punishment before the literal incarceration. To shift this perspective by moving "The Prison Door" to the end of the play, Parks creates a *Scarlet Letter* for the nation hundreds of years later in which the will to punish is always already racially and economically encoded. Thus, if we consider the prison door alongside what Douglass called the "blood-stained gate" of slavery—the spectacle of repeated gendered, racial, and sexual violence against Black women as a maintaining practice of white supremacist dominance—then the routine suffering that Parks's Hesters endure from social, institutional, and religious representatives are situated in a fuller and more precise historical context.

The final scene in *Fucking A* is likewise filled with violence and blood. In order to escape the brutal impending torture and murder from lynch mob-esque hunters, Boy asks his mother Hester to kill him first. She agrees and skillfully slits his throat to ensure as painless as death as possible. Hester completes the deed, surrenders his body to the hunters, drops the bloody knife in her wash bucket, lights a candle as she does after every abortion she performs, and continues to go back to work (220). In this way, Douglass's Aunt Hester haunts the scarlet-letter-marked Hester Smith, as a racialized body and symbol of carceral (or Black captive) violence, but also a cry against that violence. These scenes not only point to the institutional networks allowing slavery, lynching, and mass incarceration to continue; they also call the relationships of criminality, identity, and punishment as they relate to such institutions into question.

By adding Aunt Hester to our readings of *The Red Letter Plays*, a clearer Black feminist perspective emerges. It situates the gendered, racial, and sexual violence the Hesters in the plays endure within a historical framework connected to the gendered, racial, and sexual violences of slavery. It re-positions these two plays as new neo-slave narratives in their allusions to slavery's aftermaths in relation to particular racialized carceral developments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Moreover, their centering on Black women figures calls attention to the particular ways in which oppression operates at the intersections of race, gender, and class identities.

The inclusion of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester brings the particular historical experiences of Black women in the U.S. to the center of our analyses of Parks's Hesters in their struggles against oppressive racist, gendered, and economically exploitive systems. Viewing *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* alongside one another offers perspective on the relationship of the oppressive systems at work in the plays—welfare and prison—to one another as well as to inherited practices of gendered racial subjection from slavery. The oppressive forces in *In the*

Blood—social services (Welfare), medical services (Doctor) and religious institutions (Reverend D)—produce a particular brand of violence that is often less visibly understood as such. Though many critics treat these two plays separately, it is my contention that both explicitly stage two ways for thinking through the less visible or tangible iterations of carceral power at work at the turn of the century. Parks communicates this carcerality through staging techniques, props, and including associative discourse that continually links poverty to criminality. With these tools in mind, I consider these two plays within the specific context of critical prison studies' understandings of the link between welfare/social programming and incarceration. Critical prison studies scholars read the development of the contemporary prison boom alongside the broad-scale reduction in public social services throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This move away from funding social programs—while simultaneously increasing funding to policing through the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration—in many ways replaced social interventions with punitive ones.[32] With this in mind, I argue that despite their striking differences in theatrical style, setting, and major plot points, *The Red Letter Plays* depict the ways in which state violence operates through networks of programs, bureaucracies, and enforcers. These turn-of-the-century works provide two ruminations on the carceral state: first, how stereotypes of the welfare queen led to criminalizing initiatives to surveil, exploit, police,

[32] As Elizabeth Hinton explains: "Out of their sense that society was becoming unraveled in the context of civil rights and antiwar protests, federal policymakers held African Americans accountable for the turmoil and instability and took the wrong policy turn, opting to deploy militarized police forces in urban neighborhoods and to build more prisons instead of seeking to resolve the problems that caused the unrest in the first place. Once the Nixon administration moved to terminate the Office of Economic Opportunity and increasingly partnered its activities with the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), community involvement in federal social programs was largely relegated to the law enforcement realm. Even within the crime control apparatus, only about 2 percent of the grants the LEAA awarded to urban police departments went to tenant patrols and other community-based programs. The White House and the Justice Department were far more interested in supporting measures that stimulated omnipresent patrol, defensible space, and new law enforcement technologies in low-income neighborhoods while fusing police, corrections, and antidelinquency initiatives with social welfare programs" (337).

and regulate those in need of government assistance, and second, how a ballooning prison system that criminalizes poverty doubly surveils, exploits, polices, and regulates all affected by it, not just those in prison. Both are readings of carcerality that do not explicitly center the physical site of the prison, but the methods by which people are multiply immobilized through carceral power invites viewers to understand carcerality structurally. This, I ultimately argue, is how Parks invites abolitionist readings through drama.

"The Balance of the System Depends on a Well-Drawn Boundary Line": Welfare Reform, the Punitive Turn, and *In the Blood*

To view both of Parks's plays as carceral texts for turn-of-the-century audiences, we must consider the ways in which the particular genre of drama opens avenues for thinking through the spatiality of carcerality. Namely, we must think about how confinement operates both within easily identifiable spaces of confinement—prison, jail, coffle, camp, etc.—as well as spaces that are less identifiably so—the street, the home, the church, etc. Of the two plays, *In the Blood* is read as having more realistic reference points for the contemporary moment. Given that Parks's setting instructions for the beginning of the play are "Place: Here / Time: Now" and "The setting should be spare, to reflect the poverty of the world of the play" (3), directors have been able to adapt it to contemporary and legible settings, and critics have extensively linked Hester La Negrita's struggles to the state of welfare reform in the U.S. and the use of the welfare queen stereotype to perpetuate systemic disinvestment in social programming. As Jocelyn Buckner notes, while *Fucking A* is "otherwordly" yet "dealing with extremely real problems," *In the Blood* has an "uncomfortably realistic setting" (43). While the scholarship points to Parks's allusive framework for reading the state of welfare reform in the late twentieth century, I am interested in how scholars tend to read this separately from its sister play. Many critics make the

connections between the Hesters as experiencing external and systemic pressures, traumas, and limitations, but tend to draw a line between the topic of welfare in *In the Blood*, which is seen as directly relevant to the extradiegetic world, and the topics of incarceration, abortion, debt peonage, and hunters for fugitives in *Fucking* A, which is described as "futuristic," "dystopian," and allegorical. When viewed from the lens of critical prison studies and the links this line of study reveals between welfare reform and mass incarceration, I argue that *In the Blood*'s focus on welfare as well as the other representative systems that exploit Hester—Doctor and Reverend D—are part of an examination of a broader carceral project. I am arguing for a carceral reading of both of these plays that highlights how networks of government-supported agencies confine, immobilize, impoverish, and violate those who qualify for assistance. The first step for viewing these networks is to understand the relationship between welfare reform and incarceration as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Black studies scholar Jackie Wang notes that in the United States, "antiblack racism is at the core of mass incarceration and the transformation of the welfare state not only into the (neoliberal) debt state, but into the *penal state* as well" (84). In the following section, I briefly survey the historical and racialized relationship between U.S. welfare reform strategies and incarceration, and then use that perspective to read the carceral aspects of *In the Blood.* With this analytic in mind it is important to return to *The Red Letter Plays* anew to read how Parks deconstructs social conceptions of personal responsibility in relation to poverty and punishment by revealing how the machinations of systemic poverty work in tandem with what Champagne calls "the will to punish."

In *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America*, historian Elizabeth Hinton traces the growth of the carceral state from the Johnson to

Reagan administrations by examining policies designed to 1) designate, restrict, and surveil welfare and other assistance programs and 2) "get tough on crime" through increased community policing, drug criminalization, and racialized and skewed crime statistics. She explains how the Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965 allocated significant funds toward the development of policing. Paired with the contemporaneous dwindling funding of social programs, many issues formerly handled by social services became duties of robustly funded police forces. These implementations and shifts in social, legal, and economic responsibility "gave rise to a historically distinct carceral network composed of punitive and social welfare institutions, with statistical discourses of Black criminality and pathological understandings of poverty serving as its intellectual foundation" (334). What Hinton calls "the punitive shift in urban social programs" of the 1970s and 1980s results in contemporary policing technologies and strategies that enforce race and class boundaries (337). These increased policing strategies operate under the guise of "neighborhood patrol," antidelinquency programming, school resource officers, and "maintaining the peace," but ultimately these strategies result in increased arrest rates, (militarized) police occupation of racially segregated and low-income neighborhoods, and community tensions due to that occupation.[33] Hinton also points to the way in which the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) less directly worked through the police to fund social programs that were not under police management but likewise served surveilling and punitive purposes.

Jackie Wang's *Carceral Capitalism* takes its cue from Hinton's field-changing historical account to examine the updated relationship between the debt economy and incarceration at the

[33] As Hinton notes "Stemming from the punitive shift in urban social programming during the previous decade, over the course of the 1980s, law enforcement officers came to provide the primary (and in some areas the *only*) public social services to residents" (337-338)

turn of the century. Wang theorizes the ways in which the increases in police and economic surveillance technology create modes of carcerality that either discipline nominally free subjects or set up direct pathways into the prison system for them. This is what Wang calls the "invisible cell":

> [a] carceral apparatus that does not control or confine populations by housing them in physical structures. It refers to the way that certain populations are constantly being categorized (put on algorithmically generated heat lists and watch lists), surveilled (think of Muslims in America even under Obama), demobilized (think of the residents of Ferguson, where hyper-policing made residents reluctant to leave their homes as there was an average of three arrests per household), targeted (think of how algorithms can identify poor people based on their internet searches and generate targeted ads for payday loans, for-profit colleges, and other scams), and managed (think of all the tiny ways our behavior is modified by invisible forces, such as the design of cities or monitoring by closed-circuit TV). (41)

Invisible cells operate to immobilize or contain without the physical structure of the prison; however, their effects often lead to imprisonment so that a pipeline is created between the two. For Wang, poverty—the U.S. debt economy—and the prison operate as part of the same carceral impulse with anti-Black violence and subjection at its foundation. While her list is certainly updated for the concerns of the twenty-first century to include the carceral technology boom currently developing as a "reformist" effort to decarcerate, her concept for the way in which invisible cells are created—categorization, surveillance, demobilization, targeting, and management—clarifies the relationships between poverty and prison in Parks's turn-of-the-

century plays. The characters that operate under the guise of helping Hester La Negrita—Doctor, Reverend, Welfare—do not work to help Hester escape poverty, but rather work to encourage Hester to make her poverty more palatable to others. As Champagne notes, "Parks is more interested in the price society forces Hester to pay for her non-normative behavior" (174). They exploit her labor, threaten to sterilize her (and ultimately do), make false promises of repayment, and use her for sex, while lecturing her about her idleness, lack of respectability, uncleanliness, and need to subscribe to a "bootstrap" logic of personal uplift.

In arguing for *In the Blood* to be understood as a carceral text, I point to the historical continuities between the play and the shrinking of welfare programs in the U.S. happening alongside the prison construction boom. The play highlights the ways in which social service representatives seek to transform, discipline, and manage Hester's behaviors rather than help her out of her situation. Parks creates a world similar to the welfare-to-prison pipeline that Wang outlines in her work when she states,

> The project of dismantling the welfare state was intimately tied to constructing urban black Americans trapped in zones of concentrated poverty as deserving of their situation…In holding those hit hardest by cataclysmic changes in the economy responsible for their suffering (attributing their situation to laziness, criminal proclivities, and cultural inferiority), black Americans were simultaneously constructed as *deserving of punishment* (84-85).

In the Blood carries a predetermined carceral trajectory throughout, which has led scholars such as Carol Schafer to liken it to the structure of a classic Greek tragedy. Like the Aristotelian model of tragedy, Hester's lot in life seems determined from the beginning; however, unlike the Greek tragedy in which a heroic flaw or action shifts their luck and leads to downfall (*hamartia*),

Parks draws our attention to the multiple forces at play that doom the protagonist.[34] Instead of focusing on the individual acts that lead to Hester's ultimate act of violence and subsequent incarceration, Parks calls attention to the relationships, enforcers, and processes that lead there. Language and images of police violence and carcerality move throughout the play from the first to last scene. The first scene opens with Hester acquiring a stolen police club that she wears in her belt for the rest of the play until she uses it to kill Jabber in a blind rage at the end. As Foster notes, this club operates from the beginning as "a symbol of the authorities with whom Hester does battle every day of her life" (79). The particular weapon of state violence that she ultimately uses against her own son follows the path of state implication in all aspects of Hester's life.

Like many characters featured in Parks's earlier plays, Hester La Negrita (translated as "little Black woman") of *In the Blood* represents a stereotyped figure. Anderson notes that Parks's earlier works are concerned with deconstructing stereotypes, especially with figures such as Venus in *Venus* (1997), a play loosely based on Saartjie Bartman, and Black Woman with Fried Drumstick in *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1989/1992). She states that "Parks's method is deconstructive; in other words, she presents images or icons to us and then uncovers their origins, revealing them as problematic" (55). With these stereotyped figures, Parks engages in a dramatic discourse in which she conscripts her audience into participating in the stereotype's perpetuation, as she does with the Chorus at the beginning of *In the Blood* and then shifts perspective by making Hester, "the welfare queen," the main figure of sympathy in the work. As many have noted, Parks's use of the "welfare queen" stereotype

[34] Schafer's reading of *In the Blood* as a riff on the Greek tragedy argues that Hester's *hamartia* "lies in her error to distinguish that love is separable from the act of lovemaking" (192). I think this reading limits the audience's understanding of the role that the state-driven mechanisms in the play serve toward Hester's demise. The Chorus, Doctor, Welfare, Amiga, Reverend D, and Chilli all contribute to Hester's struggle but none are held accountable to help her.

primes audiences as well as directors for productions that are familiar, in which the world of the plays does not look so different from the world of the audience. Parks uses stereotyped characters to deconstruct the logics that limit them to one-dimensional conceptions by inundating the character with complexity through excess. This excess often points to how logics of language help maintain climates of anti-Blackness and reinforce social boundaries. As Wahneema Lubiano notes, the cultural mythology of the "welfare queen" is one of a deviant parasite: "She is the agent of destruction, the creator of the pathological, black, urban, poor family from which all ills flow; a monster creating crack dealers, addicts, muggers, and rapists—men who become those things because of being immersed in *her* culture of poverty" (323). Parks shows how the society views Hester through the role of the Chorus that types her as the welfare queen deserving of regulation and punishment.

While many scholars have pointed to the ways in which Hester La Negrita's extreme poverty and oppression ultimately lead her to the murderous act that imprisons her at the end of the play—an act that Verna Foster types as "psychologically and sociologically almost overdetermined" given Hester's circumstances (80)—I contend that the prison, as understood through "the will to punish," is not merely a consequence of a single character's actions, but the structural trajectory of the play from beginning to end. To be clear, carceral power and state violence operate at every turn of the play. The play begins with the Chorus clustered together, shouting judgment in unison on Hester as a burden on society; the language is weighted with personal fault:

> THERE SHE IS!
>
> WHO DOES SHE THINK
>
> SHE IS

…

SHE KNOWS SHE A NO COUNT

SHIFTLESS

HOPELESS

BAD NEWS

BURDEN TO SOCIETY

HUSSY

SLUT

…

SOMETHINGS GOTTA BE DONE TO STOP THIS SORT OF THING. (5-7)

Hester is characterized as a parasite on the community. Her overly determined status as the stereotypical "welfare queen" types her as a burden that something should be done about, according to the Chorus. The stereotype that developed throughout the late twentieth century of a (Black) woman with an excess of children who abuses social programs and tax payers in order to feed her own habits operated to encourage voters to sign on to "welfare reform," which diminished funds for social programs and increased regulation, surveillance, and occasionally proposed sterilization strategies.[35] What is often left out of scholars' readings of Parks's deconstruction of this stereotype is how it leads to societal conceptions of the will to surveil and punish. Parks interestingly invokes the language often ascribed to indict the welfare queen stereotype at the beginning of the play: "BURDEN TO SOCIETY" "WE GOTTA PAY FOR IT"

[35] Many scholars have pointed to the welfare queen stereotype at work in Parks's *In The Blood*, including Lisa M. Anderson's reading of how Parks's Hester highlights the ways in which the stereotype has operated to further harm the most vulnerable Black women in contemporary society (*Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* 65-70). These readings of Parks's Hester gain even more relevance when placed in conversation with Dorothy Roberts's analysis of how the Moynihan Report and the resulting welfare queen stereotype have operated to justify defunding social welfare programs. Moreover, these circulated mythologies helped lead to increased criminalization of women on welfare and therefore justified many initiatives to limit their reproductive autonomy.

"CAUSE I'LL BE DAMNED IF SHE GONNA LIVE OFF ME" (5-7) is repeated again once Hester is sitting on stage behind bars. The chorus repeats many of the phrases from the beginning of the play but no longer directed as Hester "the welfare mother" but at Hester "the criminal": "AND NOW SHES GOT TO PAY FOR IT"; "CAUSE I'LL BE DAMNED IF SHE GONNA LIVE OFF ME" (108-109). This doubling of discourse of who "pays" for whom and what in society echoes the discourses commonly heard about both welfare and prison in regard to reform in the United States. The linking of the discourses afforded to both "welfare queens" and "prisoners" as simultaneous threats and parasites to the society represented in the chorus shows that criminalization and dehumanization through gendered racial stereotype are part of the same project.

The ways in which language of criminality is part of the climate of "the poverty of the world of the play" is what makes *In the Blood* particularly appropriate for turn-of-the-century audiences. In the first scene, Bully snitches on Trouble for stealing the club and tells Hester that she "told him he was gonna be doing life and he laughed and then [she] said he was gonna get the electric chair" (13). When Hester asks Trouble what he stole she responds "You gonna end up in the penitentiary and embarrass your mother?" … "If you do I'll kill you." (15). Bully calls Trouble "Jailbait" after he hands over the police club to Hester, telling her that he found it and then a police officer started chasing him. Welfare later continues this language linking poverty to criminality by telling Hester her children are truant, and that plays against her ability to fully benefit from state assistance. The character Welfare is a self-righteous, exploitative representative of the ways in which social service programs offer limited resources to extend poverty rather than create opportunities to rise out of it. She proclaims: "The welfare of the world weighs on these shoulders, Hester. (Rest) We at Welfare are at the end of our rope with

you" (54). Welfare engages in criminalizing language to suggest that Hester is not only responsible for her own continuing poverty but engaging in behaviors that border on the criminal or will lead her or her children to prison: "We put you in school and you drop out. Yr children are also truant. Word is they steal. Stealing is a gateway crime, Hester. Perhaps your young daughter is pregnant. Who knows" (54). This echoing of "truancy" as a criminalizable behavior that often breaks up families or leads to what is now known as the "school-to-prison-pipeline" also links Hester's interactions with the welfare system to the prison system as they are co-operating institutions of oppression.

Welfare reminds Hester over and over that she is "paid to stretch out these hands," yet she underpays Hester for a backrub and sexually coerces her into a threesome to "spice" up her marriage; this encounter presumably leads to one of Hester's pregnancies. However, Welfare is convinced that "These men of yours, theyre deadbeats. They dont want to be found. Theyre probably all in Mexico wearing false mustaches" (55). When Welfare continues to reprimand Hester for having five kids out of wedlock, Hester grabs her club in defense to which Welfare responds "Kids or no kids, I'll have you locked up" (59). Welfare is the most explicit iteration of an institution that exploits, impoverishes, and fathers one of Hester's five "bastards" while simultaneously proclaiming the desire to help her. Parks's inclusion of the confessions in the play—monologues in which each character that presumably "fathers" a child of Hester's reveals how they had sexual encounters with her—present indicting connections between government programs and the perpetuation of poverty and harm. These characters operate parasitically, taking from Hester while offering no benefit to her, an ironic reversal given that Hester is viewed by her society as a parasite. In Wang's analysis of carceral state relations to the U.S. debt economy, she creates a description of the "parasitic state" in which three of its characteristics—

financialization, automation, and looting—"keep people alive in order to extract from them" (80), while its other two characteristics—confinement and violence—explicitly operate to maintain the current racial order. Parasitic governance in this conception seeks to extract and then exterminate, what Wang considers "a logic of disposability *and* a logic of exploitability," which forms at the intersection of racial capitalism and afro-pessimism (88). With these logics in mind, Hester's move from the oppressive carceral structures of the so-called free world toward the explicit physical site of the prison is a representation of how racialized logics of exploitability lead into racialized logics of disposability.

These two interacting racialized logics of exploitability and disposability also depend on strict spatial designations that Parks calls our attention to through her staging. Welfare's confession opens and closes with the declaration, "The balance of the system depends on a well-drawn boundary line / and all parties respecting that boundary" (61). Welfare's confession of coercing Hester into a threesome with her husband reveals how those not in Hester's situation feel entitled to her body and cross that boundary with ease and no sense of responsibility. The boundary operates unilaterally, meaning the line is maintained so Hester cannot cross into their homes, communities, and businesses, but they have unfettered access to Hester, her home, her body, and her children without recourse. The staging of *In the Blood* attends to these sorts of boundary setting. Hester lives under a bridge/overpass, a space often designated as public. Welfare, Doctor, and Amiga Gringa visit her to carry out their various duties or schemes. Their sexual exploitation of Hester, however, happens within the privacy of their own homes: Welfare invites Hester to her home under the guise of teaching her proper table etiquette, and Reverend D has her enter his home through the back way under the guise of negotiating pay for their child but concludes in cajoling Hester into an underpaid sexual encounter.

The boundary between public and private in this play operates to perpetuate harm. Welfare intimates that the system relies on "all parties respecting that boundary," a statement that, especially when understood in relation to carceral studies, means that the boundary must be enforced. Hinton's conception of the development of policing speaks to the politics of these boundaries: "Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, police patrols in white and middle-class communities are expected to guard property from outsiders. In segregated low-income urban communities, on the other hand, their task is to search for suspects and remove offenders and potential offenders from the streets" (338). The boundary then, points to the purpose of state officials, services, and enforcers to guard and maintain particular types of private property as well as punish those who do not obtain it. It is with this concept of punitive boundary maintenance that I contend that we view those in the play that enforce that boundary as state-actors rather than less direct or secondary forms of oppression.

One of the readings that gets closest to this carceral continuum in *The Red Letter Plays* is Jocelyn L. Buckner's analysis of them through Althusser's conceptions of State and Ideological State Apparatuses. This reading categorizes the types of oppression at work in both plays between apparatuses that violently maintain social control—police, prisons, other state enforcers—and apparatuses that coerce or regulate normative behaviors—Welfare, Doctor, Reverend D (*Blood*) and Freedom Fund (*Fucking A*). As Buckner argues, the ISA's operating in the plays work to maintain labor conditions for the capitalist system, and when they fail, they call the more violent State Apparatuses to intervene. This particular reading explicitly states the preference for understanding Hester through modes of class, rather than specifically gendered racial and economic harm. The primary focus on ISA's suggest that State Apparatuses are purely driven by capitalism: "By developing figures that are the embodiment of these ISAs, and the

theatrical, allegorical, and critical aesthetic in which to analyze them, Parks demonstrates not only the specific kinds of oppression that individuals like Hester La Negrita and Hester Smith face, but also the systemic forces in place that allow for their ongoing oppression and its acceptance in the service of capitalism" (50).While Buckner's focus on structural and systemic forces of oppression rather than individual actors is central for understanding Parks's plays, I hesitate at the separation of ISAs and SAs along the lines of coercion/violence in these plays, as they rely on limited definitions of violence that do not include race and gender within their metric. In *In the Blood*, Welfare and Doctor organize and carry out Hester's sterilization. That is violence. They blame the "Higher Ups" (43) for their pressure to do so, but they enact the state's enforcement of this violence. They forcefully maintain a boundary through their sexual exploitation of Hester and later through her forced sterilization. They exploit her services by underpaying her, refusing to pay their share of taking part in fathering her children and leaving her in constant hunger pain and struggling. That is violence. A definition of violence rooted in Black feminist and anti-carceral feminist discourse exposes the direct relationships of oppression to Hester.

Despite the compounding violence that Hester endures from multiple state and extra-state enforcers, she does resist. She questions Welfare when she remarks the she doesn't think the world likes women much. She persistently visits Rev. D to ask him to help pay for her youngest child that he fathered. She does not consent nor respond to Doctor's warnings that she may be sterilized. Because Hester's resistance does not always appear as direct challenges to the systemic harm she endures, many scholars have characterized her as a docile victim. In Harvey Young's reading of the Chorus in the play, he suggests that she is silent in comparison to the other characters who get to testify in their confessions. Young notes that "Although she exists at

the center of each confession, Hester does not speak…She cannot confess. She cannot testify. This is not to say that the character is mute within the narrative…What she does not do is refute their confessions. Parks denies her this possibility" (35-36). Young suggests that this silence is Parks's way of incorporating the audience. He argues that "through her embrace and (post)modernization of the Greek chorus, [Parks] stitches her contemporary audience into her narratives through identification with her onstage characters, makes a veiled critique of the present-day, societal complicity in the objectification of others, and, in so doing, encourages her audiences to feel compassion for the black, female protagonist" (30). For Young, the (post)modernization of the chorus and Hester's silence provide the opportunity for audience identification with the protagonist.

Although I contend Hester *does* speak and speak back in this play, I want to focus on the role of the Chorus and audience in relation to her. Young points out how the Greek chorus was made up of actors who were members of the community whom playgoers could identify with, which often doubled the role of the audience member as witness and participant. He writes that in ancient Greece, "To attend the theatre was, by turns, to be a citizen watching a citizen play a citizen who indeed is watched by a citizen who both watches and watches you watch" (31). Unlike the role of the Greek chorus, Parks creates a distance between her chorus and her audience, even though the types of people who would likely be in her audience would more likely socially and economically identify with the members of the chorus than her poor and illiterate protagonist. In witnessing Hester's pain, audience members must choose to disidentify with the chorus and withdraw the vocalized group judgment on her. For Young, the role of the chorus and Hester's silence is key to Parks's dramaturgy, stating

> It is important to observe that one of the many strengths of Parks's dramaturgy is her unwillingness to incorporate corrective monologues into her dramatic narratives. She resists the urge to have Hester…talk about how systemic racism; ongoing racial stereotypes, mapped across the black female body; and societal complicity created the unfortunate lives of her protagonists. Instead, she renders them mute thus denying them the opportunity to talk-back. We, as audiences, must imagine their voices. (44)

Young is right to zero in on Parks's refusal to provide a corrective or clear interpretation of the characters and events presented on stage. She relies on the audience to witness the systems of racism and societal complicity at work. But Hester does speak. Even if her final confession appears as "rambling incoherently" as Young asserts, Hester's voice comes through and—to return to Moten's reading of Frederick Douglass's primal scene—"the object resists, the commodity shrieks, the audience participates" (12). Hester's performance provides the opportunity for the audience to witness her testimony of pain through her embodied, visual, and aural presence.

Just before the prison bars lower over her head, Hester comes to terms with the reality of Jabber's death, and she delivers the final confession of the play. While still sitting near Jabber's blood at the scene of her murder, she states that she never should have had any of her children, but then quickly changes her mind, offering a recalcitrant response to the systems which confine her:

> I shoulda had a hundred
>
> a hundred
>
> I shoulda had a hundred-thousand
>
> A hundred thousand a whole *army* full I shoulda!

I shoulda.

One right after the other! Spitting em out with no years in between!

One after another:

Tail to head:

Spitting em out:

Bad mannered Bad mouthed Bad Bad *Bastards!*

A whole *army full* I shoulda! (107)

Hester's shift toward reproducing in excess is a call to resistance against the coercive state violences that attempt to deter Black women from having children. Her response to the pressures to get "spayed," the animalistic term used by Doctor who suggests the "Higher Ups" tell him he cannot let her have any more children, is to have so many children that they overrun the systems in place that aim to target, manage, and confine them. Hester reconceptualizes her womb as a space to create fugitivity and recalcitrance. In other words, she imagines creating "a whole army" of children whose counter-hegemonic birth and "Bad mouthed" behavior will challenge the racial, economic, gendered, and reproductive boundaries enforced by the state. Hester's imaginative insistence on the possibility of birthing resistance shifts the perspective of the various representatives of the system and systemic norms—including Chilli and Amiga who aren't representatives of that system—that locate Hester's poverty and struggle in the production of children rather than the ways in which women who have children are kept from true forms of assistance in their communities.

Hester's vocalized desire to have a whole army full of "Bad mannered Bad mouthed Bad Bad *Bastards"* attends to a radical motherhood in the face of a state that seeks to foreclose the possibility of reproduction. In this moment, Hester most explicitly and vocally resists and the

audience witnesses. Her speech points to a conception of radical Black motherhood that responds to centuries-spanning practices of white supremacist violence to deny reproductive autonomy. For Moten, motherhood operates as a material resistance to enslavement when he describes Douglass's maternal depictions of Aunt Hester. Moten calls us to note

> the indistinctness of the conditions of "mother" and "enslavement" in the milieu from which Douglass emerges and which he describes and narrates. This is to say that enslavement—and the resistance to enslavement that is the performative essence of blackness (or, perhaps less controversially, the essence of black performance) is a *being maternal* that is indistinguishable from a *being material*. But it is also to say something more. And here, the issue of reproduction (the "natural" production of natural children) emerges right on time as it has to do not only with the question concerning slavery, blackness, performance, and the ensemble of their ontologies but also with a contradiction at the heart of the question of value in its relation to personhood that could be said to come into clearer focus against the backdrop of the ensemble of motherhood, blackness, and the bridge between slavery and freedom (16)

The "terribly beautiful music" of Aunt Hester's scream performs resistance. As Aunt Hester represents a maternal figure for Douglass in the primal scene, his witnessing simultaneously provides an opening to the gates of the hell of slavery and a glimpse of a loud and expressive performance of defiance. The location of the maternal within the primal scene as the bridge between slavery and freedom provides us with a way to view Hester La Negrita's defiant observation that she should have had an army of bad-mouthed children. It also provides us with a way to view our own witnessing of her subjection and defiance. Parks's Hester's response—if attending to Moten's term—is the "essence of black performance" because it operates between

(neo)slavery and freedom. Her maternal call to reproduce in excess highlights the aims of state control and violence by exposing its intention to sterilize her. Hester La Negrita's last words (and the last words of the play as a whole) likewise conjures the image of a beating, when she repeats, "Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me. Big hand coming down on me" (110).

In the final scene of the play, prison bars lower over Hester La Negrita while she sits in a pool of her son's blood, and the chorus returns to deliver a final indictment. Their epithets are similar to the opening scene, but instead of calling her a "BURDEN TO SOCIETY / HUSSY / SLUT" (6), they call her "THE ANIMAL" (108). Following this, Welfare asks Doctor if Hester is in any pain to which Doctor responds, "She shouldn't be. She wont be having anymore children" (109). Hester is in prison, and Doctor has sterilized her. Hester's imprisonment illustrates the ways in which the state controls her physically, but her sterilization compounds this control biologically as well. The doubled forces of state violence through imprisonment and sterilization echoes a state-driven impulse to foreclose the futurity of Black life. Scholars such as Elam and Buckner have pointed to the particular U.S. history of eugenics invoked in this performance, but more particularly it is important to focus on the eugenics history in relation to women who are incarcerated. Buckner reminds readers of the links between eugenics practices on economically struggling Black mothers in the twentieth century and the relationship of Black women to white slaveowners in antebellum America: "While Hester is not technically enslaved, the system still 'owns' her children in the sense that they are supported by it" (40). Further, once incarcerated, the state likewise asserts full control and ownership over Hester whom it had only partially indebted via its services before. At the end of the play, the state controls both Hester and her womb. I re-invoke here the maternal-fetal conflict outlined by Dorothy Roberts which I

applied to my reading of Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* in chapter one. The state cannot sterilize Hester until she is re-inscribed into the post-Thirteenth amendment recodification of slavery: prison. There she is recast as property, her womb brought into the construct of control by the state. Given that the last scene of the play provides the literal physical barrier of the prison bars between Hester and her society, the invisible cells of the play that continue to oppress Hester become literalized. However, it is important to note that this spatial boundary only becomes possible through the various invisible cells at work on Hester throughout the play. In this way, Parks stages varying forms of social and physical boundary. She explores how boundaries are enforced in so-called free worlds that lead to various sites and states of unfreedom. While the work explicitly challenges the stereotypes associated with the welfare queen, Parks also interrogates the social, political, and economic boundaries that thus place Hester there. Parks's varied stagings of visible and invisible boundaries become the ways through which audiences can understand a developing carcerality that operates outside of the prison as much as it does within it—a dynamic equally central to *Fucking A*.

Staging Mass Incarceration in *Fucking A*

> On the whole, people tend to take prisons for granted. It is difficult to imagine life without them. At the same time, there is reluctance to face the realities hidden within them, a fear of thinking about what happens inside them. Thus, the prison is present in our lives, and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives. To think about this simultaneous presence and absence is to begin to acknowledge the part played by ideology in shaping the way we interact with our social surroundings.
> —Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003)

As *In the Blood*'s final scene highlights Hester's physical incarceration as well as the carceral forces at work that shape her life to that point, *Fucking A* begins with Hester Smith already responding to and affected by an oppressive prison system that has taken her son. Written and first produced during the peak years of the U.S. prison boom—an era marked by the

mass imprisonment of Black Americans at staggeringly disproportionate rates to their white counterparts—*Fucking A*'s major plotline follows Hester's struggle in a carceral regime, where more "men and women [are] locked up … thans walking free in the streets" (193).[36] Remarkably, however, the space of the prison itself is almost entirely absent from the staged world of the play, and its simultaneous centrality to the plot effectively renders this absence itself a form of carcerality. As such, Parks echoes in the genre of drama renowned scholar and prison abolitionist Angela Davis's call to think more critically about the ways in which the prison's presence and absence operate in the making of our social, presumably "free" lives.

While the content of *Fucking A* explicates the persistent and shaping role of the prison within social space and time, many of the play's structural elements additionally offer a template for reading like a prison abolitionist. As declared by Critical Resistance, one of the most prevalent abolition advocacy groups in the U.S., prison abolitionists—unlike prison reformers—believe that "the prison-industrial complex (PIC) is not a broken system to be fixed. The system, rather, works exactly as it is designed to—to contain, control, and kill those people representing the greatest threats to state power" ("What is Critical Resistance?"). To think (and read) like an abolitionist, Davis, a former political prisoner, proposes in her landmark critical prison studies text, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* that we must first undergo a necessary ideological shift, one that no longer conceives the prison as "an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives" (9) but recognizes it as a network of multiple, repeated state-sanctioned practices aimed to (re)produce

[36] By "peak years" I am referring to the moment in which U.S. incarcerated populations rose to bypass the incarceration rates of all other countries, as supported in H. Bruce Franklin's introduction to *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998). He states that incarcerated populations tripled between 1980-1995, disproportionately affecting African American men who were incarcerated at the rate of "seven times that for white males" (15). According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, these numbers continued to steadily increase until incarcerated populations slightly decreased in 2009, a shift which arguably marks the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century as a pivotal moment for examining mass incarceration.

containment, control, and physical and psychological violence to the disproportionately Black and poor people living both inside and outside the prison site's walls.

Fucking A provides an exemplary model for this sort of reading, as it thematically and structurally illustrates the ways in which incarceration, through various racialized institutions and social practices, marks its presence in the everyday lives of those not contained inside the prison. With these dynamics in mind, my ensuing argument in this section makes two intertwined claims. I first argue that, ensconced in a fictional and dystopian "otherworld," Parks's play interrogates the social and spatiotemporal punitive technologies of mass incarceration, which is both grounded in maintaining white supremacist, capital(istic) state power and invested in foreclosing the futurity of its captives. Second, I argue that the generic (genre-specific) characteristics of drama offer a critically privileged space for both representing and interrogating these facets of incarceration. By "technologies" of mass incarceration, I am referring to the social and state-driven institutions and practices that work together to produce and perpetuate large-scale imprisonment. These include institutions of confinement, such as prisons, jails, and detention centers; institutions of power, including but not limited to government, economics, gender, and race; state-sanctioned practices, such as policing, criminalization, sentencing, bail, and parole; and social practices, including the ways in which we regularly interact (or, more markedly, the ways we do not) with those who are deemed "criminal." For prison abolitionists, the site of the prison and the temporal measurements that define sentences do not constitute the entire structure of punishment; instead, these are two of many punitive technologies intended to remove those labeled "criminal" from social and civic life.

By looking at the way Parks stages, embodies, and performs society's participation in continually establishing these dichotomized racial carceral dynamics—citizen/criminal,

free/unfree, person/nonperson—we can gain a better understanding of the prison's relationship to the ideological factors that construct the social world of the play and, by extension, our own. Parks's dramaturgy is known for her "rep & rev" depictions of history as layered and continually repeating. In *Fucking A*, histories of anti-Black violence haunt the production of the prison and the social world constituted by it in a way that comments not only on how violence repeats and evolves but also how the production and reproduction of Black subjection marks the basis for understanding the particular practices of mass incarceration.

Casting "the Criminal": Social Technologies of Imprisonment

To understand how *Fucking A* reveals the prison's centrality to the social world of the play—even without depicting its space—it may be helpful to contemplate some existing theories regarding mass incarceration and its relation to social life and histories of racial oppression. Critical prison studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez's term "the prison regime" provides a model for understanding how incarceration's reach goes beyond the prison as a geographical site of punishment or as a mere extension of the state; rather, he defines this regime as a set of repeated social, political, and ideological practices that constructs the necessity of a space for unfreedom and, by proxy, spaces of assumed freedom as well. He notes these constitutive institutions and practices are "consistently … in progress," engaging in "a seemingly endless political-military labor that variously establishes, rearticulates, and reforms the material content and putative social meaning of state-proctored human capture" (42-43). In thinking about the prison as repeated *process*, Rodríguez also aptly relates these practices to "(re)productions" of state power within a "political drama" (44), lexically linking these technologies to performance. In a sense, the prison regime relies on multiple "performances" or "gestures" of social control that are geared toward making punishment a routine part of the fabric of social life. If understood through performance

studies scholar Richard Schechner's definition of performance as "restored" or "twice-behaved" behavior specific to a particular environment (36), the prison regime is similarly a (re)production, an ongoing event including a cast of state enforcers, repeatedly performed gestures of violence, and constructed environments (stages/sets) of incapacitation that all contribute to maintaining a narrative of social and civic order within society.

Rodríguez's conception of the prison regime as a consistent (re)production of state-driven punishment, when paired with Orlando Patterson's figurations of social death and natal alienation, offers ways to interpret Parks's carceral state as a series of punitive applications that have necessary social functions. These social functions are grounded in legacies of Black subjugation, and include—but are not limited to—structuring how citizens orient themselves to notions of crime and criminality, how families cope with the loss of someone to imprisonment, how those labeled "criminals" are subject to varying forms of dehumanization, and how these experiences are marked and signified through a language of white supremacist domination. The characters' names in Parks's play, however, always participate in resignifications that are worth noting. "Boy" and his subsequent shift to "Monster" take on further significance if considered through Christina Sharpe's understandings of anagrammatical Blackness. In her examinations, she asks "What is a black child?" to underscore how Blackness creates slippages, asterisks, and footnotes to being in the wake of anti-Black violence (80). Her focus on "blackness's signifying surplus: the ways that meaning slides, signification slips, when words like *child, girl, mother,* and *boy* abut blackness," is key for understanding the layered meanings of "Boy" and other names in *Fucking A* (80). Critically extending Saidiya Hartman's and Fred Moten's well-known readings and rereadings of Douglass's Aunt Hester, Sharpe uses the examples of Douglass's Aunt Hester and Hawthorne's Hester to examine these slippages in

signification; and I argue, Parks is similarly interested in slippages not only between Hesters, but also between "boy," a word haunted and weighted with racialized subjugation and "Monster," the name that he is given by the state.[37] Parks creates a web of naming and (re)signification throughout her work to draw attention to how racist state practices can foreclose the possibility of "boy[hood] abut[ting] blackness" in ways that authorize premature death.

Boy/Monster's renaming highlights the process by which the state dehumanizes him through the label "criminal" with the intent to use that label as a justification for murder. The audience is introduced to the name "Monster" in Scene 5 amongst the three hunters who are paid to torture and kill escaped convicts:

> FIRST HUNTER: word is they had a convict escape up north two nights ago. Someone wholl bring a good price too. "Monster" they call him. "Monster!" Hes pure evil. Done everything bad there is to do. Heres the paper, give it a read.
>
> THIRD HUNTER: Murder, necrophilia, sodomy, bestiality, pedophilia, armed robbery, petty theft, embezzlement, diddling in public, cannibalism— (143)

In this scene, the list of crimes Third Hunter reads off mediates First Hunter's association between the name "Monster" and the conclusion, "Hes pure evil." It is worth noting that Monster's body and Monster's name and reputation appear in separate scenes until Scene 9 when the information about the two begins to converge via Monster's scar that Hester gave him so that she would always be able to identify her son. In this sense, Boy/Monster's name accentuates the

[37] Sharpe is taking her cue from the tradition of key debates between Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten regarding the foundational subject-forming power of anti-Black violence and the resistant force of Black vitality, respectively. Hartman famously opens *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997) with a reading of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester's beating, a reading which Moten critiques in the introduction of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). Sharpe adds to this reading with her introduction of anagrammatical Blackness but also brings Hawthorne's Hester into the conceptualization of traditions of language, logic, and anti-Black violence.

split the audience witnesses between Hester and the state who vie for him, between his early existence as a human child within a social network and his social death sentence as a body captured and rendered extinguishable by the state.

This meditation on "crime" and what constitutes monstrosity, paired with the hunters' interest in Monster's (dead) body "bring[ing] a good price," force the narrative to engage with historically racialized practices of corporal punishment as well as the foundational racialization of criminality in U.S. conceptions of modernity.[38] Monster's alleged crimes are particularly taboo—Cheryl Black suggests they are "ludicrously excessive" (46)—and reflect deeds that would be punishable in most communities, including that of the audience; however, the type of punishment that the hunters plan to enact, a brutal and public torture scene for reward,[39] seems from another time, perhaps the time of fugitive slave laws that classified escaped slaves as property to be collected, tracked, or returned for reward, or a later time in which the practice of racially motivated lynching was normalized up through the mid-twentieth century.

As the renaming and fugitive experiences of Boy/Monster suggest, Parks depicts various ways in which *subjects in absentia* are produced, with drastic implications for their own lives but also for the social world from which they have been excluded. While it is worth considering that the staged world of the play also demands strict social stratifications—including Hester's

[38] For an extensive history on how Blackness developed into "the singular mark of a criminal" (271) in the United States through the use of deeply biased crime statistics and sociological "data" that were entrenched in white supremacist ideology in post-emancipation U.S., see Khalil Gibran Muhammad's *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and The Making of Modern Urban America* (2010). He compellingly argues how "the idea of black criminality was crucial to the making of modern urban America…it impacted how people defined fundamental differences between native whites, immigrants, and blacks" (272-3). For a study on how Black children specifically were implicated in "the process of racialized criminalization" via the rise of the juvenile justice system, see Tera Eva Agyepong's *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago's Juvenile Justice System, 1899-1945* (2018).

[39] In Scene 11, the hunters describe their plan to perform a "runthrough," which entails impaling the fugitive with a hot iron rod and then setting it into the ground and watching the person suffer to death.

branded "A" that must be visible at all times and emits an odor that makes her noticeable and ostracized in public spaces—the prison acts as the ultimate materialization of this stratification, both enabling and intensifying these dynamics in the "free" staged world. As Hester remarks to her friend and love interest, Butcher, "The brand comes with the job is all I know.… Go to prison or take this job. That was my choice. Choose A or choose B. I chose A" (164-65). Hester's choice places her in a sort of economic imprisonment to the state reminiscent of convict leasing or racialized debt peonage, and the possibility of paying for her son's freedom from prison defines and consumes her. Even within this labor alternative to imprisonment, her efforts to reunite with Boy are continually prevented by the state. During the same scene of the play where she recognizes her son and has the opportunity to reunite with him, Hester must kill him so that he doesn't endure the torture and dismemberment of the lynch mob-esque hunters. Central to Parks's dramatic structure are the echoes of racial slavery, captivity, and premature death at work as modes of anti-black violence affecting not only black characters. The lack of designation of race perhaps points to Parks's interest in the particular recoding of anti-black violence into an institution and social organization of discipline.[40] Hester's body, as it is marked, enslaved, and surveilled by the state is likewise encoded by these practices, where her gendered, sexualized, and classed status as poor, illiterate mother highlights her position in the play as a site where the borders between freedom and incarceration, futurity and premature death are less concrete.

[40] In *Fucking A*'s sister play, *In the Blood*, Parks more explicitly racializes her protagonist by naming her Hester La Negrita (Black woman). Parks is less clear about the specific casting in *Fucking A*; however, her attention to the ways in which anti-Black violence informs and structures how Hester Smith suffers at the hands of the state should not be ignored or deemed a universalization of state violence, but rather an interrogation into the structure of a system that is rooted in racialized violence and involuntary servitude.

Parks further explicates the links between criminality, personhood, and (un)freedom through another incarcerated character kept from homecoming to the extent that she never makes an appearance on stage. Butcher tells the story of his daughter Lulu, who can never make it out of prison because of the extent of her crimes. The scene is so minor that Butcher's monologue is marked as an optional cut from the play, but its inclusion serves as a proxy for those disappeared by the prison system. Butcher explains to Hester that his daughter is "rotten," and launches into a 119-item list of her crimes and offenses. The list begins with acts that sound like actual crimes and then slowly starts to shift into the realm of humor:

> Prostitution, racketeering, moneylaundering, cyber fraud, intellectual embezzlement, highway robbery, dialing for dollars, doing a buffalo after midnight, printing her own money, cheating at cheating, jaywalking, selling herself without a license, selling her children without a permit, unlawful reproduction, having more than one spouse, claiming to have multiple parents, claiming to have multiple orgasms, claiming to have injuries she didnt have, claiming to have been places she never was. (160)

Serving as comic relief to break the building tension just before Hester saves enough money for a visitation with her son, the scene juxtaposes what might be deemed actual criminal behaviors with the absurd. As Butcher's monologue moves from acts like prostitution and racketeering to the anaphoric riffs of "claiming to have" multiple parents, orgasms, injuries, etc., the list plays with the syntactical structures of legal-speak to challenge seemingly unquestioned notions of "crime and punishment." The list progressively gets more absurd, humorously alternating between serious offenses and social taboos:

> eating from the table of authority, fornicating with the Other, overdue shit at the LendingSpot, general physical underdevelopment … leading unsuspecting men and

> women into cyberspace and leaving them there lost and without a roadmap, riding without a helmet … selling state secrets, not believing in The Afterlife, defaming the name of the State … not doing her bit, having neither gimmick nor schtick, mugging i.e. pulling faces, mugging i.e. sticking up—you get the gist—having bad timing, possessing a firearm … being a bad apple, falling too far from the tree, possessing a concealed freakish attribute, harboring the convicted, fencing the stolen, giving false testimony, raising the dead, envisioning the future, remembering the past, speeding—huh. (160-61)

Punning on criminal actions such as "mugging" and playing with legal terms and syntaxes, the list turns into an experiment, asking the audience to decide which items are criminal and which are farcical. In the increasing momentum of the monologue, the types of "crimes" on the list also shift from mostly actions understood as criminal to actions understood as nonnormative or controversial, as seen when moving from "not doing her bit, neither having gimmick nor schtick" to "not believing in the Afterlife" and "envisioning the future, remembering the past." The toggling between types of actions—those that physically or seriously harm other members of society and those that seem to ideologically or socially threaten notions of community—creates cognitive dissonance between Lulu's behavior and the behavior understood as "crime" and, subsequently, between crime and the sentence Lulu is serving.

Humorously pointing out disparities between certain actions and their status as *criminal*, this scene entices the audience to question the definitions of crime as knowable constants. Some of the items on the list—actions not generally considered illicit behaviors: "fornicating with the Other" or "pulling faces"— also expose the historical entanglement of criminalization and blackness, the ways in which notions of racial purity and racialized standards of respectable behavior shape definitions of crime. The last of Lulu's crimes, "envisioning the future,

remembering the past, speeding" are particularly poignant in their link to the ways in which incarceration as a state-sanctioned practice of living death and premature death attempts to restrict one's access to futurity, the social/familial interactions that connect one to a past, and unregulated mobility, respectively. By flipping the script, these last three items corrupt the narrative that punishment, particularly through imprisonment, seeks to "fit" the crime committed or "fix" the behavior of the criminal. Parks's inclusion of the monologue instead discloses the relationship between crime and punishment as near farce, exposing both a slippery slope for the parameters of what can constitute crime and the ineffectiveness of its mode of punishment geared only toward containment, never rehabilitation. In the cases of Monster and Lulu, the label "criminal" operates as a social designation that enables the state (often with the compliance of its citizens) to incapacitate, dehumanize, and justify the social and literal death of those within its punitive control.

Staging the Prison Regime: Dramatic Absence and Fugitive Presence

The power of Butcher's list of Lulu's crimes also resides in the fact that she is not there to tell her story, nor will she ever be, as she is not eligible for release. Lulu's absence highlights the extent to which incarcerated bodies in *Fucking A* are introduced and spoken for in ways that allow only mediated representation. Following Davis's assertion that "prisons do not disappear problems, they disappear human beings," the task of staging the social realities and consequences of mass incarceration relies on representing and performing absence ("Masked" 1). The spatiotemporal facets of imprisonment are invested in institutionalized secrecy, where those "serving time" generally do so in geopolitically isolated facilities. As H. Bruce Franklin explains, part of the prison's effectiveness is its ability to elide knowledge or representation: "The prison's walls are designed not only to keep the prisoners in but to keep the public out, thus preventing

observation or knowledge of what is going on inside.… And as an unknowable place, the prison can thus also become a prime site for cultural fantasy" (4). Mass incarceration thus presents a problem for representation in that much of what constitutes "the prison" inside its walls is defined by its very unknowability and unrepresentability, part and parcel of its own punitive constitution. However, Parks approaches this problem by depicting institutionalized secrecy as a driving force in Hester's tragedy. This strategy also allows her to forego mimetic depictions of inside the prison and instead think through the ways in which the structures of incarceration interact with the social world, including how the state utilizes absence and the unknowable.

To dramatize this relationship, Parks highlights characters' absence due to imprisonment as the force behind Hester's desire and despair. Lulu's and Boy's absences play into what Andrew Sofer has called the "dark matter" of the stage:

> the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance. If theater necessarily traffics in corporeal stuff (bodies, fluids, gases, objects), it also incorporates the incorporeal: offstage spaces and actions, absent characters, the narrated past, hallucination, blindness, obscenity, godhead, and so on. (3)

Lulu's absence adds to Hester's longing to see Boy, who has been rendered absent for the majority of his lifetime. Although Butcher displays a much more casual attitude about his daughter's imprisonment than Hester, who desperately works for a chance to see her son, perhaps because there is no chance of his seeing his daughter again, their children's absences combine to stand in for other incarcerated peoples in the world of the play. In Sofer's terms, "Theater continually encourages us to take parts for wholes, but it also encourages us to take holes for parts," so that our attention is drawn to what is "'not there' yet 'not not there'" (4-5).

While the "dark matter" marked by Lulu's and Boy's felt absence synecdochally gestures that there are more like them within the carceral state, it also highlights how that carceral offstage absence can inspire and perpetuate the actions of those considered "free" on stage. In this sense, Lulu is "not there" on stage yet "not *not* there" in the world of the play, which insistently points to the unstaged space of the prison, the unseen world that motivates both Hester's onstage yearning and Boy/Monster's attempt for freedom.

The presence of Monster's fugitive body and the ventriloquizing of Lulu's story through her father create a transgressive haunting presence—the prison in the world where it ought not be seen. Just as Franklin states that the institutionalized secrecy of the prison site can allow for both unregulated torture and a breeding ground for "cultural fantasy," the material and vocal presences of incarceration hauntingly (Lulu's story) and literally (Monster's body) breach the divides between the world of the play and the unseen world of the absent. The capacity for Boy/Monster to return without state approval and for Lulu's story to be heard points to fissures in the parameters of social time and space. Haunting and fugitivity operate toward similar ends in this play; while the former exposes the operational utility of "disappearing human beings" in a carceral regime, the latter explicitly highlights the possibility and will to escape.

Parks takes the audience right up to the supposed boundary between social and carceral worlds to reveal that each does not exist in a separate sphere as they appear in her staging, but rather they both exist along a "carceral continuum," to evoke and expand the Foucauldian phrase referenced earlier in this chapter. When Hester saves enough money to pay the ironically named Freedom Fund for a visitation with Boy, her triumph is once again undercut by the institutional imposition of social death. Hester's interactions with the Freedom Fund, a company which people can pay to either see their incarcerated loved ones or save up to buy their freedom, iterate

the anonymizing practices of social death and the capitalistically exploitive aims of mass incarceration when it reduces Boy's identity to money, paperwork, and substitution. The Freedom Fund is performed by a single female character in the social, staged world of the play, and her first words point to the system's tendency to disappear and lose inmates: "His files here somewhere. Not to worry. We never lose anything. Of course you could just make a payment get a receipt and I could enter it all into his file at a later time" (131). The fund, whose motto is "Freedom Aint Free!" (131), repeatedly loses Boy's paperwork but never loses the money Hester invests. The statement, "We never lose anything," refers to the file but gains a new meaning when the Fund and prison later attempt to send another prisoner in Boy's place for the visitation because they have actually lost him. The play is unclear about whether the Freedom Fund knows that the escaped convict is Boy, but it does make clear that the fund is capable of losing and substituting him to continue collecting until it feigns his death and offers Hester a refund. The Freedom Fund becomes a disturbing example of how imprisonment operates outside of the prison's walls, as Boy's absent body and potential freedom can be capitalized upon in the "free" world in a way that further reinscribes and negotiates his social and legal nonpersonhood.

The one scene in which the outside of the prison is staged for Hester's visitation maintains distance between Hester on the picnic grounds and the guard who admits prisoners to visit. The stage direction reads, "Far far away, a Guard brings Jailbait out.… Jailbait wears shackles on his feet" (175). The distance between Hester and "Jailbait," another imprisoned character whose name derives from crimes committed but suggests a misnomer or inversion of criminality because he "always had a thing for older women" (184), sets the stage for a moment of spatial convergence and familial reunion, except that the man who emerges is clearly not her son. The exchange between the guard and Jailbait before he joins Hester is further proof of the

logic of social death as applied to the fungibility of imprisoned bodies:

> JAILBAIT: You aint scared I'll make a run for it?
>
> GUARD: Youre wearing a chain. So if you run you wont run far. Besides, yr moms visiting. And shes brought you a picnic.
>
> JAILBAIT: I aint got no mom.
>
> GUARD: Sure you do. Everybodys got a mom. Even you. (176)

Their conversation about Jailbait's shackles as well as their entrance into the visitation grounds stages a purgatory between the walls of the prison and the world of "free" society. Within this space that exposes captivity as extending beyond the material border of the prison, Jailbait is immobilized by shackles to prevent escape so that his social interactions with Hester are allowed but still restricted by an unchanged condition of state-sanctioned captivity. Further, the guard's complacent attitude toward Jailbait's protestations of not having a mother reveal the anonymizing practice of social death and natal alienation as not a singular act of social or psychological violence but as a network of normalized actions, omissions, and complacencies that attempt to render an imprisoned person's body unseen, voice unheard, and identity irrelevant outside of the label of "criminal."

Hester's persistent love for her son disrupts the anonymizing logic of incarceration, particularly through her choice to mark Boy's body. She recalls biting her son on the arm when he was initially arrested so that it would leave an identifying scar.[41] When Hester meets Jailbait,

[41] The practice of enslaved mothers marking their children to resist natal alienation upon separation has rich historical and literary grounding. While understood as a form of property identification as outlined in Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (52; 58-59), branding could also be used as familial identification among enslaved people. J. California Cooper's novel *Family* (1991) depicts this reversal when an enslaved Black female character, Always, swaps her son with the son of the white Doak family, but marks/brands him first so that she can always identify him as hers even though he passes in white society.

who decides to play along as Boy in order to get a free meal, the absence of the scar reveals her son has been substituted. The scene is filled with painful dramatic irony, where the audience, who knows Jailbait is not her son, watches Hester's joy quickly turn to pain as she searches Jailbait's arm for the scar, finally concluding, "Yr not my son" (183). Boy/Monster's scar becomes his identifying mark for the rest of the play and eventually confirms for Hester that he is still alive despite Jailbait's claim that he "smashed his brains in" himself (183). Hester's insistence that Boy will "always have my mark" (166) undercuts the disappearing logic of the prison that attempts to substitute Boy's body; however, it also intensifies the pain of the fact that her son has disappeared into a system that seems to have no intention of bringing him back out.

Even when Hester is close to the border between the prison and "free" world, Jailbait's substitution disrupts any possibility of reunion, as he is not her son, falsely admits to killing Boy, and proceeds to come on to Hester until the scene ends horrifically in rape while she is stunned from the news of her son's death. His death is real to Hester in the sense that the scene has rendered Boy's body and identity materially absent and lacking any foreseeable future. Despite the audience knowing that Boy/Monster is alive and on the run, they must witness Hester's pain, confusion, and the literal and symbolic violence associated with the prison in the resulting rape. This moment marks a turning point in the play, as Hester's rape literalizes a formerly less explicit relationship that the prison played in her life when it took her son, set a price on his freedom, forced her into labor, and substituted him.[42] This moment can also be read spatially in what critical prison studies scholar Joy James has noted as a key feature in neo-slave narratives:

[42] In its staged spectacle of sexual violence, this scene not only points to the layered meaning of the play's title, *Fucking A*. It also exposes the deeply foundational role that sexual violence plays in disciplining or dehumanizing subjects toward a criminalized, indebted, or enslaved status. Similar to Hartman's readings of "rape" and the legal impossibility of "consent" for enslaved women in "Seduction and the Ruses of Power" in *Scenes of Subjection*, Hester's marked status makes her vulnerable not only to the exploitation of her labor but also to her body's status as property, sexually available and penetrable without recourse.

> Rhetoric instructs that there are contained sites of nonfreedom and freedom. Yet, enslavement is manufactured in the 'free' world; 'freedom' is imagined and created in the slave world. When the two worlds meet, as they do incessantly and creatively and violently, there is a border crossing, an intermingling of subordinate and dominant narratives. (xxxii)

The sexual violence emerging from this scene in which Hester inhabits the border between the free and carceral worlds illustrates James's contention that sites of freedom and nonfreedom exist in a false dichotomy. Parks mimics this false dichotomy up to this point in the play by maintaining separate spheres of social control: on stage through the Freedom Fund and the hunters, and off stage through gestures toward the unseen space of the prison. In contrast, this scene attempts to site a convergence, and when that border is (b)reached, violence emerges, rewriting and exposing the tenuous—even symbiotic—relationships defining and separating free and unfree, social life and social death.

Dramatic Reversals: (Foreclosed) Futurities and Shifting the Paradigm

The dynamic relationship between absence and presence as it relates to regimes of mass incarceration is a major point of interest in critical prison studies scholarship, particularly in regard to how states attempt to render criminalized subjects not only physically isolated from the nominally free world via containment but also socially absent from the interactions and exchanges that mark everyday communal life. To achieve this goal of physical and social absence, punishment is often assigned and regulated by measurements of space and time, where sentences, as Avery Gordon states, are rendered "in units of life-time, giving time to be done in the present and taking away a life with a future, with the right to a future time, or futurity" (13) as well as sited within a geographically (often isolated) contained space. Critical geographer

Ruth Wilson Gilmore understands this conception of the prison as a "geographical solution that purports to solve social problems by extensively and repeatedly removing people … and depositing them somewhere else" (28). Together, the spatiotemporal and social impositions of absence allow for the state (and often society) to conceptualize the incarcerated as social nonpersons or isolates from communal, relational, legal, and economic activities that mark the so-called "free" world. Despite the constructed separate spaces of the "free" social world on stage and the prison off stage, Parks's characters resist the spatial and social technologies intended to maintain the nonpersonhood of the imprisoned through memory, fugitivity, and biological reproduction. Like Hester's bite mark, Boy/Monster's fugitive body on stage revolts against the various institutions at work in the social world of the play to render him absent. His physical presence and actions while on the run push toward a conception of futurity that resists the state's commuted death sentence under the terms of social death. While the state ultimately rearticulates its power through Boy/Monster's death and the spectacle of his corpse, the moments leading up to it assert the possibility of reclaiming personhood and futurity—however momentary it may be—against the prison regime's applications and gestures toward social and political nonpersonhood. Though the act of "being on the run" is the material iteration of fugitivity, the concept of fugitivity should be broadly considered in terms of possibility—the precondition/will to seek resistant opportunity precedes and motivates the act of escape itself.

The final scene of the play marks two major failed attempts at freedom and futurity: first, Hester aborts the mayor's wife's fetus without her consent in an attempt to avenge the loss of Boy to prison and his alleged death inside, and second, Hester discovers that Boy/Monster is alive but kills him at his request so he does not have to endure the torture of the hunters. Before Hester learns that her son is alive despite Jailbait's and the Freedom Fund's admission that he is

dead, she plots to take away the mayor's wife's chance at having a child because she was responsible for Boy's initial arrest thirty years prior. Hester does not know that the father of the First Lady's fetus is Boy/Monster who meets the first lady upon his initial escape from prison. The First Lady's pregnancy carries two major symbolic possibilities: (1) that Boy/Monster revises the practices of social death and natal alienation that attempt to bar him from past and future lineage through biological reproduction and (2) that the fetus he fathered would have become heir to the state, as the first lady planned to make the mayor assume the child was his. This potential is foreclosed when Hester drugs the mayor's wife and performs the abortion, and the reversal of criminal-state relations through an alternative blood revolution is never actualized. These repeated moments of radical potential against representatives of state power foreclosed by violence provide glimpses into ways that those affected by the technologies of social death begin to push back. While the traumatic and cyclical violence of the last scenes overtake these moments of possibility, they also have the power to expose and rewrite the triangulated relationship between "free" society, the state, and "the criminal."

Hester's recognition that Boy and Monster are one and the same and that her son is not dead marks the final tragic moment in the play. In running for his life, Monster seeks shelter with his mother from the hunters who have almost caught him. In these last and panicked moments, he asks her to help him avoid the torture and dismemberment by pleading, "Us killing me is better than them killing me" (219). This powerful line convinces Hester, but it also creates an interesting linguistic shift. The incorporation of "us" and "them" shifts the binary from "criminal versus noncriminal" (*i.e.*, the notion that criminals pose a threat to the community and are therefore diametrically opposed to it) to "us," both fugitive and free, versus "them," those working within the state-apparatus of punishment. In this shift, the violence intended for the

imprisoned bleeds into the social world of the play and proves to be far more unsettling than the sacrifice Hester ultimately performs. Hester, the abortionist by trade, agrees and performs what is most often read as symbolic abortion by quickly slitting Monster's throat the way Butcher had taught her to ensure as painless a death as possible. When the hunters enter, she surrenders his lifeless body. The play has no conclusion or resolution, and the audience is left with the scene of blood and death while Hester returns to work. The violence of the scene and the carelessness with which the hunters still desire Monster's lifeless body to parade around and exchange for their payment reveals the fractures in the spatial separations between the prison and the free world. The fugitive body on stage renders the boundaries between the social world of the play and the unseen world of the prison permeable, and the resulting violence appears on the stage to be witnessed. As Boy endures a tragic death, Hester, the play's primary figure of sympathy must continue within her living social death space of servitude, childless. In this way, Boy's death does not signal an end to struggle or even an end to the tragedy on stage; instead, Hester's quiet return to work as the lights dim signals a transfer of tragedy, death, and confinement that redirects the audience's attention away from the state's desire to kill the fugitive body and toward a mother's body existing in world outside of the prison, not as a fugitive but as a prisoner.

The lexical linking of Parks's Hester and her son is also noteworthy toward the end of the play. Each ruminates through song how a Mother or Monster is "made." After her traumatizing visit to the prison in which she is told that her son is dead and Jailbait rapes her, Hester concludes the scene by singing "My Vengeance" in which she devises her plan to avenge her loss through hurting First Lady whose snitching put Boy in prison. She sings,

> She'll mourn the day
>
> She crushed us underfoot.

Her Rich Girl wealth

Will not stop me from put-

ting my mark on her

And it will equal what we've paid.

My vengeance will show her

How a true mother is made. (184)

Hester remarks that true motherhood is made through vengeance. Hester aims to reclaim her son through harming the woman who put him in prison. Hester's referencing the "mark" she will leave on the First Lady participates in multiple discourses. It refers to the harm she ultimately leaves on the First Lady by performing an abortion. This mark is linked to the mark on her chest that stands for Abortionist. The mark also doubly links back to the mark she left on her son so that she would always know him. This multiple signification of "mark" suggests that Hester sees the reclamation of her son—through scar or through vengeance—as the way a mother is made. Motherhood, for Hester, is marked by many iterations of blood: through the literal maternal bloodline, through the breaking of skin to leave a scar, through blood vengeance via abortion, and through the blood sacrifice she ultimately performs by mercy-killing her son.

Likewise, Boy/Monster ruminates on the conditions of making monstrosity through the song "The Making of a Monster." He tells his mother the way to make a monster is easy, suggesting that "A small bit of hate in the heart will inflate / And that's more so much more than enough / To make you a Monster" (218). While the song is Boy/Monster's response to Hester's inquiries of what happened to him, the second person perspective allows from some ambiguity. Has Boy become a Monster or has Hester? Hester has aborted the First Lady's child and thereby her own grandchild. Monster proclaims that his life in the prison has made him a Monster,

stating "Better a monster than a boy. I made something of myself. It wasn't hard" (218). If we consider *Fucking A* alongside *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as an intertext, these ruminations of "making something of [ones]self" recalls Douglass's famous statement, offered in the form of chiasmus— "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man"—just before his fight with the abusive Mr. Covey. For Douglass, the status of manhood is obtained through physical resistance to the enforcers of the institution of slavery. His refusal to be a slave involves a physical reclamation of self through defense. Through the linguistic markings in Parks and Douglass, each shows how boys, men, and women, can be *made* into monsters, slaves, and abortionists; however, they also show how those terms can be resisted through acts of defiance and defense. Hester's killing of her son, in a way, is a reclamation. "Us killing me," reinstitutes Boy into the family dynamic, he can die through infanticide, a form that reinscribes the language of familial bond, rather than dying like a "monster," hunted and lynched by a mob. Parks presents her audience with the darkest possible form of reclamation, one that scholars have linked to Sethe in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as well as Medea.[43] Hester Smith's reclamation through sacrifice is updated for the new neo-slavery. It conceives of a world in which the state violently punishes an excess amount of the underclass in ways eerily similar to antebellum fugitive slave laws and Jim Crow era lynch mob practices.

Conclusion

Parks's staging takes a critical look at how incarceration and its constitutive institutions and practices symbiotically relate to society outside of the penitentiary. Her work both participates in the social dimensions of poverty and imprisonment and exposes the structural components of a carceral regime working well beyond the prison site's walls. Through her

[43] See Foster "Nurturing Murderous Mothers"

attention to both the social and spatiotemporal dimensions of confinement, Parks invites the audience to think through the ways in which (1) confinement manifests as a network of institutions, practices, and attitudes at work in both the social world and within the prison; (2) poverty, criminality, and monstrosity are used by the state as narratives for the purpose of maintaining control; (3) the triangulated relationship between the state, the "free" social world, and the incarcerated/criminalized can be rewritten to expose how the state attempts to create a relationship of dependence between itself and its citizens posing as the arbiter of safety, law, and order; (4) those oppressed through systemic undereducation, poverty, debt peonage, and confinement find ways to resist these punitive measures to both invite critical interrogations of the systems that imprison them and create a space/event to be attentive to absence; and (5) mass imprisonment reenacts and repackages institutions and practices of racial control and terror—lynching, criminalization, forced labor, sexual violence—under the guise of deracialized social, legal, or economic "justice." With these tools in mind, Parks equips her audience with frameworks for critically thinking through the violent tragedies with seemingly no resolutions at the end of her plays.

Parks presents us with a social theory of confinement in line with prison abolitionist discourse regarding the aims, maintenance, and function of the prison and other carceral technologies. I term my conceptual framework for reading Parks's *Red Letter Plays* in this manner "Neo-Abolitionist Drama," because such an interpretive strategy reveals figures who deconstruct stereotyped notions of racialized, gendered, and classed criminality; staging practices that focus on structures of harm rather than individual enforcers; and dialogue that exposes the linguistic and social logics that maintain social difference in the service of white supremacy. It is through these characteristics that Parks's *Red Letter Plays* focus on the interlocking systems of

harm. By positioning *In the Blood* and *Fucking A* as sister plays emerging from the same conception/womb, Parks places the social pressures and forces the Hesters face along a carceral continuum that not only interact with one another, but also signify their literary fore-Hesters in the work of Hawthorne and Douglass. In doing so, Parks demands that the "scarlet letter" of the turn-of-the-century include race and class in its metric of gendered exclusion to point to the fact that in a post-emancipation world, Black captivity is still practiced in forms of institutional surveillance, reproductive control, disenfranchisement, targeting, and punishment. In this way, Parks's dramaturgy equips her audience for neo-abolitionist readings that center Black women's experiences with state and interpersonal harm both inside and outside the prison.

CHAPTER FOUR: BREATH IN THE ARCHIVE: DAMARIS B. HILL AND NEO-ABOLITIONIST POETICS

As the previous chapter covered, Suzan-Lori Parks's neo-abolitionist dramaturgy points to the ways in which Black embodiment on stage complicates our understandings of turn-of-the-century carceral mechanisms of mass human disappearance. The performative body and the voice that springs forth from the body in spaces designed to limit, control, or annihilate reframe what it means to confine by their embracing broader conceptions of foreclosed mobility, freedom, and access. The time-bending logic that situates Parks's Hesters' struggles in relation to the shrieks of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester forms the basis for reading the gendered racial harm enacted as a constitutive practice of slavery in a post-emancipation world. As Parks's Hesters highlight and resist the ways in which carcerality works to produce the invisiblization of human beings, this final chapter examines how twenty-first century poets and scholars of the carceral state likewise direct their attention to carcerality's most vulnerable and "invisible" populations, particularly the incarcerated women in the United States, whose rates of punitive confinement increased by over 750% between 1980 and 2017 ("Incarcerated Women…").

DaMaris B. Hill's 2019 collection of poetry *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland* is the first work of literature to explicitly situate itself within a tradition of African American confinement literature in conversation with the emerging field of critical prison studies. Nominated for an NAACP Image Award, Hill's book interweaves history, literature, and memoir; it curates a poetic tradition of Black women experiencing and resisting captivity from slavery to the present,

from intimate partner violence to the prison-industrial complex. Hill cites working with representatives and advocates from The Sentencing Project in her research for the book, and often quotes the above statistic about women's incarceration at her readings. Hill's collection of poetry is broken into seven sections, each a rumination on the word "bound" in relation to Black women's histories of confinement and resistance. In her second section, "bound.fettered.," Hill writes poems in conversation with critical prison studies scholar Kali N. Gross's *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*, a critical history of Black women's confrontations with confinement in Philadelphia at the turn of the century. Hill takes snippets of descriptions of Black women featured in Gross's book who committed crimes or suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system, and she writes highly stylized poems—sonnets, villanelles, sestinas, etc.—that place each Black woman as the focus or persona. While this section explicitly connects her poems with critical prison studies scholarship, as I cover later in this chapter, the book as a whole makes an intervention in African American confinement literature by ruminating on the multiple meanings of "bound[edness]." As she explains in her preface and in interviews, "bound" means to be confined, but it also means to spring forth, to be bound to one another in kinship relations, and to bind as in the material process of book making. Specifically, the simultaneity of bound as in *fettered* and bound as in *spring forth* captures the essence of the Black women featured in Hill's collection, in that at any moment they appear confined, they are always also springing forth.

This final chapter examines the inherent doubleness of boundedness as it appears in Hill's work to theorize neo-abolitionist poetics in a contemporary moment. *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing* speaks to a Black radical poetic tradition of prison writing, but she also offers a distinctly Black feminist contribution that pays homage to African American women writers,

activists, and everyday women who were bound—in the ever-capacious sense of the term. When asked about the title at her reading aired on C-SPAN 2 Book TV, Hill stated that the title was a riff on a quote from Alice Walker:

> Alice Walker has a quote, … "a grown child is a dangerous thing." And then as I was creating this third manuscript, I was like, "If you ever see a woman bound up, you know that woman has already proven that she is dangerous. If you ever see a woman in shackles, she's demonstrated that she will run, she's demonstrated that she is committed to freeing herself." And then again, thinking about the meaning of springing forth. What does it mean to neglect the social inheritances that are associated with oppression? That is considered dangerous. And a lot of women in the book, particularly Harriet Tubman, Assata Shakur, and any references that I make to Madam Laveau which is like a mythological American figure but based on a real person Marie Laveau in New Orleans, I think of them as being the ultimate people to spring forth. They were Elijah figures. Elijah in the Bible is the person who didn't die, he just ascended into heaven. And what is unique about these three people is that they did not die in bondage. These were the most resistant Black women. The women most committed to freeing all Black people, and none of them died in bondage. So everyone that tried to work with the system somehow found themselves bound by the system. (31:50-38:25)

Hill's description of the book's title reflects the way in which the collection as a whole pays homage to Black feminist and Black womanist writers and activists who have come before her. Her invocation of a quote from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*[44] as a structure for thinking

[44] In Hill's full answer to the question, she tells the audience that in writing the collection, which details a lot of violence and trauma against Black women, she would watch short clips of Black feminist writers and thinkers on YouTube as a way to re-group and heal. She attributes the Alice Walker quote to one of these videos and states that she thinks it was in reference to Walker's daughter. The quote, however, originally appears in letter 64 of *The Color*

through the complexity of Black women's confinement and resistance points to a neo-abolitionist aesthetic rooted in the Black feminist tradition. Through her use of a rhetorical question, Hill urges readers to think about the social constrictions that likewise confine Black women—Jane Crow legal and social restrictions, domestic and state violence, and poverty—to not only broaden conceptions of confinement but point to the multifaceted ways in which Black women have psychologically, physically, and socially resisted. She links three figures—Harriet Tubman, Assata Shakur, and Marie Laveau—as women who not only physically escaped bondage and secured the freedom of others, but did so by freeing their minds from the systems that were designed to detain them. Therefore, these figures are prophet-like in Hill's work as she alludes to Elijah. This chapter examines Hill's poetic dedications to these prophet-like figures through my examination of Assata Shakur, the only remaining member of this group of Black women freedom fighters who is still living; Shakur lives in political asylum in Cuba. As she is the still-alive Elijah figure in the text, Hill's poems about Shakur appear in their own section and detail her radical Black feminist dedication to imagining life outside of the system of white supremacy. This chapter also suggests that Assata Shakur has a distinctive literary influence on Hill's poetry—what I call neo-abolitionist poetics—as Shakur's autobiography explores the possibilities and limits of freedom during her incarceration.

Assata Shakur's poetic and narrative contributions to Black feminist and neo-abolitionist literature inform Hill's twenty-first-century poetic archiving of Black women's confinement and resistance. Taken together, Shakur's and Hill's texts provide models for theorizing neo-abolitionist poetics. The characteristics of neo-abolitionist poetics that I outline in this chapter

---

Purple, where Nettie tells Celie about the way in which patriarchy among the Olinka promotes childish behavior among the men that rule over the women (166). Nonetheless, Hill's invocation of Alice Walker's words as a means of Black feminist (or womanist) healing in times of trauma points to the book's larger project of creating a Black feminist catalog or archive of radical praxis and survival.

are the following: (1) Neo-abolitionist poetics is always already Black feminist; (2) neo-abolitionist poetics emerging from Black feminist poetics is almost always a hybrid and/or intertextual text; and (3) neo-abolitionist poetics places at its center a) multi-generational understandings of Black resistance (a simultaneous operating outside of and within Time), b) the radical potential of imagination, and c) a reliance on the archive—especially the forced but recently recuperated silences in the archive—as the road map to freedom. Neo-abolitionist poetics, I argue, aligns the closest to Dylan Rodríguez's understandings of the radical imaginative possibility that is a constitutive element of abolition that I describe in chapter one. It most explicitly engages in the speculative through its refusal of Western conceptualizations of the world as well as Western literature's formal genre distinctions. As such, this final chapter examines neo-abolitionist poetics as a theory and praxis. The works of Assata Shakur and DaMaris B. Hill both honor Black women's literal and literary resistance over generations; moreover, they employ abolitionist readings of violence by illustrating how gendered racial harm operates through white supremacist ideology.

Poetry for the End of the World: Assata Shakur's Black Feminist Poetics

In the section, "bound—hem; hemmed in," Hill offers nine poems that honor Assata Shakur. Shakur is a former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army who was targeted by the FBI in the 1970s and 1980s. Her longstanding commitment to liberationist struggle led to a traffic stop by state troopers in 1973 under the guise of a faulty taillight, a shootout, and the death of passenger Zayd Malik Shakur and trooper Werner Foerster. Assata Shakur was shot in the chest and shoulder, survived, and was then incarcerated in multiple maximum-security jails and prisons. Shakur escaped prison in 1979 and continues to live in political asylum in Cuba. Her autobiography, *Assata: An Autobiography*, details her coming of

age in white supremacist America, her involvement in liberationist struggle, the injuries and abuses she suffered at police and state hands before and after her arrest and conviction, and her escape to freedom. For Hill, Shakur is a visionary. Her activism and resistance to white supremacist state violence sets an example for Black women searching for freedom. In the poem "Retina: Assata in 1970," Hill's speaker observes and critiques how the media produces images of Shakur's criminality. Consequently, the speaker argues for different ways of "seeing" by incorporating different sources of sound:

> My eyes are rummaging. This is
> A recitation on revolution. A chant
>
> That makes lace of the treetops. My
> neighbor in Ferguson wears bifocals
>
> and says that all black folks look alike
> at the end of a sniper's lens… (129)

This poem blends the contemporary moment with Assata's 1970s understandings of police violence against Black people. The first lines of the poem open with the importance of sight in the practice of revolution. The speaker refers to Ferguson—the city in Missouri where white officer Darren Wilson shot an eighteen-year-old Black boy named Michael Brown—to make evident the visibility of Black lives through multiple types of lenses, including bifocals and a sniper's lens. The speaker creates a disjuncture in the poem's focus on visual sensory expression by connecting the speaker's eyes "rummaging" to the neighbor's claims of racial hypervisibility

yet complete deindividualization when aided by lenses. As the poem continues, the speaker switches to the second person to address Assata:

> [When] you refuse to own land that was not leased to
> you from the First Nations, they paint
>
> you all shades of bandit and thief. Stain
> your granny's eye glass. Your family
>
> watches for your footsteps…
>
> [We know] you travel in the spirituals. We are
> praying for your safety. (129)

The shift in the poem marks the ways in which sight becomes skewed by the dominant culture when one refuses to conform to the colonial/imperial status quo of white supremacy. The staining of the eyeglass from the attempt to paint as thieves those who refuse complicity in the U.S. stealing of land from First Nations points to how sight becomes duplicitous, untrustworthy when the state has a hand in creating images circulated to the public. Assata Shakur was criminalized in the media—especially by the state's manipulative use of her image to indict her for multiple false charges before the New Jersey turnpike altercation—before her conviction in court. Because of this, the speaker returns to sound. As the first lines of the poem state that the poem is a "recitation on revolution" and "a chant," the favoring of sonic truth rather than the visual becomes clear by the end of the poem in which the speaker relies on spirituals to gain

information. The reliance on the spiritual links Assata to Harriet Tubman as it recalls the practice of African American spirituals containing messages of Black liberation.

Hill's study of the senses highlights Shakur's political work of revealing how a white supremacist state operates ideologically. Her autobiography cites multiple examples of how state intervention in media and therefore our conceptions of (Black) criminality are ideologically shaped by circulated images. And, according to the speaker in "Retina: Assata in 1970," these images that presuppose Black criminality shape a world that is willing to turn a blind eye to contemporary police murders of Black individuals. In this way, Hill's poetic homage to Assata Shakur highlights how Shakur's work guides individuals to a new way of seeing and listening in the world, one that is connected to the role of the spiritual as a means for Black liberation. This section turns to Shakur's autobiography—a hybrid text that interweaves prose and poetry—to outline how Shakur's texts offers a counter-narrative to the state's. This counter-narrative, I argue, is achieved through a Black feminist and neo-abolitionist poetics that Hill later uses to guide her contemporary poetry about Black women's liberation. I read Shakur's prose and poetry as outlining a poetics of radical praxis against a world organized by a white supremacist logic. To do so, I first outline a political and practical theory of Black feminist poetics to apply to Shakur's text.

In Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World," she outlines the onto-epistemological role of the poet to "emancipate the Category of Blackness from the scientific and historical ways of knowing that produced it in the first place" (81). In this undoing of the World as we know it—a world ordered by antiblackness and anti-Black violence as maintenance of power—Ferreira da Silva suggests that a Black feminist poethics would "announce a whole range of possibilities for knowing,

doing, and existing" (81). In other words, she describes a poetics/ethics that engages in a radical re-imagining of the World, acknowledging that our contemporary world is governed by a climate of anti-Blackness—in which the "Category of Blackness" emerges from systems of capitalistic labor exploitation that are historically, legally, and socially linked to conceptions of Blackness as a marker of human property—that developed under the metrics and terminology of "universal reason" (83). Further, she argues that this acknowledgment offers the opportunity for not only imagining the end of this world but also conceptualizing new worlds. Ferreira da Silva places this critical-imaginative task in the hands of the Black feminist poet when she states, "Toward the end of the World produced by the tools of reason, the Black Feminist Poet peers beyond the horizon of thought, where historicity (temporality/interiority), framed by the tools of universal reason, cannot yield but violence" (84). Ferreira da Silva points to the ways in which the Black feminist poet highlights the conception of the world as a system, but through that articulation generates the radical possibility of other systems emerging as relation, replacement, or contrast.[45] Accordingly, Ferreira da Silva states that the "Black Feminist Poet" points to "the World as Plenum and not as Universe" (85). In other words, the World that Ferreira da Silva describes is a lot like Sharpe's conceptions of the weather—the climate of anti-Blackness that governs the world. This world operates not only by the vestiges of slavery as it relates to capital but through the juridico-economic transubstantiation of conceptions of racialized human property into post-emancipation conceptions of racialized human deficiency upon which anti-Blackness continues

[45] As a further explication of this concept, Ferreira da Silva notes, "For the Black Feminist Poethicist, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives. By reconstruction, I should emphasize, I do not mean reparation or a restitution of monetary sum that corresponds to that which mercantile and industrial capital have acquired through colonial expropriation since the sixteenth century. Decolonization requires the setting up of juridico-economic architectures of redress through which global capital returns the total value it continues to derive from the expropriation of the total value yielded by productive capacity of the slave body and native lands" (85)

to operate in terms of objectification, criminalization, subordination. Black feminist poethics seeks out possibilities to undermine this world by proposing alternative ways of knowing, being, and worlding. Ferreira da Silva continues, "Following this initial mapping is an invitation to collapse the *Subjectum* and its mundus, to un-organize, un-form, un-think the world, towards the *Plenum*, there where existing—like it has always done—chases away the dominant fantasies of a kind of knowing that can only determine itself if with iron hinges of universal reason" (86). If the World is organized by Western conceptions of universal reason that depend upon Black subjection, for Ferreira da Silva collapsing the *Subjectum* as it developed within this logic constitutes an invitation toward other worlds. Ferreira da Silva locates this potential in Black feminism because of its ties to the feminist praxis of radically highlighting patriarchy's creation of its own world through an onto-epistemological hierarchizing of the genders as well as its ties to Blackness as the conceptual opposite of the *Subject* as developed in (white) Western philosophy. As Ferreira da Silva states, "released from the core of Thought—always in excess of the objects and subjects it creates—Blackness is available to a Black Feminist Poethics, as it charts a terrain by asking Black Feminist Critique to review its Categories, rearrange its project, and interrogate the very premises of its craft, without any guarantees that the craft itself will survive the exercise" (86).

Using Octavia Butler's novels as a guide for theorizing Black feminist poethics, Ferreira da Silva outlines the ways "virtuality—namely transubstantiality, transversality, and traversality—signal[s] the kind of imaging of the World announcing a Black Feminist Poethics" (93). To clarify, she points to how Butler's characters traverse time in ways that highlight how Western notions of linear progressive temporality entrap and limit. Butler points to transversality and transubstantiality to also highlight the limits and possibilities of the Western categories of

space and the human, respectively. In Butler's imaginative border-crossing of Western categories of time, space, and human she is able to imagine new worlds and call attention to the conceptual limitations of the current one. It is with this theory of Black feminist poetics/poethics in mind that I turn toward Assata Shakur's autobiography, which was published in 1984, when Butler was writing.

Shakur's political autobiography details her life in chapters that alternate between her coming of age in a white supremacist nation and her contemporary ("narrative present") experiences with incarceration after her arrest on the New Jersey turnpike. She outlines a political theory and praxis of struggle as a means for Black liberation. In one of the early moments in the text in which she outlines struggle, she provides the text of a tape called "To My People" that she recorded in 1973 and was broadcast on radio stations. In this recording, she introduces herself: "My name is Assata Shakur (slave name joanne chesimard), and i am a revolutionary. A Black revolutionary. By that i mean that i have declared war on all forces that have raped our women, castrated our men, and kept our babies empty-bellied" (49-50). In this tape, she outlines, by way of juxtaposition, her critical reading of the white supremacist ideology of Black criminality that Hill refers to in her poem. Shakur states, "They call us thieves and bandits. They say we steal. But it was not we who stole millions of Black people from the continent of Africa. We were robbed of our language, of our Gods, of our culture, of our human dignity, of our labor, and of our lives" (51). She calls attention to police violence and its influence on the media, stating,

> Every time a Black Freedom Fighter is murdered or captured, the pigs try to create the impression that they have quashed the movement, destroyed our forces, and put down the Black Revolution. The pigs also try to give the impression that five or ten guerrillas are

> responsible for every revolutionary action carried out in amerika. That is nonsense. That is absurd. Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. (52)

In this address to Black people, Shakur outlines two major ideas. The first is her outlining of how white supremacist ideology organizes the world and the violence that Black people live in and experience. The second is her contention that Black revolutions and Black revolutionaries are not anomalies within the system but a radical response to the oppressive systems at work. Her statement that Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon but are created by their conditions points to the fact that a world that is organized to confine also creates the very conditions under which people desire to spring forth. She ends her address with a poem that simultaneously memorializes those who have lost their lives in the fight for Black liberation and encourages her listeners to take action:

> It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
>
> It is our duty to win.
>
> We must love each other and support each other.
>
> We have nothing to lose but our chains:
>
> In the spirit of:
>
> Ronald Carter
>
> William Christmas
>
> Mark Essex
>
> Frank “Heavy” Fields
>
> Woodie Changa Olugbala Green

Fred Hampton

Lil' Bobby Hutton

George Jackson

Jonathan Jackson

James McClain

Harold Russell

Zayd Malik Shakur

Anthony Kumu Olugbala White

We must fight on. (52-53)

Shakur's memorialization and charge to fight on outlines a praxis of invoking the names of freedom fighters. In the practice of naming those who died in the fight, she also invokes the revolutionary spirit for others to continue. This practice of naming the dead in the spirit of struggle is a key component of Black feminist poetics that I address in later readings of Hill's poems. For now, it is key to highlight the importance of looking to the spirits of past revolutionaries—the ancestors—as praxis for revolutionary struggle.[46]

[46] The practice of naming the ancestors is a component of the African American literary tradition. Hill's work as a catalog of honoring and giving breath to Black women in her centuries-spanning collection of poems brings together two traditions of naming. The first is the practice of naming in the marginalia of a family Bible. In her preface Hill states that "these poems are love letters. The opening of the book explores how I am bound in the sense of being beholden to others. In the African American tradition, we honor our ancestors" (xiii). Hill guides us to the way her family Bible illustrated this honor in noting, "The front pages of the Bible do not begin with the shaping of the heavens and the earth; they start with the ancestors. In this Bible our family records our full names, professions, places of residence, births, marriages, and transitions of our family members…My grandmother was the 'keeper' of this Bible, taking on the role of both librarian and archivist…It was bound in white leather and illustrated" (xiii). Second, in the Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name movements, the logging and archiving of names has likewise reached to this tradition. There is also a specifically Black feminist poetic tradition of the ancestral honoring. Two examples of such are Nikki Giovanni's "For Sonia Sanchez," and Pearl Cleage's *We Speak Your Names*. In Giovanni's poem, she writes "In the name of those incredibly Brave men and women" and lists Black writers who paved the way to Sonia, including Phillis Wheatley, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove (121). Before ending the poem with Sanchez's name, she writes "In the names of those whom we silently call / and in the names of those whose names will call us / in the future" (122).

Immediately following this section of the autobiography, Shakur directs our attention to the women who are incarcerated with her, with whom she is forbidden communication. Shakur points out the specific challenges that women face inside jail, as many are there because of crimes of survival and self-defense against abusive partners. She further details the ways in which state officials prohibited children from visiting their mothers in jail, so they would stand outside while women crowded around the few windows that overlooked them in hopes of catching a glimpse of their children. She also points out the ways in which the state and prison system attempt to confine women via pathologization. Among the longest poems in her autobiography is one dedicated to a woman named Eva, whom the state deemed insane. Shakur recalls that Eva spent a lot of time in and out of jail and that most people called her "crazy." Only a few pages after Shakur ruminates that "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon. We are created by our conditions" (52), she recalls her first conversation with Eva:

> My first encounter with Eva was when she came over to the bars and sat down outside my cell and told me she could astro-travel. She called it something like astro-space projection.
>
> "I can go anywhere I want to, whenever I want to," she told me. "I've just come from Jupiter."
>
> "How was it?" i asked her.
>
> "Oh, it was fine. They had these cute little people. They were purple with crocodile skin and blue hair. You can go anywhere you want to," she told me. "You just have to project yourself."
>
> "Can you show me how to project myself the hell out of here?"

"Oh, that's easy," she said, "I do that all the time. As a matter of fact, I'm not here now."

"No," i said, "that's not good enough. I want to project my mind *and* my body out of here."

"You'll be in jail wherever you go," Eva said.

"You have a point there," i told her, "but i'd rather be in a minimum security prison or on the streets than in the maximum security prison in here. The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don't have the faintest idea how it feels to be free." (59-60)

Shakur's conversations with Eva offer a layered critique of confinement and freedom. Eva's conceptions of astro-travel in relation to confinement provides an early analysis of the Black speculative within a Black radical tradition. And together, Assata's and Eva's conversations conceptualize an un-doing of the World that Ferreira da Silva outlines in her theory of Black feminist poethics. While Shakur's tape exposes the white supremacist organizational logic of the world, Eva's descriptions of astro-travel conceptualize a psychological springing forth from that world. Eva's explanations of her mental projection toward other worlds prompts Assata's ruminations on what it means to be free. She is doubtful that freedom is even possible in the current world because of the ways in which Black neighborhoods are likewise patrolled by police on the outside. Eva's decision to project herself elsewhere encourages guards and other state enforcers to categorize and pathologize her as "crazy." Shakur notes that "Eva and I got on famously. A lot of times i didn't understand what in the world she was talking about. But at times she made so much sense i wondered if it was really the world that was crazy. She taught

me a lot about prison" (60). Shakur's understanding of the world at this moment begins to align with Eva's speculative understanding of the world—to use Ferreira da Silva's phrasing—"as Plenum and not as Universe."

Eva protects Shakur when guards attempt to prohibit Shakur from eating lunch with the other women in the jail. Because of this act, the guards send Eva "to the Vroom Building, the new jersey 'hospital' for the criminally insane" (62). Shakur states that she felt guilty that she "got her caught up in my madness…So i sat down and wrote this poem" (62). The ensuing poem about Eva outlines Shakur's new-found understanding of the relationship between white supremacist pathologization of Black women and Black liberation struggles:

> They say you're crazy
> cause you not crazy enough
> to kneel when told to kneel.
>
> Hey, big woman—
> with scars on the head
> and scars on the heart
> that never seem to heal—
> I saw your light
> And it was shining. (63)

Shakur's play on "crazy" in the lines point to the ways in which the state pathologizes and punishes women who dare to resist. Eva's conception of the World in *Plenum* and not as Universe radically threatens the World's end, or at the very least, imagines alternative or other worlds beyond. And while Shakur is initially skeptical of Eva's speculative work, she is

simultaneously hyperaware of the ways in which the state punishes this work in order to maintain the project of white supremacist domination. To imagine the end of the World in this way is to end the conception of world orders that give authority. In so doing, even when Eva is bound in jail or in a mental institution she bounds forth into other worlds—other plenums.

They hate you momma
cause you expose their madness.
And their cruelty.
They can see in your eyes
a thousand nightmares
that they have made come true.

Black woman. Baad woman.
Wear your bigness on your chest like a badge
cause you done earned it. (63)

Shakur locates the discourse on madness as a mode of punishment, but also turns that madness on the state suggesting that the madness is the way in which their power operates under the guise of justice. Moreover, Shakur's use of juxtaposition in the line "Black woman. Baad woman" explicitly locates the Black feminist critique of the ways in which Black women's existence challenges the white supremacist status quo as Ferreira da Silva points out in her analysis. Together, Ferreira da Silva's and Shakur's works provide a roadmap for critiquing white supremacist ideology. Their conceptions of the narrative and ideological architectures of anti-Blackness provide structural analyses for reading how white supremacy operates in mental pathology and criminalization. These points inform Hill's 2019 poetics, as her poems not only

highlight the ideological factors of white supremacy at work, but also engage in Black feminist curation of a radical praxis catalog through poetry.

#SayHerName: Breath in Neo-abolitionist Poetics

Breathlessness in the archive: the archives of breathlessness

- Sharpe *In the Wake* (109)

Assata Shakur's autobiography ends in Cuba where she sought and later gained political asylum. The last words of her text detail her embrace with family members who have joined her there for the first time. She concludes:

> How much we had all gone through. Our fight had started on a slave ship years before we were born. *Venceremos*, my favorite word in Spanish, crossed my mind. Ten million people had stood up to the monster. Ten million people only ninety miles away. We were here together in their land, my small little family, holding each other after so long. There was no doubt about it, our people would one day be free. The cowboys and bandits didn't own the world. (274)

These last words of Shakur's autobiography assert that freedom is attainable. Like Eva, Shakur eventually projected herself into another world through psychological fugitivity. Unlike Eva, she was able to spring forth from her physical confinement to attain a more complete experience of freedom. Her final thoughts on her journey pay homage to the millions of people who believed in freedom through revolution in Cuba. The "cowboys and bandits" of white supremacist American capitalist exploitation could not confine her. Her return to the American deployment of the "cowboy" and "bandit" figures as justification for colonial and imperial enterprises points to the fact that her victory is both physical—she escaped from prison—and ideological in that her

asylum in Cuba marks her welcoming into a country that the U.S. has described as its political and ideological antithesis.

As Shakur's life and work clearly inform Hill's use of Black Feminist poethics through the poems explicitly dedicated to her, Shakur's text haunts the other poems in the collection as well. In the preface of her 2019 collection, Hill writes that each woman she features in her poems is an act of paying homage:

> In these poems, the legacy of these women's lives chases me like a strong wind. This book is a love letter to women who have been denied their humanity. Most of these women have been forgotten, shunned, and/or erased. Every time I call a name in this book, presume that the person who bears the name is loved. If you are brave, imagine the name of that woman congealing on my tongue, give the names breath and the memory. (xviii)

Hill calls readers to imagine each name being said aloud, but also importantly notes that the utterance is attached to breath and memory. Hill's project as a whole relates to what Christina Sharpe calls aspiration. For Sharpe, aspiration is the capacious understanding of "what it takes in the midst of…the virulent antiblackness everywhere and always remotivated…to keep breath in the Black body" (109). For Sharpe the meaning of aspiration doubles and trebles in the meanings of "drawing fluid from the body," the experience of fluid filling the lungs, and "as *audible breath* that accompanies or comprises a speech sound" (109). Sharpe points to the necessity to give name through breath in the project of wake work and memory that I have referenced in previous chapters. But Sharpe also points us to the relationship of breath[lessness] and the archive. Sharpe locates aspiration with Eric Garner's final words "I can't breathe," and likewise connects this rumination of breathlessness to Margaret Garner, the historical prototype for Toni Morrison's

character Sethe in *Beloved*, who drowned one of her children and also attempted to drown herself rather than be taken back into slavery. Sharpe specifically links the journey over the Middle Passage—especially the journeys of the individuals who resisted by throwing themselves or others overboard—to an archival silence or breathlessness that has existed in centuries since through the climate of anti-Blackness. Sharpe wonders what happens when we attend to these "archives of breathlessness," asking

> "What is the word for keeping and putting breath back into the body? What is the word for how we must approach the archives of slavery ("to tell the story that cannot be told") and the histories and presents of violent extraction *in* slavery *and* incarceration; the calamities and catastrophes that sometimes answer to the names of occupation, colonialism, imperialism, tourism, militarism, or humanitarian aid and intervention?...The word that I arrived at for such imagining and for keeping and putting breath back in the Black body in hostile weather is *aspiration* (and aspiration is violent and life-saving.). (113)

To keep breath in the body in the act of saying the name of the women featured in the pages of Hill's text is a poetic performance of Sharpe's aspiration. Hill's work certainly attends to the physical and sexual violence of slavery and its aftermaths; moreover, the work also critiques the epistemic violence of slavery and its aftermaths, namely, the erasure and/or misrepresentation of Black women in the archive. As I discuss later in this section, this poetic performance of aspiration also performs the radical activist work of the Say Her Name movement as it developed throughout the 2010s to the present. Hill most explicitly invokes these two related praxes—Sharpe's conception of aspiration and Say Her Name—through her poem about Sandra Bland, a

Black woman whose death while in state custody in 2015 catalyzed the newly formalized Say Her Name movement.

In "#SandySpeaks Is a Choral Refrain," Hill ruminates on the death of Sandra Bland. As Hill's biographical note preceding the poem details

> Sandra Bland was twenty-eight years old when she was found hanging in a jail cell in Waller County, Texas. Three days earlier, Bland was pulled over and stopped for a minor traffic violation that resulted in her arrest because she attempted to defend herself…It is important to note that prior to her arrest, Bland curated and documented her protests of police killings on various social media sites using the hashtag #SandySpeaks. Upon her death, her #SandySpeaks works went viral. They stand as an archive, a record of her courage, intelligence, and activism. (97)

Hill's biographical note supplies significant Black feminist context for the poem that follows. Her person-forward description not only describes the circumstances of Bland's death at the hands of state violence, but she also provides details regarding the political work that Bland had been participating in in the months leading up to her death—details that are often omitted from reports of Bland's life and death. Hill further highlights Bland's activism by linking her #SandySpeaks works to both anti-violence protest and radical archival praxis. In this description, readers engage with the continual doubling of "bound" that Hill carries through her text as confined and springing forth.

Despite the title suggesting that "#SandySpeaks" will be the choral refrain of the poem, the repeated line at the beginning of each stanza is "It could have been me." As with many of Hill's other poems that detail the experiences of Black women, there is a speaker who interacts with and attempts to process the narrative. In this sense, the choral refrain operates to connect

Sandra Bland's story to a broader conversation about systemic violence against Black women. The final stanza of the poem explores systemic modes of state violence through role-play:

> It could have been me, a black woman
> the color of Oklahoma clay; a policeman pretending to be
> some cowboy. Sandy had been in Texas
> but a day. How long had he been hunting for one
> like her? Encinia seen this in his mind. It was
> the means of forgetting the woman
> that refused to love him and the black man
> she clinged to. In this vision, he is a rodeo
> style hero, Sandy is a rogue rascal. He holds
> out his tongue to the shower of coins
> and praises. A black woman without a job
> owns her dignity. Did his fantasy desire
> that too? He mined it out of her back
> with his knees. History told him that he could squeeze
> gold from black women's wrists with iron cuffs. Is that why
> he braided the noose to resemble a lasso? (98-99)

As the speaker considers that Sandra Bland could have been her, she points to the systemic nature of police violence against Black women. While the poem centers the details of Bland's death—she was pulled over in Texas and was arrested for standing her ground against Officer Encinia—the speaker's ruminations consider Encinia's conception of the world through a white supremacist lens that makes the individual any Black woman, and further makes any Black

woman a criminal requiring discipline. The rhetorical questions through the last stanza of the poem quoted above highlight the imaginative ideological work that white supremacy performs and maintains. To recall the last words of Assata Shakur's autobiography in which she states "the cowboys and bandits didn't own the world," Hill likewise takes up the narrative weight of the cowboy figure in the white supremacist American psyche. Encinia imagines himself to be the "rodeo style hero," a "fantasy" used to subdue Black women who within the narrative structure are typed "rogue rascal." Hill's focus on the imagination is central for how she reframes police violence from a Black feminist/neo-abolitionist perspective. The speaker in the poem points to weight of this imaginary force: "History told him that he could squeeze gold from black women's wrists with iron cuffs." The emphasis on "History" and the ideological work it has performed to re-inscribe narratives that promote a white supremacist status quo points out that police violence on Black women is never an individual act even when it is enacted by individuals. Rather, police violence is the literal ideological maintenance of human difference in which individuals in power reinforce the roles of white supremacy through Black subjection.

Moreover, as Hill's book also highlights the ways in which Black women have taken part in radical resistance through writing—for example, she includes poems about the literary and radical legacies of Lucille Clifton, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sonia Sanchez—her attention to the *performed roles* at work in white supremacist ideology acknowledges participation in an African American (women's) literary tradition. Hill's typing of Encinia as imagining himself a cowboy certainly evokes the cowboy imagery at the end of Shakur's autobiography, but the interrogation of the white supremacist imagination connects to the legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks's famous poem about the death of Emmett Till, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" (1960). Brooks's poem

has been widely read as performing from the perspective of Carolyn Bryant, the woman who accused Emmett Till of making lewd advances toward her, which prompted her husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother J.W. Milam, to kidnap, brutally torture, and murder the young boy in 1955. In Brooks's poem, the speaker initially thinks that everyone was playing their correct roles:

> From the first it had been like a
>
> Ballad. It had the beat inevitable. It had the blood.
>
> …
>
> Herself: the milk-white maid, the "maid mild"
>
> Of the ballad. Pursued
>
> By the Dark Villain. Rescued by the Fine Prince. (19)

Brooks's poem is powerful because it exposes the ways in which narratives inform and maintain white supremacist ideologies. Hill also operates in this tradition to show how these narrative roles continue to work systemically. In reflecting on the way in which Bryant and Milam were acquitted for murder, which they later admitted to committing under the protections against double jeopardy, Hill's poem highlights the conditions through which Encinia and the jail officials were initially acquitted of any responsibility in Bland's death. Both poems' interest in the ideological narratives at work clarifies how this can happen. In this way, Hill links contemporary acquittals of police in the murders of Black people, especially Black women, to mid-twentieth-century cases in which the courts and law enforcement regularly made clear that Black lives did not matter.

It is through these poetic ideological and narrative interventions that Hill's text performs a deep analysis of violence against Black women, but also archives their resistance. In a

contemporary context, Hill's poems align within the projects of Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged and gained momentum after Trayvon Martin's death in 2012, and continued as more and more Black people were brutalized or killed at the hands of police or civilians who had deputized themselves as state enforcement (such as George Zimmerman). The Say Her Name movement materialized in 2015 as a response to the paradox that even though police violence was affecting all members of Black communities, the media predominantly covered episodes of police violence against Black men and boys which circulated a narrative that they were the only people affected by state violence. The African American Policy Forum (AAPF), co-founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw, released the report, *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women* in 2015, which details the AAPF's dedication to "she[d] light on Black women's experiences of police violence in an effort to support a gender-inclusive approach to racial justice that centers all Black lives equally" (1). The movement accelerated in the wake of Sandra Bland's death that same year. As the AAPF's report suggests, the gender-inclusive approach to racial justice is a movement that is invested in reframing the narrative.[47] This narrative re-framing can have a real-life impact because, as the report states, "The erasure of Black women is not purely a matter of missing facts. Even where

[47] The AAPF report claims that the current narrative surrounding police violence leads to the erasure of Black women: "The resurgent racial justice movement in the United States has developed a clear frame to understand the police killings of Black men and boys, theorizing the ways in which they are systematically criminalized and feared across disparate class backgrounds and irrespective of circumstance. Yet Black women who are profiled, beaten, sexually assaulted, and killed by law enforcement officials are conspicuously absent from this frame even when their experiences are identical. When their experiences with police violence are distinct—uniquely informed by race, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation—Black women remain invisible" (1). Moreover, the report states, "the media's exclusive focus on police violence against Black men makes finding information about Black women of all gender identities and sexualities much more difficult. Given these limitations, our goal is simply to illustrate the reality that Black women are killed and violated by police with alarming regularity. Equally important, our hope is to call attention to the ways in which this reality is erased from our demonstrations, our discourse, and our demands to broaden our vision of social justice" (4). Therefore, the goal to reframe the narrative of police violence along the guidelines of Say Her Name has measurable political and theoretical consequences. This focus on narrative within political activism provides an argument for why literature and language matter in political praxis.

women and girls are present in the data, narratives framing police profiling and lethal force as exclusively male experiences lead researchers, the media, and advocates to exclude them" (4). As Hill's poem on Sandra Bland intervenes by centering a Black woman within the analysis of how white supremacist ideologies promote violence as a performance of the maintenance of state power, her other poems on lesser known Black women who were confined also intervene in a tradition of Black women's erasure in the archive.[48] Therefore, the following final analysis of Hill's text links the epistemic violence of the archive to the political praxis of re-framing the narrative as outlined by the Say Her Name movement.

As referenced in this chapter's introduction, the second section of *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing* is a series of poems generated from Kali N. Gross's critical prison studies and historical monograph, *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*. Gross's work uses historical records and archives to detail the complex and shifting relationships that Black women had with the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in regards to laws, crime, and cultural conceptions of Black women's deviancy. As Hill has stated in interviews, some of the first poems of the collection came from her experience of reading Gross's book. Hill notes that as she was reading, she was so taken by these women's lives that she started writing poems about them ("Free Public"). As a work of history, Gross's text takes what I would consider a Black feminist approach to the archive. She,

[48] It is important to note here that Hill's poetic participation in Say Her Name operates within a developing African American poetic tradition of Black Lives Matter. Ross Gay's poem, "A Small Needful Fact," pays homage to Eric Garner's community care work before his death. The 15-line poem is a single sentence, so when read aloud, it is hard to keep breath with the line. The poem brings together this physical performance of breath, the final lines of the poem "Like making it easier for us to breathe," and the cultural memory of Garner's last words, "I can't breathe." Jericho Brown's poem, "The Tradition," which carries the same title of the collection in which it appears, is a sonnet. Like Ross Gay's poem, Brown weaves images of flowers and oxygen but ends with a lament: "Where the world ends, everything cut down. / *John Crawford. Eric Garner. Mike Brown*" (10). These developing ruminations on keeping breath in the Black body in the wake of anti-Black violence while also honoring the dead brings together the practice of aspiration and ancestral naming in the African American tradition that Hill takes up from a Black feminist perspective.

as well as other historians,[49] notes how much of what exists in the archive about Black women—especially Black women involved in the criminal legal system—are documents curated by the state and nothing about the women's lives or circumstances outside of the crime they were accused of and their punishment. These absences not only promote the perpetuation of state narratives of Black women's criminality, but they also highlight the particular ways in which "official" state documents can curate and limit knowledge. Gross attends to this archival silence—what I deem epistemological violence via erasure—through a creative approach to the archive. She states, "Rather than perpetuate the absences or re-create historical silences, however, historians must exploit new types of evidence. This book, for example, employs interpretive analyses of both cultural mediums and criminal behaviors in an attempt to push past the limitations of the historical record" (6). I argue that Hill's poems, based on Gross's text, also push past the limits of the historical record, acknowledging that what is often present in the archive are narratives written by the state—arrest records, court documents, prison records, etc.—that do not speak to the full lives of the Black women involved. This archival poetic recuperation performs the re-narrativizing praxis as it is put forth by the African American Policy Forum stating that "When the lives of marginalized Black women are centered, a clearer

[49] Saidiya Hartman likewise attends to these archival silences in her 2019 award-winning monograph of Black women's waywardness from 1890-1935, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. In noting her method, she states "Every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern, and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters, and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor" (xiii). Hartman states that her book "elaborates, augments, transposes, and breaks open archival documents so they might yield a richer picture of the social upheaval that transformed black social life in the twentieth century" (xiv). In so doing, she suggests that she prefers to view the monograph as "the fugitive text of the wayward, and it is marked by the errantry that it describes. In this spirit, I have pressed at the limits of the case file and the document" (xiv). This Black feminist historical perspective is certainly an active and exciting mode of inquiry that is continuing to gain momentum in the academy, and for the purposes of my analyses of Black women's neo-abolitionist poetics, this perspective also participates in the Black Feminist Poethics of "un-doing the World," as it incisively challenges the historical record as emerging from the World and therefore has the onto-epistemological limitations connected with it.

picture of structural oppressions emerges. No analysis of state violence against Black bodies can be complete without including all Black bodies within its frame" (30).

In responding to Kali N. Gross's interventions in archival silence, Hill highlights how poetic forms in the (white) Western literary tradition have also operated toward the erasure of Black women. In her preface, Hill notes that this second section "looks to the idea of being fettered, restrained with irons or imprisoned…" in which "most of the poems attempt to create first-person testimonies in formal verse" (xiv). She goes on to note that "The use of the formal poetic structure is symbolic of the women's physical confinement. The formal poem structures also act as a critique of the economic and democratic limitations many African American women experienced in Philadelphia" (xiv). In this section, Hill employs forms such as the sonnet, sestina, and villanelle to depict the experiences of the women featured in Gross's text. She uses forms and language that echo canonical works by William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens, and others. The sonnet, villanelle, and sestina operate in the canon of a Western tradition of writing—a tradition that honors white male poetic expression as the benchmark of literary excellence. Hill's utilization of these forms doubly illuminates the formal constraints (confinement) of the line/meter/rhyme as well as the way in which Western literary traditions often barred marginalized people's voices from participation. Further, it is worth noting the importance of placing Black women's voices at the center of these persona poems. To place a Black woman as a subject and speaker of a form such as the sonnet is a poetic enactment of #SayHerName. With the woman's name as the title and her voice as the authority, the form doubly encloses and promotes; where the form calls for limitation in expression, the testimony rings through the utility of the highly stylized form within the literary tradition.

The section "bound.fettered." performs what Hill calls an "ekphrasis" of Kali Gross's text. The key to Hill's poems in this section is the centralizing of Black women, especially Black women who were deemed by the state to be criminal, deviant, feeble-minded, and therefore needing institutionalization. For example, in "The Love Song of Alice Clifton"—a title playing on the famous modernist T.S. Eliot poem[50]—Hill describes the experience of Alice Clifton through a Shakespearean sonnet. The page preceding the poem introduces Clifton's name in bold, and provides an epigraph from Gross's text: "Given the circumstances, Clifton's case not only offers insight into the impact of slavery on black womanhood but also showcases the impossible position of women like her. Clifton sought to escape slavery by slashing her infant's throat…" (ellipses Hill's, 25). According to Gross's text, a doctor testified that Clifton said that the white man who fathered the child, John Shaffer,[51] "had persuaded her to kill the child…he planned to 'wed a fine woman,' and he feared the impact of the scandal. Shaffer had promised he would purchase her freedom if she killed the baby" (17). Unlike the archival records that show Clifton was unable to testify at her own hearing (Gross 17), Hill's sonnet is written from Clifton's point of view, reflecting on Schaffer's prodding of her to commit infanticide to obtain freedom and her resulting punishment. Schaffer, the white father of Clifton's child, whispers "take that honeyed baby's life," as a sacrifice for their liberation.

The three quatrains of the sonnet stay true to Shakespearean form in that they perform the back-and-forth of a traditional love sonnet in which the speaker is seduced by a lover. Hill's

[50] A potential reason for a title so strikingly similar to Eliot's might be in the significance that in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the title is the only place where the reader is informed that the speaker/persona is a man named J. Alfred Prufrock. Similarly, "The Love Song of Alice Clifton" does not mention her name anywhere else in the poem but the sonnet's central focus is her relationship with Schaffer, whose prodding leads to her killing her baby and subsequent incarceration. Hill's mimicking of using the name in the title to set up the persona and following with a first-person rumination of a romantic relationship turned violent calls to concerns about patriarchal masculinity and the criminalization of Black women through the institution of slavery.

[51] Kali Gross's text refers to John Shaffer, whereas Hill's poetic rendering of Clifton's case spells the name "Schaffer." I use the spellings that each author uses when referring to the person/character.

focus on Schaffer's "sweet prod" and likening him to "a lowly cherub, coy" invokes the language and tropes of the love sonnet; however, Schaffer is not enticing Clifton to love, as we know she has already had relations with him and is pregnant. The "sweet prods" traditional to the love sonnet are updated to the nineteenth-century context of U.S. slavery, as Schaffer is urging Clifton toward the seduction of freedom. Hill employs this traditional form in a way that draws attention to the particular, context-specific seductions that would have persuaded Clifton to kill her infant. The sonnet's final heroic couplet furthers this emphasis on limitation as it is expressed through the form: "slashes for dead honey. i'm bound and blamed. / Schaffer is no savior. our sin, my chains" (27). "The Love Song of Alice Clifton" participates in a doubled discourse on form in that the poetic qualities of the Shakespearean sonnet—strict line count, rhyme, meter, and subject matter—limits the space and modes through which Clifton can tell her story, which is a phenomenon not unlike the limitations placed on Clifton's story as evidenced through the documents that remain in the archive. This discourse on form trebles when considering the legal limitations that Clifton bemoans in the sonnet's last lines when she points to the fact that although Schaffer partook in the crime, she will be the only one to suffer for it. This lamentation points to the legal, social, and political limitations placed on Black women during slavery that later perpetuate through the U.S. legal system well after emancipation.[52]

[52] In her introductory statements about the trial of Alice Clifton, Kali Gross notes how the case acts as a starting point for her study on Black women's crime in Philadelphia in a post-emancipation era even though Clifton's crime was in 1787. She notes, "The trial of Alice Clifton, an enslaved woman accused of murder in 1787, acts as a historical conduit through which we can look backward as well as forward in Pennsylvania's history. Balanced on the axis of key social contexts, Clifton's trial occurs at a historical crossroads. Positioned between slavery and gradual abolition and corporal punishment and the emergence of the prison system, the case accompanied the birth of two nations—a burgeoning republic and a fledgling freed black community. The circumstances of Clifton's crime hearken back to the days of slavery, yet her trial is poised at the threshold of the future…Perhaps most important, Clifton's trial diagrams how legislation regulating slavery shaped broader notions of race, gender, and sexuality" (14).

In highlighting the layered limitations placed on Black women through her exploration of poetic form, Hill's section based on Gross's monograph performs that praxis of Say Her Name by breathing into the silences of the archive. As part of a developing neo-abolitionist poetics, Hill's collection of poems aspirate. They not only perform the work of recuperating Black women's voices who have been relegated to state records of violence, incarceration, or death; they also provide a Black feminist analyses for how white supremacist ideology shapes the narrative and formal conventions of literary imagination as it has been circulated and canonized. Within the traditions of Say Her Name and Ferreira da Silva's Black Feminist Poethics, *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing* re-narrativizes the world by offering an alternative composite history of Black women's confinement and resistance. In her preface, Hill states that "these poems are love letters. The opening of the book explores how I am bound in the sense of being beholden to others. In the African American tradition, we honor our ancestors" (xiii). Hill links her writing with a specific praxis centered on the work of the archivist. The neo-abolitionist poet does not only point to the systemic technologies at work that maintain white supremacy, whether institutional—through policing and prisons—or ideological—through white supremacist cultural conceptions of criminality circulated through media, the archive, and literature. She also curates a record that shows the tradition of radical praxis—Black women's fugitivity—to be used as a resource for resistance in the present and future.

Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to outline new visions for neo-abolitionist aesthetics as a contribution both to the developing field of African American confinement literature and scholarly work on that field. As an extension of the neo-abolitionist novel theorized by Patrick Elliot Alexander, this dissertation both offers new expressive modes within the neo-abolitionist

novel genre written by Black women—through the blues idiom and Black radical epistolarity—and provides new modes for reading neo-abolition in drama and poetry. This examination centers Black women writers and Black feminist discourse to highlight confinement operating outside of explicitly demarcated spaces of incarceration—prisons, jails, institutions "for the criminally insane," etc.—in order to point to the social, legal, and juridical practices of confinement that certainly maintain explicit sites of captivity but also organize domestic and public spaces. In other words, Black feminist analysis—as it appears in anticarceral feminist and neo-abolitionist discourse—provides a broadened lens for reading state-sanctioned harm intersectionally in ways that reveal a long history of gendered racial domination as a practice of white supremacist social control.

Neo-abolitionist aesthetics across the chapters attends to the two-pronged project of 1) broadening discourse on confinement, especially as it affects Black women in the United States and 2) experimenting with form to highlight the ways in which traditional Western genre conventions limit expressive modalities for calling attention to gendered racial harm and resistance. The latter point becomes the most clear in the frequently-used hybrid text among neo-abolitionist poets. My hope is that the theories outlined in this dissertation do not stop here, but that they are a starting point for opening new lines of inquiry into how confinement and radical resistance operate in our twenty-first century moment. As multiple state departments of corrections are rushing to decarcerate and limit new incarcerated populations amidst the COVID-19 pandemic to slow the spread and companies supplement this *will to punish* by developing various methods of e-carceration—technology that surveils and limits the freedom of people confined within their own homes under house arrest—we must be attentive to the new and emerging ways that confinement may not look the same but continually (re)produces hierarchies

of human difference. Moreover, as I hope this dissertation has shown, contemporary activists and critics of the carceral state have a long history of intersectional analysis and resistance to draw from in continuing the fight to end prisons and imagine future worlds outside of the governing architectures of white supremacy.

LIST OF REFERENCES

"*A Bound Woman is A Dangerous Thing.*" *C-SPAN 2: Book TV*, 1 Feb. 2019, https://www.c-span.org/video/?457457-1/a-bound-woman-dangerous-thing, Accessed 12 Apr. 2020.

African American Policy Forum. *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*, Center For Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2015. www.aafp.org Accessed 18 Apr. 2020.

Agyepong, Tera Eva. *The Criminalization of Black Children: Race, Gender, and Delinquency in Chicago's Juvenile Justice System, 1899-1945*, U North Carolina P, 2018.

Alexander, Patrick Elliot. *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and The New Neo-Slave Novel*. Temple UP, 2018.

Baker Jr., Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. E-book, U Chicago P, 1984.

---. *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* Duke, 2001.

Baldwin, James. "An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis." *New York Review of Books*, vol. 15, no. 12, Jan. 1971. https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/01/07/an-open-letter-tomy-sister-miss-angela-davis/ Accessed 18 Mar. 2020.

Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative*. Greenwood P, 1999.

Bell, Bernard W. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition.* U Massachusetts P*, 1987.*

Black, Cheryl. "'A' is for Abject: The Red Letter Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 31-56.

Bonney, Jo, dir. *Fucking A*. Signature Theater, 2 Sept. 2017, New York City, 2017.

Braz, Rose. “Kinder, Gentler, Gender Responsive Cages: Prison Expansion is Not Prison Reform.” *Women, Girls, and Criminal Justice*, October/November 2006, pp. 87-91.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. “A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon.” *The Bean Eaters*, Harper & Brothers, 1960, pp. 19-25.

Brown, Jericho. “The Tradition.” *The Tradition*, Copper Canyon, 2019, pp. 10.

Buckner, Jocelyn L. “Diggin’ the Material: Ideological State Apparatuses, ‘Capitalizm,’ and Identity in Suzan-Lori Parks’s Red Letter Plays.” *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol 23, no 2, 2011, pp. 31-50.

Bukhari, Safiya Asya. “Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary.” *Social Justice*, vo. 30, no. 2, 2003, pp. 8-17.

Champagne, Lenora. “Outside the Law: Feminist Adaptations of *The Scarlet Letter*.” *Feminist Theatrical Revisions of Classic Works: Critical Essays.* Edited by Sharon Friedman, McFarland, pp.169-188.

Childs, Dennis. *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the Penitentiary*. U Minnesota P, 2015.

Cleage, Pearl. *We Speak Your Names: A Celebration*, Radnom House, 2005.

“COINTELPRO: Black Extremist Part 01 of 23.” 25 Aug. 1967. *FBI Records: The Vault*. vault.fbi.gov Accessed 19 Mar. 2020

Critical Resistance. “What Is Critical Resistance?” *Abolitionist Tools*, 2013, www.criticalresistance.org. Accessed 26 Apr. 2019.

Davis, Angela Y. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, Random House, 1974.

---. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003.

---. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith,*

and Billie Holiday. Vintage, 1998.

---. "Masked Racism: Reflections on the Prison Industrial Complex." *Colorlines*, 10 Sept, 1998.

Diamond, Elin. "Bloody Aprons: Suzan-Lori Parks, Deborah Warner, and Feminist Performance in the Age of Globalisation." *Staging International Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Aston and Sue-Ellen Case, Palgrave, 2007, pp. 9-22.

Dietrick, Jon. "'A Full Refund Ain't Enough': Money in Suzan-Lori Parks's Red Letter Plays." *Suzan-Lori Parks: Essays on the Plays and Other Works*, edited by Philip C. Kolin, McFarland, 2010, pp. 88-102.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. 1845. Dover, 1995.

Dubey, Madhu. "Jones and the Matrilineal Metaphor of Tradition." *Signs,* vol. 20, no. 2, Winter 1995, pp. 245-267.

Elam, Harry J. "The Postmulticultural: A Tale of Mothers and Sons." *Crucible of Cultures: Anglophone Drama at the Dawn of a New Millennium*, edited by Marc Maufort and Franca Bellarsi, Peter Lang, 2002, pp. 113-128.

Ferreira da Silva, Denise. "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 44, no. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 81-97.

Foster, Verna A. "Nurturing and Murderous Mothers in Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*." *American Drama*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2007, pp. 75-89.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage, 1977.

Fraden, Rena. "Suzan-Lori Parks's Hester Plays: *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*." *The Massachusetts Review*. vol. 48, no. 3, 2007, pp. 434-454.

Franklin, H. Bruce. "The American Prison and the Normalization of Torture." *Torture, American Style*. edited by Margaret Power, 28 Nov. 2004, *Historians against War*, pp. 3-5.

---. "Introduction." *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America*, edited by H. Bruce Franklin, Penguin, 1998, pp. 1-20.

"Free Public Library of Philadelphia Author Events with DaMaris B. Hill and Feminista Jones" 5 Feb. 2019. YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZi1fCkj90w Accessed 18 Apr. 2020.

Freed, Joanne Lipson. "Gendered Narratives of Trauma and Revision in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora.*" *African American Review,* vol. 44, no. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 409-420.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "Color Me Zora: Alice Walker's (Re)Writing of the Speakerly Text." *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, Oxford UP, 1988, pp. 239-258.

Gay, Ross. "A Small Needful Fact." *Split This Rock: The Quarry: A Social Justice Poetry Database*, 30 June 2015, https://www.splitthisrock.org/poetry-database/poem/a-small-needful-fact, Accessed 18 Apr. 2020.

Geis, Deborah. "Hawthorne's Hester as a Red-Lettered Black Woman: Suzan-Lori Parks's *In the Blood* and *Fucking A*." *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2004, pp. 77-87.

George, Courtney. "'My Man Treats Me Like a Slave': The Triumph of Womanist Blues over Blues Violence in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" 2009, pp. 119-147

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, U California P, 2007.

Giovanni, Nikki. “For Sonia Sanchez.” *Chasing Utopia: A Hybrid*, Harper Collins, 2013, pp. 121-122.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing, U Michigan P, 1997.

Goldberg, Elizabeth Swanson. “Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*.” *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 2, Spring 2003, pp. 446-472.

Gordon, Avery F. “Methodologies of Imprisonment.” *PMLA*, vol 123, no. 3, May 2008, pp. 651 657.

---. “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity.” *Borderlands*, vol.10, no. 2, 2011, pp. 1-21.

Green, Tara T. “The Black Matriarch’s Quest for Love: Oprah Winfrey as Sofia in *The Color Purple.*” *Presenting Oprah Winfrey, Her Films, and African American Literature*, 2013, pp. 21-43.

---. “Introduction.” *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*, Edited by Tara T. Green, Mercer UP, 2008, pp. 1-7.

Gross, Kali N. *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and Black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880-1910*, Duke UP, 2006.

Haley, Sarah. *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, UNC Press, 2016.

Hamer, Fannie Lou. “Testimony Before the Credentials Committee at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 22, 1964.” *The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer: To Tell It Like It Is*, edited by Maegan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck, UP Mississippi, 2011, pp. 42-45.

Hannaham, James. “Funnyhouse of a Negro.” *Village Voice*. November 1999, pp. 61-62.

Harris, Trudier. "On *The Color Purple*, Stereotypes, and Silence." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 18, no. 4, Winter 1984, pp. 155-161.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford UP, 1997.

---. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. Norton, 2019.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. Dover, 2009.

Henderson, Mae Gwendolyn. "*The Color Purple*: Revisions and Redefinitions." *Alice Walker*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1989, pp. 67-80.

Hill, DaMaris B. *A Bound Woman is a Dangerous Thing: The Incarceration of African American Women from Harriet Tubman to Sandra Bland*, Bloomsbury, 2019.

hooks, bell. "Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*." *Alice Walker*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1989, pp. 215-228.

"Incarcerated Women and Girls." *The Sentencing Project*, 6 June 2019. sentencingproject.org Accessed 21 Mar. 2020.

James, Joy. "Introduction: Democracy and Captivity." *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, edited by Joy James, SUNY P, 2005, pp. xxi-xlii.

Jones, Gayl. "Asylum." *White Rat: Short Stories*. Random House, 1977.

---. *Corregidora*. Beacon, 1975.

---. *Eva's Man*. Beacon, 1976.

King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." August 1963. *U Penn Africana Studies Center*. africa.upenn.edu Accessed 23 Mar. 2020.

Law, Victoria. “Against Carceral Feminism.” *Jacobin*, 17 Oct. 2014, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/10/against-carceral-feminism/ Accessed 31 Mar. 2020.

---. *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*, second edition, PM Press, 2009.

LeFlouria, Talitha. *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*. UNC Press, 2015.

Lordi, Emily. “The Intimate, Political Power of the Open Letter.” *The Atlantic*, 15 May 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/05/the-intimate-political-power-of-the-open-letter/526182/ Accessed 18 Mar. 2020

Lubiano, Wahneema. “Black Ladies, Welfare Queens, and State Minstrels.” *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality*, edited by Toni Morrison, Pantheon, 1992.

Luk, Sharon. *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity*, U California P, 2018.

Łysik, Marta. “You Have Seen How a [Wo]Man Was Made a Slave; You Shall See How a Slave Was Made a [Wo]Man’: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple as a Neo-Slave Narrative*.” *American Studies*, vol. 21, 2004, pp. 17-34.

McDowell, Deborah E. “‘The Changing Same’: Generational Connections and Black Women Novelists.” *Alice Walker*, edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea House, 1989, pp. 135-151.

McGuire, Danielle M. *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. Vintage, 2010.

Moten, Fred. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. U Minnesota P, 2003.

---. *Stolen Life: Consent not to be a Single Being*. Duke UP, 2018.

Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Harvard UP, 2010.

Norman, Brian. *Neo-Segregation Narratives: Jim Crow in Post-Civil Rights American Literature*, Georgia UP, 2010.

Parks, Suzan-Lori. *In the Blood*. 1999. *The Red Letter Plays*. New York: TCG, 2001, pp. 2-112.

---. "*from* Elements of Style." *The America Play and Other Works*, Theatre Communications Group, 1995, pp. 6-18.

---. *Fucking A*. 2000. *The Red Letter Plays*. New York: TCG, 2001, pp. 113-225.

---. "Possession." 1994. *The America Play and Other Works*. TCG, 1995, pp. 3-5.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Harvard UP, 1982.

Pillow, Gloria Thomas. *Motherlove in Shades of Black: The Maternal Psyche in the Novels of African American Women.* McFarland, 2010.

Price, Joshua M. *Structural Violence: Hidden Brutality in the Lives of Women*. SUNY P, 2012. Ebook.

Rascher, Stephan Robert. *The Neo-Slave Narratives of Hurston, Walker, and Morrison: Re-Writing the Black Woman's Slave Narrative*. 1998. University of Connecticut, PhD dissertation.

Ritchie, Andrea J. *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. Beacon, 2017.

Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. Vintage, 2017.

Rodríguez, Dylan. "Developments in the Law: Prison Abolition: Abolition as Praxis of Human Being: A Foreword. *Harvard Law Review*, vol. 132, Apr. 2019, pp. 1575-1612.

---. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*, U of Minnesota P, 2006.

---. "Locked Up, Beat Down: The Anti-Prison Movement Leaves Out Women, While the Anti-Violence Movement Criminalizes Men." *Colorlines*, 2001, p. 16.

---. "(Non)Scenes of Captivity: The Commonsense of Punishment and Death." *Radical History Review*, no. 96, Fall 2006, pp. 9-32.

Rowell, Charles H. "An Interview with Gayl Jones." *Callaloo*, no. 16, 1982, pp. 32-53.

Rushdy, Ashraf A.H. *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*. Oxford UP, 1999.

---. "NeoSlave Narrative." *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. Edited by Andrews, William L., et al. Oxford UP, 1997, pp. 534-535.

---. "'Relate Sexual to Historical': Race, Resistance, and Desire in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora.*" *African American Review,* vol. 34, no. 2, 2000, pp. 273-297.

Schafer, Carol. "Staging a New Literary History: Suzan-Lori Parks's *Venus, In the Blood*, and *Fucking A*." *Comparative Drama*, vol. 42, no. 2, Summer 2008, pp. 181-203.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*, U Pennsylvania P, 1985.

Scott, David. *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice.* E-book, Duke UP, 2014.

Shakur, Assata. *Assata: An Autobiography.* Lawrence Hill, 1987.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Duke UP, 2016.

---. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Duke UP, 2010.

Sofer, Andrew. *Dark Matter: Invisibility in Drama, Theater, and Performance*, U Michigan P, 2013.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Edited by Hortense Spillers, U Chicago P, 2003, pp. 203-229.

Sweeney, Megan. "Prison Narratives, Narrative Prisons: Incarcerated Women Reading Gayl Jones's *Eva's Man*. *After the Pain: Critical Essays on Gayl Jones*. Edited by Fiona Mills and Keith Mitchell, Peter Lang, 2006, pp. 173-202.

Tate, Claudia C. "*Corergidora*: Ursa's Blues Medley." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 13, no. 4, Winter 1979, pp. 139-141.

---. "An Interview with Gayl Jones." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1979, pp. 142-148.

Thuma, Emily. *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*. U Illinois P, 2019.

Variety Staff. "Suzan-Lori Parks on James Baldwin." *Variety,* 11 Feb. 2009. https://variety.com/2009/film/awards/suzan-lori-parks-on-james-baldwin-1118000023/ Accessed 27 Mar. 2020.

Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. Harcourt, 1982.

Watkins, Mel. "Sexism, Racism and Black Women Writers." *The New York Times Book Review* 15 June 1986: 36.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. W.W. Norton, 1985.

Williams, Sherley Anne. *Dessa Rose*. William Morrow, 1986.

Woods, Clyde. *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. E-book, Haymarket, 1998.

Young, Harvey. "Choral Compassion: *In the Blood* and *Venus*." *Suzan-Lori Parks: A Casebook*, Edited by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. and Alycia Smith-Howard, Routledge, 2007, pp. 29-47.

VITA

Education

2014	Master of Arts, English Florida Gulf Coast University
2012	Bachelor of Arts, English Summa cum Laude Florida Gulf Coast University

Publications

Articles

2020 "'Envisioning the future, remembering the past': A Neo-Abolitonist Reading of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Fucking A*" *African American Review.* (forthcoming)

Honors and Awards

2019	Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship
	MLA Career Development Boot Camp Fellow
2014-2018	Graduate School Honors Fellowship, University of Mississippi
2010-Present	Sigma Tau Delta, International English Honor Society, FGCU

Teaching Experience

Instructor of Record

2016-2018	WRIT 102: Intro to College Writing II, University of Mississippi
	WRIT 101: Intro to College Writing I, University of Mississippi
2016	ENGL 222: Survey of World Literature since 1650, University of Mississippi
2015	ENGL 223: Survey of American Literature to the Civil War, University of Mississippi
2014	ENC 1102: English Composition II, Florida Gulf Coast University
2013	ENC 1101: English Composition I, Florida Gulf Coast University

Graduate Teaching Assistantships

Prison-to-College Pipeline Program at Mississippi State Penitentiary

2019	ENGL 365: Mississippi Then and Now 2.0
2018	ENGL 365: Mississippi Then and Now
2017	ENGL 365: "Justice Everywhere": The Civil Rights Stories of King, Angelou, Hamer, and Obama