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Tender Penetralia:
Towards an Ethical Reading of Black Women's Lifewriting

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Tender Penetralia:
Towards an Ethical Reading of Black Women's Lifewriting

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An abstract of a dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

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Towards an Ethical Reading of Black Women's Lifewriting
By Ariel Lawrence

What is the labor of black women's lifewriting? What do we ask of black women writers when we ask them to tell their life stories? What do we expect when they narrate the stories of black life often lost and unrecoverable? What can we learn from this practice of black women writing about their lives and the lives of others, which so often functions as history, genealogy, philosophy, and elegy? My research considers the critical legacy of black women's lifewriting in memoir, autobiography, theoretical writing, and beyond. The goal of my dissertation is to illustrate reading practices that decenter whiteness and white actors to focus more on black interiority and intimacy rather than visceral representations of black bodies under the threat of white supremacist violences. There are three central goals to this project. Firstly, I aim to examine texts in conversation with and also pushing against assumed tropes of violence, oppression, and resilience which so often come to frame how we see black people existing in the world. Secondly, I wish to interrogate the way that readers, both inside and outside of the academy, approach these texts with a particular politics of reading which disregards the subtle nuances of black pain, joy, pleasure, and intimacy, but instead centralizes stories of black life as always responding to and laboring to heal the broken vestiges of white supremacist violence. Such a project requires careful attention to the texts themselves, as well as the pedagogical practices and paratextual operations which frame the actual encounter between reader and text. Thirdly and lastly, my project intervenes into the fields of African American Literature and Autobiographical Studies to offer ethical reading practices that consider the full breadth and depth of black women's lifewriting. Such a reading practice makes space for the dynamic interplay of rhetorical, aesthetic, and intellectual strategies that converge, and at time diverge to confirm and complicate the nuances of black life. Additionally, it encourages readers to be attuned to the quiet intimacies of black interiority beyond the invasive nature of the white gaze.

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Black Autos Revised:
Towards an Ethical Reading of Black Women's Lifewriting

Preceding the business of *gettin' born*, Zora Neale Hurston begins her 1942 autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* with a chapter dedicated to her birthplace, Eatonville, Florida. Hurston narrates an ontological connection between land and personhood, claiming that her memories, the foundation of her narrative, share a material connection to the land she calls home, down to the tree, the soil, and the "dead-seeming, cold rocks" (Hurston 1). The opening pages of *Dust Tracks* etches out Hurston's origins, but it functions as Eatonville's biography too. Articulating an alternative history of the American frontier, Hurston reverses the flow of history as the shores of Lake Maitland lure back black Southerners who had flown north and west during the Great Migration, summoning them with the "continuous roar of...the lush wood, of axes, saws and hammers" (Hurston 3). Aligning her origins with Eatonville, that "raw, bustling frontier" which served as the landscape for black autonomy in self-governance, Hurston begins her autobiography, not within the truth of historical record, but instead within the pleasure of her own narrative wills (Hurston 6). There, on the rocks of Eatonville, Hurston asks us to enter her world.

I have owned the same paperback edition of *Dust Tracks* for years—the highly lauded restored version compiled by the Library of America in 1995 and reprinted in 1996 for Harper Perennial. David Diaz's illustration dons the cover: an interpretation of a now infamous black and white photo of Hurston smiling gleefully, draped in a fur coat, sporting a felt hat with a long feather set at a steep angle across the diagonal of her forehead. Diaz's cover omits the feather, but the reference is clear. This brown smiling woman, cast against a repeated pattern of burnt orange crown-like shapes, her laugh lines carved out in thick black pen strokes, could be no other

person than the *cosmic* Zora herself. When thinking of Hurston's literary legacy, these covers are the images that most clearly begin to form in my mind. Having been the most common editions found on the bookshelves in my and my family's homes, they are burnt into my memory. On the front of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie Crawford, with her long black hair and moody blue skin, lays across sharp blades of grass—grass shaded in a saturated Kelly-green hue the same as the leaves hanging over her and the rolling hills behind her—one hand over her head and the other across her chest, looking up into what we only can assume is the open, boundless sky. The man on the cover of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*—most likely the protagonist John, a fictionalized version of her own father—floats with closed eyes on a bed of bright orange gourds ejecting green vines in curling tendrils across a royal blue background and around his dark purple face. Whether sleeping or praying, he is the most exaggerated of Diaz's illustrations, the deep, dark, angular lines along his lips, cheekbones, and under his eyes render him more statue than person. Each image, wedged between the title on the bottom and Hurston's tripart moniker in larger block font at the top, centers the brown and blue-black faces that Hurston's writing valued most. They inform the reader of the world that they are about to enter. These texts, these covers, this is a how I first encountered Hurston's world.

A cursory glance at early iterations of the autobiography's cover reveals an incoherent and sometimes disjointed approach to how the text was marketed to the public. The original 1942 edition from Lippincott features a small, colorful rural shack hovering at the top left quadrant of the frame with two female figures sitting on the porch just a few steps away from a pair of fruit trees sprouting from the grassless yard, an overexposed black and white photograph of the New York skyline lingering in the bottom right corner, and a single pathway of tan and copper earth connecting the urban to the rural. This strange collage of images, cast against the dark forest

green background, looks strangely similar to the keyhole on a skeleton key lock, the text inside perhaps becoming the key that unlocks the seemingly impossible trajectory between Eatonville and Harlem. While comparatively quaint, the 1942 cover at least attempts a sense of wonder and magic more closely aligned with Hurston's illustration of her childhood home. This magic is completely missing from the 1971 reprint, boasting an introduction from Black Arts critic Larry Neal, but rendering the paracosmic world of Eatonville to a tiny, meek, sketch of a disheveled shack hidden behind the figure of a small black girl, with an open book resting between her skirt and her nested palms. The 1990 second edition, the first restored edition with a foreword from Hurston's biographer Robert Hemingway, begins the long-standing trend of Hurston's name remaining larger and more prominent than the title. It also centers an all to serious image of an unsmiling black woman with hair and clothes wholly undiscernible to any time period. Compared to any and all images we have of Hurston, the black woman on the cover of the 1990 edition is all too recognizable, bordering on that thing which Hurston could never be: unremarkable.

Looking at the different covers chosen for this text across the long expanse of the 20th century, I am intrigued at how the variance reflects the potential desires towards Hurston's life story, as well as her position within the landscape of African American literature. While these desires are facilitated with publishers functioning as the primary intermediary, reading these covers allows us to investigate the long journey of canonization that projected Hurston from notable, to disregarded, to infamous. Many contemporary reprintings of Hurston's texts, including her fiction, simply rely on the author's photographic image as the primary paratextual device to establish its literary and historical value. Given the ubiquity of Hurston's presence on bookshelves and syllabi in the 21st century, her image is routinely plastered across book covers,

posters, and social media posts about the enduring legacy of African American literature. Such a feat was not an accident, but instead a hard-won effort from scholars and writers dedicated to the excavation and reclamation of her legacy. That story has already been told.

Nestled between Diaz's cover and Hurston's opening lines, my 1996 edition of *Dust Tracks* introduces a new forward written by Maya Angelou. While this forward has endured in many cotemporary reprints of the text, it was not until February of 2023, the same semester that I taught a course on black women's lifewriting, that I actually read it. Angelou, being no stranger to the realm of autobiography herself, does a strategic job of situating black lifewriting within a greater tradition of reclamation regarding chattel slavery. The "impulse" to "tell one's own story" is motivated, according to Angelou, by the call to "explain the utterances" of the enslaved as well as the "desires of the utterers" themselves, despite all records of such being outcast from the historical record of slavery (Hurston vii). Where Hurston fails, in Angelou's estimation, is not in the impulse to write her own story, but in the execution.

There is, first and foremost, Hurston's perceived silence surrounding the long history of lynching and anti-black violence during the Reconstruction Era: "Hurston...most certainly lived through the race riots and other atrocities...The southern air around her most assuredly crackled with the flames of Ku Klux Klan raider, but Ms. Hurston does not allude to any ugly incident" (Hurston x). In truth, save for mentioning that her father "predicted dire things" for the young Hurston, her "sassy tongue" potentially prompting "[posses] with ropes and guns...to drag [her] out" (Hurston 13), Angelou is correct that there was simply not enough room among the bountiful fruit trees and bustling front porch lying sessions for a detailed account of white supremacist violence. The subtext of this silence is, however, not about the lack of attention to white violence, but it is about the violence of white pleasure and Hurston's supposed incapacity

to not cater to it. It is not simply that Hurston is "directing her melody...to appease a white audience" (Hurston x) it is that in doing so, she robs black readers of the chance to know the real Hurston. Hurston has, in Angelou's eyes, failed her people in a very particular and pointed way. Armed with this context, this is how Angelou wants the reader to enter Hurston's world.

The penultimate paragraph of Angelou's foreword directly articulates the stakes of her critique: "There is...a strange distance in this book. Certainly, the language is true and the dialogue authentic, but the author stands between the content and the reader. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find and touch the real Zora Neale Hurston" (Hurston xii). This line, more than any other, fascinates and disturbs me as a longtime reader of Hurston's work. This is not because I see her as a pure literary figure—Hurston's creative duplicity as an author is now infamous—but instead because it forces me to question the pressures that we force on the text to satisfy our expectations and assumptions of a *real* black life in print? While I both agree and disagree with Angelou's claims, I am ultimately uninterested in adding to any more criticism debating whether *Dust Tracks* is or is not a good text overall, I begin my project by questioning the ethics required to navigate the trepidatious space that lies between writer and text, and also between text and reader. If a book cover might reflect the changing desires of a reading public in relationship to a given author or text, Angelou's foreword gives us a moment to ponder what is at stake when those expectations are *not* met. Even more, her palpable disappointment with *Dust Tracks* articulated in this foreword anticipates the questions that drive my project about black women's lifewriting: What do readers, whether situated in or outside the academy, expect from the tradition black lifewriting and also from black writers who take up the mantle of autobiographical impulse? How has the labor deployed in the process of canonization influence who, what, and how we read black lifewriting? How do the experiences of black women

specifically support, and sometimes trouble, these expectations? Within the realm of black lifewriting, what is entailed in a *women's work*?

Black Lifewriting: History and Context

In their 2010 reprint of *Reading Autobiography*, Sidone Smith and Julia Watson identify the emergence of "autobiographical discourse," defined as "discursive formations of truth telling," as a preeminent evolution within the field of autobiographical studies in the late 20th and 21st century (Smith and Watson 3). The "shift from genre to discourse," as they name it, moves the critical conversation surrounding self-narration away from the limited function of genre—autobiography, memoir, autofiction, etc.—and focuses our attention to the "aspects of power inherent in acts of autobiographical inscription" that came to define the cultural labor of autobiography in the West from the 18th-20th century (Smith and Watson 3). How then do we situate blackness within this shift from genre to discourse? Looking at the history of African American lifewriting, meaning autobiographical texts penned by writers of African ancestry with some connection to the Atlantic slave trade, we must acknowledge the ways that black writers, particularly in the 18th and 19th century, who audaciously attempt to write about black life, have been and continue to be interpolated through a complex process of rhetorical exclusion. This process is rooted, in part, in a tension that we have seen within the formation of postcolonial canons, the idea that black writers are always already situating their own story as a form of "writing back" to the long history of anti-black regimes and white supremacist ideologies.

While the autobiographical impulse was and continues to be a tool deployed by black writers for political purposes, unraveling the particular condition of black lifewriting requires us to contend with Kevin Quashie's claim that "all living is political...but all living is not in protest" (Quashie 8). In his 1999 text *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*, scholar Kenneth

Mostern argues that race, specifically blackness, functions as a particular category of autobiographical subjectivity in which the experiences of the narrating "I" influence, if not directly shape the identity of the black collective. To say it differently, within the scope of African American Studies, autobiography asserts the experiences of one or an *exceptional* few as the defining criteria of identity for many, positioning lifewriting texts as a tool through which racialization is solidified, materialized, and, most importantly, canonized.

Mostern organizes the citational genealogy of Autobiographical Studies broadly through the intersection of referentiality and subjectivity. In this, referentiality hinges on the question of whether and/or how well autobiography is representative of a "real world external to the text" while subjectivity contends with the various speaking positions of the author/narrator as well as their "social positioning and construction...autonomy, [and] relationship to other subject-positions" (Mostern 28). In this formula, questions along each axis determine how a particular lifewriting text speaks to the verisimilitude of a specific experience of History/histories and also how we as readers and scholars might evaluate the validity of a person's capacity and capability to speak or testify on behalf of a people. While this framework is applicable to the scholarly field of Autobiographical Studies as a whole, there is a particular pattern which has emerged within dissemination of black lifewriting in the US wherein, I argue, notions of referentiality have moved away from the cultural litmus tests of the late 19th century—whether or not black writers, enslaved or not, could be trusted to speak/write/illustrate their own oppression—to assumptions and expectations about the type of world that black writers must respond to/speak for.

While the black lifewriting that was most profitable in the marketplace, and most critical in the literature classroom, has changed over the course of the 20th century the values which determine both still speak to an external desire to center black life under the threat of white

violence. In his formulation of the concept of *Quiet* as a metaphor for black interiority, Quashie brilliantly summarizes the conundrum of white supremacy's persistent hold over the black imagination:

> This is the politics of representation, where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black. As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist—it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize black people. But it has also been adopted by black culture, especially in terms of nationalism, but also more generally: it creeps into the consciousness of the black subject, especially the artist, as the imperative to represent (Quashie 4).

Here, Quashie articulates how the aspiration of combating and confronting racism reveals and re-veils the specter of whiteness within the narratives of black uplift. Such a process is as seductive as it is duplicitous, especially considering that, within black stories, the inclusion of white racism always promises the potential of a familiar heroism. The politics of representation, as Quashie articulates it, positions the primacy and persistence of white power structures at the center of black experience. Readers across race, ethnicity, and class, anticipating a satisfactory and redemptive conclusion, come to black autobiography and memoir with the expectation that white people and/or white power structures must be the central antagonist to which the narrator responds.

Such an attitude towards black life narratives certainly did not originate within the

scholarship of black scholars responding to the intellectual and critical legacy of the slave narrative. There is, I argue, a direct link to the ways that the academy has evaluated black autobiography's usefulness as a historical tool, and how the public has been taught to read and value these texts outside of the classroom. Returning to Mostern, I am intrigued by his attention to, and indictment of, academia broadly, and African American Studies specifically, in the politics of reading we apply to black lifewriting. It is the intentional and fervent work of African American scholars, in pursuit of a critical canon to which I and many other scholars are firmly tethered, that has facilitated the "relatively stable location" of black autobiography "where 'I' tends to have a determinate relation to a specifically racial 'we' and where the text provides for its audience a way to symbolize racialization as a version of the real" (Mostern 30-31). Interrogating the field of African American Studies and its relationship to autobiography allows us to question whether or not canonization and theory surrounding black lifewriting serves as a particular paratextual process, similar to how book covers and other marketing facilitated through the publishing industry, that invites a particular *politics of reading* not only about the role of black lifewriting in the classroom as well as the extent of its potential as an anti-racist and pro-democratic tool.

There is an unspoken yet strategic politicization of black autobiography by scholars within African American studies which Mostern confronts and troubles. That "autobiography often stands in for the political scientist's or sociologist's negotiation of individual history with already given community identities" is a reality that he argues black critics and writers have always known and frequently utilized to their advantage (Mostern 51). Furthermore, the long-standing practice of studying black autobiography within African American Literature, for which scholars asserted a point of origin in the masculinist liberal slave narrative of the late 19th

century, has directly impacted not only how black authors approach lifewriting, but also how readers interact with it. This interaction does not solidify a pure way of reading black lifewriting nor does it speak to the myriad of ways that black writers might approach the task of narrativizing their lived experiences. However, in thinking of the constant desire that readers and scholars project onto black lifewriting, a desire to make sense of the senseless violence both public and private enacted by white supremacist institutions and regimes, we must thoroughly interrogate what is obscured, erased, or simply disregarded within black lifewriting when we read only for solutions to an untenable problem?

None of these questions are specific to contemporary black lifewriting. Contending with the positionality of the slave narrative as the often-unquestioned disciplinary origin point for African American Literature, William L. Andrews discusses the "utility" of Black autobiography for the academy in the latter half of the 20th century: "[The] study of black autobiography has had a salutary effect on the black community's sense of its own literary resources and on the white literate community's sense of the importance of those resources" ("Towards" 79). Such an exchange, Andrews argues, limited the intellectual and creative attitude contributed towards the study of the slave narrative insomuch as they are seen more as historical supplements as opposed to literary texts worthy of close, careful, and thoughtful aesthetic study. To claim, as Andrews does, that scholars and critics have valued black autobiography "as a commentary on something extrinsic rather than as statements of something intrinsic to" the lives of the authors and their communities, indicts the content of these texts and the reading practices that have been projected onto them ("Towards" 79). Central to Andrews critique is the observation that for most of the mid to late 20th century, the slave narrative functioned as testimony to an ugly historical truth more so than an artistic interpretation of the intimacy of black life. Even more, Andrews'

argument helps us reflect on how the primacy of the slave narrative as the de facto record of the sins of slavery, centers the physical and psychological pain endured by the enslaved. This, in part, renders the narrative labor of ex-slave narrators as reactionary to their oppression and centers individual and collective tactics of state sanctioned violence in support of white supremacy. The troubled "utility" of the slave narrative-cum-historical record limits not only how scholars approach their analysis, but it also emerges in the way that the general public encounters these narratives over a century after Emancipation. The desire to understand the violence of chattel slavery is not the problem. It is, instead, the inability to see these narratives as anything other than testimony to the terror of white power and the threat of an explicitly anti-black state.

The afterlife of this utilitarian reading practice bleeds beyond the boundaries of literary study. Lindon Barrett describes this particular tension in his description of the "textual crisis" that students face when first encountering the slave narrative in the classroom. In this Barrett argues that students make a "notable misstep:"

> [In viewing] slave narratives so intently as experiential records…they virtually neglect them as discursive artifacts. They expect…narratives singularly representative of authentic experiences of 'blackness' and 'enslavement', and these expectations are problematic because they diminish intriguing textual negotiations undertaken by the narrators as well as the powerful sociopolitical imperatives overdetermining racial categorization. Expecting to hit experiential bedrock, students overlook the acts of textual representation with which they are confronted (48).

This claim points towards the conflict between the constructed nature of the slave narrative and the reader's desire for an unfiltered distillation of the experiences of chattel slavery. Such a

conflict is not exclusive to black lifewriting. The desire to know or understand experiences of trauma sublimated through the mechanizations of narrative is a dynamic that has come to define the marketability of memoir written by celebrities, authors, and public figures throughout most of the late 20th and 21st century. In hungering for an *uplifting* story where a narrator's redemption is valued relationally to the obstacles they face, the public's appetite is increasingly whetted for traumas both structurally and interpersonally produced. Considering Barrett's argument, my project is primarily concerned with whether and/or how this process has caused black lifewriting specifically to be severed from its intellectual and creative intent and underestimated in its literary identity.

The historical and rhetorical utility of the slave narrative has made many texts a fixture on syllabi Literature, History, and Rhetoric & Composition syllabi across most of the United States. The proliferation of the African American literary canon from the late 1980s to today not only centers the slave narrative as origin point but also, arguably, prioritizes the inclusion of texts which directly respond to and/or are in conversation with them. One could argue that such visibility renders the problematic relationship with evidentiary reading practices as worth the risk. However, within the parameters of this project, I am arguing that the stakes of this *misstep* remain relevant to our current readerly expectations. What is the role of the slave narrative, and by extension the overall tradition of black lifewriting, outside of its call to narrate, articulate, and perform black trauma and endurance? How does black lifewriting serve as a witness to the particularities of black life outside of the expectations of the white gaze? How can literary scholars speak to the form and aesthetics of black lifewriting as it contributes to a discrete, complex, and ever-evolving canon which has been calling and responding to itself for over 150 years? If scholars of the past are guilty of "[having] read too many black autobiographies as

works, not texts" ("Towards" 80) then we must contend with whether or how in this current moment we, as literary scholars, are still seeking to understand black lifewriting primarily to its historical and political utility instead of its success or failure at emulating, responding to, and evolving descriptive and narrative strategies of the past?

Black Women, Didacticism, and the Ethics of Reading

Where do we locate black women's writing in the scope and revision of this utilitarian reading practice? What specific aspects of black women's labors as witnesses to, scholars of, and writers describing black life are germane to this framework? Even more, given the long tradition of Black Feminist Literary criticism, why is it important to consider the impact and tradition of nonfiction broadly and lifewriting specifically? My choice to focus on black women writers specifically is motivated by what I perceive as a multivalent attitude towards both writing and labor. By multivalent, I point to the ways that black women writers, in writing about themselves, also write of and in community with the living, dead, and unborn that comprise their familial and cultural circles. This often contrasts with black male-authored autobiography and memoir which so often constructs a singular and exceptional narrative reflecting the classic arc of the author and/as narrator and/as hero. This black narrator, reflected across much of the autobiographical texts in the late 19th and 20th century, is often a fugitive phenom, fighting for his freedom with little to no help, emerging at the end of the story in full control of his own destiny. He needs no one and shows no weakness; his fugitive path is the exemplary road to liberation.

Whether through the rhetorical framings of 19th century ex-slave narratives by writers like Mattie J. Jackson and Lucy A. Delaney, or the political rhetoric of 20th century Black Feminist writers and activists like June Jordan, or the poetic prose of 21st century memoirs like Jesmyn Ward and Natasha Trethewey, my exploration of black women's lifewriting practices

reveals a literary tradition that challenges masculinist assumptions of narrative authority through domination. What emerges in my reading of black women's lifewriting is something that eschews formations of the singular and exceptional, gesturing instead to quiet intimacies of the interior, whether through a multi-generational exploration of unspoken and unspeakable secrets, or the bold vulnerability of seeking solace in the comfort of others. The selected authors in this project are essayists, theorists, and memoirists who, in writing their lives, also articulate errant genealogies of familial unrest, radical historiographies of black homes and homelands, and create reluctant yet requisite elegies for black life irretrievably lost. In this, black women's lifewriting emerges through a series of layered and complex processes which shifts slowly and purposefully from harmony to cacophony, from romance to tragedy. Such texts center passion, affection, and love, but also revolve around complicated intimacies, often between mother and daughter, offering fertile ground to explore the black interior.

I also believe that black women's lifewriting deserves ethical consideration because of the complex ways the American imagination values our labor, both intellectually and materially. In the US and beyond, black women are asked to do the work—the work of anti-racism, anti-misogyny, of ending class warfare, healing generational curses, and more—for so many communities, all at once. Regarding black nonfiction and lifewriting, I turn to Mae G. Henderson whose work contextualizes how black women, as teachers and scholars are gifted with a plurality of perspectives that, at times, also begets weighty expectations. In her concepts of *simultaneity of discourse* and *subjective plurality,* Henderson discusses the many ways that black women's subjectivity exceeds the limitations of a singular self. Henderson suggests that the binary of self vs. other, the theoretical lynchpin for both African American and Postcolonial cultural and literary studies in the late 20th century, assumes a fracture that is irrelevant for black women

writers. Borrowing from Barbara Smith, Henderson encapsulates her interpretive theory in the term "simultaneity of discourse," a phrase which "[signifies] a mode of reading that examines how the perspectives of race and gender, and their interrelationships, structure the discourse of black women writers" that moves towards the self and/as other (Henderson 60). Subsequently, Henderson identifies black women writers as engaging with, and writing through a "subjective plurality"— refuting the false binary between a wholly fractured or cohesive self—that "allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference" (Henderson 75). The ability to register and recognize the self and/as other—to create a multivalent narrative presence which refuses both the dominance of singularity and pushes against the limitations of a supposedly "fractured" identity—constitutes the "matrix of black female subjectivity" itself (Henderson 60). A reading practice that recognizes and centers simultaneity of discourse requires a decentering of the dominant singular "I," making room for new formations of self/selves which emerge from facing the other not as a mirror or extension, but as an embodied and internal source of power.

While such a perspective is valuable for the work of black women writers, it also deeply effects how, and how much, black women's labor is perceived, valued, and often deployed across society. I deeply agree with Henderson when she writes that "whether or not the black woman...determines to use herself as 'text,' she will be indeed be 'read' by...her gender and racial performance in the context of the dominant cultural script" (Henderson 143). Citing Henderson, I argue that, within the cultural imagination, black women's work, including and especially her writing, is perceived as a panacea: a balm burdened to heal all wounds. It is the emotional labor of black women that is supposed to heal broken black homes. It is the maternal labor of black mothers that must save black children from the threat of premature death. It is the

intellectual labor of black women scholars and thinkers which is employed to fix the lopsided foundation of Black Studies and Women's Studies departments in universities across the nation. It is the political labor of black women in the United States as election organizers, poll workers, and especially voters that will ostensibly "save the country from itself." It is the activist labor of queer black women that is wielded against deep rooted institutions of heteropatriarchy. Black women are, so often, tasked with fixing an endless list of shattered and ruptured things. Regarding black women writers, such heavy expectations manifest into the sometimes stifling expectation for didacticism insomuch as readers, regardless of genre or the writer's aim, see black women's lifewriting as a potential answer to the endless riddle or racism and inequality.

This is not a problem that is exclusive to black women. Historically there has been a cultural assumption that it is the job of black people to rise up and solve the systemic problems which limits their life chances. What I am referring to is the assumption of didacticism, meaning the expectation from readers that the primary aim of black writers is to infuse their work with a heavy subtext of moral instruction, either for how to be an exception black person, or how to avoid being a terrible white one. This is also not a problem exclusively projected from reader onto writer. Since the days of Reconstruction there has been an expectation that black writers use their pen for the greater good of black uplift. Even more, I would argue that the African American literary canon adheres around the question of black uplift and triumph, signaling out authors and scenes where the violent wake of anti-blackness is incontestable. The pressure to illustrate this unavoidable, but not central, aspect of black life is what prompts writers like Hurston, to declare that there is "nothing but futility in looking back over [her] shoulder in rebuke" at the "dark days of slavery" (Hurston 229). My project, however, is not about refusing to look. It is about looking beyond, looking through, and looking again at these texts to develop

reading practices that recenters black life in black lifewriting.

While many can repeat, like a catchphrase or slogan, DuBois' declaration that "all art is propaganda and ever must be" less referenced is his caveat that the propaganda serves "black folk [right] to love and enjoy" (DuBois 259). The black women writers I explore in my dissertation are firmly invested in serving black folks right to enjoy their lives, and also to understand their lives as more than just fodder for tragedy from which the American public can learn a lesson. It is writing from which we can begin to understand expressions of blackness, black life, and about the many emotions and experiences that make up the interiority of black people. Black women—seeing themselves as self and other, their lives endlessly tangled with the daily dramas of lovers and loved ones—are blessed with a particular discernment, able to see, feel, and articulate with significance, both the specificities and sundries of black life. While many of the authors I explore in this project write openly of racism, as both systemic and singular, they are also writing about so much more, because there is, in fact, so much more to black life that that which whiteness aims to disrupt.

Chapter Summaries and Project Goals

The first chapter of my dissertation expounds on Jacqueline Royster's concept of *rhetorical performance* through a multi-genre close reading of works by Black Feminist writer June Jordan. Building on this notion of performance, I push against Hortense Spillers invocation of the blueswoman and her notion of *being for self* to argue that, for black women writers, the notion of authenticity is a complicated tension between the interior and exterior. Tracing the figure of Jordan's mother—someone with whom she had a contentious relationship—I ultimately argue for an understanding of Jordan's lifewriting that centers the ways she strategically performs vulnerability on the page instead of valuing it based on its historical verisimilitude. The

second chapter examines women-authored ex-slave narratives from Mattie J. Jackson and Lucy A. Delaney establishing a central theme in my project: *Black Maternal Fugitivities*. This theme expands masculinist understandings of fugitivity to consider how enslaved women engaged in fugitive acts while protecting themselves, their husbands, and their children through strategic and quiet acts of resistance on and off the plantation. While we have been trained, through careful attention to the historical context from which these narratives emerge, to interpret them as narratives of trauma, submission, and externalized redemption, I offer new ways of reading this genre as a mode of black lifewriting that documents the intimacies shared by enslaved women as mothers and daughters, friends, and co-conspirators.

Building from my articulation of *Black Maternal Fugitivities*, my third chapter focuses on contemporary memoir, set in the American South, written by Jesmyn Ward and Natasha Trethewey. In this chapter I expand on my claims about black female interiority and intimacy to better understand how black women have wrestled with, been refused, and created their own freedom through quotidian practices of resistance. Even more, arguing for a reading of these memoirs as narrative in the afterlife of slavery—directly connecting them to the themes explored in Jackson and Delaney's texts—I examine the ways that these authors both acknowledge and disrupt traditional forms and structures of slave narratives, strategically unsettling our readerly expectations. My last chapter pays close attention to the autotheoretical writings of Saidiya Hartman, specifically her 2007 text *Lose Your Mother* and her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts." In my reading of Hartman's writing, I consider how the author centers her longings and desires for the quotidian details of black life so often unrecoverable in the archives of slavery. I also argue that, through reading Hartman's personal reflection on her family history, we can better understand the stakes of her work regarding critical fabulation. Hartman's longing, I argue, more

than the scholarly viability of fabulation as a method, should be the primary focus of the reader's gaze. Finally, my conclusion thinks through the occasion of this project, born in and through the rise and fall of the 2020 anti-racist nonfiction boom, as well as future questions for expansion and revision.

In considering the ways that black women approach lifewriting across multiple genres, to many different audiences, with a vast collective of rhetorical, aesthetic, and narrative strategies, I am interested in developing new ways of reading, of listening, and of speaking about how black women value black life both publicly and privately. There are three central goals to this project. Firstly, I aim to examine texts in conversation with and also pushing against assumed tropes of violence, oppression, and resilience which so often come to frame how we see black people existing in the world. Secondly, I wish to interrogate the way that readers, both inside and outside of the academy, approach these texts with a particular politics of reading which disregards the subtle nuances of black pain, joy, pleasure, and intimacy and instead centralizes stories of black life as always responding to white supremacist violence. Such a project requires careful attention to the texts themselves, as well as the pedagogical practices and paratextual operations which frame the actual encounter between reader and text.

Thirdly and lastly, echoing Andrew's desire for scholars of black lifewriting to cultivate the critical curiosity necessary to unravel the *something enacted* through the act of writing itself, my project intervenes into the fields of African American Literature and Autobiographical Studies to offer ethical reading practices that consider the full breadth and depth of black women's lifewriting. In this I am thinking primarily through the Black Feminist ethical framework articulated by Patricia Hill Collins in her canonical 1991 text *Black Feminist Thought*. For Collins, the Black Feminist *ethic of caring* is invested in three main tenants:

personal expressiveness, deployment and validity of emotion in writing, and the centrality of empathy in practices of knowledge/meaning making (Collins 215). While Collins' work was and continues to be foundational to the fields of Black Studies and Sociology respectively, it also speaks directly to the ways we might encounter black women's writing as literary scholars and critics. Regarding personal expressiveness, we must contend with the reality that, from poetry to theory to fiction and beyond, there is no singular or monolithic approach to ascertaining the meaning of the black women's writing. In this, there is both the capacity for great divergences of thought and tastes, as well as intellectual connections and overlapping that reaches across centuries connecting writers from pre-emancipation to today. Subsequently, within the realm of emotion, an ethical approach to black women's lifewriting asks that we accept and wrestle with the full range of emotions that black women experience and express in their craft. This means looking beyond the expectations for stories of racial uplift or classist redemption and embracing fully the joy, the pleasure, the rage, and the deep sadness that black women writers illustrate in their work. It also requires understanding that to think empathetically does not necessarily mean that readers must inherently expected to approach or appropriate black women's experiences as their own, but instead called to *feel with* black women in their writing and to locate themselves within a greater constellation of social, political, and psychological connection that, borrowing from Collins, asserts a particular "epistemology...in which truth emerges through care" (Collins 216).

Practically and materially, what does an ethical reading practice of black women's lifewriting look like? In attempting to construct such a concept in my project I argue that it must make space for the layered and dynamic interplay of rhetorical, aesthetic, and intellectual strategies that converge, and at time diverge to confirm and complicate the nuances of black life.

It must invoke and hone a reading practice that pays attention to the particularities of an author's language and tone both individually and in relation to past practices of black self-narration. Additionally, it would need to consider the broader implications of how black folks experience life beyond the spectacular scope of anti-black violence and in this be attuned to the quiet intimacies of black interiority beyond the invasive nature of the white gaze. Finally, an ethical reading practice of black women's lifewriting, at its core, would deprioritize, but not discount, historical verisimilitude —those notions of referentiality, to use Mostern's framework, that evaluates black writing based on its proximity to historical truth— in exchange for an ambivalent curiosity. Readers of black literature know that there are rarely fair or just endings in the story of black life. Instead of looking for the answer to racism in the lives of black writers, we should be cultivating the tools to ask better questions.

"Consider the Queen:"
Vulnerability and/as Resistance in June Jordan's Lifewriting

In the 2006 biography *June Jordan: Her Life and Letters*, author Valerie Kinloch positions the reader at the center of an old familial dispute. Kinloch's research was collected, in part, through conversations with Valerie Orridge, Jordan's cousin and childhood companion who claims that Jordan "misrepresented the family in many ways" (Kinloch 1). Jordan's memoir *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood*, released in 2000, presents a combative and explosive coming of age tale set in Harlem and Brooklyn. Orridge's dismissal perfectly exemplifies the most legible anxiety of lifewriting and trauma: the question of authorial veracity. Whether or not we can trust the author to tell a true story, the fear that someone might be making it all up, is for both critics and the general public the metric that we have traditionally used to evaluate *authenticity* within lifewriting.

The most enthralling aspect of Kilnoch's project is the focus on Jordan's mother. While many critics center their reading of *Soldier* on the father's abuse—it is a memoir bloated with his unrelenting presence, both charming and terrifying— the scant role that Jordan's mother plays in the text signals a richer, more complex tension. The looming absent-presence of Mildred Granville, Jordan's mother, is both palpable and perplexing in *Soldier.* Where Jordan cites her father as "giving [her] reason to learn how to fight," Mildred is instead categorized as uninfluential: "Black women…we're socialized to revere our mothers, to honor them…I would say that my mother was pretty much beside the point. I don't think she had any choices open to her, but choices or not, she did not intervene, she did not rescue me from my father" (Jordan Interview 102). In *Soldier*, the core identity that Jordan performs is one of strength and action while her mother's lack of intervention is presented as its own distinct form of harm. Responding

to this tension, Kinloch proposes a series of fascinating questions:

> "Was Mildred waiting to speak? Was she waiting to be asked to speak and thus, waiting to be heard? Was she speaking to and with herself about Granville's physical and verbal attacks, or was she praying that her silences would protect her and her daughter from some larger sociopolitical and sociopsychological pain? Or, was Jordan's reading of her familial past fictionalized, even to some extent, in comparison with the accounts offered by Valerie Orridge?" (Kinloch 18).

The structure and framing of these questions illustrate a desire from Kinloch to know and access the interior motivations of Mildred Jordan. Even more Kinloch does not simply inquire about Mildred's interiority, she fabulates a narrative of silence by suppression, positioning that narrative within a greater Black Feminist ideology of language and action. It is not only that these questions reveal a desire to understand Mildred, but that they also make clear an even deeper desire: to redeem her.

Can we trust the narrator to tell a true story, or must we face the possibility that Jordan, or any writer, might be guilty of "fictionalizing the past so as to recreate, reconstruct, and re-present it" (Kinloch 19)? All that we know about Mildred is in direct relationship to what Jordan has said or written about her. Therefore, the desire to name Mildred's silences as a form protection is directly mediated by Jordan's intervention that her mother, even in her stillness, contributed to her harm. Within this, Mildred's intentions are positioned as a direct foil to Jordan's veracity as the conflict shifts from Jordan and Orridge to Jordan and her mother. The line between the mother and daughter asserts a tension between Mildred's *unknowable* truth with Jordan's *authorial* truth. Truth and authenticity in the realm of lifewriting is tricky. So often readers of memoir and autobiography seek out the genre to gain a more authentic understanding of the

author, and in this the validity of a text is reduced merely to a story's veracity or provability instead of considering the emotional, social, or political truth of a given narrative. Possibly more appropriate than factual truth is the concept of *autobiographical truth*.

Autobiographical truth is, according to Smith and Watson, a concept that resists the "logical and juridical" ideology of "truth and falsehood" and instead is forged out of the "intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader" ("Smith and Watson" 16). Autobiographical truth is evaluated within the relationship between author and reader and through this "self-narration becomes an epistemological act" dependent on a clear bond between "writerly tact and readerly trust" ("Smith and Watson" 17-18). There is, I argue, an expectation that lifewriting functions as *evidence* of a life instead of the textual translation of life as *experience*. To think of memoir as evidence is to align the goals of lifewriting practices with that of the court, the author not only bears witness, but offers testimony before the reader who, momentarily, serves as both judge and jury. This is, I believe, a misunderstanding. The goal is not to create writing that is evidentiary, but instead to craft narratives that give voice to the endless experiences of black life. Lifewriting hinges on the trust between reader and writer to believe in the narrator's experience of trauma, joy, fear, and pleasure. What readers crave from autobiography and memoir is *authenticity*, and attitudes about authenticity are less about evidence and more about *performance*.

Given that the overarching goal of this project is to illustrate ethical reading practices for Black women's lifewriting, I begin with the concept of performance. Using Jacqueline Jones Royster's concept of *rhetorical performance*—a term that gestures towards black women writers' ability to intentionally construct multiple ethos positions to reach, and inspire, a wider audience—I argue that more than verifiable fact, the performance in writing

determines how readers evaluate. Authenticity is another term that I also take time to interrogate, particularly as memoir and autobiography remain a genre fixated on the audience's desire to know the authentic story of its author. How authenticity is determined, however, is a process burdened by both interior thought and exterior expectations, leading at times to conflict between writer and reader. Responding to this tension, I will examine lifewriting from activist and poet June Jordan and I will be focusing on performances of *vulnerability*. Jordan's memoir, essays, and poems center lifewriting practices to illustrate the stakes of her political position standing against racism, misogyny, state-sponsored violence. She also cares deeply about using her life story to reach out to her audience on an intimate and interpersonal level. In this, we witness Jordan's vulnerability while also being privy to the systemic threads that bind her to other readers also existing under the threat of powerlessness. Vulnerability becomes one method to connect with readers who, after engaging with her words, better understand their experiences as part of a matrix of injustices that require a political response. More importantly, I believe, these connections also open the possibility for readers to recognize their own vulnerabilities as part and parcel of a greater narrative of resilience.

The Limitations of Authenticity

Authenticity reflects a particular anxiety of the self—an anxiety of whether and how the self becomes legible and verifiable to oneself—that is related to how we, as readers, desire to encounter others in lifewriting. Modern definitions of authenticity posit the truth of an object or experience based on its proximity to both veracity and verisimilitude, both of which are so often determined by how reality is perceived and understood. The question of authenticating experience through the mediation of text becomes even more difficult as the boundary thins between self and other, as well as time and memory. Authenticity has two Greek roots,

authentikos, meaning that which is original or genuine, and *authentes*. This latter term, comprised of both *auto* (self) and *hentes*, a root that gestures towards the action of both *doing* and *being*, all of which expresses the idea that authenticity, in part, is rooted in the capacity to act fully within one's own authority. The intersection of these two terms presents authenticity as a word in which something or someone is all at once knowable and genuine to self and others resulting in a self-narrativization that is marked by action, intention, and reflexivity. Authenticity hinges on the same trust between reader and writer that anchors autobiographical truth. In this, it is not enough that writers present experiences that are verifiably real, they must make the narrative of their experiences something that their audience can *feel* as being real.

The importance of being *real* is affirmed in Jordan's own illustration of Black English as a rhetorical mode, which she details in her essay "Nobody Mean More to Me Than You and The Future Life of Willie Jordan." In this piece, Jordan identifies the importance of *clarity* in the rhetorical function of Black English. Jordan argues that clarity reveals how "the motivation behind every sentence is the wish to say something real to somebody real" ("Some of Us" 163). I read a useful tension here between Western attitudes of clarity, so often determined at the level of syntax and grammar, and the sociopolitical implications of what and who is read as "real" within the scope of black culture. Grammar is, of course, not what Jordan is speaking of when she speaks of clarity. Clarity links speaker and listener by asking for both parties to be "real," a term which points to the desire, above all else, to not be harmed. To "be real with me" invokes a type of authenticity which signals the recognition of a mutual vulnerability, a term I will focus on heavily in the last sections of this chapter. To be "real" is not a request to be syntactically formal or conceptually minimal; it is, at its core, a plea to be seen, heard, and ultimately protected by the other party in an exchange of words.

In *Soldier*, there are many scenes where Jordan's desire to "be real" with her family and community affirms her status as an outsider. In one particular moment, motivated by the eternal struggle to impress a new crush, as well as the desire to outperform her cousin Valerie, Jordan decides to choreograph an "authentic" African dance to perform at the church social. Jordan claims that, in this dance, there is the opportunity to "invent and pursue something else that would be entirely my own idea" ("Soldier" 113). Such an aspiration points directly back to *authentes,* that is the need to navigate external actions with the intentions of the interior. Or, to say it another way, the very idea of this dance, and the audacity that it would take to perform it, requires that Jordan be a "doer" of her clearest sense of *self* and *being*.

There is no shortage of scenes in *Soldier* that illustrate Jordan's struggle for control over her body and her destiny. This moment, however, devoid of physical threat, presents the idea of this dance as something that, even momentarily, will grant Jordan something that she rarely is able to wrestle away from the grasp of those that limit or challenge her imagination: the chance for complete, authentic self-expression. The fantasy of the "authentic" African princess complicates the narrative even more. In her child's mind, to be an African woman is to navigate the world with wild abandon: moving to the "relentless drumming" of "extremely African" music; wearing an exotic uniform of "sequined black scarves" turned "glittering veil" and a rhinestone necklace transformed into an ornate pendant ("Soldier" 114-115). The costume that Jordan chooses, with its kitschy disregard for respectability or historical accuracy, is lavish and loud. Jordan recycles the orientalist and exotic fantasies of the African woman to serve as the vessel for her own potential self-actualization.

When Jordan finally performs her dance, aided by her crush Earl, she is met with an unsurprising swell of confusion and silence. The experience of navigating this entire section as

reader/audience is purposefully disconcerting. We know that, despite her clear hopes to be fully accepted as her authentic self, this dance, outside of the imagination, holds the potential for judgment and shame. It is, in the context of the past, a performance of self that will inevitably be misunderstood. Even though we can see disaster over the horizon, we are also privy to what the other players in the texts are not. We know how the dance makes Jordan feel about herself and the potential to express that self publicly without being hindered or stifled. “I thought I looked really regal, really African...” Jordan writes, “I went wild. I was dancing in the jungle. I was dancing in the desert. I was practically naked. I was free. I was laughing and whirling about and never losing the beat” (“Soldier” 115). Here, the clumsiness of Jordan’s existence throughout the memoir—she is, for most of the text, tripping, falling, and being thrown against the jagged edges of unforgiving concrete; twisting her fingers and limbs in the spokes of bicycles and the metal thorns of barbed wire fences—is transformed into a boundless beauty and grace. Surrounded by the unfiltered sounds and movements of her own fantasy, Jordan is momentarily unyoked from the social limitations of both her girlness and her blackness as articulated by the constraints of societal expectations. She is acting on her selfhood and performing the potential of that selfhood as both a *freedom of* and *freedom in* her body.

The record abruptly stops and Jordan, even without meeting the gaze of the church goers, knows that she has incurred the wrath of her perceived transgressions. Jordan writes “I could feel something awful...I felt cold. I could suddenly tell how small I was. And I shivered” (“Soldier” 115). If, in part, the success of Jordan’s dance hinged at all on the recognition and validation of her audience, then the "[horrible] silence” engendered by the lack of applause marks this performance, in its first iteration, as a failure (“Soldier” 115). However, because we have access to Jordan’s interior thoughts, and because that interiority has- been given more narrative weight

than the reaction of the community, we as readers understand this performance not as improper, but as the full expression of her authentic desires. In this we can see how the failure of this performance speaks not to Jordan's authenticity, but to the limitations of others to see, recognize, and accept the freedom that she is trying to embody. Such an exchange, the act of validating Jordan's freedom through this dance, becomes the labor of the reader. Even more, we believe in the power of this dance, of this moment, because we are able to feel and experience the disconnection between the interior longing and the exterior refusal. Looking back at this moment through the lens of lifewriting, this failed performance of the past as righted, in perpetuity, by the power of narration. What Jordan fails to do in her memory, she successfully rectifies in her re-telling of that memory.

Rhetoric, Performance, and the Blueswoman

While young Jordan suffers the disapproval of her hostile audience at the Church social, as an adult she recasts the scene in a new light, with a new audience, inside the confines of her memoir. This restructuring of narrative and/as memory is accomplished by, in part, the way that Jordan presents the scene within the greater context of her adult life. What might have been a failed performance becomes something else precisely because of the way that Jordan crafts a particular version of herself that is, in the realm of narrative, also in the act of becoming something else. The reader is drawn into this dance, even with its many anachronisms and literal/figurative missteps, because, as a gifted writer, Jordan crafts an experience of this moment that readers can feel and connect to. This is, of course, a different type of performance, one that is facilitated through the fluid power of written language and a particular self-awareness of one's role as author and/or narrator. To better understand this, we turn to Jacqueline Jones Royster and her concept of *rhetorical performance*.

Royster's 2000 text *Traces of a Stream* deals exclusively with the legacy of black women authored essays in the late 19th and 20th century. Central to Royster's argument about black women's essays is that they are shaped and understood by the "means of their rhetorical behavior" a concept which is defined by the "material conditions of [their] life and work" (Royster 26). In this we are to understand that quotidian experiences of Black women—as individuals and also as a diverse array of communities and collectives—has a direct effect on the ways they read the world and subsequently the ways that they approach writing a text. Here, *rhetorical behavior* as a tool of criticism unravels the tension between both the particularities of a given author's unique experience, and the connections or convergences of experiences as facilitated by identity. How those connections or convergences become legible and relatable within the scope of the reader's mind comes down to how a writer performs multiple versions of themselves. In this, *rhetorical performance* is a term that points to the "how the rhetorical features [of a text] suggest the formation of ethos and identity" for the author as well as the "various sense-making and organizational strategies" that express how a given text may be "deeply encoded with values and desires" so much so that they are recognizable as a "complex literate event" (Royster 39). This concept becomes clear within the examination of two distinct relationships, that of the black woman writer and her audiences and the black woman writer and herself.

Firstly, while rhetorical behavior is deeply rooted in the traditional rhetorical triad (speaker, message, audience), Royster's invocation of the term is an attempt to create a new space or category for the processes by which black women writers perceive the systemically created gaps between them and their audience(s). This gap, according to Royster, is created and maintained by negative attitudes towards black women's experiences and to the audacity

necessary to assert that those experiences are, in fact, a form of knowledge that addresses political and social inequities. To say it another way, that black women not only see their lived experiences as a form of knowledge, but also that they share those experiences from the authority of their pens, creates a wider distance for them to have to traverse in order to be understood, accepted, and valued as a "complex literate event" (Royster 65). Following this, the strategies used to close this gap gesture towards a particular form of ethos formation in which the black woman writer "[forges] connections between herself and her message, audience, and context" with "eloquence and grace" (Royster 39). Most interesting in this concept is the acknowledgement that the rhetorical features black women writers deploy to assert themselves as speakers and narrators with "their own sense of character, agency, and authority" (Royster 65) can be understood as a strategy which engenders a particular and intentional performance of language in service to the author's project and the reader's needs. Returning to Jordan and her dance, questions and evaluations of rhetorical performance point not only to how this scene in *Soldier* illustrates a particular vulnerability for the child protagonist—a black girlchild dancing, twirling, thrashing her body, showing all that she knows to be true of herself in front of an audience who desires nothing more than for her stop— but also, in our commiseration, Jordan's performance demands that we feel this vulnerability with her.

I focus on rhetorical performance here because, as a concept, it anchors my critical reading practice of black women's lifewriting as a response to both a writer's ability to craft a particular feeling and a reader's capacity to sense and be in tune with that feeling. In this, questions of authenticity are evaluated not by the verification of trauma through shock and factuality—metrics within lifewriting that inevitably over-value the salaciousness of violence and trauma—but by the writer's capacity to communicate pain and pleasure at multiple registers.

Additionally, I am also very interested in unpacking the tension between *rhetoric* and *performance* as two separate processes that deepen and complicate each other. While rhetoric itself sets the boundaries of language—a boundary that makes space for both a writer's intention and the readers' interpretation of that intention—performance functions as a metaphor that holds space for the ways that black women writers strategically use emotion to convince readers that they are experiencing something true and genuine. Even more, as a word, performance embodies both notions of *process* and also *artifice*, suggesting a productive ambivalence between what and how an author actualizes in writing, and the writing's capacity to dissuade readers against its own constructedness.

To illustrate the relationship that black women writers have to the process and metaphor of performance, I turn to the blues. This turn is inspired by the work of Hortense Spillers who exalted the figure of the blues singer in her canonical essay "Interstices." Published in 1984, Spillers' essay offers a somewhat contentious argument: that black women scholars languished in a poverty of critical language surrounding their sexuality. Black women, being the "beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (Spillers 153), risked in their theoretical voicelessness a particular type of philosophical threat that Spillers deemed the "paradox of non-being" (Spillers 156). Deeming the "nonfictional feminist text" as the "empowered text" most necessary to navigate "critical/argumentative symbolic plays of power" (Spillers 154), Spillers suggests that black women's critical silence risks not only an intellectual capitulation, but a type of ontological undoing as well.

One strategy for confronting this non-being is exemplified, conceptually, in the figure of the *blueswoman*. It is she, who holds all the "principal elements involved in the human drama...compressed...into a living body" exemplifying in her performance the "the subject

turning in fully conscious knowledge of her own resources toward her object" (Spillers 165). In this, the object being the song, language is transformed by the singer's physicality as well as the depths of her interiority. Such a figure anchors her performance within the purist expression of "being-for-self," a notion that Spillers defines as a "particular and vivid thereness...an unalterable and discrete moment of self-knowledge" (Spillers 165). The notion of "being-for-self" speaks to a particular autonomy present in an artist and/or performer which centralizes their interiority without eliding the presence and impact of the audience. It offers a reorganization and reorientation towards Black women's bodies, particularly at the intersection of pain and spectacle, that empowers Black women to speak the totality of their experiences while acknowledging the performance of that pain (and joy and vulnerability and so on) as a form of nourishment.

In developing this "being for self," Spillers suggests that black women scholars should aspire to "translate the female vocalist's gestures" in their writing and better "articulate both her kinship to other woman and the particular nuances of her own experience" (Spillers 167). Such an argument, in its connection to interiority and selfness, approaches an often-murky discourse lying at the intersection of art and ontology. My concern here is less about the validity of the blueswoman as a subject of study or aspirational figure. More so, I am hesitant to accept the assertion that black women scholars, in adapting the blueswoman's gestures and revealing a coherent representation of their interiority within their writing, might distance themselves from the threat of misrepresentation. Especially given how black women writers have historically faced a general public wholly intent on and invested in misunderstanding their work. The blueswoman and the black woman writer, I argue, are motivated by a similar desire to narrativize black life carefully and honestly and both anchor their work within a deep expression of emotion

and feeling. However, whether a given performance, aural or rhetorical, becomes the seamless translation of their interiority to the exterior world of the audience, is a more complicated question. What most interests me about the figure of the Blueswoman, in both history and narrative, are the moments in which the context and content of a given song comes to stand in for the performer herself. In unpacking this disconnect between the *performer as actor* and *performance as action*, I am interested in expanding Spillers' analogy of the blueswoman through and beyond the realm of the purely interior to examine how the full expanse of her performance holds space for both fluency and mistranslation. In continuing to extrapolate from this analogy, my interest is less directed at who the Blues singer is performing for—although such a question is not completely erased as a point of interest—but instead what in the song, and all the elements of its performance, moves listeners to interrogate and reorient their relationship with the subject of the song as text, and the subjectivity of the singer herself.

How, then, do we fully explore the figure of the blueswoman in relationship to and beyond her inner-motivations and desires? I echo Spillers' sentiment that, in understanding and translating the practices of the blueswoman we are ultimately "interested in the singer's attitude toward her material, her audience, and, ultimately, her own ego-understanding in the world as it is interpreted through form" (166-167). To explicate this attitude, and the ways it is sometimes obscured through the desires of the audience, I invoke Ursa, the protagonist of Gayl Jones' 1975 novel *Corregidora*. Having been assaulted by her jealous husband, the novel begins with Ursa receiving an emergency hysterectomy. This inciting violation propels the narrative forward through multiple waves of grief and rage as Ursa confronts not only mourning her own reproductive potential, but also the intergenerational trauma of slavery. My examination of Ursa is not necessarily motivated by Jones' larger project of interrogating the legacies and afterlives of

slavery, instead I am interested in what fiction offers us that history cannot: an interior view of the blueswoman. Much has been written about this text, most often focusing on the generational curse of transatlantic slavery and the question of how reproductivity functions within the legacy of slavery. I am, however, most drawn to moments in the text when Ursa speaks of her relationship to the songs she performs.

Fearful of the ways that her attack has manifested in the sound of her voice, Ursa approaches her first public performance post-hysterectomy with trepidation. More than a description of her performance, readers are privy to Ursa's *attitude* towards the performance: "I bit my lip singing. I troubled my mind, took my rocker down by the river again. It was as if I wanted them to see what he'd done, hear it. All those blues feelings...My voice felt like it was screaming. What do they say about pleasure mixed in the pain?" (Jones 47). Given that *Corregidora* is a book that examines, among many questions, how much black women endure at the hands of men under systems of patriarchy and racism, this moment emerges as one where Ursa, through her singing, is in full control of her interior turmoil and her external expression. There is a particular gravitation towards *tenderness*, that mixing of pleasure and pain that comes to define her relationship to men and sex, and to women and labor, as much as it defines the edges of the wound in her mouth. These thoughts exemplify what Angela Davis names as the self-reflexive quality which implores performers to share with the audience their *vision* of the blues. While Ursa's vision of the Blues does in fact refer to her inability to communicate her grief and rage, the use of first person is also key to understanding her agency. In performing the Blues, she "troubles" her own mind, and brings to light her frustration at only being able to communicate a fraction of her pain to the listening audience. She is not satisfied, but neither is she silent. However, in her lack of silence, Ursa is also not immune from being misunderstood.

In fact, I argue that there is a notable tension between Ursa as the narrator and *subject* of her own Blues aesthetic and Ursa as the *object* of the Blues as narrative—an object often possessed and positioned through the desires and anxieties of the listener.

Is the Blueswoman inseparable from the Blues itself? The Blueswoman in body and metaphor is the keeper and sublimater of secret longings, both hers and her listeners. In her community, Ursa's employment as a Blueswoman aligns her being in relationship to the Blues as a narrative pain and catharsis. Time and time again, different men—husbands, bosses, onlookers, and strangers—fail to separate the woman from her performance. In this, they confuse the negative emotions and anxieties of the Blues with the presence of the woman herself. Across the novel there are a slew of violations and assaults against Ursa at the hands of ancillary male characters. In one encounter Max, Ursa's manager at the club, sexually assaults her while she is at work precisely because he is enamored by the echoes of trauma in her voice: "You got a hard kind of voice...like callused hands. Strong and hard but gentle underneath...The kind of voice that can hurt you...Hurt you and make you still want to listen" (Jones 91). Max is one of many characters in the novel who notice that the depth and tenor of Ursa's voice shifted after her husband attacked her. Similar to those that came before him, Max also projects a narrative of trauma and desire onto Ursa, a narrative of this own making defines proximity to pain as seductive.

While 21st century standards of consent cannot be fully applied to this context, it intrigues me how clearly Max sees the singing of the Blues as a form of preemptive consent to becoming his vessel for catharsis. In conflating the performer with her performance, Max envisions sex with Ursa to be both accessible and transformative. Her voice, transformed by trauma and thusly transformed by the Blues, embodies in his mind the capacity for endurance, meaning the

willingness and desire to "hurt...[and] still want to listen" (Jones 91). The motivation of a given audience to seek out the blues as entertainment is very similar. Broadly speaking, the blues was often invoked to let out the problems that emerge from the lived experiences of blackness. According to Davis, "confronting...[and] naming the blues through song, is the aesthetic means of expelling the blues from one's life" (Davis Ch. 5). Max conflates sex with the Blueswoman as a direct intimacy with the Blues itself. In this process of catharsis, Ursa's humanity is threatened so that Max can use her to expel the Blues in him. Max, like all of Ursa's listeners/readers, can hear the vulnerability in her voice, but what he cannot discern is how to respond to it with tenderness instead of domination.

If *being for self* is a concept which extends from the depth of the Blueswoman's interiority, Ursa serves as a representation of how porous the lines between self and other can become. Ursa's voice is a direct extension of her material body, and the pain it endures shapes the candor of her voice. While Ursa's songs are motivated by her interiority, an interiority sharing memories inherited from stories of enslavement, this is ultimately a process that the audience cannot access. What they have is the performance of a cohesive self, expressing the tenderness of blackness like the pain and pleasure of manipulating a fresh bruise. Connecting here the threads of performance and authenticity I articulated earlier in this chapter, I am drawn to the moments in the text where the performance of trauma and desire, of pain and pleasure, is so convincing that they come to enshroud the performer herself. In these moments, questions of what is true and authentic within the performer is entangled with the nuances and choices they make in the expression of their performance. Even more, this process is also deeply entwined with the desires of the audience and their attitude towards the performance and performer.

In noticing the ways that Ursa as blueswoman is misseen for embodiment of blues itself, I

am fascinated and disheartened by the ways that her vulnerability is misunderstood. While the notion of *being-for-self* is apt for speculating about the motivations behind a performance, it does not fully illustrate the stakes of *mistranslation*. Ursa exists within the novel as a violated woman. The obsessive belief from listeners that her hardened voice has been made *better* by this violation—more appealing, more seductive, more real than before—encapsulates a particular attitude towards her work wherein authenticity is marked by suffering. This process is further impacted by societal expectations that the black female body is preternaturally prepared and equipped for multiple threats of violence, flesh engineered to endure. Such an attitude not only obscures the intentional nuances of her performance, but also fails to recognize her vulnerability as a gift and not a sacrifice. Returning to the concept of performance as *process* and *artifice*, I believe that Ursa offers us a vivid illustration of how performance, in and beyond rhetoric, is a relational experience which holds particular stakes for black writers broadly which are even more compounded when confronting black women's texts.

Lifewriting and the blues are not the same thing, but in the space where they overlap as forms of expression, there is a clear valorization and desire for a first person narrator to be real with the listener/reader. For lifewriting crafted by black writers, the lines of demarcation between the authorial I is troubled by the propensity for blackness to function as a narrative and political tool, particularly in literature where blackness labors as an endless metaphor for injustice and inequity. The expectation of the black body being, conceptually and materially, the property of others is historically forged. Therefore, when blackness emerges as first person in narrative, who the writer is allowed to be contends with the expectation for black writers that the central goal of speaking truth is to undo a system of power they did not create. Additionally, lifewriting and the Blues share an attitude towards performance which is as much self-reflexive

as it is inventive. In thinking through the blueswoman as metaphor, I am locating new ways of articulating black women writers as performers, confessors, and narrators of black life.

Vulnerability and/as Resilience

Returning to Jordan, this final section examines how she performs vulnerability in her writing to signify a particular form of *resilience*. Resilience is most often associated with the quality and rate at which an object can rebound after compressed, bent, or manipulated. When applied to humans, resilience becomes associated with adaptability under pressure, meaning the ability to recuperate efficiently from, or resist altogether, adversity and suffering. Given this, I want to acknowledge and repudiate the notion that black women, as writers and humans, are praised for their resilience insomuch as they embody and almost preternatural ability to *endure*. Such an attitude towards black women's resilience as endurance values how well people and things resist showing the imprint of their manipulation or violation. It positions resiliency in relationship to the black women as a metric of psychosocial independence which transforms her into a metaphor for what can be faced and overcome under systems of oppression. To say it another way, resiliency as endurance defines black women's historical survival of domestic and state sponsored threats as notable precisely because it assumes that the resilient black female body will always be able to recoil and recover. My intervention into this predicament is to reject endurance for *vulnerability*, and to track the ways that vulnerability is performed by Jordan as an intentional rhetorical practice. This practice, I argue, exemplifies how Jordan uses the memory of her and her mother's shifting vulnerable state to stage a political critique of women's labor. More broadly, in considering resilience as rooted in vulnerability and not endurance, I am advocating for another way of valuing black women's relationship to and narration of strength. Strength,

here, holds the capacity for the full expanse of black women's feeling, sitting in stillness with the relative discomfort of violence instead of so quickly turning toward the hope/call/invocation of resolution.

Vulnerability emerges across many different moments in Jordan's writing as a way to communicate not simply resiliency of body, but also of mind and spirit. Kevin Quashie argues that within nationalist discourses of blackness, discourses which serve to create and support political narratives of aspirational black revolt and disruption, vulnerability is a bit of a dirty word. Quashie writes "In face of systemic violence against black people...the notion of vulnerability is neutered; rather than being seen as a quality of an inner life and a necessary human capacity, vulnerability becomes defined as a liability to black survival" (Quashie 76). This claim, embedded within a larger critical argument against the obsession that Black life should be public, loud, and disruptive to systems of white supremacy, reveals vulnerability as a mode of resistance which may, or may not, be accessible to or legible within social expectations of racial discourse in the US. In restructuring the syntax of Quashie's argument, I am drawn to the claim that vulnerability is in fact a necessity to black survival, and that within the practices of black lifewriting, expressions of vulnerability embody more than mere spectacles of trauma.

Vulnerability is not exclusively traumatic, nor is it inherently victimizing. As a metric for the "quality of an inner life" (Quashie 76), vulnerability is not synonymous with submission, but instead gives language to the process by which black bodies are placed in danger whether intentionally or by neglect. Such danger registers at different volumes and frequencies but remains nonetheless present in body and mind. In my study of vulnerability in Jordan's writing, I aim to highlight how anti-black violence functions in a multiplicative way that fosters a multivalent response. In this, vulnerability and resilience are not only coterminous, but,

especially in the realm of lifewriting, co-constitutive. So often, in the act of self-narration, resilience without vulnerability is deceptive and vulnerability without resilience ventures on gratuitous. Tracking both as relative terms of strength and skill, is necessary to identify the full range of emotions and experiences in black lifewriting. When I speak of vulnerability and/as resilience, I am first signaling the ways that black women writers use the performance of vulnerability to intentionally connect with their audiences from a position of authenticity. I am also gesturing towards the specific ways that Jordan and other black women writers use their craft to illustrate an active response to trauma, one that makes space for both the black girlchild in trouble to evolve and become *something else*. While the something else remains subjective, through vulnerability we understand resilience for black women writers as an intentional action or response instead of a reflex. Echoing its Latin root salire meaning to *jump* or *leap* vulnerability as resilience becomes an action that is intentional, strategic, and deeply felt.

I begin by reading both Jordan's 1974 poem "Getting Down to Get Over" and her 1985 essay "Many Rivers to Cross." I argue that both of these pieces offer distinct but related rhetorical performances that strategically invoke the memory of Jordan's mother to make an argument about how readers should live a boisterous life to avoid a silent death. In the poem and essay Jordan uses the memory of her mother as a cautionary tale that warns readers to fight back against the social and political systems that detract from personal freedom and autonomy. While the call for political action is the primary lens we use to read Jordan's work, I am more interested in how Jordan articulates her own anxieties in relationship to the black mother as symbol and the black woman as worker. Jordan is not writing to reveal the truth of her mother—there is evidence in her writing to support the idea that the writer never truly gained access to or understanding of her mother's motivations. Most notably, in *Soldier* Mildred upholds an

undeniable status of beauty and grace, but she is ultimately a sad and lonely figure. Jordan's childlike perception of her mother positions her like an elusive piece of art hidden behind the deceptively clear protection of museum glass. Gazing at her mother in photograph, Jordan writes:

> My mother's wedding picture portrays a young woman standing in white satin and lace. It is as though this is the snapshot of a statue no one can identify. She will not move. She does not breathe. She stands attuned to the timing of an event she can neither comprehend nor compromise. The slant of her beautiful head mystifies the camera, and her lowered eyes appear to pity the bridal train of languid lace that spills past her feet, on the floor. This young woman is no one I ever knew (Soldier 17).

Throughout the text, we can discern that for Jordan seeing her mother in the flesh is often the same as looking at her in this photograph. She is revered by her daughter but remains emotionally inaccessible. Such a dynamic is broken a few times across the text. Only in fleeting moments—teaching her daughter to pray, rescuing her child from the rush of the waves at the beach, caring for Jordan while home sick with pneumonia, eating and laughing with wild abandon at the World's Fair—is Mildred allowed to offer small moments of tenderness and care to her child outside of the domineering control of her husband. Where we grow to understand the oppressive conditions that, in part, contribute to her father's indignation, we are offered little in *Soldier* to better understand the impulses that drive Mildred's life. While Jordan positions herself as the direct foil to father, the figure she must rebel against to develop into the hero of her own story, Mildred merely disappears into the narrative. When we encounter a memoir like *Soldier*, what we are reading her is not a confession, nor is it an authentic interpretation of Mildred's life. It is, instead, a daughter's revision of her mother's life in a text that reflects the values and ethics

so *deeply encoded* in Jordan's life as an activist. In understanding how this process functions, we can also notice moments where Jordan's performance of vulnerability fails, meets, or even exceeds our expectations of her as a narrator. In these moments we must focus our attention less on how well her writing factually it mirrors the past, but instead interrogate how her performance makes us feel about her argument in the present moment.

Published in her 1974 collection *New Days*, Jordan's poem "Getting Down to Get Over" is a poem that can easily be read as autobiographical. Dedicated to her mother, the poem begins with a raucous invocation for the black "momma" in her multiple forms. She is "woman", "mistress", and "sista" all in one breath ("Essential June" 75). This unfolding of identities shifts in the third stanza where a single couplet emerges: "blackgirl / slavegirl" ("Essential June" 75), and it is here that blackness first emerges as a disrupter and modifier of personhood. Here, the lack of space collapses the many possibilities of black womanhood present in the first stanza into two commensurate categories: black and slave. This is a process that is repeated in the sixth stanza when blackness, line by line, transforms the figure of "momma" further and further away from her humanity: "*Black* Momma / *Black* bitch / *Black* pussy / piecea tail" ("Essential June" 75, emphasis in original). Blackness here works as a formal intervention that moves the figure of the black woman further and further from her personhood into a concept, and from a concept into an object, each line cementing the impossibility of self-possession. In this, the figure of *momma* centers the black woman as a valuable liability, something the narrator desires to protect but also to understand. Here, Jordan invokes blackness in the full expanse of its rhetorical labor, with little regard for positive or negative representation. In some moments, summoning the rhetoric of misogynoir, blackness casts shame on the figure of the black mother, it not only breaks her down but atomizes her into a series of incoherent expressions that mean nothing and everything at the

same time. However, in doing this Jordan trusts the reader to see through this process of dehumanization to recognize the vulnerable state of the black mother both materially and metaphorically.

While the first section of this poem illustrates the narrator in search of her "momma," diving deep into the hostility of social narratives to look for her, the second section finally locates this mother in a realm of her own unmaking under a new name:

> Consider the Queen
> hand on her hip
> sweat restin from
> the corn/bean/greens' field
> steamy under the pale/sly
> suffocatin sky ("Essential June" 80).

These lines read to me like the establishing shots of a film: a close up of the black mother's hands, the perspiration on her brow, followed by a slow pan out to the field itself, the woman swallowed whole by the vastness of the land and its endless demands. Here, the sky does not signal respiration, the feeling of lungs in the air, but instead suffocation and silence. Across this section "consider the queen" is repeated like a refrain or mantra. The queen, much like momma, is invoked as a figurehead, a symbol that embodies both service and duty, but not necessarily closeness or intimacy. Here we understand the black mother in relationship to her laboring that re-centers the body, and in doing so, we must sit with the physical vulnerabilities that mark her domestic labor. Jordan asks readers to witness the black mother at work but even more, she illustrates how that work comes at a physical and spiritual cost.

The queen is the maker of meals, the mender of shirts, and the speaker of blessings, but

this work is of little interest to the narrator. What the speaker desires is for the reader to be able to see the repercussions of the queen's continual sacrifice and to bear witness to the "Soft/Black/swollen/momma breast" ("Essential June" 81) that both nourishes and shields a slowly breaking heart. This is where Jordan wants the reader to enter and linger. She turns our focus from the exterior to the interior to signal the material and bodily costs of a silent death. I locate the figure of Mildred Granville in this poem. She is, I argue, at the center of this interrogation of women's work and while it is her heart that I read as breaking, it is important to note that such an experience is relative. I locate her in this poem not as the solution to what the poem is *about* but instead as a clear articulation of who this poem is *for*. It is not as important that this poem is autobiographical as much as Jordan uses the autobiographical to evoke a feeling of vulnerability that readers can relate to and, whether through the narrator or the subject, see themselves in.

Other poems written by Jordan make their connection to her mother more explicit. I am drawn to "Getting Down to Get Over" not because of its abstraction, but because of its clear formal and aesthetic overlap with Jordan's latter essays and memoir. Additionally, I read this poem in conversation with Jordan's essay "Many Rivers to Cross" because in prose, the stakes surrounding black women's labor are raised to existential heights. Published in her 1985 collection *On Call: Political Essays*, the essay begins with Jordan in a precarious state. It is a familiar narrative: a black woman becomes a defacto single mother after being abandoned by her husband. At this significant moment of transition, Jordan's work as poet, activist, and teacher cannot effectively respond to the stakes of her current financial situation. Such a shift destabilizes not only Jordan's sense of self, but also her material relationships to labor and power. Jordan writes: "What I could not see was how I should go forward, now, in any natural,

coherent way. As a mother without a husband, as a poet without a publisher...it seemed to me that several incontestable and conflicting necessities had suddenly eliminated the whole realm of choice from my life" ("Some of Us" 233). The separation of mother and husband, as well as poet and publisher, signals a psychological unmooring brought on by the revelation that her networks of support were always more fragile than even she anticipated. Despite her many gifts and talents, we are witnessing a writer impeded from self-actualization. This is further exacerbated by the fact that Jordan is hiding from her family the physical encumbrance of her recently failed abortion. The evidence of this secret is only discernable as bodily pain and exhaustion. The lack of *choice* that Jordan references to embodies the ways that systems of inequity contribute an experience of living death spurned on by social precarity. Such precarity is a common trope in narratives about black women and black mothers in the US in the post-Moynihan era. However, Jordan's invocation of this trope anticipates a decidedly political intervention into the question of black women's work.

Evicted from her apartment, she returns with her son to her childhood home, the Brooklyn brownstone that would become the central stage for her familial drama in *Soldier*. The tension between Jordan and her father is palpable. He looms over the writer as she enters the house with her things, naming her a failure, and vacillating wildly between "weeping bouts of self-pity and storm explosions of wrath" as he faced an unknown future with an infirmed wife. (*"*Some of Us*"* 236). The dynamic present here in this essay seamlessly aligns with the interpersonal tensions present in *Soldier*—Jordan reeling, Granville screaming, and Mildred silent in the corner—but this conflict is strategically shifted to the background as her personal crisis plays out in the center. The move is disrupted by the abrupt death of Jordan's mother, allegedly from suicide. It is Jordan who is tasked with the job of having to determine whether her

mother is alive or dead as her father, ill-quipped and unprepared, fails to be able to face his wife's lifeless body. In the throes of her mourning and reeling from a physical altercation with her father, Jordan's body collapses under the stress. Bleeding profusely, she is sent to Harlem Hospital where she contemplates whether and how to navigate the truth of her physical condition. In this, the question of whether to reveal that she is suffering from a failed abortion becomes one more vulnerability that she must manage, one more physical manifestation of the ways that society has been careless with her body.

Left alone with her thoughts in the hospital room, Jordan narrates a clarifying analysis of the events at hand, moving through her description of the past towards her central argument about the predicament of women's work. The passage itself is worth quoting at length:

> I lay in that bed at Harlem Hospital, thinking and sleeping. I wanted to get well.
>
> I wanted to be strong. I never wanted to be weak again as long as I lived. I thought about my mother and her suicide and I thought about how my father could not tell whether she was dead or alive.
>
> I wanted to get well and what I wanted to do as soon as I was strong again, actually, what I wanted to do was I wanted to live my life so that people would know unmistakably that I am alive, so that when I finally die people will know the difference for sure between my living and my death.
>
> And I thought about the idea of my mother as a good woman and I rejected that, because I don't see why it's a good thing when you give up, or when you cooperate with those who hate you or when you polish and iron and mend and endlessly mollify for the sake of the people who love the way that you kill yourself day by day silently.
>
> And I think all of this is really about women and work. Certainly this is all about me as a

> woman and my life work. I mean I am not sure my mother's suicide was something extraordinary. Perhaps most women must deal with a similar inheritance, the legacy of a woman whose death you cannot possibly pinpoint because she died so many, many times and because, even before she became my mother, the life of that woman was taken; I say it was taken away.
>
> And really it was to honor my mother that I did fight with my father, that man who could not tell the living from the dead. ("Some of Us" 240).

Formally there are many interesting things happening in this passage. The overwhelming repetition of "I wanted" is aspirational. However, this is a laundry list of wants that signals the many spaces where Jordan feels vulnerable as a mother, daughter, and woman neglected. The valuation of wellness here is cast in direct opposition to the presence of weakness, particularly the weakness of Jordan's mother to refute her husband's abuse. It also gestures towards the weakness of Jordan's father whose inability to tell life from death represents his failure to act as a protector. He cannot tell whether Mildred is dead for the same reasons he cannot face the ways he has slowly contributed to her decline. Additionally, there is a harried and discomforted pacing to this passage signaled by a lack of commas. We move briskly from thought to anxious thought, devoid of the comfort of pauses, until the interjection of "actually" abruptly shifts Jordan's focus. This interjection transitions the direction of Jordan's wants and desires from the interior to the exterior wherein what Jordan *really* wants is to have others confirm her living as oppositional to her mother's silent death.

Jordan's strength is defined directly in opposition to her mother's weakness. This tension plays out rhetorically in the clash between the "good woman" of the past and the "new work" for women in the present. Jordan rejects the notion that her mother was a "good woman" because

she cannot accept the high cost. The way that Jordan remembers her mother, and thusly the way that she memorializes her mother in this essay, reflects less about the reality of Mildred and her experiences, and more about Jordan's consternations about her eminent future as a mother, poet, and activist. This piece, however, is as much a personal essay about grief as it is a political essay about the stakes of women's work. Jordan's concluding statements call for a "new work" for women that, while illustrated through metaphor, centers personal freedom, autonomy, and political action without having to explicitly name it as such. Using her mother's story as a forewarning, Jordan is evangelizing to those who must recognize their own death and strive for a more politically active life. Such an active and expressive life is cast against the death of submission, submission to individuals and systems which aim to kill you. This is the heart of Jordan's project, I argue, and I read this essay with a clear view of what Jordan, as author and narrator, desires her readers to think and do. Beyond this, what is most striking, in my view, is how Jordan uses Mildred's story as the referent for her own, casting her mother's submission as a failure that Jordan will not repeat. Laying in the hospital bed, contemplating both her mother's life and death, Jordan deploys an analysis about her and her mother's life that acknowledged their shared vulnerability as black women and mothers. However, it is only Jordan's expression of vulnerability that we are encouraged to read as a form of resilience. Jordan positions herself as the poet, activist, and "soldier" who faces her vulnerability with action and actualization. She responds to her mother's suicide with anger and rage, but most importantly, she uses Mildred's death to argue that submission to oppressive forces is as much a political death as it is a spiritual one.

It is more than possible that witnessing her mother's submission—being privy to those tiny wounds that culminated in a living death long before her body expired—was a type of labor

that Jordan struggled with. That the truth of Mildred's life is not something fully discernable in the text should not be cause for concern, but a recognition of the boundaries of Jordan's project. As we bear witness to Jordan's invocation of her mother life, the authenticity of this narrative is determined through how well the author illustrates her attitude towards that life. In this I echo Royster's claim that truth and authenticity "is not static, abstract, or separate from the individual" but instead "[accounts] for the 'genuine' knowledge and understanding that grows organically from experience" and reflection (Royster 67). These texts offer an invitation for readers to investigate their own vulnerabilities in and beyond their relationships to political systems. Jordan's texts offer an illustration of the quiet and interior response threats, but systemic and interpersonal, which invites readers to interrogate our own vulnerabilities as a qualifier of their humanity. This interrogation is not about victimization; the threats of anti-blackness are ubiquitous and never-ending. Instead, this interrogation is about understanding how we face systemic threats and respond to them in both silence and action, in the peace of stillness and the distress of exertion.

We can never know the interior motivations of Mildred, but we accept her life as a narrative of oppression and submission precisely because Jordan writes it as such. Mildred does not need to be redeemed, but instead be fully contextualized in the rhetorical and narrative labor she performs within the constraint of Jordan's writing. The performance of black life Jordan articulates is successful insomuch as it causes you, the reader, to feel connected to Mildred, her interiority, and the limitations which rendered her life so tragic. My goal is not to comment on what writers create, but instead to offer new ways of shifting our awareness so we can read in and beyond authorial intent. To approach Jordan's work, and black women's lifewriting broadly, the fact of trauma must not be as valued as much as how it is experienced and performed on the

page. In paying close attention to the performance of a given lifewriting text we affirm its aesthetic quality and, even more, its rhetorical prowess.

Black Maternal Fugitivities:
Interiority and Intimacy in Black Women's Slave Narratives

Listening in the Graveyard

Covered by the darkness of night, a woman kneels by the graves of her parents. They are not marked by granite headstones. They are not adorned with flowers. These graves are marked by the black stump of a tree long dead—planted by a mourning husband—and a small plank of wood with no discernable name, decaying and "obliterated" by time (Jacobs 77). A woman kneels by the graves of her parents thinking, praying, and looking for guidance. She must make a seemingly impossible decision. She must decide whether she will do what is necessary to procure safety and autonomy for herself and her children. She must decide whether the possibility of this autonomy, small as it might be, is worth risking her life and possibly the lives of those children. She has to decide whether the potential of her life is worth risking death itself.

There are other options, ones that require complete submission to the violent wills and desires of another, but this is simply another kind of death, a living death. Knees and shins in the soil, she recognizes that this little patch of earth is, for her, as sacred as any other. It is hallowed ground. There is even a church nearby, a "wreck of [an] old meeting house" now dilapidated and empty (Jacobs 77). This church once housed voices wild with worship, syncopated claps of joyful hands, and the reverberations of feet pounding, pushing away the earth as they try to make it one inch closer to heaven. She cannot hear those sounds now, but she is listening. For a moment, she swears she can make out the lilt of her mother's voice, but she is unsure. The forest at night is never really silent. There is always the relentless hum of crickets and critters roaming across the prickly edges of overgrown grass. Despite the soft cacophony, across the sonorous lull of nighttime sounds, and whispers of distant memories, this woman, kneeling by the barely

marked graves of her parents, can hear her father's voice telling her clearly and fervently, to keep running until she makes it to "freedom or the grave" (Jacobs 77).

I imagine this as I read, once again, this key scene from Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl*. It is a fleeting moment. She is deciding whether to run away from the Flint plantation. At this point in the narrative, Jacobs has already laid the groundwork of her ethos through a series of vulnerable confessions. She has illustrated her girlhood existential awakening to her enslavement. She has articulated the multiple violations she endured from the white owners of the plantation to which she is legally bound. She has revealed both the pain of her unrequited love, and the salacious divulgement of her coupling with a white man as a means of procuring protection. As a humble witness, she has narrated many scenes detailing the terrors of slavery in the South. She has established her ethos through a polyphonic deployment of multiple voices, both didactic and belletristic, but this moment of "death-like stillness" is one where Jacobs, and the reader, are invited to simply listen (Jacobs 77).

I first read *Incidents* in a course on the Black Revolutionary Tradition my freshman year of college. In the sixteen years since, I have encountered the text numerous times—in courses on Early American Literature, Black Feminist Writing, African American Literature, and more—each reading within the frame of different academic contexts and intellectual traditions. Every semester, in each class, like clockwork, we honed in on the same key scenes: Dr. Flint's invasive and violent whispers, the white mob storming the streets in the wake of Nat Turner's revolt, the claustrophobic stillness of the garret, and her eventual flight to freedom through the tempest of the seas. As a student, I was asked to consider how the narrative functioned as a political text, both in the antebellum era and again in the 21st century. I was taught to understand the narrative as representative, standing in as the best example of an ongoing historical practice of fugitive

acts and black self-liberation. Jacobs' narrative, standing in for a longer tradition of black antebellum lifewriting, shaped the foundation of my imagination around chattel slavery as well as my attitude toward reading slave narratives as a discrete and fully realized genre.

When I taught my first African American Literature course, I included Jacobs in my syllabus and was delighted to find a truncated version of the text in a larger anthology of black nonfiction. I could teach all the key scenes, all the hits as it were, effectively and cohesively edited into a smaller, and more manageable iteration. I taught my students to read the narrative as a political text, relevant not only in its own time but their current time. I lectured about the critical value of the slave narrative within a larger tradition of African American letters. More specifically, I repeated borrowed and original thoughts about the different forms of non-bodily violence deployed by Dr. and Mrs. Flint, the importance of Jacobs' grandmother as a reluctant confessor, the material and theoretical implications of the garret, and the stakes of Jacobs' flight to freedom as an enslaved woman and mother. As a first-time lecturer, who had been, for years, a student taught to value the tradition of the African American canon, I did the job I had been trained to do.

I revisited Jacobs during my doctoral coursework in a class on black sonic theory. As a nod to the sonic tradition, but more so as method of multitasking, I listened to an audio recording of *Incidents* in preparation for writing a seminar paper. I listened to the narrative while I washed my dishes and folded my laundry. I listened to it in my car while I navigated Atlanta traffic. I listened to it while I walked around my neighborhood—one of the brief activities that allowed me to be outside of my house in Spring 2021—and through this listening, a momentary detachment from the material copy of the text, I was struck at how much of the narrative I rediscovered. Most notably, there were so many scenes wherein Jacobs describes the bright and

vibrant community to which she belonged. These were scenes illustrating black intimacy and connection, even in the face of immense terror and mourning, that made me curious about the myriad of black peoples, some enslaved and some not, who roamed freely throughout Jacobs' narrative world. In this auditory reading, I felt I had found and unnamed space within the larger world of the text, a space where the looming presence of white terror was pushed to the periphery, where black folks could talk about themselves, their lives, and their adventures without the imminent threat of bad, or good, white actors. Outside the gaze of whiteness, the relationships between Jacobs and her brother, her grandmother, between her and her first love, her elegiac sketch of her Aunt Nancy, or even between her and her parents, reveal a series of black intimate bonds that, for me, reshaped the rhetorical and political scope of her narrative.

It was during this reading that I rediscovered the scene in the graveyard where Jacobs' entreats her deceased parents for guidance on the eve of her escape. In my paper, I focused intently on Jacobs' as both a listening body and as a narrating presence capable of multiple nuanced and layered voices. I wanted to assert Jacobs as a protagonist who receives the inspiration for her choice to run away from Dr. Flint not from the threat of his voice, but from the inspiration of her father, an explicitly black voice. I felt strongly that the hyper focus on Dr. and Mrs. Flint asserted Jacobs, to borrow from Quashie, not simply as vulnerable, but as a victim. I also wanted to challenge the notion that Jacobs' predominately white and female readership during its original publication somehow diminished its capacity to function as a black expressive text. It was a text *for* black readers, especially black readers like me who were personally invested in the notion that there is still a great deal to learn about blackness from these antebellum voices. While not a critique, in hindsight I realize that I was arguing from a defensive position, reading the text as something to safeguard as opposed to a rich world to unpack.

At the moment of writing this paragraph, I am, once again, interrogating my experiences with the text, my expectations of the author, and the desires—personal and political—that I bring to my reading practice. From where did I build the notion that white readership diminished a black author's merit? Why had my own teaching of the text, so directly informed by my time as a student, been so focused on the bad actions of white characters? Why had I not paid more attention to the intraracial and interfamilial dynamics at play in Jacobs' narrative? Who was my reading defending and what was it defending against? Even now, as I reread the scene at the graveyard, I desire deeply to connect the old church house, contextualized by Jacobs within the greater history of Nat Turner's revolt, to Jacobs' own revolutionary potential. I want to make a claim that her voice, like Turner's, was an explosive and aggressive challenge to the prevailing logic of the plantation class. Valid a reading as that might be, comfortable as I might be in articulating that interpretation, I am challenging myself to listen instead to the barely perceptible voice of Jacobs' mother, unseen but not unheard, "chiding…[and] whispering loving words into [her] wounded heart" (Jacobs 77). What does her voice sound like inside Jacobs' mind? How can listening to these whispers, even more than the those of Dr. Flint's, reveal to us more about the potential for Jacobs' intimate and interior life?

Reading, as a practice, and blackness, as a concept and identity, are neither neutral nor singular things. When they both intersect, there emerges a constellation of hopes and longings bigger and more complex than any one text or any specific writer. In continuing my exploration of ethical reading of black women's lifewriting, this chapter explores *context*—historical and otherwise—and examines women-authored narratives of enslavement, the histories to which they respond, and even more importantly, how we as contemporary readers respond to these texts.

In the aftermath of the Black Power Era and the rise of Black Studies in the academy, slave narratives are best understood as intentionally political tools, authored or orated by black people and deployed by white-sponsored abolitionist networks interested in using the most harrowing experiences of the enslaved to convert readers to the anti-slavery cause. In this, the rhetorical labor that narratives of enslavement perform is evidentiary in nature: exceptional black life as textual witness to the exceptional nature of white terror. Our contemporary reading practices are contextualized by two distinct but connected histories: the antebellum period which produced these texts, and the solidification of the slave narrative as a cohesive genre towards the end of the 20th century. This latter history established African American Literature as a critical field of study bolstered, in part, by the canonization of key texts, namely Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and later Solomon Northrup as representative of that genre. Additionally, through the scholarship of critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr., Robert Septo, Frances Scott Foster, and William L. Andrews, the slave narrative was affirmed as the point of origin for African American Autobiography.

The attention granted to slave narratives, many of which skyrocketed into favor in the 1970s after languishing in obscurity for the first half of the 20th century, cultivated a specific reading practice that we continue to apply to slave narratives today. Subsequently, this practice continues to influence our attitudes towards contemporary black lifewriting. This reading practice privileges not only political disruption and racial representation, but it also perpetuates the idea that the most valuable aspect of slave narratives—and by extension contemporary black lifewriting—is how well the author uses memory and life experience to illustrate and challenge both systemic and interpersonal forces of white supremacy. This is not to say that such a dynamic is all that is present in a given text—many black authors craft prose that gestures

towards a multitude of quiet, intimate, and spectacularly joyful moments of black life—but instead to suggest that we have cultivated a reading practice that sees the intimacy of black life as less interesting or valuable than that of black and white conflict. Ultimately, in prioritizing how well a black lifewriting text addresses and contends with white supremacy centralizes whiteness in black life using a deceptively seductive dialectic of white terror and black exceptionalism. To say it another way, in zealously looking for a black narrator to speak about white terror, the reader's attention is pulled away from critical moments where black people are safely nesting in the solace of their interior thoughts.

The core argument of this chapter is that the readerly expectations we apply to black lifewriting from the 19th century to today, extends from a hermeneutical expectation which anchors rhetorical purpose within historical context. On its own, such a task allows readers to understand the socio-cultural expectations thrust on writers in the era of a texts' given publication. Many early American texts written by white authors have been elevated above the limitation of historical context to literature that, in its timelessness, always provides deep examinations of the human experience. However, we still seek out black writers to use their lives as evidence to solve the never-ending paradox of racism in America. As I have stated before, my focus is less on what authors write and more on what readers value. In this, I argue that we read slave narratives today with the same general expectation that 19th and early 20th century readers had in the past: to reveal the true ills of slavery and provide exceptional examples of black writers who faced their masters and persevered. While on its own, such narratives are as inspiring as they are harrowing, this reading practice continues to pair the valuation of black life in relation to white terror. Today I ask: what do we, as readers seek, both affectively and culturally, from narratives of enslavement? What feelings do we apply to such narratives and

how do those feelings shape the scenes we return to again and again? How can we rethink, refocus, and revise our reading practices to acknowledge, but not center, black life as a testament to the depths of white terror? Can we find new ways of interpreting these texts that seek out the *quiet* and *quotidian*, to borrow from Tina Campt, instead of seeking out the spectacular violences of anti-black harm?

Context, Slave Narratives, and the Politics of Reading

To fully understand and interrogate the context surrounding narratives of enslavement, it is necessary to answer three distinct questions. What were the politics of reading surrounding slave narratives at the time of their original publication? How did those politics shift across the reclamation and republishing of these texts during the rise of Black Studies? What are the stakes, literary or otherwise, that emerged from the slippages between the two? Context, within the framework of the rhetorical situation, is the greater set of circumstances, events, or cultural underpinnings which surround a given text and serves as the impetus for its creation. Graphic representations of the rhetorical situation often portray context as a sphere enclosing, and containing, the rhetorical triad: a never-ending loop encircling speaker, listener, and message, each one a sharp point threatening to pierce through. When explaining context to my students I say, again and again, like a chant: *from where or when does the text emerge? To what or who does the text respond?* Context can reveal something vital about a text, but it can also obscure, not like a mask or shroud, but instead like a dense thicket, where readers are forced to pull apart thorny clusters of opinions and interpretations. Considering context makes a page a palimpsest, each sentence stitched both to the next sentence on the page and many unseen sentences outside the margins.

It is near impossible to define the parameters of rhetorical context without history. The language of history makes rhetorical discourse legible, revealing its contour, and making clear the stakes of an author's critical intervention into the generational debates of their day. I turn to context in my exploration of reading and ethics because of its requirement that readers not only consider history but *interrogate* it. Therefore, in thinking about context, which is always thinking about history, I am also considering how the relationship between reader and text is mediated by generational precedents. This includes re-readings, mis-readings, and un-readings that reflect the sometimes conflicting desires and values of varied peoples. In thinking about context in connection to reading black women's lifewriting, I am also paying close attention to the converged interests which cement black women writers as mournful witnesses to a particular type of history in which heroism is defined in masculinist terms, and freedom is only discernable by way of spectacular disruption.

What conditioning, if any, has come to define how we read narratives of enslavement? As stated earlier, I believe that our contemporary reading practices of slave narratives have been conditioned by two distinct, but interconnected histories: the period from which they emerged as textual objects, and the period in which these textual objects became historical and, eventually, literary. Furthermore, because these two histories are contextualized by different social and cultural desires from the reading public, there is a critical slippage in how contemporary readers of slave narratives have been taught to approach, and evaluate, these expressions of black lifewriting. In my exploration of ethical approaches to reading black lifewriting, I am constructing this chapter to challenge traditional practices of reading slave narratives —reading practices that focus intently on scenes of interracial conflict and strife—to bring more nuanced attention to various articulations of black interiority and intimacy.

While scholars often pinpoint slave narratives as the point of origin for black autobiography in the United States, it instead emerged as a slow-forming constellation of literary and rhetorical acts from the colonial period through the 19th centuries. While anti-slavery literature was on the rise in the early 18th century, abolitionist networks most often promoted white-authored texts under the presumption that white, usually male, authors offered the most trustworthy authorial voice. The predilection for first-person accounts of enslaved persons living under the peculiar institution from white audiences was ultimately an unexpected phenomenon. Foster highlights the shift from the mid to late 18th century—when the slave narrative first emerged as a distinct genre separate from white-authored anti-slavery literature—and the 19th century which saw the rise of the anti-institutional polemics we are most familiar with today. According to Foster, 18th century slave narratives, many of which were published under the auspices of editors and publishers in England, featured a narrator who articulated an "opposition to slavery on moral, religious, economic, and social grounds" but separated the slave trade broadly from the people who participated in and profited from it ("Witnessing" 52). In these narratives, the religious and moral failings of the slave trade are made clear, however the physical abuses that the enslaved endured under the threat actual slave traders is diminished and decentered. Many of these early narratives satisfied the tastes of white 18th century readers hungering for either pious tales of conversion from sinner to saint, or swashbuckling adventures centering on kidnapping and escape. The 19th century, by contrast, sees a rise in direct confrontation not only with the institution of slavery, but with the individuals and communities that take part in the violence against the enslaved. Here, violence against the black body is not only illustrated, itis centered as an accusation white readers must face head-on.

The rise in publication of slave narratives in the US towards the end of the 18th century into the 19th is attributed to a series of shifting social and political trends. Foster cites the increase in literacy among the middle and working class whites, uptick in circulating libraries, and cheaper prices from technological advances in book printing as a confluence of social changes that lead to wider audience hungry for tales of adventure and woe. Between the 1840s and the 1860s there is a mass proliferation of publications of slave narratives wherein we can see the emergence of texts that would eventually become exemplar of the genre including narratives by William Wells Brown (1847), Frederick Douglass (1845), Sojourner Truth (1850), Solomon Northrup (1852), Charles Ball (1859), and Harriet Jacobs (1861). Similiar to their predecessors, these texts and others described the daily lived experiences of the enslaved, centered Christian ethics and morals as the root of each narrator's path to self-actualization, and detailed various method of dissent from bondage including physical flight from the plantation space. Unlike their 18th century counterparts, these later publications were much more direct in their critique of the slave trade and plantation politics, including direct appeals to white readers who passively or directly benefit from enslavement.

The relationship between these texts, their authors, and readers is as varied as the narratives themselves. In his book, *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture*, Michaël Roy challenges the notion that slave narratives were beloved during the antebellum period and false assumptions about the role of heavy-handed white editors. Many contemporary readers of slave narratives assume that most of these texts were published through the critical intervention and support of self-interested white abolitionist organizations who aimed to utilize their popularity among white middle-class readership. One historical assumption that Roy pushes against is that black authors could not only easily secure publication but could also easily make a

stable living from sharing their woeful tales. On the contrary, Roy writes, "[many] slaves were self-published, sometimes with the more or less helpful support of an antislavery society, sometimes wholly independently, on the fringes of the movement" (Roy 7). While some select texts saw wide appeal across the country, this was often the result of an intentional marketing campaign aided by public speaking events on the anti-slavery circuit as was the case with Douglass and Truth. Many other slave narratives were written, printed, and distributed at the local and community level, deployed as a means of crowdsourcing funds for newly escaped slave in need of financial support. In his research, Roy illustrates the complex set of labors—from self-funded or crowd-sourced publication to the endless self-promotion through public oration—that many formerly enslaved authors performed as active agents in the marketing, promotion, and dissemination of their work.

Even with narratives that were wildly popular, there remains the question of whether and how the predominantly white, literate, reading public understood and responded to these narratives. They were, after all, not only entertaining tales of bondage and escape, but "fundamental expressions of [the authors'] political views and self-identity as well as a source of income" (Roy 49). The emergence of first-person accounts from the enslaved shifted assumptions of power surrounding whose voices should come to stand in for the cause of anti-slavery. For ex-slave narrators, their task equal parts literary and political as it was philosophical insomuch as they also were burdened with task of humanizing the enslaved. In his canonical text *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography*, William Andrews describes the wide rhetorical chasm that ex-slave narrators faced in writing about their lives for a predominately white public:

"Faced with the exigences of slavery and a mass refusal to see blacks as fully human or

> hear them as truth-tellers, black autobiographers...could not think of their task simply as the objective reconstruction of an individual's past or a public demonstration of the qualities of selfhood...The writing of autobiography became an attempt to open an intercourse with the white world" ("To Tell" 17).

The rhetorical binding of black selfhood with white validation was a necessary labor for many of these 19th century black lifewriters. Opening discourse with the white world was, and remains, a precarious endeavor for black authors. The politics of reading that surrounded these narratives was not singular but varied, at times even chaotic. The consumption of a slave narrative, or even the enjoyment of reading one did not unilaterally inspire audiences to come to the cause of abolition. However, the proliferation of these narratives opened the door for new ways of understanding black life, while also providing material support for the formerly enslaved and cultural inspiration for those still in bondage.

The road to publication for many formerly enslaved authors was often rocky and costly with disparate results. The eventual solidification of the slave narrative as a cohesive genre, which demanded a keen attention to what makes slave narratives similar, positioned antebellum black lifewriters as the unintentional architects of literary tradition with a specific teleology towards liberation from the forces of white supremacy. This teleology affirms a particular understanding of race, identity, and power through the dialectic of black exceptionality and white terror. In this, the foundational lexicon to articulate the value of black life must contend with the presence of whiteness, or more specifically, whiteness invested in, or divesting from, anti-black violence. Perhaps what has changed between the 19th century and today is not necessarily just the desires of the reading public—I would argue no reading public has ever had a wholly unified attitude towards the goal of black writing—but instead the cultural and social terms which come

to shape and articulate those desires. Dwight McBride asserts that the ideal "discursive reader" of slave narratives is not a person but a "confluence of political, moral, and social discursive concerns that animate, necessitate, and indeed make possible slave testimony itself" (McBride 150. The discursive reader subsequently extends from "discursive terrain" of the antebellum era, meaning the social, cultural and historical landscape that "[enables] articulations" of the experience of slavery through language "[enabling] us to read, to decipher, and to interpret those articulations" (McBride 3). In this, McBride argues, despite the slave narrator being the "raw material" around which "abolitionist discourse coheres" they still must construct the discursive reader in their mind to better "speak the codes, to speak the language that preexists the telling of his or her story" (McBride 6, 3). I turn to McBride to suggest that part of the slippage between these two distinct histories of slave narratives is in fact due to an underacknowledged shift in the discursive terrain that surrounds slave narratives as political, historical, and literary objects.

The second historical period which came to shape our reading practices of slave narratives is found in the post-Civil Rights Era wherein African American studies began to flourish in and beyond the American university. It should be noted that since the days of Reconstruction, there has been an intentional effort from scholars, artists, and activists to solidify, in print, the aesthetic expression of a distinctly black voice. The first half of the 20th century, from the abstract and sumptuous writing of the Harlem Renaissance to the fiery polemic prose of black writers during the second world war, saw the emergence of African American intentionally written, disseminated, and collected under the banner of an emergent black aesthetic. The late 1960's and 1970s, however, saw an intentional boom in reclaimed and reprinted 19th century texts and uptick in critical scholarship surrounding these texts which became the foundation for black literature and black studies programs across the nation.

Regarding the academy, Barrett articulates three distinct stages of the slave narrative's critical history during this era. First, Barrett observes, was the historical phase, where doubts or belief in the enslaved author's capacity for literacy is investigated as a measure for the narrative's historical veracity. It is in this first era we see, from scholars, the anxieties of white intervention into and influence over black writing. Secondly, there emerged the literary phase, in which the relative literacy of the writer and/or orator is not only assumed but argued as the core feature of its critical-interpretative value.

Both phases share a converged interest in positioning the slave narrative as an authoritative document tasked with the labor of authenticating the harrowing experiences of the enslaved in the face of white denial and institutional silence. What literature and history share in relationship to narratives of enslavement is an expectation to access something authentic from the perspective of the enslaved. And in this expectation, the formerly enslaved narrator was asked to speak the unspeakable, and represent the irredeemable, to an audience as curious as they were skeptical. Even more, in our current moment, the desire to understand the authentic experience of the enslaved, similar to our desires to understand raw and unfiltered black life in America, is more often satisfied through the language of black suffering.

Recent critiques of film and television shows portraying slavery, and the social media users decry for "no more slave movies", reveal to us a specific tension surrounding social and political uses for slave narratives in our contemporary moment. While there are many sentiments online for more "black stories", there seems to be frustration with the types of stories that are told and how those stories should be valued within the ever-shifting market of cultural representation. At the center of this debate is the pitting of black joy against black pain. This binary, while incredibly effective as a rhetorical quip within the confines of a tweet, does not

address the fullness of black interiority, nor does it consider the vast intricacies of the slave narrative as an expression of lifewriting. In this, I turn to the third critical phase that Barrett identifies: cultural analysis. Rather than separating history and literature as two distinct and competitive modes of valuing the rhetorical labor of slave narratives, within the cultural analysis phase Barrett places the historical and the literary on equal footing, revealing how the cultural discourse surrounding slave narratives illustrates for us the "systems of shared symbolic-expressive conventions…[that] form the zero-degree [of] 'reality' from which both history and literature emerge" (Barrett 95). I take up Barrett's framework of cultural analysis in relation to the slave narrative because I am deeply invested in the idea that these texts are limited in their capacity to reveal significant observations about the interiority of black life. In re-reading slave narratives with black interiority and intimacy in mind, I am gesturing towards a new reality wherein the narrative labors of the enslaved can be understood on its own terms.

Black Maternal Fugitivities

Depictions of enslaved women in male-authored narratives of enslavement were generally, but not exclusively, deployed to garner either pity or disgust. As Foster writes, for many of the male authored slave narratives, the enslaved woman was seen as "as [a] victim—to be pitied perhaps—but neither respected nor emulated…she stands on the auction block, nameless, stripped to the waist, her infant just sold from her arms, waiting to be claimed by yet another licentious master" ("Witnessing" xxix). Notably, Douglass and Northrup use the figures of Aunt Hester and Patsey respectively as visceral examples of the brutality of slavery, taking time and effort to articulate the violence each woman endured at the lash of the whip handled by both slave masters and, in the case of Northrup, the enslaved. Navigating these scenes, readers

face unrelenting descriptions of exposed flesh and blood dripping down the edges of broken skin; they hear the incomprehensible screams and wails of women stretched wide and beaten towards the edge of life itself. Like the male narrators, readers are helpless to stop the violence unfolding on the page, and in this relentless discomfort, they are made to carry the weight of that violence in their mind's eye. Even as the enslaved male narrator moves from bondage to freedom, these women remain in fixed in this vulnerable position; the height of their narrative arc is the pain they endure.

Many male ex-slave narrators deployed these violent scenes centering enslaved women to for a myriad of reasons, namely, to reveal the ultimate terrors of chattel slavery to sympathetic readers. Barrett notes that the "black woman in bodily distress [was] employed by male narrators to provide dramatic testimonies concerning the evils of slaveholding" reducing their bodies to "an entity imposed upon and, in its tortured or injured state…voided of language" while all other parties—the slave master, overseer, and...the narrator...remains "fully vocal" (Barrett 106-107). Even more, in allowing the worst parts of chattel slavery to hinge on the hyper-vulnerability of enslaved women, narrators like Douglass, Northrup, and more argued against the slavery's perverse effect on their ability, as men, to protect the bodily safety and honor of enslaved women. The subtext of this such that the literal violence these women endure, becomes a psycho-social violence against these men's perceived role as patriarchal protectors.

What, then, does the enslaved woman have to say about her own experience or the vastly diverse experiences of other enslaved women she encounters in her lifetime? Examining slave narratives authored by black women, readers are privy to scenes of physical violence against black men and women, but there are far more examples of enslaved women navigating the plantation space beyond the whipping post. Foster asserts that, based on slave narratives dictated

or written by enslaved women, many "saw themselves as far more than victims of rape and seduction. Though they wrote to witness slavery's atrocities, they also wrote to celebrate their hard won escape from that system and their fitness for freedom's potential blessings" ("Witnessing" xxxiii). Examining women-authored ex-slave narratives, readers encounter black women as mothers, sisters, and wives; as loyal and dedicated members of their communities; as women who prayed for the safety of husbands and loved ones dodging blood hounds on fugitive paths to self-emancipation; and as, most importantly, active participants in their own iterant paths to freedom.

In this chapter, I will place two slave narratives written by black women —*The Story of Mattie J. Jackson* and Lucy Delaney's *From the Darkness Cometh the Light*—in conversation with each other to elucidate the ways that black women see themselves, and other black women, during and after the antebellum era. Comparing male and female authored slave narratives, Foster notes that black men relied heavily "upon litanies of beatings and mutilations of [others]" to "[enhance] their descriptions of the crippling power of slavery" ("Witnessing" xxxiii, xxxiv). Conversely, black women writers more often "[presented] more positive images of secondary female characters…[and] more discussions of familial relationships" resulting in communal narratives that made room for the narrator's escape from bondage as well as the escape of others ("Witnessing" xxxiii). As narrators, both Jackson and Delaney are intentional about centering their familial bonds within the greater narrative of their enslavement and freedom, particularly centering their enslaved mothers as the primary model of rebellion against the institution of slavery itself. Where these women's stories diverge also offers critical insight to the complex legalities of the chattel slave system: while Jackson seeks her freedom through what we would consider the "traditional" route of fugitive escape, Delaney sues for her freedom in the court of

law. While both narratives have many narrative tropes that would be familiar for readers of slave narratives, I am most interested in paying close attention to the intimate and private moments these narrators articulate about their families, their communities, and themselves.

I am centering my close reading of these narratives around the theme of *Black Maternal Fugitivities* which considers how the relationships between enslaved women and their daughters become the driving force behind the narrator's decisions to refute the bonds of slavery. As a framework and theoretical concept, fugitivity has remained ever-present across a myriad of recent Black Feminist, Afropessimist, and cultural theory projects. Surreptitiously emerging from the work of Fred Moten, fugitivity has come to express both a sense of in-betweenness—the experience of blackness as an interstitial thing, something only discernable in the liminality of the break—but also an acknowledgment of blackness and black people's experiences of eternal othering across the hostile topology of the liberal humanist landscape. To be a fugitive is to be always on the outside, always on the run, always already both chained by the system and unfettered from the binds of normativity. For my evocation of Black Maternal Fugitivities, I am directly in debt to the work of Tina Campt, who defines fugitivity as, in part, a "practice of refusal" meaning "the range of creative responses black communities have marshaled in the face of racialized dispossession" that is less about "extreme violence" but instead is relational to everyday encounters "with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight" (Campt 10). Such a definition of fugitivity is precisely necessary for the lived experiences of enslaved women whose path to freedom was often rocky and iterant, weighed down at times by the responsibility of motherhood and the care for vulnerable persons including their children and themselves.

In Jackson and Delaney's narratives, their black mothers set the groundwork in childhood for their daughters' respective rebellion against their status as property. They reminded them, time and time again, to seek freedom at any cost, in any way possible. This theme gestures towards the myriad of ways that black women broadly, and black mothers specifically, navigated the system of slavery—and its afterlife— accounting for how they wrestled with, refused, and ultimately created their own freedom through quotidian practices of resistance. My overall goal in comparing Jackson and Delaney's narratives is to produce a reading that decenters the presence of white actors—and thusly the presence of whiteness itself as both a negative and positive force—to instead center both the intraracial bonds between enslaved persons and the narrator's articulation of their interiority. Decentering is, however, not erasure. The context of chattel slavery and the roles that white persons played as oppressors of and advocates for black Americans in the antebellum era are important to the historical and critical context that surrounds narratives of enslavement. I contend, however, that in evaluating the fullness of slave narratives as expressions of black lifewriting, meaning both its rhetorical construction and literary merit, it is vital to consider what the narrator reveals about the intricacies of black life regardless of how it directly responds to or challenges the threat of white supremacy.

In my articulation of black maternal fugitivities across Delaney and Jackson's text, I am directly responding to Foster's concept of the "Heroic Slave" trope embodied most prominently, but not exclusively, through figures like Douglass, Northrup and William Wells Brown. Foster argues that the heroic slave as type manifests in writing as an "everyslave" who "has endured the most inhumane environment imaginable…escaped with his life and his integrity" and "needs only free soil in which to blossom into an industrious, literate, and totally moral citizen" ("Adding Color" 31). As the heroic slave "narrates [his] success story" of challenging and

besting "an institution that denies his humanity and threatens his very survival" enslaved women are relegated to the background as either spectators of black male heroism, or as the spectacles of black pain which inspire the protagonists in their cause for abolition ("Adding Color" 31). The ripple effect of this particular trend manifests as a strategic disempowerment of the enslaved woman as she is further removed from her own process of self-actualization rendering her a passive presence in the greater historical memory of abolition. Focusing my reading of Delaney and Jackson's texts on their relationships with their mothers and other black women—and decidedly not on their antagonistic relationship with white actors—I am most interested in tracing a new understanding of heroism in and against the system of chattel slavery that hinges on the deep intimacies cultivated between black mothers and their children.

Mattie and Polly: The Washerwoman's Pleasure

Both Delaney and Jackson construct multi-layered narratives that articulate not only their own path to freedom, but also the stories of family members, living and dead, and their illicit relationship to the institution of slavery. While locating oneself across and extended bloodline is not new or novel with regards to lifewriting, Jackson and Delaney's insistence on writing the names and brief personal histories of their ancestors is better understood as a challenge to the strategic fracturing of African American family units under the threat of chattel slavery. Given this, enslaved people's insistence to carve out their lineage within the boundaries of these narratives is an intentional move to push against the limitations of their humanity imposed by antebellum law and custom. Additionally, it echoes DeVeanna S. Fulton's claim that enslaved women "re-member" their families through stories and naming to resist the structural "obliteration of identity through forced separation during slavery" (Fulton 3-5). Remembering here is an act that is political and personal, but, in the context of antebellum black lifewriting, it

is also rhetorically multiplicative, doing the work to assert the humanity of many through the narrative of one. The double meaning of "remember" here, both as an action pertaining to the recollection of memories, as well as the reconstruction and rebuilding of social and familial institutions through naming, is reflected all throughout Jackson and Delaney's narratives.

For both authors, their story begins not with their birth, but with the theft of their ancestors' liberty. Jackson begins with the story of her great-grandfather whose original name, the one she bears, remains unknown:

> My grandfather...remained a slave for some length of time, when he was emancipated, his master presenting him with quite an amount of property. He was true, honest and responsible, and this present was given him as a reward…He was earnestly invited by a white decoyer to relinquish his former design and accompany him to Missouri and join him in speculation and become wealthy…On the passage, my grandfather was seized with a fever, and for a while was totally unconscious. When he regained his reason he found himself, near his journey's end, divested of his free papers and all others...Oh, what a sad disappointment. After serving for thirty years to be thrust again into bondage where a deeper degradation and sorrow and hopeless toil were to be his portion for the remaining years of his existence" (Jackson 3).

Jackson's choice to open with this passage casts a positive light on her entire lineage, asserting that she and her people, perhaps like the people who are reading her narrative, reflect the core American ethics and values of her day. In beginning with the claim that Jackson's grandfather was a freed person who was captured and resold into slavery, the narrator locates her entire familial line within a legacy of stolen labor. The articulation of this legacy performs a specific

rhetorical task: it asserts her relationship to slavery as fraudulent and makes her positionality within that system an exceptional error. This opening passage lays the ground-work of redirecting the accusation of impropriety on the predominately white society which illegally kidnapped their ancestors and took from them their earned or inherited right to navigate their own destiny. Rhetorically, these scenes also push against the assumption that the enslaved were devoid of history by embodying multiple histories in a single text through the inheritance of memory. Even more, through the retelling of other people's stories, Jackson, and later Delaney, constructs a personal and political history that becomes the primary impetus for their freedom.

Jackson continues to illustrate her familial life as foundational to her personhood by describing the deep care and affection shared between her mother and her father, Polly and Westley. This affection fostered an intimacy and tenderness within their small family that makes her father's seemingly inevitable departure bittersweet. Jackson writes:

> "I can well remember the little kindnesses my father used to bestow upon us, and the deep affection and fondness he manifested for us. I shall never forget the bitter anguish of my parents' hearts, the sighs they uttered or the profusion of tears which coursed down their sable checks…he was not hers, for cruel hands had separated them" (Jackson 5).

Jackson's inclusion of her parent's love story in her own narrative relays to the reader that she, like them, is a person with traceable and discernable roots, that she is someone's daughter and that she was birthed out of and raised within a household that prioritized loyalty and love. Her father's escape, aided directly by his wife, is necessary for his survival, but it is nonetheless a critical disruption to Jackson's idyllic childhood. While Polly's personality is primarily defined by her ability to sacrifice for the cause of freedom, it is not wholly selfless. Polly's "painful" choice to actively support her husband's escape is, according to Jackson, quelled through both

the "contemplation of her husband becoming a free man" and the "hope that her little family…might be enabled to make their escape also" and that both might reunite and "part no more on earth" (Jackson 6). Polly's vision of freedom, while beginning with her husband's escape, holds imaginative space for both herself and her children. Given Westley's early departure, and extended absence in Jackson's life from adolescence into adulthood, Polly is positioned as the progenitor of fugitive thought for Jackson.

Years after her first husband's departure, Polly leads the charge for her family to attempt escape, and even though such a venture was not initially successful, her insistence that her daughters self-emancipate whenever the moment was opportune functions as a multiplicative threat that is wholly perceptible by the white planter class. When speaking of the specific disdain that Polly's master directed towards her, we can see that what is most offensive to him is her demeanor, her refusal to perform subservience even as she excels in her labors and service to the household. Jackson writes, "Mr. Lewis…hated my mother in consequence of her desire for freedom, and her endeavors to teach her children the right way …[He] could not bear the idea of her being free. He thought it too hard, as she had raised so many tempests for him, to see her free and under her own control" (Jackson 15-16). While the expectation under slavery was that Polly, as an enslaved woman and black mother, would literally birth new generations of a subservient class, what disturbs Mr. Lewis is her role as a propagator of radical thought and self-actualization. Polly's push towards fugitivity is a destabilizing force, not only to continuation of the status quo under slavery, but to the assumption that black women's fear of losing their children could be manipulated and deployed as a form of control.

In the years following Westley's escape, and Polly's failed attempt to escape with her children, Jackson describes the heightened tensions between her family and their owners, Mr.

and Mrs. Lewis. With the Civil War looming above them, and the impending victory of the Union Army becoming all too clear, Jackson asserts that they had a deep psychological investment in quelling her and her family's clear desire for escape. Jackson's narrative illustrates a montage of the many times her, her mother, and her siblings were routinely threatened with forced separation, spending months at a time living in the trader's yard, most often as punishment for their thin-skinned masters' capricious attitude. Notably, in one scene, Mrs. Lewis declares she would "rather see [her white children] dead" rather than being "on an equality" with black people, Polly responds with a resounding and unrelenting silence. While Jackson's mother was not usually one to hold her tongue while sparring with Mrs. Lewis about the outcome of the war, in the face of such direct verbal attack from her mistress, Polly's silence reflects what Fulton calls a "strategic silence" often deployed by enslaved women as a "mute demonstration…used in both affirmation and protest" (Fulton 66). Even more offensive than her "saucy" retorts, Polly's intentional and pointed silence disrupts the accepted power dynamic between enslaved woman and mistress by rendering Mrs. Lewis impotent and ineffectual. Even in her silence, Polly is a direct threat to her mistress' assumed access to domination and oppression, a threat that the mistress attempts to quell indirectly by later attacking Jackson.

Jackson and her mother challenged the authority of their owners not necessarily through spectacular moments of physical conflict, but through a steady and unwavering dedication to their own autonomy. Unable to face their pending disempowerment, Mr. and Mrs. Lewis focus the entirety of their hostility towards Jackson's mother to make her hold the psychic weight of their socio-political anxiety. This tactic is particularly harmful when deployed by Mrs. Lewis who maintains close proximity to the enslaved women working in the domestic space. The mistress is not a physical threat to these women, but instead creates a constant state of

psychological unrest as she disrupts their work to project onto Polly and others her disquietude about possible Union victory. These key differences in both how and where anti-black sentiment manifests, as well as how Jackson and other black women respond to this sentiment, reveals the particular context through which readers much encounter and evaluate black maternal fugitivity as both attitude and practice.

The experience of enduring Mrs. Lewis' mercurial temperament only deepens the intimate bond between Jackson and her mother who both share a secret joy at their mistress' constant unraveling. Jackson writes "[the] days of sadness for mistress were days of joy for us. We shouted and laughed to the top of our voices." (Jackson 11). This brief moment of unabashed schadenfreude reveals to us as readers the complex emotions that both these women embody. Far from the traditional refrain of the humble yet noble slave, there is a biting playfulness between Jackson and her mother here. In the Lewis household they are restricted in existing as their authentic selves, but outside of the watchful eyes of their master and mistress, they express an unfiltered pleasure at Mrs. Lewis' well-deserved anxiety. Even more, their connection under the weight of bondage is strengthened by the clandestine nature of these exchanges. I read the intimacy that Jackson illustrates between her and her mother as a mutual recognition of their interior selves. While Mrs. Lewis, and other white observers of black life, are blinded by a troubling opacity, Jackson's narrative reveals the, to borrow from Quashie, "raucous" expression of black interior desire that "[can] be understood as the source of human action" (Quashie 8). Sharing brief pointed glances, secreted smirks, and stifled giggles, Jackson and her mother, through blood and experience, are able to access each other's interior emotions and feelings in clear view of the looming white gaze that encircles them.

Despite the many punishments doled out, Jackson and her mother remained dedicated to each other and to the idea that escape was not only possible, but imminent. Such an attitude, however, did comes at a constant physical cost. The strained dynamic between Jackson, her mother, and Mrs. Lewis comes to a violent peak when Mrs. Lewis seeks out her husband to punish Jackson under the guise of a false accusation. Mr. Lewis hits Jackson over the head with a heavy piece of wood, inflicting a wound the results in profuse bleeding. In the midst of this violence, it is Polly who emerges to protect her daughter. Jackson writes,

> "The blood ran over my clothing, which gave me a frightful appearance. Mr. Lewis then ordered me to change my clothing immediately. As I did not obey he became more enraged...[he] would have punished me more had not my mother interfered...He was aware my mother could usually defend herself against one man, and both of us would overpower him, so after giving his wife strict orders to take me up stairs and keep me there, he took his carriage and drove away" (Jackson 12).

It is important to note that this conflict between Jackson and Mr. Lewis is escalated not by the narrator's physical resistance to being beaten, but by her refusal to hide away the evidence of her master's violence. As mentioned earlier, there are no shortage of scenes across narratives of enslavements where black women are physically beaten or assaulted. What I find to be most compelling about this scene is both Mr. Lewis' immediate discomfort with having to witness the aftermath of his attack—that being Jackson's bloodied "frightful" face—and also Jackson's rejection of her master's authority when he asks her to change her clothes. Like her mother, Jackson's refutation manifests as a threat to his privilege and power as a white man and slave owner. While Jackson endures the physical violence inflicted over her, she challenges Mr.

Lewis' authority over her response to that violence, and because of this he doubles down on his beating to subdue not only her body, but her spirit as well.

Traditionally, male authored slave narratives build towards scenes of combat between enslaved men and their masters and/or overseers, highlighting how physical domination gestures towards the capacity for complete self-actualization. Conversely, black male authors might also have used a scene like this one to articulate the ills of slavery through the enslaved woman's perceived helplessness, victimhood, and lack of protection. What I find most striking in this scene is that at the very moment where the violence escalates, Jackson's mother enters and, without lifting a finger, her presence looms mightily over Mr. Lewis. What is most daunting is not the presence of one or the other, but of both mother and daughter as a combined force that, Jackson claims, even Mr. Lewis knows could "overpower" him. To defuse this threat, he asks that his wife separate mother and child before he flees. Considering the individualistic nature of the heroic slave trope, the intervention of Polly in this critical scene highlights the communal nature of resistance in Jackson's narrative.

This quarrel between Jackson and her master culminates with an ironic twist. After the fight, Jackson flees to seek refuge with the Union soldiers who offered her protection for some time before she is reclaimed by Mr. Lewis and placed in the trader's yard. This decision, being a direct violation of the Union General's lawful demand that Mr. Lewis take Jackson home and treat her kindly, earned the slave owner a fine of $3000 and "one hundred lashes with the cow-hide, so that they might identify him by a scarred back" (Jackson 13). Despite the General's desire that Mr. Lewis be publicly shamed for his unnecessary violence against Jackson, he keeps his beating a secret from those in his circle, but not from Polly. Jackson writes "My mother had the pleasure of washing his stained clothes, otherwise it would not have been known" (Jackson

13). While so many critical interpretations of slave narratives focus on both spectacular forms of anti-black violence, and thusly, public and spectacular examples of black resistance, I am most interested in the fleeting and quotidian moments wherein we are able to gain a deeper understanding of the enslaved person's desires. Washing the blood out of Mr. Lewis' clothes, on the surface, might seem like one among many endless chores that Polly was forced to do during her tenure as an enslaved woman. Yet, in this brief line, through lye-stung and water-logged hands, I imagine Polly taking particular delight in seeing the rust stains lodged in the woven fibers of Mr. Lewis clothes. I see her, soaking and wringing, soaking and wringing, her daughter still in the back of her mind. Jackson's language here echoes Bynum's interpretation of pleasure as "[anticipating] a pending or inevitable satisfaction and a hoping for what is not yet seen" (Bynum 3). As Polly washed the blood out of Mr. Lewis' clothes I wonder if she, perhaps, was daydreaming, thinking of Mr. Lewis enduring the sting of the lash on his skin, smiling at the thought of him knowing the way that cold wind feels like daggers against the open wounds of beaten flesh.

Polly washing the blood out of Mr. Lewis' clothes echoes Campt's description of fugitivity and refusal as "strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant" both "creative and "nimble" (Campt 32). It is easy to reduce the moment to an act of servitude, but in Jackson's narrative, we understand the full context of this scene and can align it with a long montage of active, passive, and sometimes silent practices of resistance. Despite the many attempts to escape together as a family, Jackson's family is separated, and she is sold to a family who treated her poorly for six months before she is able to flee. Aided by an unnamed guide, she escapes, by boat, to Indianapolis where she is reunited with her mother and brother two years later. Regarding this reunion, she writes: "After so many long years and so many attempts, for

this was her seventh, she at last succeeded, and we were now all free. The sound of freedom was music in our ears...I was overjoyed with my personal freedom, but the joy at my mother's escape was greater than anything I had ever known" (Jackson 25-26). In this moment, Jackson openly articulates what she has attempted to illustrate throughout her narrative, the deep help belief that her freedom, in whatever form and through whatever means, is not a singular or individual experience, but one that is directly tied between mother and daughter. Although she has been living under the auspices of her autonomy for over two years, Jackson's freedom is incomplete without Polly. It is their intimate bond, and eventual reconciliation, that finally brings their fugitive paths to completion.

Lucy and Ellen: Wild Thoughts and Fugitive Schemes

Delaney's mother Ellen, like Polly, functions as the primary inspiration for her daughters to seek freedom. However, Delaney's narrative differs from Jackson's in that Ellen and her daughter seek out, and eventually, gain their emancipation not through escape, but through a freedom suit in the court of law. Due to Ellen's origin story as one who was illegally sold into slavery after being born free, she emerges in Delaney's narrative as a woman tormented for existing out of her proper *state*. Delaney writes, "having been brought up in a free State, mother had learned much to her advantage, which would have been impossible in a slave State, and which she now proposed to turn to account for the benefit of her daughter" (Delaney 16). I read the notion of state not just as a political or geographical boundary, but also as a relational condition of being. To willingly transform oneself from human to chattel is a type of sublimation that Ellen refuses for herself and for her children. Extrapolating from this, I am interested in how Ellen, like Polly, exceeds multiple limitations surrounding her status as enslaved by rendering false the idea that she, or her daughter, should desire to be the property of others.

Ellen centers a myriad of fugitive plots in her daughter's life positioning Delaney from childhood as an active *co-conspirator*. Similar to Jackson and her mother, the shared fantasies they have about their own self-emancipation connects them deeply. Delaney writes,

> "I was then twelve years old, and often talked the matter over with mother and canvassed the probabilities of both of us getting away. No schemes were too wild for us to consider! Mother was especially restless, because she was a free woman up to the time of her being kidnapped, so the injustice and weight of slavery bore more heavily upon her than upon me…I was her only confidant" (Delaney 19-20).

As her mother's "confidant", the dynamic that Delaney describes reveals to us a particular form of black intimacy shared between the two women. Connected both by blood as well as the daunting experience of navigating slavery as women, they support each other and also keep each other's secrets. There is a furtive joy and playfulness present in this moment. Reading these lines, I imagine these two women in the cover and protection of night, their voices oscillating from hushed whispers to raucous laughter, every idea for their flight from the grounds of the plantation more outlandish than the one before. This deep intimacy, once again, is facilitated by the fact that as these women see each other they also see the expansive interiority they share as individuals and collaborators within a speculative futurity of their own making. While it is easy to cast off these unactualized plans as futile, I read these schemes through Bynum's assertion that "[because] interiority and its resulting pleasures are imaginative, it possesses a materiality that refuses the limits of agency and resists certainty" (Bynum 22). Secreted away from the watchful eye of their respective masters, these women share in many flights of imagination and fancy wherein they can safely articulate their fugitive desires.

Furthermore, we can see in this passage that Delaney, from childhood, was a constant observer of her mother's psychological and emotional distress as an enslaved woman. The narrator perceives in Ellen's face the "weight of slavery" as it manifests in her mind and body. We see this clearly early on after Delaney's sister Nancy flees to Canada at her mother's behest (Delaney 20). Ellen, who Delaney asserts "never spared an opportunity to impress it upon [her children], that we must get our freedom whenever the chance offered" not only encourages Nancy, she also employs the help of a friend to take care her daughter and help her find employment (Delaney 16). When the plan is successful, Delaney witnesses a series of performances from her mother that ultimately protects both Ellen and Nancy from being discovered. Delaney writes "Mother was very thankful…but outwardly she pretended to be vexed and angry. Oh! the impenetrable mask of these poor black creatures! [How] much of joy, of sorrow, of misery and anguish have they hidden from their tormentors!" (Delaney 18). As Ellen suppresses her "[wild]…joy" from white onlookers, in private Delaney writes that she would "dance, clap her hands…waving them above her head" allowing us to be privy to the full expression of her mother's unfettered interior emotions. (Delaney 19). In Delaney's description of her mother, Ellen embodies the belief that true protection for her children requires the risk of escape and bodily harm. Ellen's insistence on her right to her own autonomy, and subsequently for the autonomy of her children, sets the very foundation for Delaney's personhood. In lieu of property or goods, resistance is the legacy she offers as her daughters' inheritance.

The act of mother and daughter imagining themselves not only as free, but also having authority and control over that freedom, instills in Delaney an unwavering confidence. This confidence, however, becomes a liability once Delaney is out of her mother's protection. After a tense argument with their mistress, Mrs. Cox, that resulted in the enslaved mother being

suddenly sold, Ellen flees to Chicago leaving Delaney vulnerable without her familial network of protection. Ellen does not, however, make it to Chicago; she is eventually caught, and decides to sue for her freedom in the courts. While freedom suits were rare, hers is ultimately successful because she was able to secure testimony that she was, in fact, a free woman kidnapped and sold illegally into bondage. The argument put forth before the court in Ellen's defense, according to Eric Gardner, "depended on recognizing and allowing legal slavery" by arguing that unless "an individual African American was not 'once free'- through birth to a free mother, residence, manumission, or other circumstances carefully specified in state law- then she or he had no legal right to demand freedom" ("No Business" 43). In proving that Ellen was an exceptional woman with an exceptional case, her lawyer ultimately weaponized liberal ideals on her behalf and opened the path for Delaney to do the same.

Delaney runs away from the property to seek asylum with her mother after a hostile interaction with her mistress, Mrs. Mitchell, over laundry. Soon after, Ellen secures the assistance of a lawyer, Edward Bates, to sue Mr. Mitchell for possession of Delaney. Since the court had established that Ellen was kidnapped, wrongfully enslaved, and entitled to her freedom, and that, in the eyes of the law, for the enslaved the condition of the child follows that of the mother, Delaney was legally entitled to her freedom as well. While awaiting her trial, at the behest of Mr. Mitchell, Delaney is imprisoned in the St. Louis jail for over a year. When Delaney describes the seventeen "long and dreary months" that she spent in jail, waiting for her trial and eventual release, she articulates her experience as one of perpetual listening. Breaking from prose into verse, as she does throughout the narrative, Delaney writes:

"I was put in a cell, under lock and key…listening to the

--foreign echoes from the street,

Faint sounds of revel, traffic, conflict keen—

And, thinking that man's reiterated feet

Have gone such ways since e'er the world has been,

I wondered how each oft-used tone and glance

Retains its might and old significance." (34-35)

Similar to Jacobs description in *Incidents* of her time in the garret, Delaney's invocation of herself as a listener is effective because it illustrates the loneliness of forced isolation. She describes her imprisoned state not through an articulation of her daily experiences, but through the disparate soundings of the world and its quotidian affairs. While everyone else is constantly moving, persistent in both their quarrels and pleasures, Delaney is stagnated and alone. In this solitude, however, Delaney not only listens, but ponders, considering how the small gestures of daily living become devoid of meaning when separated from those who love and protect her.

The sorrow that Delaney illustrates for the reader while imprisoned echoes Bynum's sentiment that "[living] is a daily practice" both "chaotic and affective" that "can only make sense…because there is something or someone in whom to take pleasure or with whom to feel good" (Bynum 22). In jail, Delaney is severed not only from her mother, but from the greater community of enslaved persons who helped her triangulate her place in the world. Alone in the jail cell, she is removed from the foundation of her personhood, and in this we are privy to her interior submission to immense melancholy. What is missing from this meditation on her time in jail are any details about the experience *inside* the facility. Gardner, echoing an 1856 court commissioned report about the St. Louis jail, highlights how the "cold, damp, and overcrowded" jail was almost "impossible to keep clean and comfortable" due in no small part to the lack of a drainage system that could "carry the filth from the cells into the sewer" and diminish "extremely

offensive" odor (Qtd. in *No Business* 39). Swiftly covering more than a year of distressing confinement in this sub-par facility, Delaney does not linger on the specificities of these indignities. Perhaps this is due to her virtuous and chaste nature, regardless, Delaney's deployment of verse here firmly prioritizes the weight of psychological distress over physical discomfort. Regardless, this rhetorical decision strengthens the reader's connection to Delaney's interior space and, once again, elevates the communal and familial connection, even as an absent presence, as the primary focality in her narrative.

Given that Delaney was absent from most of the court proceedings, it is the articulation of deep interior feeling that becomes the experiential anchor for readers. When Delaney finally has her day in court, we are privy to her subjective experience through the articulation of complex and uncomfortable feelings. Delaney contrasts the "bright, sunny day…which the happy and care-free would drink in with a keen sense of enjoyment" with the "bitterness" lodged deep in her heart (Delaney 39). She writes "I could see only gloom which seemed to deepen and gather closer to me as I neared the courtroom…I could not see one gleam of brightness in my future, as I was hurried on to hear my fate decided" (Delaney 39). The honesty and vulnerability of these lines challenges any assumptions that Delaney was approaching the trail with confidence or trust in a legal system which had heretofore not even recognized the possibility of her personhood. Delaney's confession of negative feeling bolsters Quashie's claim that black interiority "is expansive…impulsive and dangerous…not subject to one's control but instead has to be taken on its own terms…something more chaotic than [consciousness], more akin to hunger, memory, forgetting, the edges of all the humanness one has" (Quashie 21). After over a year in confinement, the anxiety she describes, and the bitterness she feels, is well earned. Paranoid and vexed by the "helpless terror" of her hyper-exposure under the watchful eyes of the

all-white jury, Delaney trusts no one, no thing, and especially no legal precedent. Isolated and deprived of her mother's guidance, Delaney articulates an emotional unmooring that, while deeply authentic, complicates our notion of what a heroic or valorous slave narrator is supposed to sound like. Her rhetorical power here is not the expression of blind confidence, but in the invocation of vulnerability to reveal to the reader her genuine experience of existing in, and fighting from, the most interstitial spaces of the law.

When Delaney finally rises from the cold underbelly of her jail cell to the sun-drenched walls and ornate architecture of the courtroom, she is filled with such an immense anxiety that it physiologically splits her into two. Drowning in the anxiety of her precarious position, she describes a complete out of body experience:

> "I had taken my seat in such a condition of helpless terror that I could not tell one person from another. Friends and foes were as one, and vainly did I try to distinguish them. My long confinement, burdened with harrowing anxiety, the sleepless night I had just spent, the unaccountable absence of my mother, had brought me to an indescribable condition. I felt dazed, as if I were no longer myself. I seemed to be another person--an on looker--and in my heart dwelt a pity for the poor, lonely girl, with down-cast face, sitting on the bench apart from anyone else in that noisy room. I found myself wondering where Lucy's mother was, and how she would feel if the trial went against her; I seemed to have lost all feeling about it, but was speculating what Lucy would do, and what her mother would do" (Delaney 47).

Even in this fracture, Delaney's mother stands as the primary source of strength that fuels her self-hood. Here, Delaney strategically weaponizes vulnerability through the invocation of her own, delicate, black girlhood. As many Black Feminist writers have noted, the innocence of

childhood is a notion rarely afforded to African Americans within the social imagination. However, Delaney's unwavering dedication to her relationality to her mother does in fact position the narrator as, first and foremost, a daughter in need of protection.

While the reader is safely taking in this scene with the knowledge of the eventual outcome, the Delaney illustrated in this moment teeters on the paper-thin edge of self-actualization. While onlookers might simply see a silent, pensive young woman sitting before them, we as readers are privy to her interior state. In this clarity, we are also able to see how she comforts her uneasy mind, by breaking away from the unbearable weight of this moment and transforming herself into an onlooker. Protected by the distance of time and memory, Delaney writes herself as she wishes the reader to see her: a scared black girl worthy of basic empathy. Perhaps this is also the truth of how she felt. I imagine there is little difference between the two. What I am most struck by is that, even in this fractured state, Ellen, or perhaps the longing for Ellen, emerges as a symbol of morality that eclipses even the literal and material presence of the law. For Delaney, the wisdom that would satiate her existential dread is not facilitated through the courts, but through her mother, friend, and confidant.

The rhetorical and narrative impact of this "indescribable condition" that Delaney attempts to curate language for can be read in multiple ways. There is first the lingering aftereffects of her isolation but there is also the pressure of being so publicly vulnerable and visible in the courthouse, a space that is, to say the least, immeasurably hostile towards the selfhood and autonomy that Delaney is trying to protect. Responding directly to this particular scene in her narrative, Barrett writes that "[for] Delaney [her] odd self-knowledge is a foreign and contrary knowledge" that challenges the "estranged…marginalized Other" the courts desire to project onto her and that she, like other African American writers, "recapitulate the hostile

'knowledge' that discounts them" through autobiographical acts (Barrett 142). While Delaney was imprisoned and, therefore, mostly absent from the court room during her trial, she does in fact "recapitulate the hostile knowledge" of her personhood in the act of writing her narrative. It is significant that, in describing this out of body experience in the court, we can read Delaney standing firm in the fragmentation that comes to define the enslaved person's existential crisis as both person and property. While it is commonplace for any lifewriter to create cohesion between the narrative self and the experiential self, Delaney hones the separation between the two in order to communicate the absurdity of her flight towards freedom. In this scene, the fractured version of herself that emerges as she awaits the verdict breaks protagonist from narrator, aligning the latter with the reader, both waiting with bated breath for the ultimate outcome.

Even in her absence, Ellen looms heavy over Delaney. The eventual victory of Delaney's verdict is almost immediately hampered by the realization that her mother is not present at the courthouse. It is her mother, and only her mother, that Delaney is interested in seeing after her imprisonment. Their reunion, both emotional and triumphant, once again illustrates the intimate bond that these two woman share with each other as kin and kindred spirits. Delaney writes:

> "I was much concerned at my mother's prolonged absence, and was deeply anxious to meet her and sob out my joy on her faithful bosom…As soon as she heard of the result, she hurried to meet me, and hand in hand we gazed into each others eyes and saw the light of freedom there… Dear, dear mother! how solemnly I invoke your spirit as I review these trying scenes of my girlhood, so long agone! Your patient face and neatly-dressed figure stands ever in the foreground of that checkered time; a figure showing naught to an on-looker but the common place virtues of an honest woman!" (Delaney 49-50).

The efficiency of Delaney's prose moves the reader swiftly through the action of the narrative. However here, in this deeply emotional reunion, the reader can truly begin to understand how wide a chasm was produced between these two women during their separation. Seventeen months separated, Delaney and her mother embrace each other with the full knowledge that, despite their case being ethically and legally sound, they had been gambling on the leniency of the American justice system, and that such a bet was high risk. As she embraces her mother for the first time in over a year, drenched in daylight, Delaney aligns her own personhood with her mother's virtuous spirit and solidifies her as the hero of both their stories.

To Delaney, her mother is as much a hero as any of "the great ones of earth, which are portrayed on historic pages" (Delaney 51). Her inclusion and consistent centering of her mother in her own narrative is a strategic choice to write both women, as well as a host of other ancillary black figures, into the records of history. Both Ellen and Polly exemplify Gardner's observation that, through women-authored narratives of enslavement, readers might fully understand how black mothers are heroic even as they are "beaten down in ways from which [they] may never recover" ("Face" 62). Through the able pens of Jackson and Delaney, contemporary readers are able to see the fullness of black women's intimate bonds as well as their interior lives. These slave narratives are undeniably political objects worthy of careful historical study, but they are love letters to the women who inspired in them a rebellious spirit in the face of social, legal, and spiritual degradation. The nuances of these relationships have been, I argue, overshadowed by a hyperfocus on the looming presence of white figures in the texts. Scores of academic articles focus on scenes where the narrators survive the violent and petty interferences of white plantation owners and their insecure wives, no doubt as a means of highlighting how these women survived and overcame their situation through legal and extra-legal self-liberation. In my

reading of these two texts, I aim to think through the intraracial and intra-gendered bonds that facilitated survival but also cultivated deeper sense of selfhood and self-knowledge.

Reading heroic tales with satisfying conclusions is, at its core, a deeply pleasurable experience. While Jackson and Delaney's narratives present two successful conclusions, wherein both the narrator and their heroines are safe and free by the story's end, there are also a series of fraying loose ends that remind readers of the real stakes of fugitivity. Jackson and her mother are never reunited with, their sister/daughter Hester. Delaney is able to reunite with her father but only to find him, years after the escape, a traumatized shell of his former self. Such failed and complicated reunions in the wake of self-liberation echoes Gardner's claim that "even in freedom, the remnants of the slave system continue to damage Black families" ("Face" 60). I gesture towards these unsatisfactory narrative moments as a consideration of readerly expectations of slave narratives broadly, and black lifewriting specifically. Interrogating readerly desire, I argue that the reading of slave narratives, in the past and present moment, provokes a complicated pleasure that greatly fluctuates depending on what explicit or implicit desires a given reader brings with them to the text.

In considering the complex mechanizations of pleasure, Bynum asserts that "pleasure needs dissatisfaction or discomfort to urge the desiring that will ultimately seek it. Dissatisfaction or discomfort inspire a desire to appease, satisfy, or comfort" (Bynum 4). I would further this observation to say that often pleasure is inspired not just by the satisfaction of a particular desire, but also, by the reckoning of a deep longing. The pleasure that readers seek from reading slave narratives is not unlike the pleasure that modern readers seek from contemporary black memoirs, autobiographies, and biopics. It is a pleasure rooted in a particular ambivalence that balances, somewhat precariously, the conflicting desires of multiple readers.

This includes the desire to identify themselves with the hero of the text and disidentify from the villain, or villainous system, which keeps the hero from its righteous destiny.

Readers often desire, if not a happy ending, a conclusion wherein the narrator's conflicts fade into the distance behind them. Less desirable is a conclusion where a hero stands firm, despite the grueling persistence of oppression. My invocation of ambivalent pleasure aligns with Saidiya Hartman's observation that during the antebellum era "[pleasure] was ensnared in a web of domination…and possibility...indifferently complicit with quite divergent desires and aspirations, ranging from the instrumental aims of slave-owner designs for mastery to the promise and possibility of releasing the body from...the pain of captivity" (Hartman 82). What Hartman observes here is that the pleasure of the enslaved was directly tied their conditional distress, as well as the relational safety and protection of the not-enslaved (often white) body. The pleasure of self-narration in any form of lifewriting is directly connected to a reading practice which names, shames, and eventually quells the narrator's trauma and pain. When we read a harrowing tale of overcoming trauma, the narrator becomes for the reader a vessel, not as much for trauma specifically, but the feeling of triumph that comes with the immense pleasure of overcoming a social, historical, cultural, or psychological obstacle. Therefore, when the pleasure of lifewriting—a pleasure already upholding the tensions of trauma and its narrative consolations—intersects with the politics black self-narration, there is an underlying expectation that it is the presence of whiteness, whether as ally or foil, that must validate the pleasure of black life in both its pain and uplift. I have modeled in my own reading practice the limitations of such expectations. In this chapter, I have attempted to recalibrate my own desires to focus less on the pleasure of black triumph over spectacular white violence and more on the interior longings that fuel the narrators' pleasure and anxiety. I do this not to invalidate the different

desires that many readers bring into reading narratives of enslavement, but instead to show the potential of what can be discerned from the pleasure of watching black life unfold on its own terms.

Troubling the Masterplot:
Narratives in Afterlife of Slavery

I came across the term *masterplot* while reading *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, written by H. Porter Abbott. Defined, in part, as the "stories we tell over and over in myriad forms…that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes, and fears," the term reflects the intimate relationship that exists between narrative, identity, and personhood (Abbott 42). Using examples like Cinderella, the pulpy rags-to-riches tales of Horatio Alger, and even Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Abbott affirms the endless manifestations of masterplots that spring up across the American imagination. They are myths, necessary fictions that allow readers to follow and identify with protagonists who seem cosmically chosen to defy all odds and emerge from conflict not only wiser, but often richer in either social, political, or fiscal capital. Masterplots create order, and give meaning, to the social and political conflict that defines the human condition.

In the United States, citizens believe in our masterplots, we value and protect them, we embrace the lived experiences that uphold them, and we fight against the lived experiences that challenge them. The types of masterplots that underline race, gender, nationality, and culture rhetorically and philosophically shape what any one person, community, or nation believes to be true, or untrue, about the world they exist in. Within the masterplot, the mythos of American exceptionalism is propped up, in part, through a retelling of similar variations of the same kinds of stories wherein an exceptional and driven individual can and will overcome the limitations of institutional oppression through their wits and hard work. One seductive feature of the masterplot is its clear and rhetorically effective "moral force" which, as Abbott writes, "[creates] an image of the world in which good and evil are clearly identifiable…[and] blame can fall squarely on one party or another" (Abbott 44). In this, the ways that we identify heroes and villains within

the American mythos, as well as victims and victors, is connected to a long tradition of individualist responses to systemic threats under the guise of exceptionalism.

Masterplots are also significant in their ability to comfort readers through the promise of a familiar kind of *closure*. No matter how many twists and turns or obstacles the protagonist encounters, the reader takes comfort in knowing and recognizing narrative formula and patterns: action and consequence, followed by triumph. Closure, in the simplest sense, is the resolution of conflict that is vital to the narrative experience. No matter how it unfolds, how an author chooses to close their narrative will always leave the strongest taste in the reader's mouth. Abbott asserts that closure is conceived in a series of binary models: closure is "satisfying" or "frustrating", legible at the level of either "expectations or questions", always "imperfectly balanced" for the reader as either "[fulfillment]" or "[violation]" (Abbott 53-55). While closure is always anticipated, its success hinges totally on the individual taste of the reader. Some find solace in the guileless unraveling of a familiar tale, while others have a predilection for the puncture of a sharp unexpected turn. What bonds both this ease and this hurt is the hope that the narrative, and the characters bound to it, conclude the journey in a way that resonates with the reader, and affirms their comprehension of the narrative codes that shape the material world. "Closure," Abbott writes "brings satisfaction to desire, relief to suspense, and clarity to confusion. It normalizes. It confirms the masterplot" (Abbott 60). The pleasure of closure is neither homogenous nor formulaic, it instead emerges in the validation or disruption of readerly expectation and narrative felicity.

I was struck by Abbott's term not because of its precision—there are many other narratological terms which can speak to the particular dynamic he describes in his text—but because of its etymological slipperiness. Within the narratological, the plot is a story, but a plot

is also a conspiracy. In the realm of the physical and material, a plot is a parcel of land on which we build, whether as shelter or food, the things that sustain us. Therefore, expanding Abbott's term, the master of the plot, the one who wields power and control and decides its purpose, has power over the story, and the scheme, and the land. For a literary critic, who loves a good pun as much as the next, the notion of a masterplot seemed deliciously apt for my exploration of narratives of enslavement and the readerly expectations that have emerged from our engagement with them.

Within the relationship between reader and text, there is an unbridled pleasure in seeing oneself through, and as, *the hero*. Narratives of enslavement, particularly those that closely adheres to the "heroic slave" type that Foster outlines, fall squarely within the realm of the masterplot. The industrious and self-reliant protagonist of the masculinist slave narrative echoes his, or her, own tone of individualism and exceptionalism. They recognize earlier than others the evils of enslavement. They best masters and slave breakers alike with either their physical strength or their mental wit. They seek out their freedom against the hostile American terrain, ducking in the cover of night to outrun the persistent threat of thieves and hounds. They emerge on the other side of bondage's boundary, the thin line of demarcation between free and unfree states, no longer fugitives, wholly in control of their personhood. Here, closure emerges as a vector of pleasure in these narratives insomuch as the end of the narrative becomes the end of fugitivity. Readers of slave narratives take comfort in knowing the narrator writes from a position of triumph, thus allowing them to experience the ills of slavery from a safe psychological distance.

What happens when these types of narratives have no clear happy ending? How does the reader find comfort in a story of black life where the protagonist faces a more ambiguous

conclusion? What lessons can readers learn from black lifewriting that articulates a murky and complicated notion of liberation? This chapter examines two contemporary memoirs—Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive* and Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*—that explore various landscapes and histories, both public and private, of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Georgia in the aftermath of the Civil Rights and Reagan/Bush eras. Both of these texts converge around complex expressions of black grief. While Ward's detailed and extensive project tells the story of loss through the early and preventable deaths of five black men from her youth, most notably her younger brother, Trethewey's slim and precise meditation hones in on the cosmic absence of the author's mother who was murdered by her emotionally and physically abusive husband. Both texts map the arc from infancy to adulthood, writing not only about their lives but the lives of the generations that preceded them and the black southern communities that aimed to protect them amidst the aftershocks of desegregation.

I argue that both texts can be best understood as *narratives in the afterlife of slavery*, a designation that directly echoes Hartman's now infamous framework that gives language to the systemic and ever-present erosion of black life under the technologies of capitalist domination and white supremacy. I consider Ward and Trethewey's works as texts directly in conversation with narratives of enslavement structurally, thematically, and rhetorically. Just as late 19th century black authors sought to detail the nuanced experiences of black life while also making a concerted effort to convince readers to interrogate, and eventually divest from, the systems of oppression that created and supported slavery, these two authors engage with a similar didactic aim. In telling the stories of themselves, their families, and their communities, Ward and Tretheway illustrate for contemporary readers the historical stakes of anti-blackness' perpetual hold, in both structural and interpersonal ways.

Elucidating racism is not the only project of each text; both authors also unravel the philosophical quandaries of black grief, the limitations of memory, and the role and function of narrative/narrator to recuperate black life lost both violently and prematurely. In naming these texts as *narratives in the afterlife of slavery* I am highlighting their convergences with slave narratives, but also their divergences, namely the ways that both memoirs strategically and intentionally refuse a certain type of closure to readers. While Ward and Trethewey offer a series of thoughtful meditations on the nuances of black life, what they do not offer is the solace of a clear victory. Instead, both writers sit in and through their loss, linger in the impossibility of language to speak to such loss, while using language and memory to craft a literary experience that presents another, more authentic, kind of catharsis. These texts trouble our understanding of closure while also offering a strategic kind of writerly and readerly pleasure in the process.

As previously stated, this chapter is a companion piece to my earlier meditations on the intimacies shared between, and the interiority expressed by, black women in women-authored slave narratives. Examining both Ward and Trethewey's memoirs, I will also expand my conceptual framework on *Black Maternal Fugitivities* by focusing specifically on the ways that the black women authors, and these black daughters, position their mothers as mirrors and reflections of themselves. While this might seem self-evident for Trethewey's text, I would argue that focusing on the ways that the author views her mother is a critical departure for *Men We Reaped* given the ample scholarly work thinking through Ward's role as a perpetual witness to black male death, a subject I do briefly touch on. Overall, what the black mothers in these texts teach their daughters are strategies for a communal type of survival that often is not perceived as exceptional. The choice to continue this exploration of the complicated relationships between black mothers and daughters reflects my critical investment in illustrating the complexity of

black interiority.

First, I will define the parameters of *Narratives in the Afterlife of Slavery* and outline how both texts respond to, and challenge, the form and function of late 19th century slave narratives. I will then analyze both texts with a keen eye for the ways that both authors acknowledge and interrogate the narrativity of their writing through photography and memory. While there are many different narrative technologies that Ward and Trethewey deploy in their memoirs, I choose to focus on photographs and memory because, through these two tools, both authors ask the reader to consider what they know, what they remember, and where there might be inconsistencies or slippages between the two. Photographs, especially in the writing process, are tools for remembrance, but they can also reveal how differently people perceive, understand, or feel about a shared experience. Photographs also tell us of just how much we have forgotten, a harsh reminder of our limitations as reliable narrators in/of our own stories. Even more, I believe that theoretical attitudes surrounding the study of photographs, particularly photographs of black subjects, hold space for misreading as a valid form of knowledge production, something that theory surround self-narrative can and should borrow from. While we can accept that the distance between photograph and subject, and between photograph and viewer, leaves room for useful interrogation, we are less likely to apply that same lens between memory and narrator. In Ward and Trethewey's memoirs specifically, focusing on photographs also allows us to reconsider the power of the gaze: how these daughters see their mothers, and how these authors translate that sight into narrative, reflects a particular kind of looking that centers vulnerability even in the face of harm. Throughout this entire chapter I am guided by a series of questions: What is narrative labor of blackness? As a conceptual and rhetorical agent of disruption, how does blackness impose on narrative and to what end? How do these memoirs complicate our

understanding of closure and pleasure within the realm of narrative? Finally, what does it mean to look at the full expanse of black interiority, including and especially expressions of both pain and pleasure, outside the masculinist expectations of heroism and exceptionality?

Narratives in the Afterlife of Slavery

"Like all children, they were the children history and place" writes Ward, speaking about her parents, in the early pages of *Men We Reaped* (Ward 15). With these words, the author locates herself, through her parents and their parents, in relationship to the public and private histories of southern Mississippi and Louisiana. These words, to me, encapsulate the greater didactic mandate of both Ward and Trethewey's memoirs. They write to inform the reader of this unseen history, rooted in the experiences of marginalized communities, but even as this history is articulated, with painstaking attention to language and form, a critical inadequacy of language remains ever-present. Like many ex-slave narrators, both Ward and Trethewey center their respective birthplaces as the foundation for their longer testimonials about black life under varied systems of white power. While Trethewey situates the start of her story in post-Civil Rights Mississippi as a child of miscegenation, Ward frames her childhood across the long durée of Reagan/Bush era politics in the post-industrial American South. Both *Men We Reaped*, and *Memorial Drive*, are contextualized between competing these narratives of history and place. Each writer carefully describes their birthplace from a bittersweet distance, a psychic exile filtered through time, memory, and lament.

Another way that Ward and Trethewey's texts echo that of 19th century narratives of enslavement is in the expected journey of the exceptional black protagonist. Just as early readers of slave narratives approached texts with a hunger to *know* the plight of black life in the Antebellum South under the system of slavery, contemporary readers approach black memoir

with a similar edificatory hunger. This hunger is satiated by the content of the narrative, but also, at times, by the familiarity of its form. Regarding the form of late 19th-century slave narratives, Foster describes the structural elements of as reflective of "Judeo-Christian mythological structure...[moving] from the idyllic life of a Garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land" ("Witnessing" 84). The linear trajectory from enslaved to free is also a direct path from ignorance into enlightenment, darkness into light, and, as a reversal of chattel slavery's "ultimate aim" to the "[transform]...a man into a thing," it is also a political transfiguration from objecthood to personhood ("Witnessing" 85). This trajectory shapes the journey that readers of slave narratives anticipate, and this expectation, I argue, still shapes our desires of contemporary black autobiography and memoir.

Foster formulates the structure of slave narratives as a "mythological pattern" in four parts: Mortification and Purgation, Resolution, Escape, and Freedom ("Witnessing" 85). The first phase tracks a loss of innocence as the generally happy black child, ignorant of their enslaved condition, discovers what it means to be a slave, and therefore not fully human, within the plantation hierarchy. With this discovery comes immense shame and the initial driving impulse to "purge himself of those elements that would facilitate enslavement" ("Witnessing" 85). Following purgation is resolution, wherein the enslaved protagonist makes up their mind to seek out extralegal "alternatives to bondage," most often fugitive escape, culminating in a type of "conversion experience" where the "resolve to be free" usurps all anxieties or fears of white terror ("Witnessing" 85). Following purgation, the ex-slave narrator takes care to illustrate their escape, detailing all the "pitfalls and obstacles" as well as the "sufferings and moments of bravery" they encounter in their fugitive state ("Witnessing" 85). The final phase of this

trajectory is the acquisition of freedom which is, according to Foster, like "the arrival at the City of God or the New Jerusalem...[corresponding] to the jubilation of ancient ritual" ("Witnessing" 85). This final phase is paradoxically utopic: the ex-slave narrator does in fact physically cross over into a free state, but, beyond the conclusion of the narrative, readers both past and present understand that there is nowhere the formerly enslaved can escape their second-class status.

While contemporary black memoir does not follow every step of Foster's formula, the general arc remains the same. The black girl-child or boy-child discovers their blackness in the face of explicit systemic inequality, they resolve to become different from those around them, they hone specific skills and talents which will facilitate their escape, most often through predominately white educational systems. They finally conclude their narrative from a position of overwhelming self-reflexivity; the writer, looking backwards, with all their access to language and narrative, has forged a new path for themselves, but often at a significant cost. Regardless of this cost, readers come to black memoir precisely because of the familiar catharsis of seeing the boundaries of white supremacy, even temporarily, thwarted. Foster's words are just as true for readers of black lifewriting in the 19th century as they are today: "The outcome is never in doubt. The narrative, after all, was written by a freeman" ("Witnessing" 85). We trust the narrator to bring us from the darkness to the light.

Often in the mid to late 20th century, the systemic violences that informed black lifewriting were spectacular and overwhelming, like the bombings Angela Davis describes in her Birmingham childhood neighborhood in her eponymous 1974 autobiography, or the shards of glass exploding from James Baldwin's hand against the wall as he throws his water at the head of the white waitress who refused him service in *Notes of a Native Son*. However, more recently, black writers have articulated more quiet and insidious forms of violences which disrupt black

childhood and propel them into a state of racial self-consciousness. These include the looming absent-presence of Ashely Ford's incarcerated father in *Somebody's Daughter*, the twin cycles of addition and poverty in Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*, the threat of state mandated mental health interventions in Asha Bandele and Patrisse Cullors' *When They Call You a Terrorist*, or even the entanglement of homophobia, racism, and grief in Saeed Jones' *How We Fight for Our Lives*. Each of these memoirs offer different tones, styles, and approaches to discussing complications and nuances of black life but they are connected by the readerly expectation that the sufferings of childhood and adolescence will forge an author/narrator who can articulate, with authenticity, an answer to the existential crisis which has haunted black life, and black lifewriting, again and again.

This framing is also applicable to Ward and Trethewey's texts, however, in this chapter I aim to focus less on how these women write about anti-blackness, systemic racism, or misogynoir from a didactic perspective. I am not looking for lessons to solve the problem. Instead, I am interested in how these authors face head on the *impossibility* of answers, wrapping both rage and tenderness in language like gravel in satin, and speak with vulnerability—*to say something real to somebody real*—about the interior experience of loving and losing loved ones as a black person in a hostile world. Such a feat speaks to a distinct and impactful pleasure, one that is both meaningful and ambivalent, that does not depend on the triumph of traditional closure to make readers feel what they are straining to express. Ambivalent pleasure is unavoidable when interrogating the nuanced relationship between readers, of all kinds, and black lifewriting. During slavery, the "ambivalence of pleasure" emerged from the paradoxical intersection of both the "ambitions, whims, fantasies, and exploits of the [slave] owner" and the "slave's unmet yearnings" (Hartman 82). This paradox is still present today as so many readers

seek out black memoir—memoir written by black writers attempting to better understand the aporia of their own survival—to satisfy their taste for racially motivated trauma, or more specifically for the catharsis facilitated by said trauma. Considering the complicated role of pleasure in black lifewriting, I also argue that these memoirs embody what Barthes describes as *jouissance*, or bliss, meaning an experience of reading that breaks from the "comfortable practice of reading" and instead "imposes a state of loss," an experience of pleasure that "discomforts...[and] unsettles the reader's...assumptions" and "brings to crisis [their] relation with language" (Barthes 14). The afterlife of slavery, as we understand it, has no definitive material closure, but black life, I argue, still offers complex expressions of pain and pleasure legible on and off the page. Narratives in the afterlife of enslavement, subsequently, aim to capture these complex expressions, and lay bare for the reader—as bare as the translucent screen of memory can allow—a black interiority that exceeds the constraints of exceptionality.

Snapshots and Portraits: Looking and/at Black Women's (Narrative) Labor

Carole Boyce Davies argues in her canonical text *Black Women Writing Identity: Migrations of the Subject* that, for black women writers, the notion of Diaspora cannot be exclusively fixed to a particular space, place, or nation-state. Instead, we must understand black women's subjectivity within Diaspora as migratory in nature. Davies writes:

> [The] autobiographical subjectivity of Black women is one of the ways in which speech is articulated and geography redefined. Issues of home and exile are addressed. Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement…Thus the complicated notion of home mirrors the problematizing of community/nation/identity that one finds in Black women's writing (21).

In this formulation, home refers both to the domestic space often created and maintained by black women but also how black mothers stand in for the connection to, or distance from, a metaphorical and conceptual *homeland* for the black writer. Even more, categories of home and exile are not only mutually inclusive, in some cases, they are co-constitutive. Whether home or homeland, both Ward and Trethewey's texts illustrate how black mothers are exiled not necessarily at the hands of the state, but at times through alienation from and within family unit.

Black mothers, and black women who act as mothers, have historically been vilified within the rhetoric of American politics for how they navigate networks of familial care. However, Ward and Trethewey's memoirs reveal how these women are in fact navigating life through a series of affective responses to the systemic and existential threats against black people broadly, and black children specifically. These responses reveal how the anxieties of black motherhood manifest in actions and reactions that, given the circumstances, are all at once erratic and cogent. Regarding black mothers in literature, Davies observes that while they retain "symbolic importance" in any writings about home generally produced by black women authors, "there is little idealization of these mothers. [They are] still presented with all their failings...nevertheless [remaining] heroic (sometimes anti-heroic)" (Davies 129). This acknowledgement of the black mother as simultaneously heroic and anti-heroic affirms the many complicated maternal figures I have encountered in my research on contemporary black lifewriting. Black mothers are caregivers and co-conspirators, but at times they also serve as foil to the black memoirist. So often the ones that stay behind in the aftermath of death or abandonment, black mothers also bear the negative psychological weight of black male loss for their children. Whether playing the villain to keep the peace, or becoming the villain to maintain order, black mothers often emerge in narrative as the looming figure standing in the way of the

author's inevitable self-realization. I echo Davies' assertion that black women's migratory subjectivity as "constituted [through] multiple identities that do not always make for harmony" resulting in a narrative presence defined not by the binary of good or evil, but instead through a confounding "slipperiness [and] elsewhereness" (Davis 36). The affective slipperiness of the maternal figures in both memoirs exemplify a seemingly conflictual aspect of Black Maternal Fugitivities: the ways that black women engage in fugitive acts when literal flight is not an option.

Men We Reaped is a memoir that lives and lavishes in its mourning. Functioning as autobiography and elegy, Ward writes that she must "give voice" to a story about her town, her community, and her "ghosts" in order to avoid the "silence" swallowing up the "subsumed rage [of her] accumulated grief" (Ward 8). Ward writes to give voice to her grief and also to assert her own genealogy of wayward men and formidable women exemplifying how black lifewriting serves as a radical genealogy that tracks family to community, and communities to the land. *Men We Reaped*, with its focus on the painful and preventable deaths of black men, represents in part what Jennifer Nash and Samantha Pinto have deemed the "Black Maternal Memoir" which they define as a subgenre of black lifewriting that "[stages] public mourning in deeply gendered ways: black boys are dead, and black women are the mourners" signaling how, most often as mothers, black women's grief "becomes a political commodity...that is only palatable (and respectable, even) because it is constituted through and only after loss" (Nash and Pinto 492). Nash and Pinto's concept, specifically noting recent memoirs by Lezley McSpadden and Sabrina Fulton, the mothers of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin respectively, directly gestures towards black lifewriting that "[creates]...political movement out of personal loss" (Nash and Pinto 492). Ward,

who has written extensively in her fiction about the anxiety of black mothering in an anti-black world, writes her memoir as a sister and friend. However, I find this framework applicable because of the way it embodies the readerly attitudes and expectations. *Men We Reaped* is a memoir about a black women watching black male death, but it is also a memoir about the black women who remain behind, the ways these women live in and through the deaths of others, and their own slow deterioration.

As narrator, Ward negotiates the narrative through a confluence of private and public memory wherein the memoirist has control not only over their memories, but also the memories of others, and even the conditional memories of the dead or estranged. This negotiation manifests in a constant tension between the individual and the communal, the *I* and the *we*. This is discernable in the tension between the section title "We Are Born" and its opening line: "I was born..." (Ward 42). The latter of the two is an oft-repeated line in slave narratives that, while acknowledging their birthplace, also conflates the ex-slave narrators' personal origin to the plantation to which they are bound. Furthermore, the tension between "I" and "we" highlights how black women authors from the 19th century on, in writing their own lives, are simultaneously writing about the lives of others. The "we" of *Men We Reaped* signals how Ward and her family, and her greater community in DeLise, bear witness to the pleasure and pain of Wolf Town. Finally, the "we" also makes space for the many readers of this text both known and unknown. Ward, similar to Trethewey, narrates from both the position of the *I* and *we* because of a transference of memories facilitated in two ways: storytelling and photography. This phenomenon, wherein the memoirist has access to both individual and communal memories, where the stories they tell about themselves are inherently linked to stories they have heard about others, is reflected in the concept of *postmemory*.

Postmemory, according to Marianne Hirsch, is a phenomenon where the descendants of those who shared a collective generational trauma "grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth...these stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch 22). As a psychological and cultural inheritance, postmemory differs from traditional memory precisely because the "connection to [the] object or source" of the shared trauma is "mediated not through recollection, but through an imaginative investment" in the cultural and narrative codes of the past (Hirsch 22). While Hirsch's study is specifically about the experiences of children and grandchildren born to the survivors of the Holocaust, it is also an apt concept to apply to the generations of black Americans in and beyond the South that descended from antebellum slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the economic fallout of desegregation. These memoirs are structurally connected to narratives of enslavement, echoing at times the form and rhetoric performance of the genre, but they are also connected because of the inherited memories directly influenced by the experiences of the enslaved and their progeny.

Photographic images hold a similar power to storytelling within this transference of memory. Although stories, like most oral traditions, hold space for organic revision in the act of retelling, photographs are too often seen as cemented representations of objective truths. Even more, describing family photographs is a common strategy broadly deployed by memoirists to add a guise of precision to the slipperiness of distant memories. Hirsch writes that the family unit, which is inherently "structured by desire and disappointment, love and loss" is ultimately mythologized by the photograph; being "the only material traces of an irrecoverable past," these family photos provide "the illusion of...the real" (Hirsch 5, 7). We often see photographs as documentary, borderline evidential, providing irrefutable evidence of important dates, events,

and relationships. However, the interpretive act of reading these photographs, of projecting feelings and purpose onto the facades of faded snapshots, reveals them as narrative tools useful to an author's narrative precisely because they are contextualized under the narrator's gaze.

Returning to *Men We Reaped*, Ward tracks her birth story through a series of photographs that document her harrowing entry into this world. It is through these photographs, and specifically the author's interpretation of these images, that the reader first encounters the narrator in the first of many vulnerable moments. Ward's description of herself as a in infant is directly informed by family photographs:

> When I was born, I weighed two pounds and four ounces, and the doctors told my parents I would die. My skin was red, paper thin, and wrinkly, my eyes large and alien. My father took a picture of me, of my entire body, cupped in the palm of his hand. Because I weighed so little, I developed blood tumors, which swelled up and out: they were bulbous, swollen maroon, an abundance of blood barely contained by thin skin" (Ward 42).

The story of Ward's infant body, as told through this descriptive encounter with these family snapshots, is a familiar narrative of the black body pained and under duress. Even before she is given the chance to navigate a life determined by systemic anti-blackness, segregation, and class inequity, she struggles to survive against the weight of her own failing heart, lungs, and veins. The theme of red emerges again and again through these photos, bolstered even by the tinges of red on the edge and back cover of the book, and the red shirts and shorts sported by her toddler aged brother in the sepia toned childhood snapshot of them on the cover. As an infant, Ward emerges in this text as gender fluid, looking, to her mother's disdain, more boy than girl, a state that the mother attempts to remedy with feminine clothing, always of a red or maroon hue. Ward

explicitly states that “red was the color my mother chose to dress me in, again and again: no pink or blue or green or purple, but red. Red as the blood tumors. I was not a pink girl” (Ward 43). This thread of red blood, red clothes, and even “red boned” or fair skin, creates a narrativized cohesion between the photographic image of Ward as an infant, the developing character of Ward as child, and the narrator speaking from the voice of experience.

Both *Men We Reaped* and *Memorial Drive* are memoirs deeply concerned with the threat of forgetting. This forgetting, however, is not simply the result of the passage of time. It is a practice of protection that the author engages in to survive the violence that surrounds her mother’s death. Trethewey’s memoir, emerging from this state of suppression, sits with grief and forgetting, but also with the impossibility of piecing together what has been so willfully cast off in the name of self-preservation. While more focused in its narrative scope, *Memorial Drive* is a memoir constantly unraveling around its philosophical pursuits. Trethewey also grieves; she grieves the violent loss of her mother, Gwendolyn, who was murdered by her abusive husband, the author’s stepfather, as retribution for trying to leave the marriage. Like Ward, Trethewey relies primarily on memory and storytelling but her narrative is also bolstered by the archival materials of the case file documents collected after her mother’s murder: a detailed police report, transcripts between her mother and her abusive stepfather, and even brief autobiographical sketch from her mother, written by hand, describing the details of how she was coerced into a union fueled by domination, manipulation, and violence. Many times, across the memoir, Trethewey literally recovers her mother’s words, the archive allowing the author to move past the simulacrum of memory. However, Trethewey’s project is as concerned with telling the story of her mother’s death as she is with interrogating the validity of autobiographical impulse itself.

Who can really be trusted to tell their own story? Who can tell the stories of others within and against the fallibility of memory?

Slim, precise, and lyrical, Trethewey's memoir floats through the poet's magical and paracosmic childhood in Mississippi under the watchful eyes of her matriarchal guardians. Often the only child among adults, Trethewey also learned what it meant to be a woman—to navigate loss and abandonment and also the "figurative power" of ordinary things in their "meaningful juxtapositions"—from grandmothers, aunts, great-aunts, and more (Trethewey 31). These are the women who protect the author, who prepare her for an unkind world in which she, a mixed-race child, will be caught between the ire of two communities deeply invested in the protection of racial boundaries. This practice of protection is exemplified, in an early scene in the memoir—perhaps the most explicit example of postmemory across both texts—where the transference of memory, through narrative, becomes foundational to the narrator's lived experience. Here, Trethewey describes, in vivid detail, a spectacular threat of violence enacted by the local Ku Klux Klan in front of her grandmother's house:

> "Though I was too young to recall the night the Klan burned a cross in our driveway, I heard the story again and again, and the night lives in my memory as experience. I see it as though watching a scene in a documentary, silent but for the metal box fan...a whirring sound like an old movie projector" (Trethewey 36).

For black Americans, the act of sharing stories of white violence, interference, and negligence is not simply an airing of petty grievances, it is a tactic of survival. That the author frames this story as a cinematic experience is apt. It gestures towards the visual iconographies of the post-Reconstruction era that have become akin to tropes in the cultural imagination. The cross burning scene is not unlike the myriad of scenes in film and television I watched as a child in the

early 1990s: white actors styled in mid-20th century fashions, shaking their fists and yelling racial slurs and epithets, bright orange flames consuming the edges of an intersecting wooden structure, all signaling a performance of racial violence reminiscent of days long gone.

The point of the cross-burning scene, however, is not to create distance, but to signal the miniscule gap between the violence experienced by her family and the violence she lives with everyday. "[The] act of remembering," Trethewey writes, "[of] recounting that story, was meant to ensure my future safety, protection gained through knowledge and the vigilance it brings" (Trethewey 36). The "hyperawareness" imparted by this vigilance manifests viscerally within Trethewey's body, tension pricking through her skin at the sound of a certain kind of accent or the sight of a Confederate flag (Trethewey 36). Through this memory, inherited through a story repeated again and again like a refrain, Trethewey shares a particular kind of fear with her mother and grandmother that is felt deeply in the author's nervous symptom. It is a shared fear that will, in her maternal ancestors' view, holds the power to save her life.

Family photos and portraits are also a major narrative device throughout *Memorial Drive*. Images track the chronology of the author's familial life—snapshots of young Trethewey nestled lovingly between her parents, the sole focal point of their mutual tender yet cautious love, are later supplanted by the awkward portrait of her blended family, the author sitting at a distance from her stepfather and half-brother and also from her silent suffering mother. Photographs also serve as a site of narrative revision, the author looking again, and anew, at old images that tell different stories over time. Photographs, both personal and public, also perform an important narrative labor in illustrating multiple ways of looking at and through various racialized subjects, including the author herself. My examination of the photos in Trethewey's memoir echoes Hirsch's claim that, family photographs "need not disguise the internal politics of the family" but

instead must "resist transparent readings" through an embrace of their "[contradictions and ambiguities]" (Hirsch 76). In thinking through how people look differently at photographs, and the subjects in those photographs, I aim to consider how empathy is facilitated through, and resonates within, intraracial intimacies.

While Ward's birth is marked by the physiological vulnerability of her premature state, Trethewey's birth is haunted by the pageantry of revisionist history. Trethewey describes the "barrage of rebel flags lining the streets" around the hospital the day she was born celebrating Confederate Memorial Day, "a holiday glorifying the old South, the Lost Cause, and white supremacy" (Trethewey 16-17). The "paradox" of Trethewey's birth as a bi-racial child born in the American South under the threat of anti-miscegenation laws, manifests in different ways for her two parents (Trethewey 17). Her father, a curious and creative white man born in rural Nova Scotia, indoctrinates his daughter to the power of narrative and metaphor. Through him, she is challenged and encouraged by Greek mythology and ultimately taught that through the precision of language, the world itself can bend towards the writer's will. Trethewey's mother, in contrast, sees the physical and material danger that threatens her daughter in and beyond the confines of Mississippi. In her mother's view, Ward's existence is one of constant precarity, a small child bearing the weight of history against her tiny, fragile frame.

The history that Trethewey's mother perceives is manifested, in part, through a photograph of black pain and duress. Trethewey describes her mother as one who had "come into being...hemmed in, bound to a world circumscribed by Jim Crow" and, as a form of survival and protection, she learned early the "necessity of...making of one's face an inscrutable mask before whites" (Trethewey 17). This insidious education Gwendolyn received across the 1940s and 1950s is presumably influenced by both her personal lived experiences, but also the proliferation

of visual media documenting white mob violence in the mid-20th century. While Trethewey's mother saw first-hand the threat of white violence, she also was surrounded by other spectacular forms of anti-black violence in magazines and newspapers. Trethewey writes "[in] the summer of 1955, when she was eleven years old, [my mother had] seen what could happen to a black child in Mississippi who had not behaved as expected...in my grandmother's copy of *Jet* magazine, Emmett Till's battered remains, his destroyed face" (Trethewey 17). While the photographs of the young Till's mangled body—and also of his mourning mother, doubled over in agony over his open casket—have now become infamous within the US cultural imagination, there is something very intimate about how it is described in this scene. Here, Trethewey conjures for readers a private moment wherein the girl-child that would become her mother in a little more than a decade, bears witness to an act of violence, the "destroyed face" of an innocent child, that not only becomes her inheritance, but her daughter's inheritance as well.

Young Gwendolyn's connection to the photographs of Till is rooted in a particular expression of empathy that Courtney R. Baker discusses in her 2015 text *Humane Insight* which probes the ethics of seeing images of suffering and pained black bodies. In this text, Baker draws a clear distinction between the concept of the *gaze* and the act of *looking* which is the foundation of humane insight. She argues that while the gaze "[names] the dangerous look that targets and immobilizes its human objects" under the weight of oppression and dehumanization looking is "a more variegated practice" that requires vulnerability and empathy (Baker 2-3). Whereas the gaze "ignores or denies the humanity of the person being looked at," looking aims to embrace the unavoidable suffering of the pained photographic subject to "[seek] knowledge about the humanity of that person...to identify the body being looked at as a human body" worthy of recognition and respect (Baker 5). Trethewey's choice to include her mother's relationship to the

images of a battered Emmett Till, a foundational memory for many black children raised in or around the 1950s, reflects a kind of looking that recognizes mutual vulnerability. Even more, it is this act of looking, of seeing the vulnerability of the black body in the most innocuous and harmful moments, that informs how she sees her daughter, and how her daughter sees her.

Another moment in the text that illustrates the difference between the gaze and looking materializes through a photograph of Trethewey taken by her father on a family trip to Mexico. In 1969, two years after the landmark Loving v. Virginia supreme court case that federally banned anti-miscegenation laws across the country, Trethewey and her parents took a family road trip to Monterrey in the hopes of being able to "relax" in a space where "color differences might be less noticeable" (Trethewey 40). Trethewey writes:

> "I have just one photograph as a record of our journey. In it I am alone. There are mountains in the distance behind me and I am sitting on a mule...Of all the photographs of my early childhood, this one—I can see it now—shows me what each of my parents, in different ways, needed me to know. It was my father's idea to place me on the back of the mule—my father who, perhaps oblivious to his own metaphors of animal husbandry, had referred to me in one of his poems as a *crossbreed*. The photograph was perhaps his version of a linguistic joke: the sight gag of a mixed-race child riding her namesake, animal origin of the word *mulatto*" (Trethewey 41).

Trethewey's reading of this fifty-year-old snapshot reveals to readers conflicting perspectives on the experience of black life. In her father's eyes, a father who believes deeply in the individualistic power of both language and self-determination, this photograph reflects the humor and irony of antiquated attitudes. These attitudes, falling out of fashion one restrictive law at a time, are not a threat to his daughter because, to him, she represents a more hopeful futurity. In

laughing at the metaphor, in finding irony in this strange "linguistic joke," he is preparing her for a new world on the horizon, not yet seen, but seemingly inevitable in his view.

Trethewey's articulation of her parents' conflicting attitudes towards the photograph highlights the conceptual stakes surrounding blackness, and black bodies, within the particular eye of the beholder. Within the American consciousness, and by extension the narrative codes which come to shape that consciousness, blackness is not neutral presence. In her exploration of the complexities of pleasure within the economy of chattel slavery, Hartman argues that it is the "figurative capacities of blackness" that provided the plantation class pleasure through both the degradation and fetishization of the enslaved person's body. Hartman writes that the "value of blackness" is determined, in part, by its "metaphorical aptitude" meaning the capacity of black bodies to stand in as both a "[fungible] commodity" and the "imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves" (Hartman 8). Here, blackness, as concept and ideology, is projected onto the bodies of black enslaved persons through the white gaze, offers both the opportunity for "self-reflection" through an "exploration of terror, desire, fear, loathing, and longing" but it also embodies a dangerous and violent type of empathy wherein "the [white] self stands in for and subsumes the other" facilitating the total "obliteration and engulfment of the slave" (Hartman 8-9). Returning to the text, the metaphor implied in sitting a mixed-race girl on a mule is, all at once, both amusing and horrifying. The contrast in vision surrounding this photograph signifies a cultural schism between Trethewey's parents that will ultimately fracture their relationship beyond repair. Both father and mother see themselves reflected in their daughter, a common impulse that rings true in multiple ways. However, what her father is seemingly unable to understand is the critical lack of distance between his clever "sight gag" and the historical precedent sustaining his daughter's otherness.

Trethewey's capacity to elucidate the conflicting views of her parents in this brief scene is a testament to her prowess as a writer and memoirist. In this moment, she both acknowledges the gap between her parents and bridges it, inviting readers to interrogate and reorient their vision of the photograph. The material violence brought forth by the metaphor affirms what Andrews names as the "tropological truth" mediated by black autobiography ("To Tell" 18). Acknowledging the complicated and sometime hostile linguistic and rhetorical terrain navigated by ex-slave narrators, Andrews argues that within the metaphorical, readers must face the "semantic clash" between subject and modifier, between the material object or person described and the figurative element to which the material is compared ("To Tell" 11). To fully embrace this clash, readers accept both the "connotations" embodied in the metaphor as well as the reality that their "presuppositions about the subject were limited" ("To Tell" 11). "[Metaphors] do not simply adorn arguments for persuasive purposes," Andrews writes, "*Metaphors are arguments*. Their success depends greatly on the capacity of the reader to accept and explore the creative dialectic of the semantic clash until new meanings emerge from the debris of old presuppositions" (Andrews 11, my emphasis). To accept the validity of the metaphor, a reader must be open not only to its literal implications, but also the figurative potential of its subtext. In relationship to the metaphor, blackness is not neutral; the very potential of blackness within the white supremacist imagination is found it its historical ability to swallow whole the sins of systemic oppression. For 19th century ex-slave narrators, and I would argue potentially for black writers across time, the challenge of metaphor lies in gulf between what white readers know about blackness how much they are willing to imagine they do not, and cannot know, about black life.

Looking at the photograph, Trethewey's mother does not see humor nor hope. She can only see violence in the metaphor. "My mother," Trethewey writes "knowing very well what the visual metaphor meant, could not have thought it was funny...She knew that...I would ultimately be alone...carrying the invisible burdens of history, borne on the back of [that] metaphor...both bound to and propelled by it...[she] wanted only that I not be destroyed by it" (Trethewey 41-42). Immediately preceding the mention of this photograph, Trethewey describes a pivotal memory that becomes a narrative refrain across the entire memoir. In this memory Trethewey, playing in the hotel pool, almost drowns and is rescued by her mother, who herself cannot swim. This core memory, of Gwendolyn reaching for Trethewey at the edge of the pool, the sunlight "[radiating] around her head, her face like an annular eclipse, dark and ringed with light" is an image that haunts author's dreams well into adulthood (Trethewey 41). Perhaps Trethewey dreams of the moment her mother saved her life as a child because she laments that she was unable to save her mother's life so many years later. Regardless, the sequential suturing of the pool scene with the photograph illustrates mirrored moments where Trethewey, through her mother's eyes, is caught in the wake of life-threatening harm. In both scenes, an inconceivable empathy is thus facilitated through the act of Gwendolyn's looking at her daughter. This looking is undeniably wistful, girded by both immense sadness and the necessary conjecture of her daughter's undiscovered resilience.

Between mother and daughter, this act of looking, wherein mutuality and empathy are centered, flows in both directions. At the beginning and end of Trethewey's memoir she lingers on an image of her mother, a studio portrait taken shortly before her death:

> "The last image of my mother, but for the photographs taken of her body at the crime scene, is the formal portrait made only a few months before her death...For the sitting

> she'd chosen a long-sleeved black sheath, the high collar open at the throat. She does not look at the camera...her face as inscrutable as it always was...a billboard upon which nothing is written...She sits perfectly erect without looking forced or uncomfortable...I am struck with the thought that this is what she...meant to do: document herself as a woman come this far, the rest of her life ahead of her" (Trethewey 5-6).

Similar to Jordan's description of her mother's wedding portrait in *Soldier*, Trethewey's reading of her mother's portrait fixates on what can be seen, but also what is intentionally hidden within her the subject's countenance. Here, Gwendolyn is blank slate, a screen onto which her daughter projects a speculative narrative, a narrative that speaks to, and pushes against, the strategic opacity the subject deployed as a form of self-protection. In Trethewey's narrative, the portrait holds secrets; the "gloomy" and "elegiac" light peeking from behind her mother's head gesturing towards the unknowability of death, the very "darkness, emerging...from the depths of memory" (Trethewey 7-8). What matters more than the material details of the portrait is how her daughter sees it and sees in it. Trethewey is not simply trying to remember what her mothers looks like, she is looking for signs of whether her mother knew, could sense, her soon-approaching end.

Unlike the spontaneous nature of vernacular photography, portraits require intentionality and planning. Appointments are made, studios booked, and outfits are selected with a purpose in mind. While the photographer has control over the studio space and the apparatus of the camera, the subject is charged with designing the aesthetic logistics of the body itself: hair, clothing, jewelry, and makeup. Campt writes that for black subjects, portraits are simultaneously a "liberatory vehicles of agency" and a "unilateral instruments of objectification and abjection," a paradox revealing the process of possibility she names as "reassemblage in dispossession" meaning "micro-shifts in the social order of racialization that temporarily reconfigure the status

of the dispossessed...[and] redeploy relations of power in unintended ways, with unexpected consequences" (Campt 59-60). What I find most useful from Campt's interpretation of the portrait is its ambivalence. The portrait bears the capacity to empower the subject—Campt's notion of reassemblage is quite similar to Fulton's re-membering, or re-articulation, of the dead through memory, narrative, and naming—but the photograph, once taken and printed, becomes a dynamic object outside of the subject, or the photographer's control.

Whether empowerment or abjection, the portrait, like any text, can be revised, or seen again by the same person with new eyes and different narratives of the same moment. Such revision does not necessarily change the meaning of the image—images hold infinite meanings—but it does reflect the shifting desires of the onlooker. After her mother's murder, while searching her apartment for her funeral attire, Trethewey encounters the portrait again:

> "In my mother's closet I search for the outfit in which she'll be buried...I choose the black cashmere dress she wore in her last photograph—a formal portrait done in a studio only a few months earlier...I stand looking at the photograph a long time. I am still staring at it, at the glass in which I see my own reflection within hers" (Trethewey 196-197).

From the beginning of the memoir, Trethewey asserts the multiple ways she was, from birth, indelibly marked by her mother. The image of Trethewey's face reflecting on the glass pain protecting her mother's portrait, a palimpsest of familiar faces, visualizes the psychological collapse of mother and daughter. They reflect each other, but the prosthetic of the portrait also solidifies the reality that this mirroring can no longer happen face to face. The connection between the two women, their undeniable bond, manifests a practice of empathetic looking that can be traced across the entirety of the text. Considering this practice of looking, the final section of this chapter examines the myriads of ways that Trethewey and Ward position their mothers as

reflections of themselves, shaping their narrative perspectives through the intimacy of their maternal bonds.

Considering the black mother as a mirror or reflection of her daughter also highlights how seeing our mothers differently allows us to see ourselves in a new light. Ward's memoir, similar to Trethewey, sketches out a complicated matrilineal lineage that speaks to the difficulties of maintaining trustful and nurturing bonds between black women and black men. Historically, this fracture extends, in part, from the problematic legacy of the 1965 report from Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," which, among many claims, argued that a central cause for social and economic inequity was the decentering of a black patriarchal figure and the rise of a toxic black matriarchal system. The black women illustrated in Moynihan's report are caricatures, exaggerated figures of angry and intransigent black women, too masculine for comfort, and too cunning for their own good. These exaggerated tropes were later encoded in the misogynist rhetoric of black male nationalist leaders, who claimed that the social and political mobility of the black man in the post-Civil Rights era was hindered not only by broad systemic failings in the public sphere, but also by disobliging black women in the home. While a patriarchal structure of the black family explicitly depends on the invisible labor of black women, the reluctant matriarchy of Ward's text hinges on and responds to the absence of black men. Black women who are called to lead under the dire constraints of death or abandonment are perceived as a threat because such an act both acknowledges and complicates the notion of the nation-state as masculinist project.

Since Reconstruction, black women writers and activists have been publicly fighting to identify and dismantle the politically converged interests of white supremacy and black male hegemony. Survival under the systemic threat of anti-blackness and misogyny requires that

Black women must constantly shift their socio-political allegiances. If in some cases, as Ward's text exemplifies, a black matriarchy must emerge to continue one's bloodline, such a phenomenon is not without significant costs to black mothers and the children that love them. These expressions of reluctant motherhood are not necessarily about a refutation of familial bonds or care, but of the extra burden that presents itself when black women take up the space left by the void of absent, negligent, or deceased fathers. A close look at many of the black women characters in both memoirs gestures towards an experience of reluctant motherhood wherein these women's relationship to care and nurture is muddled by oppressive forces in both the public and domestic sphere.

Ward's grandmother Dorothy emerges as one of many "from a line of men and women who have fought hard to live" (Ward 45). Abandoned by her husband, Dorothy works multiple jobs to support her seven children: "She held jobs as a maid, a hairdresser, a seamstress, and finally a factory worker at a pharmaceutical plant. 'We need a woman who can work like a man.' My grandmother got that factory job after a man saw her lift and carry a full-grown hog on her shoulders" (Ward 45). Ward's retelling of her family history does not exclude or deny her patriarchal legacy; she takes care to mention the many men in her family who have worked hard to "[build] houses from the ground up with their own hands" (Ward 45). However, it is Dorothy's story that requires close attention because it exemplifies how black women, estranged from black men via death or disregard, are forced to take up both traditionally masculine and feminine roles to tend to the survival of their blood line. Dorothy being called to "work like a man" is not an exception to her duties as a maternal figure, as a black woman, it is a requirement. It is a requirement that speaks to the multiple labors that black women serve in Ward's family as the keepers of black children and the mourners of black men.

While *Men We Reaped* is undoubtably a memoir about the grief surrounding the loss of black male life, there is another performance of mourning across the text: the mourning of innocence that comes with discovering your "legacy" as a black woman. It is not simply that black women are made to do men's work, but that that black mothers in Ward's family, often as the sole providers for their children, are tasked with taking on an excessive amount of traditionally masculine *and* feminine labors. Across *Men We Reaped* there is a pervasive generational narrative of black daughters, often elder sisters, forced early in life to act as caregiver to others, first to resentful younger siblings and then, inevitably, to their stifled husbands and trepidatious children. This is best exemplified in Ward's conflictual relationship with her mother. Recounting her mother's childhood, Ward details how early the young girl was parentified against her will: "[My] mother was the mother figure in her own family…This set my mother apart from her siblings: she was one of them and not. The role she assumed made her lonely and isolated her...She resented the strength she had to cultivate, the endurance demanded of women in the rural South" (Ward 19). This description of coming early into an unwanted inheritance of maternal responsibility alludes to Ward's own inevitable fate when her parents' divorce forces the protagonist to become the thing neither she, nor her mother, ever wanted to be.

As a small child, Ward sees her mother as an embittered authoritarian, especially compared to the carefree nature of her father. After her parents' separation Ward is called to take on more work in the domestic sphere, mirroring her mother's experience: "My mother taught me that I had a new responsibility. I was the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter, and I had to do as she had done and help keep the household together" (Ward 133). As the author approaches her teenage years, she is forced out of childhood early, mourning not only childhood innocence, but her capacity to see a path in life divergent from her mother's. In outlining her mother's history,

she anticipates her own future and collapses the stories of herself and her mother. Even more, in the wake of her father's absence, and also under the pressure of her mother's expectations, teenage Ward takes on a deep self-loathing: "I looked at myself and saw a walking embodiment of everything the world around me seemed to despise: an unattractive, poor, Black woman. Undervalued by her family, a perpetual workhorse. Undervalued by society...This seed buried itself in my stomach and bore fruit" (Ward 135). In this transition from child to eldest daughter, shame and frustration flourishes inside of the Ward's psyche; seeing her fate as unavoidable, she turns her blame inward. I align the relationship between Ward and her mother within the greater theme of mirrors and reflections performed by Trethewey in her description of her mother's portrait. Ward sees herself in her mother—she literally finds it difficult to locate any aspect of her father's features on her own face—and at first, this mirroring is a burden. What remedies this, however, is a shift in perspective facilitated through storytelling and vulnerability.

After a trip to the store, in the sanctuary of an empty car, Ward's mother confesses to her daughter the nuances of her life, her strained marriage, and her the foundation of her seemingly insurmountable expectations for her eldest daughter. Ward writes: "At thirteen, I glimpsed something of what my mother had suffered...I knew something of [her] burdens, some of which mirrored my own...I felt keenly what it meant to be my mother's daughter. For a little while, I was wiser than I had the maturity to be, and I did what I could. I listened" (Ward 160). While Ward ostensibly understands some aspects of her mother's biography, it is at this point that she is hearing, and taking in, her mother's story, a narrative shaped not only by the teller's perspective, but also by her desire to be understood. Once she looks at her mother, sees her with empathy and understanding, Ward is able to access their shared vulnerability. Neither of them is truly safe in the world or in the home, but they are, temporarily, safe in each other's mutual regard.

Whether through the quiet performative submission within the system of slavery, or through the daring articulation of care which demanded freedom be sought at all costs, I am deeply interested in how black women's life writing centers fugitivity and flight during and in the afterlife of slavery. Joycelyn K Moody reminds us that "to disregard black women's fugitivity is to risk misreading black women's lives and life writings. Anti-blackness everywhere has always required black women to construct a fugitive selfhood that exploits and subverts the very invisibility that white patriarchal imperialism imposes on them" (Moody 636). Fully understanding black women and black mother's perspectives in these memoirs is to accept the ways that fugitivity manifests as acts of defense and defensiveness, various modes of self-preservation, and daily quotidian survival.

My aim for this chapter was to use fugitivity to create a bridge between black women ex-slave narrators in the 19th century and black women memoirists in the 21st. I focus on the relationships between mothers and daughters because, across time, similar themes of love, longing, and grief remain emergent. As Delaney and Jackson's texts' show, narratives of enslavement ended with the declaration of freedom, but also the lamentation of loss. Brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, lovers and children, all were lost to the system of slavery whether separated by the intervention of slave masters or the fugitive pursuit of freedom. What defines *narratives in the afterlife of slavery*, I argue, is not simply the acknowledgement of loss, but the refusal to tout that personal and individual survival is enough to satiate such loss. While many ex-slave narrators quickly move past the pain of losing loved ones, efficiently moving to a more uplifting proclamation of liberty obtained, Ward and Trethewey sits in their grief, they write from it, interrogating it and elevating that interrogation above the triumphant declaration of

freedom and an unfree world. It is a choice that disrupts the reader's expectation that their stories will conclude with how they have *overcome* that which can never be, a feature, I argue, that differentiates it from the ex-slave narrators that preceded them.

Returning to Barthes, he argues that the pleasure of reading is bifurcated into two paths: "plassir," the *comfortable* reading that "grants euphoria" by affirming the reader's existential paradigms, and "jouissance," a disruptive reading practice that, by way of shattering the reader's ego, gives way to an arduous but indispensable *bliss* (Barthes 14). I argue that these memoirs, in disrupting our expectation of triumph and heroism, in sitting with and not moving past the weight of grief, troubles the catharsis traditionally expected from black memoir. Such a disruption is not a refutation of closure, but a strategic embrace of the impossibility of closure for black women, and black people, contending with the ongoing project of black life in the afterlife of slavery. Both *Memorial Drive* and *Men We Reaped* offer readers closure that roots itself in the impossibility of reclamation and invite us to sit with the impossibility of such longing.

Speculative Hunger:
Saidiya Hartman, Longing, and the Antitheoretical Impulse

Just shy of two weeks before Christmas, I boarded a 6:00 am train with one close friend and a handful of her co-workers for a day trip to Washington D.C. The unknown majority were black women who worked as teachers and support staff for a private school planted by the Episcopal Church next to a long-standing low-income housing community in Richmond. We reserved tickets at the National Museum of African American History. Almost immediately as we entered the building, the factions split. Within the wider matrix of bearable associates, close and familiar friends gravitated to each other. Somewhere towards the end of the 18th century, I was alone and staring down at a first edition copy of Phyllis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. To the left of the encased book, stood a life-size bronze statue of Wheatley, modestly dressed but undeniably regal, shyly grasping a downturned quill pen in her hands.

I should admit that, with regard to Wheatley, I have been quite ambivalent, historically taking her presence for granted. This is, I believe, due in part to a certain overexposure we cast on the forebearers of any great literary canon. Wheatley's literary talent is something akin to a mythology. In her biography, historians and critics have sought out an origin story, that which reveals a cohesive history amongst the chaos of everyday moments. Although I was familiar with Wheatley's place within the mythos of African American Literature, I had never seen a physical copy of her work. The narrow book stand forced me to stand directly on top of the glass and peer downward to read. Had the book been lying flat, the rust-stained edges of the faded pages would have been less noticeable. Instead, they clustered together into two dark columns, framing the open pages displaying her poem "On Recollection." In this poem, Wheatly implores Mneme, the

Grecian muse of memory, with both praise and self-lamentation. Wheatley desires to retain all her memories, no matter how far back they span, but also grieves the burden of self-awareness she, or anyone, would possess having full record of their lived experiences. If the title is to be taken seriously, this poem is not just about the act of remembering. It is a mandate to gather up, time and time again, the memories that make us who we are, memories we, over time, often let slip away.

I was not familiar with "On Recollection." When I approached the stand, I anticipated either the commonly displayed frontispiece—a bonneted Wheatley sitting and looking over an open book, forever frozen, cradling her pen in one hand and her chin in another—or, what I perceive to be Wheatley's most read poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America." In her text *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America*, Tara Bynum documents her initial experience encountering Wheatley's infamous poem:

> "I read into this poem a tradition that I needed to tell me stories of collective suffering…or resistance to white supremacy and heroic accounts of overcoming…I expected Wheatley to discuss slavery and the very public matters of her existence all the time. I needed her to memorialize a past that I presumed was dependent upon the suffering and resistance of her racial body…My misreading privileged slavery and the master's gaze as the sole site of a racialized and cultural becoming. I expected Wheatley to serve as a 'first' in the makings of a literary tradition made real…by racialized suffering and a desire for literacy" (Bynum 29-30).

In transparently describing the interiority of her reading practice, Bynum exemplifies the cultural baggage potential readers bring with them in the act of interpretation. The *heroic* Wheatley is forever called on to both endure and to fight, to anticipate in her verses the needs and desires of

black readers unborn and unimagined in her lifetime. Such expectations are not crafted in a vacuum. They are conditioned through historical, pedagogical, and cultural narratives that shape the limited conditions in which black life is allowed to be useful to the reading public. Bynum's "misreading" articulates the burden of the black literary tradition that black art be perpetually evidentiary of black humanity insomuch as said humanity is seized, through exceptional grit, from the hands of terrible white people.

As I stood in the museum looking at Wheatley's statue, I was immediately reminded of an essay by poet and novelist Honorée Fanonne Jeffers I discovered in the 2016 collection *The Fire This Time.* In this essay, Jeffers describes her journey researching both Wheatley and her husband, Peter, a man historically maligned as the ruination of Wheatley's phenomenal career. Jeffers describes the limitations and biases that Bynum and other researchers of black life have discovered in the material annals of the archive. At the end of her essay, no closer to knowing the truth of their tumultuous marriage, Jeffers turns to her imagination to create a soft space for John and Phillis:

> "I imagine Phillis and John, what their moments together might have been. Maybe Peters thought Wheatley was beautiful. He was drawn to her delicate face, to her very dark skin, her full lips, her tight, kinky hair, to the ring in her nose that might have been an ornament she carried from across the water...And maybe Wheatley thought Peters handsome. He might have looked like her relatives, back in the Gambia that she wrote about. She and Peters might have shared a hankering for a place that lived only in their memories...Maybe at night, when they settled down together in their rickety bed, they talked in whispers, telling each other stories of that faraway place across the water. Folktales or proverbs that had been passed down." (Jeffers 62-63).

There is an unabashed longing in this scene. It is a longing for black intimacy, soft and messy, and it is also a longing for both a home and homeland to which neither Wheatley nor Jeffers can return. Even more, there is a tenderness to this scene in how Jeffers imagines the wedded pair, connected by both an irretrievable past and a sanguine future. History has no need for this type of love story. It cannot topple institutions. It cannot amend legislation. It cannot change the disheartening reality of Wheatley's impoverished end.

I cite both Bynum and Jeffers' reading experiences of Wheatley for a myriad of reasons. First, as readers of their work, I am drawn to the emotional core of their desires for Wheatley. I am more curious about Wheatley when I read their work because of the way they are drawn to her. In this engagement both writers reveal less about Wheatley's life, and more about the critical zeal which motivates their study. Secondly, both Bynum and Jeffers exemplify how readers might expect a particular hermeneutical exchange with those we have elevated to the utmost heights of black authorship. This exchange trades aspiration for inspiration, wherein interpretation reveals not only new understandings of the work, but of the social, political, and (sometimes) ontological riddle of blackness itself. Finally, as Bynum and Jeffers passionately project onto Wheatley the shadows of their personal and professional longings, both writers represent, and complicate, Hartman's claim that the "fungibility" of the enslaved "makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of other' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" ("Scenes" 28). To be sure, I am not comparing Bynum or Jeffers to slave owners. Such a comparison would be a disingenuous engagement with their work, its critical goals, and the context from which it emerges. However, in reading their interior desires surrounding Wheatley, I am most interested in interrogating the underlying, and often unspoken,

desires and longing which fuels research about black life in the academy, particularly as it pertains to the archive.

In previous chapters, I have explored various modes of black lifewriting, modeling reading practices that decenter the spectacular forms of white supremacy, choosing instead to consider how black people see each other, their community, and themselves. Centering black intimacy and interiority across my analysis of women authored ex-slave narratives, essays, poetry, and memoir reflects my commitment to the ideal that black life and black writing, regardless of genre, has aesthetic and intellectual value beyond anti-racism. Concluding this project, I shift my gaze towards writing and scholarship about black life, produced by black women, in the academy. The final chapter of my dissertation project focuses on autotheory, specifically the autotheoretical scholarship of Saidiya Hartman, to examine the relationship between self-narrativization and knowledge formation, and how that relationship is affected by the presence and perspective of black femininity. I am motivated to think through these relationships for multiple reasons. Firstly, given this project's dedication to interrogating black lifewriting as a broad category encompassing multiple genres and forms, I believe that autotheoretical texts are a vital opportunity trace the autobiographical impulse of black women scholars *as writers*. Examining autotheory informs both how we understand the aesthetic capabilities of black lifewriting—how well these writers deploy language to garner deep affective responses from readers—as well as its ideological boundaries.

Secondly, as this project is deeply concerned with the ethics of reading and the responsibilities of readers, autotheory deserves special attention due to its explicit yet elusive brand of didacticism. Fiction or poetry are genres in which the autobiographical is granted a protective veil through the guise of strategic *unfactuality,* and even creative nonfiction which,

fully embracing the bias of the narrator, remains truthful without the necessarily being *the* truth. Autotheory, by contrast, has the propensity of being caught in a triple bind, wherein readers are fixated on the rigor of the scholarship, the integrity of the scholar as narrator, and the viability of the narrator/scholar's memory as a critical analytic. Lastly, considering the recent proliferation of genre-bending memoiristic monographs from writers like Frank Wilderson III, Christina Sharpe, and Jennifer Nash, conversations surrounding the ethics of black autotheory are vital to how we understand future iterations of knowledge and meaning making surrounding black life. As Vilashini Coopan notes, for black, brown, and/or colonized writers, autotheory emerges at "the locale of a writing that envisions a place beyond racism's blanket negation" functioning as "both plaint and paradise" in the determination of anti-blackness' scope and in imagining a world beyond it (Coopan 590). Given this high bar, I am deeply interested in what readers, in and beyond the academy, ultimately seek from texts that aim to elucidate the problem of antiblackness, often using their lives as evidence of that problem, while also refuting the idea that it is something that can be solved.

The impact of Hartman's intellectual labor within and beyond the academy is immensurable. Her first book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, published in 1997, was a groundbreaking exploration of the historical, psychological, and philosophical conditions of chattel slavery in the American consciousness. Deeply regarded for her prowess as an archival researcher, Hartman's arguments about subjugation and resistance, the relationship between slavery and selfhood, as well as the complicated entanglement of power and pleasure—which has been vital to previous chapters in this project—continues to reverberate through contemporary scholarship about black life across

multiple disciplines. Hartman reflects on her time researching in Ghana in her second text *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* published in 2007. In this text, which will be a focal point of this chapter, Hartman uses memoir to frame her interrogation of history, memoir, kinship, and fugitivity within and against cultural narratives about slavery in Ghana and the United States. Her most recent publication, 2019's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, examines the daily relationships and experiences of black communities in Philadelphia and New York at the turn of the 20th century. This last text was well received in both the academy and by the general reading public, earning her a National Book Critics Circle Award.

Wayward Lives is a culmination of Hartman's most lauded, and divisive, intervention into the field of History, the research and writing process she calls *critical fabulation*. A novel approach to archival research, critical fabulation first emerged in her 2008 essay "Venus in Two Acts." Broadly, it is an approach to creating scholarship that attempts to think beyond the limitations of the archive. For researchers interested in the personal and private lives of the enslaved, the limitations of the archive extend from a violent negligence that reflects the fungibility and disposability of black life within the Atlantic slave trade. Named in part for narratologist Mieke Bal's concept of the fabula—the events in narratives caused by and thusly experienced through various human and non-human actors—Hartman describes critical fabulation as a method that guides her writing practice:

> "By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story...I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event...and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis 'what happened when' and by exploiting the 'transparency of sources' as fictions of history, I wanted to make

> visible the production of disposable lives...if only by first imagining it...By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse" ("Venus" 11-12).

Regarding method, the most discomforting aspect of critical fabulation is its enthusiastic and shameless embrace of the *speculative.* This is an anxiety deeply felt within the constraints of History, a field that sees the usefulness of narrative as something to constantly keep in check with the authority of primary documents, most often discovered in archival collections. While it is easy to latch onto the unseriousness of imagination as an analytical tool within the academy, it is also prudent to acknowledge that Hartman's investment in "[toppling] the hierarchy of discourse" is an idea that, while conceptually exciting, is inherently disturbing in the material world. How do you trust even the brightest researcher to imagine a past that is not tainted by their desires for, and their disappointments in, the present moment?

Since the publication of "Venus in Two Acts," multiple scholars have responded to the viability of critical fabulation as a credible scholarly method with skepticism, to say the least. Notably, in his 2016 essay "Freedom's Surprise: Two Paths Through Slavery's Archives," Kazanjian takes Hartman to task, arguing, in part, that the foundational logic of critical fabulation is flawed. Pushing against the notion that the archive can even be held accountable for the very grievances Hartman asserts, Kazanjian writes: "as Hartman's essay brings us to the verge of a concerted reckoning with the [archive]...it also holds that archive responsible for answering...questions of who did what, where, when, and why. My concern here is that...the unverifiable and the empirical conflate" (Kazanjian 135). The foundation for this dissent hinges on Kazanjian's reading of Hartman's unrequited desires for an "extant autobiographical

narrative" detailing the life of Venus or any unnamed woman who survived the horrors of the middle passage ("Venus" 3). In his article Kazanjian laments autobiography as a primarily 19th century Anglo-American form that, when deployed by black writers, resulted in texts "negotiated and improvised with whites who held the purse-strings and wielded the editorial pens" (Kazanjian 136). While I, aided by the research and criticism of thinkers like Foster, Andrews, McBride, and Roy, have contested such a limited scope of black autobiography written by formerly enslaved authors, I am fascinated by Kazanjian's view that autobiography, or better yet the desire for black autobiography, is the fatal flaw in Hartman's method. To argue that the "genre of autobiography" is not an "ontological necessity" and, even more "does not epitomize the archives of slavery" is not an argument I desire to endorse or refute (Kazanjian 136). However, I would argue that such an instance misunderstands the longing articulated in Hartman's essay and, more importantly, misrepresents the strategic function of *autos* in her essay.

I am, to no one's surprise, very ambivalent about the methodological debate surrounding Hartman's embrace of the speculative. There seems, as with any theory or method, the potential to do this kind of work well, and also to do it poorly. I am instead drawn to critical fabulation in this analysis because I am fascinated at *how* Hartman fabulates, how the autotheoretical functions within that fabulation, and why so many contemporary scholars are turning to autotheory to frame scholarly interventions about blackness in the wake of slavery and its afterlives. Thinking through these interests, first, I will outline a definition and genealogy for autotheory as a scholarly practice and locate Hartman's work within that tradition. I will then closely read "Venus in Two Acts" paying careful attention to Hartman's narrative presence in the essay and how that affects its overall structure. Next, I will consider how the autotheoretical

impulse emerges in *Lose Your Mother*, specifically how the presence, and absence, of Hartman's ancestors in the historical record stands in as a precursor to the longing that motivates her later articulation of critical fabulation. Finally, I will consider how the autotheoretical impulse functions as a rhetorical tool within the larger scope of Hartman's argument, a tool that is often supported by the seduction of *beautiful* writing.

Before diving into Hartman's writing, it is prudent to consider the definitive contours of autotheory and its role in the production of philosophy, theory, and other critical expressions of interrogation. In her 2021 text *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, Lauren Fournier sketches out a comprehensive genealogy of autotheory as a discrete critical genre and writing practice spanning centuries, deployed by some of the most foundational thinkers across Western philosophy. Broadly defined, autotheory describes a "self- conscious way of engaging with theory—as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice—alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment" (Fournier 7). Fournier traces the earliest examples of autotheoretical expression to Saint Augustine's spiritual autobiography, aptly named *Confessions.* She also cites 16th century French philosopher Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* as an early expression to autotheory. Often cited as a foundational text within the field of creative nonfiction, Montaigne's *Essais* were a series of philosophical musings describing the frank, uncomfortable, and arguably embarrassing aspects of the author's embodiment. Across the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries she cites the works of Rousseau, Kant, Marx, and Nietzsche for displaying autotheoretical underpinnings. However, Fournier notes how autotheory was deployed by marginalized thinkers like W.E.B. DuBois and Frantz Fanon to both frame their philosophies on race and identity, but also to make an argument for the value of their often-contested humanity.

While the term autotheory first appeared in Stacey Young's 1997 text *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*, it began to proliferate within the contemporary academic zeitgeist after the 2016 publication of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*. Nelson's text was a hybrid form of memoir and theory that focused on the author's changing body during pregnancy alongside the experience of her transitioning partner while wrestling with concepts from thinkers like Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Gilles Deleuze. *The Argonauts* sparked a myriad of conversations about the form and function of autotheory within the academy, as well as criticism surrounding the ethics of disclosure. However, the most important genealogy for Fournier's project is represented by 20th century women writers, theorists, and/or Feminists including Zora Neale Hurston, Audre Lorde, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, bell hooks and more. This tradition reflects Fournier's claim that autotheory, as we now understand it, is a "fundamentally politicized mode of feminist writing" allowing those residing "on the edges of art and academia" to ultimately "redefine what it means to theorize" (Fournier 26). Similar to DuBois and Fanon, these women use personal experience, including and especially embodied experiences, to not only challenge the limitation of theoretical perspectives in the academy, but also to argue for their bodies, and bodies similar to them, to be seen as a viable and critical sources of knowledge production.

Sitting with both *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts," I am interested in how Hartman uses an autotheoretical approach to illustrate the stakes of critical fabulation as well as its immediacy within the field of History and Black Studies. It is the inclusion of the *autobiographical I* in her scholarship that, I argue, fully articulates a particular kind of longing and mourning which motivates her work, a longing that I believe is often obscured within the broader rhetorical performance of objectivity in the academy. Similar to Cheryl Wall's

articulation of the *autobiographical impulse* I am interested in how Hartman, and black scholars broadly, engage in what Fournier describes as the *autotheoretical impulse*, meaning the compulsion to "critically theorize and philosophize from the perspective of someone who is clearly subjective and embodied" and to ultimately "understand one's self as part of one's practice of making work" (Fournier 67). While Hartman does not use autobiographical framing in all or even most of her work, when she does choose to follow the autobiographical impulse, the result forces readers to encounter her, to see the humanity in her work, including and especially the messiness and disappointment that comes with archival research. In this encounter, whether as scholars, students, or some hybrid of both, readers of her work are also encouraged to consider how their embodied experience touches, and ultimately imprints upon, the scholarship we create.

Fleshing Out Bare Bones

In the first few paragraphs of "Venus in Two Acts" Hartman's *autos* is strategically shrouded, lurking behind the conditional presence of Michel Foucault ("I could say after a famous philosopher...") and hiding amidst the plurality of the scientific "we": "*We* stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life...*We* only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her" ("Venus" 2 my emphasis). This essay begins with the story of an unnamed "dead girl" because it must. This is her story. More than the overseer, the slave ship captain, or even scholar who names this dead girl Venus—named, of course, after Sara, South Africa's stolen Hottentot whose name was also forgotten for so many years in the records of history—the reader must understand the import of this dead girl's demise. Therefore, before Hartman emerges as a narrator of her own unrequited desires, she invokes "we" as a means of

pulling in the reader, making them culpable in this historiographic messiness. We fall headfirst into this narrative, stumble through the darkness with Hartman as scholar and narrator, an ever-growing plurality of selves witnessing this weighty absent presence. Even before the reader is fully cognizant of the essay's central claim, when Hartman declares that "the archive is...a death sentence, a tomb", through the deployment of the "we," she compels readers to see themselves as mourners.

When Hartman first emerges in the narrative as an independent "I", what Smith and Watson deem the "Historical I," she comes bearing her desires, her unfettered wanting, her unguarded longing. Hartman writes "But *I want* to say more than this. *I want* to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. *I want* to tell a story about two girls capable of retrieving what remains dormant...without committing further violence in my own act of narration. It is a story predicated upon impossibility" ("Venus" 2, my emphasis). With regards to the tyranny of grammatical rules, I am somewhere between disinterest and disdain, but there is something warm and disarming about Hartman's choice to start the first sentence of this paragraph with a conjunction. It is familiar and conversational, as if, sitting directly across from you, she breaks a long and pregnant silence, unfinished thoughts assembled into sentences closer to fragments than declarations. Her "but" is an interjection, piercing through the aforementioned limitations of the archive, but also the very flow of the essay.

It is not simply that Hartman is critiquing the archive of slavery, she is accusing it, demanding that it give her back something she did not realize had, slowly and over time, been taken from her. Hartman's longing drives the momentum of this essay: "*I wanted* to write a romance that exceeded the fictions of history...*I longed* to write a new story, one unfettered by the constraints of...the archive...which enabled me to augment and intensify its fictions"

("Venus" my emphasis 9). This refusal to perform objectivity, a contrived performance that so often drowns the active present/presence of the scholar into the staticky haze of passive voice, becomes a righteous tantrum. Hartman's desires are positioned as an analytic in their own right, worthy of space, consideration, and interrogation. Undoubtedly, she lays out a series of well written, deeply researched, and logically sound critiques—the devastating carelessness of primary documents and records written in the hands of enslavers; the devious capacities of narrative; the constellations of violences, both spectacular and insidious, extending like live wires from the past into our present moment. However, running through all of these arguments is a critical voice, almost breathless in its exertion, that gestures towards Hartman's visceral investment in, and response to, the incalculable loss she describes.

If, as Hartman writes, the author was "engendered" by the perpetually incomplete history of the Atlantic slave trade, then we must sit with, or at least consider, that the "pain experienced in [her] encounter with the scraps of the archive," the pain that motivates her to create a new critical and aesthetic mode in critical fabulation, is not simply an intellectual dilemma ("Venus" 4). It is a pain deeply felt and personally experienced. Even more, despite the specificity of the critical issue—there is a limit to those who choose to engage with the painstaking work necessary to probe archival collections—it is a pain framed through a familiar language of loss and mourning. While it is unlikely that the majority of readers are familiar with archival methodologies, it is more than likely that any reader has experienced, whether personal or professional, some form of grief. Hartman's rhetorical performance in this essay aims to reach readers through the unifying experience of loss, and this performance is effectively observed when she interjects her longing into the paragraphs. Hartman writes: "I wanted to represent the affiliations severed and remade in the hollow of the slave ship...But in the end I was forced to

admit that I wanted to console myself and to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic" ("Venus" 9). Here, Hartman admits the limitation not of her skill, but of her hypothesis, the supposition that the archive, with its promise of authority, could provide the answers to the questions that drive her research. Even more, in a moment of strategic vulnerability, she reveals to readers that her foray into the archive is driven, in an existential sense, by a deep need for consolation, the need to seek comfort or mitigation from the anxiety of seeking black life bound by the record. This brief confession, the naming of her need for solace in the wake of her necessary but uneasy labor, sets the stakes of her work, and the stakes of critical fabulation, by revealing what most scholars know but seldom say: that the work we do is, at times, unbearably personal.

This is not the first time that the archive has let her down. "The loss of stories," Hartman writes, "sharpens the hunger for them" ("Venus" 8). Hunger is a logical response to the need, and desire, for satiation that holds within it the possibility for seemingly irrational acts. In thinking of Hartman's autotheoretical impulse as one responding to both the logics and irrationality of her particular hunger, I turn to *Lose Your Mother*, where, I argue, we can better understand how the questions proposed by "Venus in Two Acts" were anticipated by an earlier loss, one that hits Hartman, both literally and metaphorically, closer to home.

In a 2008 interview with Patricia Saunders, Hartman admits her own hesitancy about using autobiography in *Lose Your Mother*. Describing herself as "an incredibly private person," she concedes to Saunders: "I never thought that I would write anything that anyone could attach the label memoir to. I didn't want to write that book. That's not me, and we know all the critiques of confessional discourse" (Saunders 10, 4). These "critiques" Hartman refers to are

plentiful and not limited to autotheory. The writer who sees their work as a mode of confession is prone to making the embarrassing mistake of assuming absolution in their scholarship, or even worse, conflating their sins with the anxieties of the reader. When successful, such familiarity with the reader can be create a deeply intimate bond. However, too much focus on the personal and autobiographical risks alienating the reader, or even worse, boring them. This risk is significantly higher when it comes to tracing the history of the Atlantic slave trade wherein the scholar must anticipate multiple vectors of discomfort in the subject matter, most explicit among these being the different but contiguous feelings of shame shared by both the descendants of the enslaved and/or slave owners.

Hartman ultimately attributes her decision to follow the autotheoretical impulse in her second book to DuBois:

> "[For] me, DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn* are critical models. DuBois is always using what Spivak and Chandler would describe as the autobiographical example, which is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them...I wanted to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction. For me, that had to be embodied in physical story, and I was the one who had to hazard the journey" ("Fugitive Dreams" 5).

Hartman's invocation of DuBois and the autobiographical example directly confronts the anxieties surrounding confessional discourse that she mentions earlier in the interview. To say what the example is not about—navel gazing as it were—is to confront the ways that less than stellar examples of autotheoretical discourse use the self not in service to the scholar's guiding

critical question, but instead as a means of writing their own heroic, or tragic, journey. Here, the DuBoisian mode of autotheoretical rhetoric uses the self as a tool, the same as one might use primary and secondary sources, to offer the reader a pathway to understanding the ways that knowledge is produced, and reproduced, through an ever-shifting lens of bias, power, and influence. While this model is valuable in the broad sense, Hartman takes time to note how significant this model is for black scholars and writers in her reference to the "violence of abstraction." While any figure in history has the propensity to be transfigured or transformed by the mechanizations of narrative, Hartman's reference to abstraction speaks to the intentional ways that blackness, in the imaginative hold of white supremacy, are intentionally abstracted into flesh, the fungible non-human matter that binds and bolsters the exorbitant historiography of whiteness.

Building on her deployment of DuBois, I also read Hartman's turn towards the autotheoretical, particularly the way that she uses personal experience to address macro and micro processes of historical erasure, as an expression of what Édouard Glissant calls the *prophetic vision of the past*. In his essay "The Quarrel with History" Glissant dissects Hegel's claim that African peoples hold no real history. In this, Glissant draws a line of demarcation between the *history/histories* of colonized communities with "History with a capital H" meaning the "highly functional fantasy of the West" that anchors the belief that "it alone 'made' the history of the World" (Glissant 64). History, then, emerges as an intellectual domination of colonized people's histories, meeting its "[end]" at the anticipated moment when "those people once reputed to be without history come together" (Glissant 64). Glissant's confrontation with the history of colonized people, and quite specifically those in the French Caribbean, does not aim to negate the idea, nor to reclaim it, but instead he positions it as a point in the greater

constellation of the human experience that might provide colonized writers a place of departure from the oppressive linearity and overdetermined trajectory of Western History.

Glissant deploys the notion of *nonhistory* as a useful diagnosis for the colonized writer, a word that names the greater existential destabilization that History has blamed on the individual and collective lack and lag of black peoples across the diaspora. Glissant writes that in the French Carribean history is "characterized by ruptures" namely the "brutal dislocation [of] the slave trade," a phenomenon that has split the continuum between nature—a people's relationship with their environment—and culture—meaning the people's relation to the accumulation of shared experiences (Glissant 61). The fracturing of this continuum presents, in part, as the "erasure of the collective memory" that constructs the history of black Caribbean peoples, resulting instead in a violent past that, while seemingly immaterial, is "obsessively present" within the colonized psyche (Glissant 62, 63). It is, then, the "duty of the writer" to explore and interrogate this nonhistory, to think through it as something more than mere "nostalgic lament," to use the momentum of writing to craft a "prophetic vision of the past" that directly faces this fracture to produce, echoing Campt, something inevitable but not yet fully realized (Glissant 64).

Turning to *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman's first foray into fabulation is set against her own confrontation with nonhistory and the erasure of collective memory within her own family. This erasure first emerges in the text with the introduction of her maternal great-grandfather "Poppa" Moses. Hailing from Montgomery, AL, it is through her great-grandfather that Hartman is first made to confront her connection to the history of slavery. On a summer trip down south in 1974, Poppa Moses, anticipating the end of this yearly tradition, takes Hartman and her brother on a long drive. Touring the "monochromatic brown stretch of farmland" Poppa Moses points out the many farms that, once black owned, now fell into the possession of the white-owned big

"agribusiness" ("Lose" 9). He tells the children the story of his grandfather's farm, which was stolen by a duplicitous white neighbor who had previously "[tried] to drive him off the land" through poisoning the well and killing the livestock, ultimately succeeding in his theft with a "fraudulent deed" ("Lose" 10). Poppa Moses, speaking of the "dark days" of slavery in a way that Hartman had yet to experience, instills in the author a key lesson about blackness and dispossession: "to be landless was to be a slave" ("Lose" 10).

This dispossession refers not only to the material land, but also to familial history and memory. It is through Poppa Moses that Hartman first hears of her maternal ancestors Ellen and Ella—Moses' grandmother and mother respectively—whose limited biography inspires the author's first experience with the pull of fabulation. Born in Tennessee, Ellen was a house slave who worked for a mule trader who sold her, quite suddenly, while accompanying her master on a trip to Alabama. Ella, Ellen's daughter, was born in Alabama only a few years before the end of slavery. The story of Ella, as told by her son to his great-granddaughter, is direct, efficient, and sparse: "A soldier rode up to my ma and told her she was free" ("Lose" 11). While Hartman does claim that Moses' lack of detail regarding his mother might be a result of his own grief, still guarding his pain at having lost her too early, this line anticipates the sparseness of black life housed the archive she later describes in "Venus in Two Acts." The "bare bones" biography of Ella provided to Hartman by Poppa Moses "stunned" the author: "Her life consisted of two essential facts—slavery and freedom juxtaposed to mark the beginning and end of the chronicle. But this is what slavery did; it stripped your history to bare facts and precious details" ("Lose" 11). Ella's story reminds me of the many emancipatory side quests I encountered in women-authored ex-slave narratives. While Jacobs dedicates an entire section of her narrative to details her brother William's escape, Delaney dedicates only a few lines to her sister Nancy who

escapes from Philadelphia years before reuniting with her sister and mother in Toronto and Jackson, overjoyed at her sister Hester's escape from Kentucky, never finds closure in a reunion. I mention these stories to highlight a key difference in intention. While Delaney and Jackson only offer a few lines in their narrative to illustrate the tails of their loved ones' escape from bondage, they do so to intentionally to inscribe these lives into the greater narrative of history. I believe what Hartman mourns in the "bare bones" of Ella's story, of Moses' story about his mother, is what little remains from the years of intentional forgetting and self-inflicted silence.

The short family history that Poppa Moses shares with Hartman in her childhood sets her on an iterant path which eventually leads to the archives of slavery. She is initially propelled on this path not necessarily by a desire to understand slavery intellectually or critically, but by a clear desire to flesh out the faded maternal figures in her family. "The gaps and silences in my family were not unusual," Hartman writes, "slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable" ("Lose" 13-14). This notion of unspeakability emerges as significant in my reading because it gestures to the ways that the descendants of the enslaved, in holding into the shame of slavery, a holding that is generational and at times unconscious, participate in the erasure and ruptures of history regarding the lives of the enslaved. As Hartman traces her childhood education of chattel slavery, and the subsequent era of Jim Crow that followed emancipation, she confronts how much has been forgotten in the name of, as her mother says, not "[talking] of such things" ("Lose" 12). Such non-telling is a symptom of shame, the shame associated with the dirty business of creating, preserving, participating, and surviving the ecosystem of chattel slavery. This shame did not belong to the enslaved, but was ideologically cast onto them in the wake of emancipation as an act of historical revisionism and moral preservation by the plantation class in the South. Shame begets forgetting and, as Trethewey reminds us, "there is a danger in

willed forgetting; too much can be lost" (Trethewey 52).

In the midst of this forgetting, key details survive—Ellen's predilection for her corncob pipe, memories of photographs describing her great-great-grandmother Polly's "round" and "dark chocolate face"—only as "fragments of stories" passed down, patchy and unfinished, from one family member to another ("Lose" 13). These unfinished portraits of her maternal forebearers fuels Hartman's hunger for stories. However, in the face of this familial dearth, she feeds herself with fabulation. Fleshing out the bare bones of Ella's story, Hartman writes: "At twelve I became obsessed with the maternal great-great-grandmother I had bever known, endlessly constructing and rearranging the scene...I tried to fill in the blank spaces of the story, but I never succeeded" ("Lose" 12). Long before Hartman's eventual encounter with the archive, where she will find, and lose, a glimmer of her great-great-grandmother Polly in pages of slave testimony from Alabama, the need for fabulation emerges. These stories about Ellen, Ella, and Polly anticipate the dead girls buried in the tomb of the archive described in "Venus in Two Acts." Looking at both texts, the autotheoretical impulse emerges not as an indulgence or navel gazing, but as a rhetorical articulation of the method Hartman calls on in the midst of the personal and institutional forgetting of enslaved people's lives.

Detours and Failed Returns: Against Reclamation

Returning to Kazanjian's article, I want to articulate a few dissents, not pertaining to his overall argument, but to his reading of Hartman's intention behind the call for critical fabulation. Kazanjian's rebuttal to Hartman emerges in two distinct ways. First, he pushes against the limitations of Ango-American archives of slavery by calling for a more expansive investigation of slavery's archives across the globe, namely colonial Spanish archives. This decentering of Britain and the United States gestures towards a productive need to expand our understanding of

how blackness is constructed beyond the binary of black and white, a sentiment I wholly agree with. Secondly, refuting what he believes is Hartman's fixation with *capital A* Autobiography, he suggests that the goal of archival research is less about "reconstructing individual lives" and more about theorizing, the goal being a useful "overreading" of "seemingly quotidian texts" to reveal the ways they "speculate upon ontological, epistemological, and political questions" surrounding the conditions of slavery and freedom (Kazanjian 143, 140). Again, to this point, I also agree. I disagree, however, with his reading of Hartman's desires surrounding the autobiographical and with the embedded assumption that the autobiographical precludes the possibility for theorizing.

As a reader of Hartman's scholarship, I would be remiss to not mention that she does, in fact, do the type of theorizing that Kazanjian calls for going back as far as her first book. Most prominent in my memory is the chapter in *Scenes of Subjection* where she uses pedagogical manuals distributed to recently emancipated slaves in the early days of Reconstruction by freedman's schools. While the original purpose of these manuals was to "remedy the predicament of emancipation," tampering the wickedly potential idleness of newly freed slaves with rhetoric about the value of labor and respectability politics, Hartman identifies the conflicting subtext of these seemingly banal documents ("Scenes" 226). Contextualizing these manuals within the greater bodily, systemic, and philosophical violences deployed by the plantation class, Hartman observes that "freedom was defined in contradictory terms" wherein the formerly enslaved were called to be civil in the face of white terror while the "aversive racial sentiment [was] negotiated and defused by the obeisance of the freed" ("Scenes" 228). In this section, and across the entire text, Hartman uses quotidian documents from the archive to theorize about the condition of freedom within the liberal humanist imagination. She also makes

a significant claim about how the rhetoric of freedom was historically used to obfuscate the lingering binds of chattel slavery—manifested most often through debt and incarceration—through a projection of waywardness onto the bodies of the enslaved. As stated earlier, I turn to this section of Hartman's earliest monograph to exemplify that she has, as Kazanjian suggests, used "quotidian and often fragmentary texts [to] theorize ideas such as freedom itself" (Kazanjian 140). I also mention this passage to exemplify the many ways that, for the enslaved and their descendants, even the notion of freedom is heavily burdened with the weight of whiteness and its existential anxieties. While the archives of slavery do produce multiple ways of understanding blackness as an identity and ideological/historical process, it is the pervasive presence of whiteness and white people which continues to obscure the nuances of quotidian black life.

Ultimately, what draws me to Kazanjian's article is not a need to refute the author, nor to defend Hartman. Instead, I want to embrace the opportunity to discuss how the autotheoretical impulse can be read, and misread, against the false promise of objectivity in scholarly writing. As I have discussed at many points in this dissertation project, black lifewriting—including and especially narratives of enslavement—is too often valued for protagonists who embody heroism and exceptionalism in the face of white supremacist violence. While I agree with Kazanjian's claim that within the archive autobiography is not an "ontological necessity," I do think his understanding of black autobiography is limited as well as his reading of Hartman's desires when she observes that there is "not one extant autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage (Kazanjian 136, "Venus" 3). In my view, Kazanjian reads autobiography in Hartman's article as the desire for a narrative both fully coalesced and exceptional, a story written by a narrator who has already solved the puzzle of freedom. I argue

that Hartman does not long for the autobiographical in the realm of the exceptional, she is, instead, searching for the nuances of the quotidian—the wrinkles and contours of Polly's dark round face, whether or not Ella smiled when she first learned she was a free woman, the sweet and pungent scent of Ellen's corncob pipe. These details would not necessarily provide answers in the philosophical sense, but they would satiate a particular kind of hunger for those who desire to know more about how enslaved persons lived, instead of merely how they survived. Even more, following the autotheoretical impulse, Hartman also outlines that which she seeks, the tiny boring details of black life lost to the negligence of the archive and the shameful forgetting perpetuated in the afterlife of slavery. The autotheoretical framing illustrated in *Lose Your Mother* and "Venus in Two Acts" makes legible Hartman's desire for a black life through the reconstruction of her own. It is a rhetorical performance that reveals the personal motivations of the author, but it also allows us to fully understand all that is lost and unrecoverable regarding the lives of the enslaved.

In this chapter, I have attempted to engage with Hartman's autotheoretical expressions as an aesthetic mode, a critical analytic within the creation of scholarship, and as a rhetorical performance whereby the author uses her autobiography to highlight the stakes, and weight, of those quotidian details that remain unrecoverable within the archive of slavery. This interrogation of Hartman's writing, and autotheory broadly as an expression of black lifewriting, is an ethical concern because, as I have outlined multiple times across this project, the expectations we have of black writing, particularly of black women writers, is both embraced and thwarted by the various texts we encounter. It is important to acknowledge that my exploration of Hartman's autotheory is not an attempt to reveal something pure or unfiltered about her integrity or personhood. As Coopan reminds us "if autotheory is about the self, the self

it constructs is fiction" (Coopan 601). Hartman's use of her personal narrative or memory is as strategic a choice as her use of any other primary document or theoretical text, it is useful to a particular rhetorical performance aimed at making a critical argument about how we make meaning of black life.

Regarding autotheory's importance to Literary Studies, we must take a second to discuss the gorgeousness of Hartman's prose. I first encountered "Venus in Two Acts" in 2017 when I was granted access to a Ph.D. course on the history of media, art, and text while working towards my M.A. in English at Virginia Commonwealth University. I was then quite ambivalent about a career in academia. I am still ambivalent. My primary motivations for graduate education have been to seize the opportunity to learn and write. When I first read the essay, I was deeply moved by Hartman's words, despite the fact that I knew very little about archival research as a methodology, or even the scope of Hartman's work. I knew next to nothing about the archive, but I knew I wanted to write like her. I knew I wanted to care about my work enough to write as powerfully and passionately as she did. Since 2017, I have lost count of the many times I have heard echoes of this essay emerging across academic writing in multiple fields—endless allusions to the *archive as tomb* metaphor, aspirational claims towards articles as *counter-histories*, and many declarations to tell *impossible stories*. I would argue, even more than the call for critical fabulation, the legacy of this essay can be found in how many scholars have been inspired by the craft of Hartman's pen, her capacity to write beautifully and seductively about difficult and painful things. Subsequently, *Wayward Lives,* while being the culmination of many years of detailed and rigorous archival research, is deeply felt because of the way that Hartman writes, because of the narrative she spins, and the care with which she lavishes in the sumptuous details of her subjects everyday lives. This is, as Jennifer Nash writes, the *beautiful* writing we

have come to expect from Black Feminist writers like Hartman, beautiful writing that stands as an "ethical method" in its ability to "[take] emotional risks in the service of bringing its reader and writer close...to the scene of loss" and its infallible "will to move its reader" (Nash 10). The impact of Hartman's work as a scholar and writer, interrogating the craft of her pen, affirms for me that tracing the shape and effect of beautiful black autotheory is of particular interest for literary studies. Future explorations and expansions of this topic will expand the scope—I am particularly interested in the trifecta of Hartman, Sharpe, and Campt, although Nash's most recent text also deserves special attention. Even more, in thinking through how we are moved by this kind of writing, I aim to interrogate whether we can name it as a distinct practice of poetics, one that centers the longing of the scholar not only as a rhetorical performance, but as an intervention into how we understand the value of black lifewriting in the greater canon of African American Literature.

Coda: A Biography of a Dissertation

Reading as a Survival Practice

While the earliest ideas of this project emerged during my coursework, this project truly began to take shape in Summer 2020. In those days I knew I wanted to write exclusively about black women writers and that I wanted to highlight the memoirs that had impacted me in recent years. Armed with a new Fulton County library card, I assuaged my anxiety that I had not *read enough* by listening to audiobook editions of every memoir, audiobook, and essay collection written by a black woman that I could find. I had just moved from my first Atlanta apartment, a one-bedroom unit in a thin-walled Decatur complex, to a two-bedroom house in Oakland City. By this point, we were 4 months into a national shelter-in-place order brought on by COVID-19. Even though I had never met, and would never meet, the person or persons who owned my rental—I often joked that I was shelling out $1200 a month to a Russian bot—I was happy to have a bigger space to settle into. As I unpacked my things and nested in this house, I listened to Shonda Rhimes' *Year of Yes*, Gabrielle Union's *We're Going to Need More Wine*, Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race*, Zadie Smith's *Feel Free*, Michele Harper's *The Beauty in Breaking*, *Hunger* by Roxane Gay, and *Memorial Drive* by Natasha Trethewey. At a certain point, I knew that many of these books, specifically the black celebrity memoirs, would not be a part of my dissertation, but I justified my indulgences by telling myself that I was staying a breast of contemporary trends, learning about the wider market of black lifewriting as a means of contextualizing whatever texts I eventually committed to. Truthfully, I simply have a penchant memoir. Whether it comes from an award-winning poet, a tv melodrama mogul, or the former head cheerleader of the East Compton Clovers, I like the ways that these black women narrativized their lives and, ultimately, justified the need to write one's own story.

I was also filling time, looking for a distraction amidst the compounding dread of the unknown and unavoidable: a deadly global pandemic that moved too quickly for scientists to understand, the continued hyper-visibility and vigilance of anti-black police violence, and the economic depression of stalled markets that lead to resentment and restlessness among the American population. These were the years of a decisive black nonfiction boom. The rise of, as Nash names it, the "Black Lives Matter literary market" where social media provided and ever-growing supply of "reading lists that promised consumers that they could read their way into an anti-racist self [and] transform themselves...with words" (Nash 55, 32). Suddenly, in the midst of such equalizing vulnerability, people wanted to learn more, to do more, to rise above and separate themselves from the racialized violence falsely assumed by some to be a relic of the past. Listening, reading, cleaning, walking, scrolling, dreading, sleeping, it was all something to do when I didn't know what to do.

There were trends I noticed as I listened to these texts. Most writers, regardless of background or current socio-economic status, has to discuss the value of their work, and make a case for how hard they work, in their perspective fields. Most seemed to discuss, as one point or another, a sense of feeling invisible, most often by family, even though most presented themselves as deep and critical observers of their family life. Everyone had to talk about race, and racism, and how the specters of segregation shaped some aspect of their desire to break in, and dominant, the creative or professional space they so desperately wanted to enter. Most struggled with their relationship with one or more parent, many times their mother, although not exclusively. As I moved through my first year in that house, navigating two semesters of online coursework, TAships, departmental meetings, pedagogy trainings, and many deserted hobbies that required a laughable amount of power tools—over-functioning has always been my go-to

coping mechanism—I began to ask myself the questions that would solidify this project. Why must black writers not only write about racism when they right about their lives, but write about it in such similar ways? Who are these memoirs and essay collections written for? Who do the authors, as well as editors and publishers, imagine are reading or listening? What do audiences expect when they read a story of black life and are these expectations fair? Why do so many black women writers feel smothered, or neglected, by their mothers? Are black writers crafting the same story, or am I only paying attention to the same themes? Why is Gabrielle Union quoting *The Fire Next Time* in a collection of essays about bad divorces and *10 Things I Hate About You*?

Broadly, my goal with this dissertation project was to examine black women-authored lifewriting to interrogate the readerly expectations surrounding anti-racism and anti-blackness. I chose the term lifewriting because of the way it casts a wide net, encompassing the many genres and subgenres that black writers have used in their pursuit of the autobiographical impulse. Even more, given the intellectual baggage that terms like autobiography and memoir hold in the greater fields of History and Literature, lifewriting hold space not only for multiple genres, but for breaking down assumptions and limitations about where, when, and how black life and narrative intersect. My central argument has been that readers across race, class, and ethnicity, approach black autobiography, memoir, and essays with a presumption that these texts are inherently didactic, offering readers moral instruction on how to identify, and dismantle, systems of white supremacy. While some texts explicitly fit into this rhetorical category, I also argue that such an attitude towards black lifewriting is limiting insomuch as it presumes the primary goal about writing about black life is to think through and against whiteness. Even more, I have gestured towards the long tradition of understanding black lifewriting through the lens of

traditional, masculinist *capital A* Autobiography, a practice I align with Foster's concept of the *heroic slave trope*, meaning narratives focused on a singular and exceptional narrator whose entire character arc is built around subjugation and liberation. Such an arc, in my view, creates a dialectic between black exceptionalism and white terror, a phenomenon that asks black writers and artists to create works that reflect white fantasies—fantasies of good and bad whiteness alike—instead of using their skills to investigate the daily beauties and complexities of blackness itself.

Why Interiority and Intimacy?

A major turning point in this study was my encounter with the work of Tina Campt and Kevin Quashie, whose respective musings around blackness and the quiet/quotidian presented new language to ask better questions about what I desired from these texts. These scholars, as well as Tara Bynum, Kevin Young, and Joycelyn K. Moody, are deeply invested in sitting with and thinking through the full expanse of blackness in a way that does not erase the histories of white terror but diminishes its existential and philosophical hold. While white people, and whiteness, remain ever-present in black peoples' universe, but they are only one of many in a great constellation of histories, cultures, experiences, and attitudes; they are not the sun. In looking for a new way of reading, I embraced scholarship about black interiority and intimacy, to refocus my critical gaze away from the loud and spectacular expressions of black triumph that I had been, for so long, trained to fixate on, and instead listen to the quiet whispers writers so diligently braid into their work. Reading for black interiority forced me to focus on brief and fleeting moments where the narrator expressed unspoken desires, anxieties, and unnamed feelings. While I was often tempted to focus my close readings on scenes that centered action—scenes where the narrator finds their voice and declares, with explicit fervor, the problems

plaguing their neglected communities—I had to re-consider the weight and value of self-reflexivity in the text. I also had to build up my confidence as a close reader, often doubting whether paying such close attention to a few impactful and compelling lines of interior thought was just as important as the paragraphs of didactic exposition. This kind of reading was not initiative. Many pages of writing were cut wherein I focused on the violence enacted by a slave master or the systemic neglect emerging from the landscape of Louisiana. In my many efforts of revision, I had to see again my own writing, and my reading, to accomplish the kind of work I set out to do.

Black intimacy was also important to this work. I sought to illustrate the layered intimacies shared between lovers, partners, family, and, of course, parents and children. Echoing Bynum, I see intimacy as something that is deeply connected to pleasure, but not exclusive to it. Just as intimacy is fueled by pleasure and desires—and in desiring we always risk not getting the thing we want—it is also fueled by frustration, longing, sadness, and shame. I changed the title of this project a few times; writing for me is always a process of discovery that has little to no regard for the well laid plans of a detailed prospectus. Once I understood how important interiority was to my project, I spent hours searching for a precise word that could frame my aspirations. Penetralia, briefly defined, refers to the innermost parts of a structure, whether it be building, sanctuary, or temple. Laced with an undercurrent of mystery, penetralia reflects all that black interiority holds secret, even to ourselves. I chose tender to modify the noun based on some of the ideas I explored in my chapter on June Jordan and the blueswoman. Tenderness is a word, and a descriptor, that feels deeply apt for black women. Tenderness refers, in part, to the soft touch of a caregiver but, considering wounds and bruises, it also embodies the recognition of hurt, both hurt bodies and hurt feelings, that accompanies the sting of discipline maternal figures

are known to inflict. *Tender Penetralia*, then, refers to a series of ideas and themes I am only starting to explore in my work including but limited to the labor of black women, the value of black interiority, and the ways that care can hurt while also saving your life.

Why Ethics?

The relationship between literature and ethics, or more specifically the ethics of reading, has produced a long-standing tradition explored by such figures as James Phelan, Judith Butler, Elaine Scarry, and more. As I stated in the introduction, I align my perspective of ethics most closely with Black Feminist foremother Patricia Hills Collins whose *ethics of caring* is erected on three central tenants: *personal expressiveness*, *emotions*, and *empathy*. In the foundation of Black Feminist Thought, Collins argues that we should consider all three an indispensable vector in the meaning making and knowledge production. Thinking through the texts I have explored in my project, expression, emotion, and empathy run throughout. Even more, at the end of this project, I am confident that all three of these tenants are critical lenses through which to discern black intimacy and interiority. Additionally, I argue that the call to decenter whiteness from readings of black lifewriting is also a deeply ethical concern. If this project was born in the early days of the pandemic, and in the fervor of anti-racist literature that centered black nonfiction and lifewriting as the remedy for anti-blackness' lingering malignancy, then this project finishes at a somewhat ironic point.

We are in a moment where structures of inequity are running rampant across the nation. Structures of socio-economic violence that once primarily, if not exclusively, affected minority communities in the United States have been unfurled on the majority of the population, and the scapegoat to justify this has been unabashedly presented in the familiar rhetoric of misogyny, anti-blackness, anti-immigrant sentiment. When I started my exploratory reading, the public was

hungry to learn from black life, to use these texts as moral instruction for a liberated future. Now, conversations about inequity have been intentionally bleached, removed of its historical context and lexical power, the value of diversity and inclusion in the American political economy reduced to less than a dozen eggs. The strategic erasure of black life and literature from syllabi, architecture, and the general cultural consciousness reminds me the tides will change, and the general public's interest in anti-racism will, as most things, wax and wane. For me, as I move forward with my research and my career, I find the exploration of black life from the interior space, to be an ethical and sustainable choice.

Emergent Themes: Black Mothers and Daughters

I never set out to write a project about mothers and daughters. However, given that three of my four chapters focus on that relationship, the subject's prevalence in my work remains unavoidable. Whether I was drawn to texts that centered this tension due to my own life, or perhaps black women writers and scholars often find themselves in direct conflict with their mothers, the topic emerged organically. Overall, I am confident that future iterations of this research with center the theme that I have decided to call *Black Maternal Fugitivities*. This concept considers how the relationships between black women writers and their mothers drives the narrator's decision to refute subjugation in multiple forms from multiple actors, not all necessarily white. I center the *maternal* in this concept because, while not all black women are mothers, the *black maternal* is a fascinating analytic as its symbolic value, particularly for black writers and scholars, both supports and constantly troubles our expectations for black women's labors in the material world. By this I mean, the way we expect black women to nurture, even mother, others cast a particular light on whatever work they aim to do in their lives. As a black woman, the desire to be a mother is viewed through a complicated history of social, political, and

historical tension. Even for black women who do not want to be mothers, the choice is often seen as a divestment from the primary respectable labor that empowers black women caught in systems of misogyny and racism. Either way, mothering and motherhood will continue to be central to my work.

Fully understanding black women and black mother's perspectives in black lifewriting is to accept the ways that fugitivity manifests as acts of defense and defensiveness, various modes of self-preservation, and quotidian survival. Additionally, considering the relationship between mothers and daughters offers me a wide palette of affective responses with which to paint the scope of black intimacy and interiority. While recent scholarship and discourse on social media has made a plea for less suffering and sadness in narratives about black people, something many would call a plea for black joy, I am interested in something beyond the binary of pleasure and suffering. The relationship between mother and daughter, as I have read and personally experienced, is one fraught with a wide constellation of emotions. There is joy, yes, but there is also anger, frustration, envy, shame, as well as desire, affection, warmth, and unfathomable depths of love. Writing about mothers and daughters offers me a certain richness, an abundance of opportunities to consider all aspects of black interior life.

The Future of this Research

Looking at my dissertation project, I can already see the fault lines splitting apart chapters into a series of different futures. As someone who has a particular fondness for revision, I am looking forward to thinking through what aspects of this collection will grow into my first book project, and what threads will remain dormant, for the immediate future, until they can thrive on a vine of their own. Logistically, I want to expand on this idea of black writing and didacticism, considering how canon formation has contributed to the expectation that black

writers be the teachers of anti-racism. I also believe that the chapter on black women's autotheory is its own adventure. Expanding the scope of my research by looking at how 20th century scholars like bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, and others have indulged in the autotheoretical impulse, I aim to think through the ways that many contemporary black women scholars have been instructed in their aesthetic practice as much as prominent creative writers like Hurston or Toni Morrison. Finally, I look forward to solidifying my framework of *Black Maternal Fugitivities* by diving deep into the 20th century and building bridges between the turn of the century and the Black Power Era respectively.

I started examining black nonfiction while writing my M.A. thesis. That project was an abrupt course correction after, to my great surprise, I discovered that I actually had little interest in the subject I first proposed. I pivoted to nonfiction because, as a failed black essayist—that is what I called myself then—I wanted to study more about the genre I had grown to love. Eight year later, I have learned a little more about the genres that I have, for years, simply loved to read. I look forward to learning more. Above all else, I am excited to continue this work, to keep following these threads, and to learn to ask new and more insightful questions about how we read and write about black life.

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