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Amon Pierson March 30, 2022

Reading the Hieroglyph: The Em Dash in Action

by

Amon Pierson

Dr. Calvin Warren
Adviser

Department of Comparative Literature

Dr. Calvin Warren

Adviser

Dr. Axelle Karera

Committee Member

Dr. Maria Carrión

Committee Member

2022

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Amon Pierson

Dr. Calvin Warren

Adviser

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Abstract

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By Amon Pierson

This project is a literary account of the position of black women in with society. Occupying the space of a fundamental nothing that cannot be recovered, the figure of the black woman is of the hieroglyph, or the em dash (—). As such, black women exist in a space of *indeterminacy* that defines their existence. Using literary analysis methodologies, this text reads Richard Wright's *Native Son* for an image of the violence that exposes the hieroglyph, and Toi Derricotte's poem, "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses," to discover the nuances of the hieroglyph. This project is a radical re—formulation of our relation to language, our signifiers of existence.

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Acknowledgements

For: My mother, Dietra; My aunt, Jeanne; My sister, Amari

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INTRODUCTION

ANALYTICS OF THE HIEROGLYPH; OR THE —

The impetus for the project begins with my mother, Dietra, and my aunt, Jeanne, and my sister, Amari. I was raised, cultivated by black women. From best friends, to sisters, aunts, and mothers, my life has been fundamentally constituted by the presence of black women. Hearing the narratives of their lives sparked curiosity in me—it seemed as though there was something within their grammar that was yearning to be excavated. It seemed as though their narratives were colored by violence. In other words, as I encountered each of these women in my life, I noticed that there was an unspoken presence of violence within each of them. When asked: "When have you felt that your existence as a black woman was in peril, that an assault was taken out onto your existence, as a black woman?" the women I engaged with described moments of hyper-surveillance, hyper-sexualization, and hyper-(in)visibility. As a queer man, I am very cognizant of the distance I have to this subject. I am cognizant of the violence and subjugation that men—gay, straight, what have you—perpetuate onto women, especially black women. Despite this position, I take on this massive venture in order to inaugurate a new practice of reading, a new way of articulating the existence that is of the black woman. This massive undertaking seeks to do the (im)possible: to find a way of bearing witness to the pains, the strife, *the violence* that permeates through black womanhood. *Reading the Hieroglyph: The Em Dash in Action*, seeks to uncover the violence that permeates through black womanhood, and discuss its a/effects.

This project is a literary account of the violence that is laden through black womanhood. This project converges close reading methodologies with the growing scholarship on

Afropessimism, black feminist thought, and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Literature is the perfect medium for such an inquiry because it gives light, gives language, to the unspeakable. Literature can be a vast window into the social life of the United States. This project forges new grounds by accompanying much of the work done by fellow black Lacanian analysts (like David Marriott) with famed black feminist thinkers (like Hortense Spillers), and black feminist psychoanalysts (like Selamawit Terrefe) in order to understand the complex state of black womanhood.

An amalgam of literary theory and philosophy, this project argues that the em dash, or — in writing, is a *hieroglyph*. In other words, the — is the conflation of image and language, where both exist at the same time. The hieroglyph represents an irrevocable nothing because there is always something hidden and unknown to those who encounter it. Between Lacan's registers of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic are points of departure and convergence, so the — as the hieroglyph is the *unraveling of the nodal point between the Symbolic and the Real*. Black women occupy that space of the hieroglyph, and as such, represents an *indeterminacy* that is their existence. They experience a double-bind of violence: where they experience violence that I call a/effective, or violence that oscillates between affective and effective[i] on one hand, and on the other, the only way to read the hieroglyph is through violence. As such, this double-bind is what exposes the hieroglyph as the figure of the black woman. The exposure of the hieroglyph is incomprehensible for the Symbolic, therefore death becomes the only possible outcome for her. The hieroglyph is a system of signification for the dead, for the "female flesh ungendered" (Spillers, 68), which is inherently dead[ii]. Reading the hieroglyph then, requires a fundamental shift in our reading and writing practices. Given the presence of the black woman as the hieroglyph as the em dash, the act of writing poetry and the presence of the poem itself is a

grammar for the indeterminant, for the hieroglyph/em dash, for there is always a piece that is unknowable.

Critics will say that this work only reifies the violence it seeks to escape, because it "does not give voice or visibility" to black women's pains. They will say that this project is "reductive" and posits that black women are nothing. This project is everything further from those shortsighted assertions, for occupying the space of nothing requires a radial re—imagining of the essence of black womanhood. This project speaks to the indeterminacy that defines black womanhood.

Jacques Lacan: Nothing, Lack

Since its inception in the 1950s, Jacques Lacan's work has fundamentally altered the landscape of black studies, feminist discourses, literary history and theory, etc. Theorists such as Hortense Spillers, Calvin Warren, David Marriott, George Sheldon, Selamawit Terrefe, Bruce Fink,—the list goes on—have taken the core principles of Lacanian psychoanalysis and proposed radical new readings of the doctrine. One of the foremost scholars of Lacan, Bruce Fink, in *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, provides an astute understanding of the essentials of Lacanian psychoanalysis. When discussing the subject and the Other's desire,[iii] Fink articulates the S(Barred A), where the S stands for the *signifier* and A as the *Other*, hence S(Barred A) can be re-stated as "the signifier of the lack of the Other" (58). We are constituted by and of the Other, or the mOther through the mirror stage, as Fink puts it, so this figuration of the lack present within the Other can be extended to the subject, where because the subject is constituted by the Other, they are therefore made up of a *fundamental lack*. Where lack and

nothing converge is the central project of this section. The relation between lack can be defined as that which is constituted by an aporia or an absence; both lack and nothing are based upon a fundamental absence. Lack and nothing are distinct, for where the former implies a sort of movement of being propelled toward something that is can never be solved for, the latter implies a sort of stasis, where things *just are*. *Reading the Hieroglyph* seeks to test the limits of Lacan's discourse by asserting that nothing is irrecoverable. For Lacan, lack is mediated by the phallus, or the signifier of the Other's desire, which provides the fantasy of fulfillment of lack[iv]. There is no fantasy of fulfillment for the hieroglyph, the nothing *just is*. This project, then, seeks to activate the power of nothing and its ness. The possibilities for nothing and nothingness are unlocked as one navigates through the discussion of lack.

But what is *manque-à-être*? How does one name or give language to *nothing*? I look to a seminal black psychoanalyst, David Marriott, for answers. Marriott's exciting and fresh work in *Lacan Noir* is a keen re-formulation of Lacan's work through a lens of blackness, and thereby antiblackness. Marriott begins his work by discussing "Slave and Signifier," where he proposes that we are "enslaved by the signifier," by language. In this section, Marriott states, "Blackness is called into non-being not because it negates being—but insofar as it introduces a subtractive negativity into being, a *n'est pas* which is operating through nothing, and as nothing, and whose avatar is the *non-moi*" (19) and "(a *n'est pas* or negative existential particular)" (27). In other words, the black is infinitely propelled toward nothing, a movement toward negative infinity, a movement from nothing to nothing.

Let's pause for a moment to notice where Marriott and Lacan diverge, for it will open the doors for a new interpretation of *être*. Lacan and his disciples use the infinitive of the verb *être* to denote an openness, a generalizable ability to be. Conversely, Marriott uses *n'est pas* rather than

the conventional *n'est-ce pas*. Marriott effectively removes the subject from the sentence, thus demonstrating the absence of the subject and absence of being for the black in language. Additionally, *est* is the third person, so a sense of outsideness, a sense of distance between the "I" and the black is present. The difference between Lacan and Marriott provides a new interpretation of the *n'est pas*: that even at the very basis, the very basic level of language, the black "called into non-being." Blackness, in nothingness, has no "action" of being. "Black Infinity," is a static yet propelled state of the black. The sum of Marriott's words greatly influences this project, for the *n'est pas* is another conceptualization of the nothingness the blackness occupies. Indeed, the *n'est pas* and the hieroglyph are the same in that they symbolize a nothing; however, they are distinct in a very crucial way. While we are all "enslaved by language," the relation to "enslavement" between the *n'est pas* and the — are different. In my reading, the *n'est pas* completely submits to language, whereas the — as the hieroglyph begins to push the bounds of what language can and cannot account for. In other words, the — requires structural and essential changes in our reading and writing practices. Furthermore, Marriott's work has a fundamental blindspot in the form of the set of the black woman. He gives no distinction of gender, no analysis of difference that can fully attend to what the — does. By postulating the black as "ungendered," which is true, Afropessimists alike have been able to subvert an analysis of difference that thoroughly attends to the double-bind of violence that black women. It is my hopes within this work to provide an analysis of the hieroglyph as the marker of difference.

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Point de caption

To refer again to Lacan (as a primary interlocutor for this project), it is necessary to pause for a moment on the *point de caption*[v]. In Lacan's seminar on psychosis[vi], he reads Racine's *Athaliah* as a way to understand the mechanisms of the signifier and the signified. Looking to Saussure's theory of the sign, signifier, and signified, Lacan rereads Racine's work to discover the *point de caption*, or the "anchoring point," or the "quilting point," where Lacan states, "Whether it be a sacred text, a novel, a play, a monologue, or any conversation whatsoever, allow me to represent the function of the signifier by a spatializing device, which we have no reason to deprive ourselves of. This point around which all concrete analysis of discourse must operate I shall call a quilting point" (267). In other words, the *point de caption* is the nodal point between the signifier and the signified, the "spatializing device" where they converge. Using the image of the quilter and their needle illustrates the relation between the signifier and the signified, that their intimate connection is "knotted together," formed like a woven blanket (286). In a later work titled *Écrits* (Routledge, 2001), the "anchoring point" is that which, keeps the signifier from continually engaging in the endless process of signification (231). Given all of this, it can be inferred that the signifier belongs to the Symbolic order, where the signified is part of the Real. It is apparent from the words of Lacan that the *point de caption* is an essential part of the "normal" subject' existence in the Symbolic.

The main proposition of *Reading the Hieroglyph*, then, is what happens with the woven blanket comes apart? What happens with the *point de caption* is unraveled? To that, I assert because of the function of the hieroglyph as the —, which exposes and symbolizes nothing, those who occupy that space have an existence of *indeterminacy*. It is the presence of black women and the violence done on onto them that fundamentally questions the *point de caption*. In other

words, the hieroglyph as occupied by the black woman is a complete re—formulation of the Symbolic.

The Em Dash & The Hieroglyph

The dash (or, formally, the em dash) is a common writing convention in language. As one of the premier dictionaries of the English language posits, there are a litany of uses for it, but in all, it is used to communicate action, importance, and change. For the purposes of this work, I will activate the use of the em dash as an indicator of "an abrupt change or break in the structure of a sentence" and as an indicator of "interrupted speech or a speaker's confusion or hesitation" ("A Guide to Em Dashes, En Dashes, and Hyphens," Merriam-Webster Dictionary). If we figure the sentence and speech as representative of the "proper workings of language," of language in its "perfection," then the em dash, it's very function, represents a nothing within the Symbolic.

Now that a brief overview of the em dash has been provided, I will now turn to discuss the hieroglyph in more detail. A pioneer of black feminist studies, Hortense Spillers in the famed "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" provides an astute reading of the hieroglyph. In "Mama's Baby," Spillers gives a sustained reading of the difference between the "flesh" and the "body" (67). We encounter the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," within this discussion, where she states:

> These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating

> moments? As Elaine Scarry describes the mechanisms of torture [Scarry 27-59], these lacerations, woundings, fissures, tears, scars, openings, ruptures, lesions, rendings, punctures of the flesh create the distance between what I would designate a cultural *vestibularity* and the *culture*, whose state apparatus, including judges, attorneys, 'owners,' 'soul drivers,' 'overseers,' and 'men of God' apparently colludes with a protocol of 'search and destroy.' This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside. (67)

First, what is notable about what Spillers writes in this passage is the usage of long lists to more than emphasize the violence that slavery ensued. Her usage of long lists not only prove her dedication to uncovering the mechanisms of slavery, but also make violence an inherent part of the "undecipherable markings on the captive body." In all, Spillers here argues that "ethnicity" conceals the ruptures—as hieroglyphs—onto the captive body, and, through evoking the hieroglyph, provides a "language" for the ruptures on the captive body.

Spillers' work supports the central claims of this project; however, she can only take us so far. By naming the violence done onto the captive body a "rupture," and seeing the hieroglyphs of the flesh as such, Spillers speaks of a form of violence that can be filled, completed by something. *Reading the Hieroglyph* pushes Spillers' discourse, for the hieroglyph as the em dash denotes a nothing that cannot be recovered. Further, the very use of the figure of the hieroglyph within this work is a contradiction because of what the hieroglyph is at its most basic level: hieroglyphs *can* be deciphered, but only through a new practice of reading and writing. The contradiction continues: How can the markings of the flesh be "undecipherable" and at the same time have "symbolic substitution"? It must be emphasized that this work contends

with Spillers' because the — is the hieroglyph, and as such, symbolizes what she sees as covered by ethnicity, and that is *nothing*. Finally, where Spillers' makes this a problem of the Symbolic by creating a "distance between "cultural *vestibularity* and *culture*," this project makes it a problem of the very connection between the Symbolic and the Real, which is constitutive of such.

Spillers' reading of the hieroglyph has been the impetus of a particular work that I wish to pause for a moment, to discuss the convergences and divergences. Black psychoanalyst Selamawit Terrefe is another scholar in which I will be in conversation with, for this work is a rereading of her rereading of Spillers. In "Speaking the Hieroglyph," Terrefe argues that "Black woman's flesh" is constitutive of and "drives the language and discourse of not only psychoanalysis but the unconscious itself" (126). She continues, "The erasure and silencing of affective responses to Black women's suffering mirrors her ontological absence, the obliteration of her suffering in our collective imaging of antiblack violence and theoretical apparatuses Black critical theories of Black life and Black death employ" (126-27). There are apparent convergences between this work and hers: both employ the figure of the hieroglyph, and both speak to the violence done onto the black woman. *Reading the Hieroglyph* diverges from "Speaking the Hieroglyph," for the very reason that black women *never had an ontological presence*, they are fundamentally defined by the —, an indeterminacy. As such, she cannot have "ontological absence" in the first place. In addition, I am not convinced that there has been an "erasure" or "silencing' of the "affective responses to Black women's suffering," rather because the —, the hieroglyph, is so embedded within our conventions of language, of society, of existence, that her violence has been *overlooked and forgotten*. This work is an attempt at bearing witness to the —, to remember and look at the hieroglyph.

Where do the em dash and the hieroglyph come together? Put simply, both represent an unknowability at the center of the signifier, both demonstrate an indeterminacy that is constitutive of black womanhood. To add another dimension of complexity, the hieroglyph as — is the system of signification for the perpetually dead and is only seen through violence. I must reiterate, the hieroglyph as the — requires a *radically new practice of writing and writing*, a new way to relate to the Symbolic and the Real. Through the use of the —, I am appropriating a common writing convention in order to explode the form, to re—form a new way of reading.

Chapter Itinerary

The chapters of this work were carefully chosen to first, to represent the violence that positions the black woman in "nothing," and third, the recognition of "nothing" as such. After laying the groundwork for the project, chapters one and two are literary accounts of the main assertion of *Reading the Hieroglyph*. Chapter one is a close reading of *Native Son* by Richard Wright to present a/effective violence, or a violence that oscillates between *affective* and *effective*. This form of violence is what exposes the "nothingness" that constitutes black womanhood. For *Native Son*, Bessie Mears' death is a symptom of the inability of the American Symbolic to accommodate for such an exposure of "nothingness." Chapter one also discusses the hieroglyph in more detail, looking to Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and the Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique" and Hortense Spillers' "Interstices" to provide a critique of their work. Chapter two is a close reading of Toi Derricotte's poem "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses," to illustrate the notion that the act of poetic writing provides a new grammar for the indeterminacy of the black woman. The act of poetic writing is a

grammar for the —, because, like the hieroglyph, there is always something unknowable in poetry. Black women occupy a space that is incomprehensible for the Symbolic, and the act of writing poetry makes the hieroglyph seen.

My one and only hope for this project is to give back to the women that created me. To give them a new theory of existence, a way to understand what it means to be a black woman.

CHAPTER 1

EXPOSURE OF THE HIEROGLYPH

To attend to the questions posed in the Introduction, this chapter begins by discussing the convergences and divergences of two prominent black feminist thinkers: Denise Ferreira da Silva and Hortense Spillers. Then I will move to a close reading of *Native Son* by Richard Wright in order to present the a/effective violence that permeates and defines black women's indeterminacy. In sum, this chapter seeks to understand the black woman's relation to Lacan's *manque-à-être*, or Marriott's *n'est pas*, and to being to meditate on the question of the field of literary studies at large.

Da Silva and Spillers—Interlocutors

The praise and celebration around "Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique" (2018), by da Silva and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe " by Spillers is well warranted. In these works, the two scholars re—articulate[vii] the position of the black woman within the Symbolic. This chapter seeks to provide a reading of the work done by da Silva and Spillers to first, lay the groundwork for the hieroglyph, and second, to provide a critique. The two thinkers can only take us so far, for ultimately, they create a "gap" within black womanhood that can be filled, they propose a "female figure of blackness" that can be "solved for."

In "Hacking the Subject," da Silva gifts us the "\X," as the "female figure of blackness." In a lecture she gave at Barnard College, the theorist states that her main project is to, "take

blackness back away from science and history and release it in and to the world," and stage an "exploration of the radical possibilities of the object." In other words, da Silva seeks to radically rethink the subject that has the ability to decide. She wants to attend to the wonders of blackness, and locates that onto the black woman. The figure of the "\X" can be dissected into two field: the hack (\) and the (X).

For da Silva, the process of "hacking" involves a, "…de\composition, or a radical transformation (or imaging) that exposes, unsettles, and perverts form or formulae. It is an active and purposeful mis-understanding, mis-reading, mis-appropriation" (27). As a new reading practice, hacking, as marked by the (\) is, an "alchemy" (27). In other words, the hack requires a completely new way of encountering the black woman in modernity. She is the "composition" of multiple "forms" that exist in modernity. Da Silva defines the X by placing it in the equation: X=0-Y, where 0 is the cypher and (-) is the mark. Where the mark denotes "without," the cypher is, "…(a) the disappearance of value (nullification—crossing out); (b) the absence of value (nothingness); (c) beyond any means of measuring (excess); and more importantly, (d) the plenum (virtually, as a possible new origin or beginning)" (31). Put simply, the cypher describes a figure that is nothing and at once something; simultaneously everything and nothing. All of da Silva's work in "Hacking the Subject" culminates to the idea that the black woman as the figure of the "X" is "infinity minus infinity," "she refers to the undifferentiated abyss and the promise of dissolution of the forms of subject," or a nothing, to da Silva (31).

It is clear where the similarities between this project and da Silva's are: we both center the "female figure of blackness" around a fundamental nothingness and that black women expose the wonders of blackness at large. "Hacking the Subject" is the sister of *Reading the Hieroglyph*, for both of the projects request a new practice of reading, of being within the system

of language. However, despite these significant resonances, there exists glaring distinctions between the two theories of black womanhood. Before that, I must emphasize that the hieroglyph or the — represents an *irrecoverable nothing*, an *unfillable gap* where the black woman lies.

Put simply, Da Silva ultimately does not escape the violence what she attempts to solve for a host of reasons. First, one does not have to look far in the concept of the "hack" to notice where her theory falls short. To conceptualize a new reading practice as an "alchemy" or a "recomposition" without fully negating the composing parts of said "hack," she effectively doesn't alter anything; the practices of reading gender and sexuality just change *form* but do not change *essence*. The hieroglyph, however, calls for a truly new form of a practice of reading. In addition, the — is an *appropriation* of form, not a "recomposition." Next, the fact that she places the definition of the "female flesh ungendered" within an equation is violent because if we follow da Silva's reasoning, the "X" will always be in relation to a (-Y). The fact that it is in an equation is a contradiction because by doing so, she effectively puts the figure of the "X" back into the structure that she seeks to take her out of. Finally, to the question of the cypher. The hieroglyph is distinct from the cypher because it is a *pure nothing*, it is, again, an *irrevocable, unfillable nothing*. Whereas the "0" can be filled, it can be decoded back into the normative (violent) structure of gender and sexuality. As shown by the reading of the closeness of our two theories, an allegiance to da Silva does not alleviate the black woman of the violence of the violent structures of gender, sexuality, and (as a result) race.

Da Silva is an incredibly close reader of Spillers, particularly "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," where she uses the "female flesh ungendered" as the foundation of her text. Although a reading of Spillers' text was provided in the Introduction, it is imperative to recapitulate the main points of her argument, so as to discover the nuances of the work.

Spillers work in "Mama's Baby" begins with locating the black female flesh as a "confounded identity" (65). In my view, Spiller's main project is to interrogate what she calls an "American Grammar," a "symbolic order" that "begins at the 'beginning,' which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation" (68). As I see it, Spillers attempts to "reclaim" the position of the black woman by positing her in the "female flesh ungendered" (68), a fundamental negation of the structures of gender and sexuality caused by the violence of slavery. Spillers continues that this "female flesh ungendered" offers a sort of "text," thus a new form of reading. Throughout her discussion of the "American Grammar Book," she maintains that our modern social epoch is constituted by the female slave, where she reads Daniel Patrick's "Moynihan Report" as the basis for her argument. Her reading is astute and has been cited by a host of scholars; however, my main project is to dissect Spillers' work to see where the hieroglyph can better attend to the very problem she seeks to solve for.

At the end of her text, she theorizes about the power of the "mother's touch." It is of utmost importance to relay the words of Spillers directly so as to discover its theoretical prowess:

> The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the *mother*, *handed* by her in ways that he cannot escape, and in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. This human and historic development—the text that has been inscribed on the benighted heart of the continent—takes us to the center of an inexorable difference in the depths of American women's community: the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated—the law of the Mother—only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as

> from *mimetic* view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law. (80)

At the outset of the passage, it is clear that the relation between the black man and the mother is incredibly intimate. Spillers assertion about the "white American male' places this intimate moment between the man and the Mother within a temporal schema, through "fatherly reprieve," that ultimately end in violence, for a "reprieve" is just a delayed punishment. Next, Spillers carefully uses the word choice of "evocation," which demonstrates the notion that she sees the new position of the black woman as the "female flesh ungendered" as that which *can* proclaim the "I," is a being with determination. I find it intriguing that she gifts us with the negation as the "female flesh ungendered," yet denies such a negation by making her a sort of locus of affirmation, as "cultural synthesis." Finally, the "Father's law" is that which is lost by the violence of slavery, that which the "female flesh ungendered" can recover.

Given this discussion of the "mother's touch" it can be argued that the "female flesh ungendered" contributes to not only the "African-American male," but the Symbolic at large. I want to move to further discuss this "mother's touch" to provide a firm reading of Spillers' canonical text. Spillers continues

> …the female, in the order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an 'illegitimacy.' Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the *only* American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself… It is the heritage of the *mother* that the African-American male

> must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within.

In essence, the beginning of the passage states that the female is a rupture in the signifying chain of the Symbolic. The female's significance as a rupture and as marking "a denial and an 'illegitimacy' further indicates her as a negation, and is very akin to da Silva's "X." Spillers argument that the black man can "learn who the female is within itself," shows that, for her, the black woman can *give back*, can fill in the gap where other are lacking. The ability of the black man to "regain" the "mother's touch" underscores a recoverability that can be allotted to him. My question then becomes, What about Her?

The words of Spillers culminate in a couple of ideas: the "female flesh ungendered" and the "mother's touch." At this moment, I will discuss where Spillers' argument in "Mama's Baby" falls short. First, it must be reiterated that the "female flesh ungendered," is a negation and not a nothing that the — is. By giving us the reconceptualization of the black woman, I suggest that Spillers is trying to make the black woman an entity that can be enunciated, that can proclaim the "I," that can decide and determine (da Silva [ADD PAGE NUMBER]). This is a major contradiction because to posit them as an entity that can "decide" just throws the black woman back into the problematics of gender and sexuality. Next, through the importance given to the "mimetic partner" that is the "African-American male," it is clear that she ascribes to a heteronormative relation between man and woman that does not give space to "nontraditional" familial structures that, as we know, were present during slavery, and now. This attention given to the "mimetic partner" is violent to black women because it reifies the normative (violent) gender and sexuality dynamics. The final moment I'd like to discuss here is the question of the negation. Because the black woman has been denied from herself by her own negation (as the

"female flesh ungendered"), only in the realms of the male can she be recovered. It cannot be repeated any more—Spillers provides a negation that can be solved for or filled. There are glaring resonances between da Silva and Spillers, but I think that the most important is both attempts to provide a new formulation of the black woman. Where Spillers gives a negation in the "female flesh ungendered," da Silva gives us the "X" as a fillable nothing. In essence, both seek, in an act of negation or nothing, to affirm or fill, to be a "subject."

In reaction to the "female flesh ungendered," the hieroglyph can save the black woman from a negation that ultimately affirms the very structure that Spillers seeks to dismantle for the most fundamental and simple reason that it is only through *nothing* that the wonders and powers of the black woman as an indeterminacy can become seen. In the way that I have conceptualized the —, there is no recoverability, no way to "fill the gap." It is almost as though Spillers presents us with a shining gem of a theorization then ruins it by putting it in the realm of the black man. In effect, Spillers call on the negation of the black woman to "fill the gap" for the black man. How does this not reify the violence that she seeks to escape? I'm not convinced that the negation that she provides is a sufficient enough reading of negation.

To the hieroglyph. As a fundamental nothing, the "mother's touch," the "X" are *impossibilities*.

Attending to *Native Son*

"Yeah," she breathed.

By close reading *Native Son* for the hieroglyph, we actually get at the question of indeterminacy for the black woman—I am attending to the a/effective violence that permeates through black womanhood. Where Spillers and da Silva want to fill the gap of negation or

nothing, yet my project states that this nothing is *unfillable*, *irrecoverable*. In what follows, the close readings of *Native Son* will support the notion that the black woman exists in the space of the —. It will show the a/effective violence that exposes the hieroglyph.

Heralded for its prowess to describe "black life" in literary naturalism, Richard Wright's *Native Son* details the violent and bleak life of Bigger Thomas. Bigger's life is permeated with violence; where the central moments are the murder and decapitation of a white debutant, Mary Dalton, his subsequent capture and assumed death, and, the focus of this chapter, the rape and murder of Bessie Mears, Bigger's "girlfriend." This is a large text, totaling 430 pages with three parts titled "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." The apparent alliteration of the three parts of the text demonstrates their intimate connection—that for the characters of *Native Son*, "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate" are not dissimilar. In addition, the order of the titles suggest that the one prior is compulsory for the next: fear led to flight, which led to fate. Because it is so famed throughout black and literary studies—for better and for worse—I need not to summarize Wright's text, but, rather, the central focus will be on the moments that Bigger and Bessie share, for they communicate the notion that *Native Son* is representative of a/effective violence and exposes the nothingness the hieroglyph, the —. The American Symbolic cannot accommodate for this exposure, and as such, the death of Bessie becomes is inscribed in every faucet of language. But because this death is in the form of the hieroglyph, it is incompressible for language. Through this reading of *Native Son*, it will become clear that a/effective violence is the intermingling of affect and effect—that feelings and embodied sentiments are inextricably intertwined with action and existence. The space between affect and effect is discursive, rhetorical violence. The slash in a/effective denotes such a dynamic, where affective and effective can be completely distinct, yet are closely related, and connected by a language convention, the "/." This central contradiction

between distinctness and closeness within the a/effective represents the oscillation of the spheres of violence that *Native Son* explores.

Before the reading the novel, it is imperative to take a survey of the current debates surrounding the text. Growing out of a moment away from the centrality of the author to the text, Alan W. France in "Misogyny and Appropriation in Wright's *Native Son*" argues that there are two "dialectical struggles": one in which is an "exposed presence" and the other as "the struggle to appropriate (and thus dehumanize) women by reducing them to objects of male status conflict…" (414). France continues, "From underneath, *Native Son* is the story of a black man's rebellion against white male authority. The rebellion takes the form of the ultimate appropriation of human beings, the rape-slaying, which is also the ultimate expropriation of patriarchal property, the total consumption of the commodified" (414). France's attempt to explain away the grave violence enacted onto women by localizing it onto Bigger's need to "rebel against white male authority," makes it a problem of masculinity. Therefore, France essentially positions women as an inferior entity than that of the man. France's attempt to solve for the violence of *Native Son* reifies the brutalization of the text because his work uses the same structural methods of violence to inscribe an "Otherness" onto women. France continues, "Women, as characters in *Native Son*, are objects of this appropriation; they are at the same time desired as objects but contemptible in their weakness and passivity…The woman, as displaced Other, is characterized as blind and weak" (416). It is a sound reading to display a fundamental contradiction within the existence of the woman in *Native Son*; however, in the quotation above, the methods of structural violence are clear. By being characterized as a "displaced Other," the narrative and significance of the woman in *Native Son* is erased.

Next, Abdul JanMohamed's project *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright's Archaeology of Death* explores the role of death in the black subject's life. Arguing for the "death-bound subject" which is "…the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death" (2), JanMohamed takes the position of the archeologist and discovers the artifacts of death in Wright's works. In his second chapter on *Native Son*, where he reads the book as a *dream*, one of his main proponents is that, "…given the interchangeability enabled by the dream structure of the novel, the rape of Bessie can be read as a displacement of Bigger's desire to rape Mary…the novel's tendency to affirm this metonymic displacement becomes crucial to Wright's representation of the sexual economy of the racial border" (79). JanMohamed sees *Native Son* as laden with relational capacity, where certain objects and characters are metonymically and metaphorically connected to different ones. JanMohmed's reading is smart, yet, in a similar fashion to France, reifies the violence of the original text. Bessie's standing as a character, her body, and her indeterminacy are used by JanMohamed to diagnose the ailments of Bigger without giving time and care to Bessie herself. *The Death-Bound Subject* is representative of the very problem I wish to demonstrate in this chapter: the incomprehensibility of violence enacted onto black women. Out of the thirty pages in his chapter on *Native Son*, a mere *three* are dedicated to discussing Bessie and her rape and murder. One tenth. It is almost as though JanMohamed's work is the — in action, that the entire text could be written in hieroglyphs. Although the emphasis of JanMohamed's work is not on Bessie, he reads the enactment of violence onto Bessie as central to Bigger, which is true, but he does *not* discuss how the violence affects her. It is almost as though Bessie is used merely as a plot point, a detour.

The final work to be discussed is *Psychoanalysis and Race: Desire and the Protocols of Race* by the acclaimed Claudia Tate. Her astute reading of noncanonical texts in the black literary tradition: *Savage Holiday* by Richard Wright, *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, to name a few, seeks investigate how the "…African American canon formation has marginalized desire as a category of black textuality by demanding manifest stories about racial politics" (5). In other words, Tate attempts (and succeeds, in my opinion) to create a grammar to describe desire based off of the *latent content*, demonstrated by noncanonical texts, of the canon. Although this quick summarization does not give justice to the theoretical skill that Tate possesses, her reading of *Savage Holiday* illuminates the role of Bessie for Bigger in a way that many other scholars fail to notice. Tate asserts:

> In *Native Son* Bigger is a more arrogant version of the boy Richard in *Black Boy*, he can express his resentment of the conditions of his life, while Bessie and his mother are resigned to the utter futility of theirs. Bessie mirrors and thereby forces Bigger to see his own suppressed fear, while his mother reflects his utter humiliation. However, Bigger's egotism depends on how disowning these parts of himself, which he splits off and projects onto these maternal objects with Mary's aid…To protect himself from additional fear, he intentionally murders Bessie and disclaims his mother and her religion… (108)

Tate's assertion here relates the dynamic between black women and Bigger in *Native Son* that is not reductive and, in reality, speaks to the exposed nothingness that is the hieroglyph. The connection between *Native Son* and *Black Boy* that Tate creates can be seen as a reaction to France's tendency, in a very Barthesian manner, to make the author distinct from the text. The connection between the two texts is at the center of Tate's work: to discover the latent content

that influences how to think about desire. Furthermore, her proposition of Bessie and Bigger's mother are "resigned to the utter futility" of their life demonstrates that there is no grammar to speak about the life of black womanhood in strife. It demonstrates the propensity to localize violence and resentment onto the black "male" body, and the dedication to Bigger's point of view throughout the text is a testament to such.

As shown by the reading presented of works by France, JanMohamed, and Tate, there is a fundamental gap in the literature on black women in *Native Son* that does not reify the violence of the original text. Although it is more overt in the readings of France and JanMohamed, I find problem with all three of these texts, for they center Bigger. The problem of literary point of view and a corrupted narrator makes this situation all the more dire. That makes sense, of course, because *Native Son* is about Bigger, but what is important to note is that there is very little (and I dare say no) critical engagement about the position of Bessie *in and of herself.* This in and of itself is a form of a/effective violence in that it is discursive, thus existing between the affective and effective violence. Tate begins to do so in her work, but that was not her main project, and I give her credit where she does accommodate for Bessie. However, the texts brought up at this point in the chapter are representative themselves of the inability of the American Symbolic to conceptualize the black woman when met with the exposure of nothing. They show a fundamental aporia, a black hole, in how to attend to the black woman. My reading of *Native Son* is an attempt at the (im)possible—to articulate how the rape and subsequent murder of Bessie Mears by Bigger Thomas exposes the hieroglyph, the —.

The first part, "Fear," details the life of Bigger Thomas and his family and is the section of the text with the death of Mary Dalton. Within this section, we get a sense of the relation between Bigger and Bessie, which is laden with animosity, aggression, and adversity. While at a

local black restaurant with Mary and her Communist boyfriend Jan, Bigger feels uncomfortable, on edge. He sticks out like a sore thumb—he is dining with two white people in a popular black restaurant. Bessie sees Bigger and approaches the troupe, their conversation is as follows:

> Then Bigger felt a hand grab his shoulder.
>
> "Hi Bigger! Where you been?"
>
> He looked up and saw Bessie laughing in his face
>
> "Hi," he said gruffly.
>
> "Oh, 'scuse me. I didn't know you had company," she said, walking away with her eyes upon Jan and Mary (73)

Although seemingly banal and unimportant, this moment is foundational to the understanding of Bigger's position and point of view. The introductory word of "Then" signifies a shift in the action of the scene—this moment must be attended to. These remarks about where Bigger is placed within the social hierarchy of the text elicits the question of *power*. The text begins to initiate the question of position within the Symbolic for Bigger by eliminating specificity from the hand that grabs his shoulder, demonstrating that it could be anybody that has power over Bigger. Specifically choosing the word "grab" indicates that this is not a tender, loving moment between the two. The question of position is further indicated by Bigger *looking up* at Bessie. In said hierarchy of being and power, Bigger is static within the lowest level. The text curiously transitions the scene from one about Bigger to one about Jan and Mary, with her, "…walking away with her eyes upon Jan and Mary." The shift in subject of the scene creates physical and structural distance between the troupe and Bessie, thus suggesting that Bessie knows; knows that

Bigger's sentiments have changed. Altogether, the subtle nuances of this moment shows how the text twists and morphs this moment that should be affectionate and cordial into a commentary about position within the Symbolic. This moment can be seen as the impetus for the rest of his and Bessie's relation, for it represents the mixture of hostility and closeness that characterizes their dynamic. It is the spark for Bigger's need to dominate and have control over Bessie. The hostility and anger, demonstrated by his "gruff" response to Bessie's touch, sets the stage for the a/effective violence that is perpetuated onto her.

The gravest and most apparent form of violence—the rape and murder of Bessie—is presented in the second book, titled "Flight." This is the phase in which Bigger devises the plan to attempt to escape capture, collect ransom money from the wealthy Daltons, and implicate (kill) Bessie in his crime. After committing the act of murdering Mary, Bigger seeks "his woman" for comfort (134). Bessie asks Bigger a host of questions about the origins of the money that he stole from the Daltons, then, to distract Bessie, he kisses her (134). The following is the record of the beginning their first sexual act:

> "Come on, honey"
>
> They were still a moment longer; then she rose. He waited. He heard her clothes rustling in the darkness; she was undressing. He got up and began to undress. Gradually, he began to see the darkness; she was on the other side of the bed, her dark body like a shadow in the denser darkness surrounding her. He heard the bed creak as she lay down. He went to her, folding her in his arms, mumbling. (135)

A/effective violence is laden through this interaction. The sweet nothing of "Come on, honey," demonstrates the fantasy of closeness, of tenderness, of sweetness, that Bigger constructs. It is

clear that this fantasy is violent, for it lures Bessie into a space of vulnerability and trust that Bigger ultimately violates. Next, a fundamental aspect of Wright's work is the usage of the semicolon. Grammatically, it joins two independent clauses into one—it represents an unstable subject of the sentence. For example, in "They were still a moment longer; then she rose," or "He heard her clothes rustling in the darkness; she was undressing" there is a switch from "they" to "her" and then from "he" to "her." The unstable subject illustrates Bessie's position in relation to Bigger—she is second, subordinate, lesser. The instability in her position within the subject of the sentence is a/effective violence and represents the corrupted narrator—that the narrator has allegiance to Bigger and thus has betrayed other characters in *Native Son*. The corrupted narrator is the figure of discursive violence within *Native Son*. What must be noted is how the text plays with darkness and lightness. Bessie is *naked within the dark*, exhibiting that Bessie is literally and figuratively bare, vulnerable, and available for violence.

In "Gradually, he began to see the darkness; she was on the other side of the bed, her dark body like a shadow in the denser darkness surrounding her," (135) the text presents a common motif: the ability to *see*. For *Native Son*, Bigger is the only one that can truly "see" the "true" existence of blackness in Modernity. However, we cannot trust this vision or view of the Modern Symbolic. This view is an assault on the narratives and experiences of alternative characters. Keep a tab open on the question of seeing—it will become important later. This gradual moment ultimately is representative of Bigger's point of view of Bessie that *is* a/effective violence, for it is the literal and metaphoric exposure of the hieroglyph. The final part of this sexual moment is the creaky bed, which demonstrates a space of intimacy that is shaky and unstable, further setting the stage for her rape and murder. This introductory moment of sex between the Bigger and

Bessie shows that even in the smallest encounter, a/effective violence is cast upon Bessie. We shall see later how this violence is the exposure of the nothing that is integral to every subject.

This moment continues with another soft plenitude from Bigger, "Gee, kid" (135). The text wades through the connection that Bigger and Bessie feels as they are engaged in sex:

> "Gee, kid"
>
> He felt two soft palms holding his face tenderly and the thought and image of the whole blind world which had made him ashamed and afraid fell away as he felt her as a fallow field beneath him stretching out under a cloudy sky waiting for rain, and he slept in her body…after he had been tossed to dry upon a warm sunlit rock under a white sky he lifted his hands slowly and heavily and touched Bessie's lips with his fingers and mumbled,
>
> "Gee, kid." (135)

The problem, the (im)possible feat of this text, is to construct a narrative of exposure and violence for Bessie, yet this whole passage is about the embodied sentiment of Bigger. The task then, is to discover the subtext of this passage. The fact that one must even look beneath the surface of a text in order to find a narrative for Bessie is violent, and fully represents language's inability to accommodate for the narrative of exposure. Here, the text communicates the intimately violent connection between the two. From the outset of the passage, the "two soft palms" are Bessie's, demonstrating that it is tenderness and love and sweetness that is localized onto Bessie, not Bigger. Although one-sided love is not inherently an attack, it further indicates their dynamic. It's as though Bessie sparks embodied sentiment for Bigger, that Bigger can actually *feel* when he is with Bessie. The entirety of the passage is dedicated to how Bigger feels

when he has sex with Bessie. The well-read reader will say: "Yes, of course this moment is about Bigger, the whole text is about Bigger!" which I don't deny; however, it is representative of not only a/effective violence because we don't get a sense of Bessie's position, but also that it is representative of discursive violence that plagues the writing practice taken up in *Native Son*. Because the narrator is corrupted, we must cultivate a new reading and writing practice, so as to alleviate the hieroglyph from the violence that exposes it. As a "fallow field," Bessie is figured as a being for consumption; Bessie is figured as a being that must be "cultivated." Bessie is devoid of a voice, of a position, of any significance other than for being *for* Bigger. This is one of the purest forms of a/effective violence because it is *affective* in that Bessie's sentiments are not honored, and *effective* in that we have no record of Bessie's position.

Alcohol is metaphorized as Bessie's "religion" (240), so to soothe her and after the previous moment, Bigger and Bessie go out for drinks. Bigger yearns to be "…back in bed with her, feeling her body warm and pliant to his" (140). It is obvious what Bigger thinks of Bessie, it is apparent that, for *Native Son*, Bessie is *for* Bigger, and further demonstrates the role of consumption within their dynamic. The text then goes on to provide a narrative of Bigger's conceptualization of Bessie:

> As he walked beside her he felt that there were two Bessies: one a body that he had just had and wanted badly again; the other was in Bessie's face; it asked questions; it bargained and sold the other Bessie to advantage. He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him. (140)

This dissection of Bessie's being: face versus body, is one of the litany of forms of a/effective violence throughout this text. The sentence structure of "As he walked beside her…and sold the other Bessie to advantage" is intriguing, for it is continuously discontinuous, thus demonstrating that the very being that it is describing. Consumption is further underlined here, for Bigger "wants her body" again. What is further intriguing is that the text presents an economic transaction of the two Bessies, which is almost akin to a doubling of violence—that the Bigger's splitting of Bessie is violent itself and leads to self-reflexive exchange of being. The final sentence: "He wished he could clench his fist and swing his arm and blot out, kill, sweep away the Bessie on Bessie's face and leave the other helpless and yielding before him," has a similarly intriguing structure, for it utilizes polysyndeton to create a rhythm, a cadence to the sentence, but is then broken up by the commas of surrounding "kill." The commas that surround "kill," highlights its significance and provides a sort of foreshadowing to the next scene.

Bigger devises the plan to escape to an abandoned, dilapidated building with Bessie. This building is a haunted house of sorts, with the howling wind rustling the windows, the creaky walls, and the ominous atmosphere. Haunted houses are spaces of danger, of fright, of unexpectedness, of the dead. In the haunted house, Bigger *feels* again, "He laid his fingers upon Bessie's shoulders; slowly he felt the stiffness go out of her body and as it left the tensity of his own rose and his blood grew hot" (232). For Bigger to feel within the haunted house represents a fundamental contradiction in the affect within him. Perhaps he is a monster who inhabits the haunted house. Furthermore, this moment represents a shift in the introductory scene with Bigger, Jan, and Mary against Bessie. This is a moment of triumph over Bessie, a moment where Bessie is fully under the control of Bigger—it does not take scholar to recognize how that is a/effective violence.

While in the haunted house, the couple lay on a makeshift pallet on the cold, creaky floor (232). In the moments leading up to Bessie's rape and murder, it is curious that the moments between Bigger and Bessie in the abandoned building are eerily similar to the moment in which Bessie places her "soft palms" on his face earlier in the text. The text relates that Bigger was "tense inside," teeming with desire, and "…that part of him which always made him at least outwardly adjusted to what was expected of him made him now keep what his body wanted out of full consciousness" (232). The simple response to Bigger's inquiry if she's cold, "'Yeah', she breathed" (233) demonstrates Bessie's reduction to just the breath, to just sound. This reduction to merely sound shows the inability of language to accommodate for the nothingness that fundamentally is the position of the black woman. This is the last time in which we get an essence of Bessie before her rape and murder. The fact that the only perspective we get about Bessie's rape is from Bigger a/effective violence. The fact that the narrator has betrayed the voice and position of Bessie within the narrative is a/effective violence. The very fact that Bessie must be *extracted* from the point of view of Bigger is a/effective and, most of all, discursive violence.

> "Please, Bigger…."
>
> "She tried to turn from him, but his arm held her tightly; she lay still, whimpering. He heard her sigh, a sigh he knew, for he had heard it many times before; but this time he heard in it a sigh deep down beneath the familiar one, a sigh of resignation, a giving up, a surrender of something more than her body. Her head lay limp in the crook of his arm and his hand reached for the hem of her dress, caught it in his fingers and gathered it up slowly. His cold fingers touched her warm flesh, and sought still warmer and softer flesh. Bessie was still, unresisting,

> without response. His icy fingers touched inside of her and at once she spoke, not a word, but a sound that gave forth a meaning of horror accepted. Her breath went out of her lungs in long soft gasps that turned to a whisper of pleading.
>
> "Bigger…. Don't!" (233)

Dialogue tags contain a noun or pronoun and a verb. Throughout the time in the haunted house with Bigger, Bessie's words are devoid of a dialogue tag. The absence of such is representative of the result of a/effective violence, discursive violence; we cannot trust the narrator—the text, and therefore language, cannot accommodate for Bessie's being; she cannot *be* as a noun and *do* as a verb. In addition, these tags act as indicators of who is speaking, thus further demonstrating the corrupted narrator, that it cannot give signal to when Bessie is speaking in the position of the hieroglyph. The ellipses in "Please, Bigger…" suggests that there may have been more that she needed to say, but it was not recorded, not spoken. Her attempt to "turn away" from Bigger is an attempt at self-preservation. Ultimately, though, this attempt is futile, for in the face of a/effective violence, there is no escape. This moment is all encompassing. Bessie's sigh further indicates the reduction to sound, but also shows that there has been a pattern of abuse and subjection. This sigh is a signal that her attempt at securing the fantasy of wholeness is futile, that in the exposure of nothingness as a result of violence, symptomatizes death. Bigger's almost "comforting" cradle of Bessie's limp head is yet another example of a/effective violence. Although there are moments where it seems as though she has a voice, that in her exclamations. the fantasy of being is shown, but how can that be when it is in the face of such grave violence? *It is the violence itself that must be emphasized, for it is what leads to the uncovering of the hieroglyph.*

To account for the rape:

> He had to now Yes. Bessie. His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her. Yes. Bessie. Now. He had to now. don't Bigger don't He was sorry, but he had to. He. He could not help it. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it now. She should Look! She should should should look. Look at how he was. He. He was. He was feeling bad about how she would feel but he could not help it now. Feeling. Bessie. Now. All. He heard her breathing heavily and heard his own breath going and coming heavily. Bigger Now. All. All. Now. All. Bigger…. (234)

The moment is the culmination of a/effective violence and it's in-between, discursive violence. This is *the moment* because the mechanisms of the hieroglyph and the corrupted narrator come into full view. It is about how Bigger feels, not what he does to other, and, as I have shown, is a general amnesia in the text. What is notable about this moment is that the act of rape is never explicitly stated; the reader must infer what is happening. This, along with the fact that the text continually repeats the short clauses represents how the position of the reader is invited into the text. The repetition of the sentences are almost acts of persuasion, and I suggest that Bigger and his narrator are trying to present Bigger in a different light, that Bigger has remorse for what he has done for Bessie (although, I don't buy it). With reference to the sentences, their structure is short and run into one another. The text is broken, demonstrating the inability of language to accommodate for this moment, and simultaneously continuous, demonstrating that this moment happened in a continuous movement. The narrative pace is fast, this moment happened in a *flash*. Moreover, getting back to the question of repetition, the text repeats "Bessie" then after "Look at how he was," repeats "Bigger." I find this moment curious, for it is almost as though the

corrupted narrator from being about Bessie to Bigger; that the rape means something more for Bigger than it does Bessie. To focus on a detail, the text states, "His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her," which shows that their bodies are synonymous with *his* desire, and that there is a distance between his hand and his fingers. The distance created by touch shows a distance between the one who touches and the object, who touches the hieroglyph. With the reading of Bessie's rape, and especially the sentence structure, it is almost as though the text is written in hieroglyphs, more explicitly than in *The Death Bound Subject*. This is the — in action and its exposure. This is the ultimate moment for this chapter because while I have shown that a/effective and discursive violence is present, it is the clearest here.

After Bigger is relieved of his unrelievable itch, the text wades through his immediate sentiments: he feels calm, clear headed, vulnerable, *feeling again* (234-35). Bigger immediately plots his next act: to kill Bessie, because "He could not take her with him and he could not leave her behind" (235). He continually repeats his mantra as though he needs to convince himself that killing Bessie was the right thing to do. Bigger then plunges the brick into her head, with a loud "thud," and exclaims "*Yes!*" (237). At this moment, Bessie becomes deader than dead. This moment further underscores the —, the hieroglyph in action. The death of Bessie is incomprehensible, is too much for the impotent Symbolic, so there is no true way to attend to her death; however, the reading the hieroglyph is an attempt at such, for it is necessary to cultivate a new reading practice to fully observe her death.

The moments in which Bessie is engaged with Bigger is laden with a/effective violence, which is violence that teeters between *affective* and *effective*. It has been my project throughout this work to present the violence that has been enacted onto Bessie. This text is a commentary of a form of violence that, to reiterate, exposes lack. The "so what" of this reading of *Native Son*

lies in the fact that black women exist in a doubled assault on their existence, the nothing as the —, the hieroglyph. Black women are met with gratuitous, a/effective violence, where they are suspended into indeterminacy. They exist in a double-bind of violence that in effect exposes the —. Thus, black women exist in a space in which violence is constitutive of their existence—that to be aa black woman is to be *of* violence.

Bigger throws Bessie's body down an airshaft after his act is completed: "The body hit and bumped against the narrow sides of the air-shaft as it went down into blackness. He heard it strike the bottom" (238); the descent into the airshaft *is* the ineptness of the American Symbolic.

A Brief Commentary on the Field

This commentary on *Native Son* elicits important questions about the act of writing and reading and the role that the narrator and author plays in their text. One might ask: "How can we write from a black male's perspective without reifying violence?" To that, I'd say with the writing conventions that we hold so near and dear to our hearts, it is in an impossible task, for the — or the hieroglyph is fundamentally an aspect of language, thus requiring a new practice of reading and writing. This brings up more questions: "What about black women? Can they escape the violence?" "Is Writing as a whole a practice of violence?" "Is there any way to solve for the violence that is laden throughout black womanhood?" That's more complicated. Although black women writers are more *in tune* to the violence that exposes the hieroglyph, I am not convinced that they escape those implications of violence. If we look at Toni Morrison as an example, in *Beloved*, the acts of violence[viii] perpetuated onto Sethe are still within the normative (violent) reading and writing practices of our Symbolic. Finally, one might ask: "Is *Reading the*

Hieroglyph violent?" and to that, I am not sure. But what I can say is that if we look at other forms of literature, such as poetry, that answer may be solved for. The act of writing poetry (and the presence of poetry in and of itself presents a system of the hieroglyph that can attend to the indeterminacy of the black woman, in a different way.

CHAPTER 2

WONDERS OF THE HIEROGLYPH

"Black women are dying in ways that are structurally unimaginable for most other women,"

Patrice Douglass, "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying

Toi Derricotte. Not much has been written about her and her work. Derroicotte takes an almost autobiographical mode of poetic writing, which is exactly present chapter seeks to investigate. Derricotte's poem, nine stanzas, with four lines each (totaling thirty-six lines), demonstrates another form of exposure of the hieroglyph, but in "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses," this exposure is done through a "self-conscious" act of writing poetry: as the poem moves, it is actively being written. As such, the act of writing poetry provides a new grammar, a new system to speak to the indeterminacy that is the existence of the black woman. This new grammar exposes the — in a new light, because, like the hieroglyph, there is always something hidden from the surface that we cannot account for. I am not proposing that poetry is distinct from prose in that it avoids violence, for all literature is, in a way, about trauma and violence and they both utilize the problematics of conventional reading practices; however, I am articulating the notion that where prose is an exposure of, poetry is a grammar for. Ultimately, there is no way to escape the violence presented by the —, nothing is inescapable. In what follows, I will discuss the previous scholarship that has been written about Derricotte's main project in all her poetry, then move to an analysis of "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses."

Terri Brochers, Patrice Douglass, David Marriott—Interlocutors

Terri Brochers, professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Medaille College, looks to writers such as Toi Derricotte, Adrienne Rich, and Walt Whitman to discover how these poets use the structure of language as "…action to create worlds they share—and sometimes don't—with others" (184). Brochers project, titled "Toi Derricotte's Language as Action: The Construction of Individual and Collective Identity," seeks to use Derricotte's work as a model for how poets "create worlds out of language"; how they use metaphor to converge seemingly distinct ideals (184-85). She (partly to her own fault) provides an exhaustive list of ideals (freedom and "bondage" to name one coupling) to describe how metaphor is used to "…portray the interrelationships of the many permeable boundaries or portals of human existence that beg to be centered or crossed…" (185). Brochers's reading of Derricotte's work could not be farther from the reading of this chapter, for Brochers's work is symptomatic of a harmful dedication to Humanism and "progress." Brochers's convergence of Adrienne Rich, Walt Whitman, and Toi Derricotte is fundamentally against the central project of *Reading the Hieroglyph*. I am not reading Brocher's derisory work for its content, rather, I am reading this work for its method. Brochers excavates a very important aspect of Derricotte's main project throughout her works: the significance and presence of language. This project takes a more critical examination of language than that of Brochers. In so many words, Derricotte's work, by way of Brochers, demonstrates that we are fundamentally created by language—that we are figured by language, not the other way around. Language is the way that we relate to ourselves, and Others.

Before an engagement with "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses," it is important to further contextualize Derricotte's masterpiece. In "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying," Patrice Douglass explores the centering of violence onto the ungendered

body, which signals a mark in Modernity. In an insightful reading of the death of Korryn Gains by the hands of the police, Douglass argues that "The conflation of all Black genders as male…does not masculinize anti-black violence, but misaligns it as inherently without gender, since maleness is assumed as structurally unbound by the suffering of gender violence. Furthermore, it reveals that violence deracinates Black gender into an unrecognizable state, such that what is seen does not account for all that has occurred" (109). In other words, Douglass is arguing that there is a blanketing of antiblack violence as "without gender." As such, antiblack violence completely refigures black gender in such a way that the barriers between gender difference become dissolved. This blanketing, universalization of violence is, in turn, violent itself. By looking at the interactions between policing and black women, Douglass hopes to show "…how these encounters demonstrate very explicitly the gendering of Black women as inhabiting a space of violence that exceeds the assumptive parameters of the terms of gender" (110).

Although the emphasis of Douglass' work is slightly different than this chapter's, I've chosen to include it at this point in the text because it represents the very notion that I wish to demonstrate throughout this entire project. Douglass and I converge on the fact that black women inhabit a space that is incomprehensible, one that exceeds prevailing knowledge systems. Through its inclusion, Douglass' work provides theoretical support to this chapter, and is important because it demonstrates a recognition of the —.

Douglass' work provides a wonderful segway into David Marriott's work, "Corpsing; or The Matter of Black Life" because of the emphasis on death and dying. In Marriott's work, he takes a critical examination of "corpsing" as a verb. For him, "corpsing" involves when "people fail to live up to or grasp their social roles" (33). He further focuses on his notion of "corpsing,"

where it is "the knowledge and loss of rules determining the subject" (35). In other words, akin to da Silva and Spillers[ix], Marriott is looking to re—articulate the notion of the determining subject. I have chosen to include Marriott's thermotical treasure because both of us use poetry as a method of reading and appropriate a figure of writing to understand the complexities of race and gender. In a way, this chapter of *Reading the Hieroglyph* responds to Marriott's concept of "negritude" and his notion of "speaking of corpsing," which is *through poetry*.

In my reading, Marriott's usage of "negritude" is a negation that is simultaneously empty, a *vide*, that can be recovered. Marriott's project and that of this one are very similar in that the arguments, purpose, and method are aligned; however, it is distinct from Marriott's work in that first, it cannot be more emphasized that the hieroglyph is an *irrevocable nothing*, whereas Marriott proposes an appropriation of language that can be solved for, an empty signifier that is of negation, "…[it] enacts a new role for blackness that necessarily has nothing to do with essentialism and everything to do with an abyssal explanation and consequently with a writing that inscribes a blackness of meaning deeply inside itself" (46). Early in his text, he states, "…in the poem, the 'natural' order of racial life is literally cut open by a single signifier, that of 'negritude,' whose status as a kind of radical autonomous act exceeds both meaning and judgement" (36). The "natural order of racial life" is the signifying chain that organizes the set of "race." He sees "negritude" as that which ruptures such chain (an idea akin to Spillers and da Silva), Moreover, the word "negritude" is empty, but *not nothing*. Here, Marriott localizes his argument on the *word*[x] rather than the hieroglyph, and does not escape the problematics of the system of language. He focuses on the *word* not the *mode of writing* (poetic writing), which is a fundamental blind spot. It's as though his focus on the word alone attends to the nuances of

poetry in and of itself. He speaks of a way to write but does not discuss the way of writing in its own right.

Marriott activates the power of the black woman by looking to Eurydice and Sartre's "Orphée Noir, "…these negrophobic women are hidden, remarkably out of place to the experiences they are used to narrate, but they must also be *seen* to be impossibly out of place, unable to yield or teach any clear knowledge but to illuminate the truth of desire precisely because of their obscurity" (59). Here, Marriott's goal is to make the black woman "present," to make them "visible." Furthermore, he uses them in the very same way that Spillers does, to activate them to influence the black man. In doing so, Marriott ascribes to identity politics and the notion that black women are constitutive of and by the world but does not attend to the violence that is perpetuated onto them.

The hieroglyph, the — is a far better "*symbolom*," than negritude, for, as I will show in the reading of "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses," it *attends to the nothing that is of black womanhood*. Where Marriott does not focus on the act of poetic writing itself and *how* "negritude" is placed within Aimé Césaire's text, this work picks up, and fully attends to the hieroglyph, as *symbolom*.

Title and Narrative Structure

In this next phase of the chapter, I will tackle the task of close reading the nuances of Derricotte's text. The structure of this section is purposeful, and will allow for a granular account the entire project of "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corpses."

Now to begin the interpretation of Derricotte's poem. The title and narrative structure provide a litany of commentaries on the innerworkings of the poem. From the very outset, we can notice how the text attempts to give presence, gives significance to the meaningless, through capitalizing each of its words: "On," "Turning," "Unidentified," "Black," "Female," and "Corpses." Because "On" is a preposition, the very simple use of it in the title demonstrates that the "Unidentified Black Female Corpse" are merely objects for the poem, for prepositions are used to inaugurate the *object* of the sentence. Next, "Turning Up" is in the present continuous verb tense and demonstrates that quite literally; that the display of the "Unidentified Black Female Corpse," mark the unearthing of the — in the Symbolic. Furthermore, it connotes a surprise, some sort of out of nowhereness that is not locatable within the Symbolic. For the corpses to be "Unidentified" illustrates the universalization of the black woman, it expresses a sort of "confounded identity" that Spillers asserts in "Mama's Maybe, Papa's Maybe" (S;pillers, 65). In addition, it demonstrates a failure in naming, a negation of naming, thus taking away reference from the subject of the sentence. Finally, the inscription of death can be seen through the word choice of "Corpses." It shows that the objects of the poem are *deader than dead*. The objectivity that is demonstrated by the preposition in the title is connected to the idea of a corpse, for, is a corpse a something or a nothing? Is a corpse a subject or an object? How does being inscribed by death occupy the space of the —? As we have seen in chapter two, death is a symptom of the failure of the American Symbolic to have a —. Here, we can see the a/effects of such a symptomization to the black woman herself. The rhetorical devices present within the title of Derricotte's poem are important because they lay the groundwork for the rest of the text. Moreover, they articulate death as a symptom of the incomprehensibility of nothing for the

American Symbolic. As we will see, the vast sea of rhetorical maneuvers that Derricotte uses will make very explicit how the — a/effects the black woman.

Stanza 1

Moving his three acres with a tractor,

a man notices something ahead—a mannequin—

he thinks someone threw it from a car. Closer

he sees it is the body of a black woman.

This first stanza is representative of the first encounter with the "mannequin." How can we "encounter" the symptom of death? How do we "encounter" nothing—is that even a possibility? The "mannequin" *is the hieroglyph*. Beginning at the broadest level of interpretation, the sentence structure shows a rupture in what can/cannot be articulated. Next, the first line brings up the question of point of view and "visibility." The pronoun "his" inscribes gender into this scene, where a generalizable man stumbles across a "mannequin." This first line is further representative of the question of point of view because it asks us to ponder: How do we give attend to the dead? How can the dead have a point of view? It matters that *a man* discovered the "mannequin" on *his land* because it illustrates a gender dynamic within the text, where black women become abject. Additionally, three acres is a great deal of land (130, 680 feet squared, to be exact), which articulates the notion that the woman, as represented by the "mannequin" is easy to overlook, easy to be missed. The ease at which the black woman can be "overlooked" is important because it represents how the text positions black women: that they are *of* the world,

yet not *in* it. Throughout this sustained reading of the first line, it has become clear that, from the poem's outset, there exists a pervasive gender dynamic, a difference.

What I must call attention to in the second line is the end of the line, "—mannequin—." For the text, the em dash calls attention to the "mannequin," it displays its significance. Further, the specific word choice of "mannequin," connotes perfection, the model, the exemplary, thus demonstrating a mode of being for the black woman; that it is literally a *model for violence*. The fact that it is not a "body" or a "corpse" or a "person," but a "*mannequin*" demonstrates the notion of *deader than dead*. What does it mean that the "mannequin" is made in the image of the Human? Time must be given to the "mannequin" because it represents a sort of poetic consciousness. For me, I see the em dashes that encircle the "mannequin" as the moment of poetic recognition, "poetic consciousness," of the nothingness that the black woman occupies.

The final moment of this stanza that we must pause over is the man *seeing* "the body of a black woman." This vision of the body of a black woman provides an important insight into the poetic encounter with nothing. First, there is a tension between the title of the poem and the naming of the mannequin as "the body of a black woman." The only way to work out this tension is to tease out what it means for a mannequin to be "the body of a black woman." The imposition of the mannequin onto the black woman positions them in such a way where they are static, still, staid. Mannequins are manufactured (along with the fact that this first stanza happens on land that is being cultivated), and so this connection between the mannequin and the black woman shows the notion of violent malleability. In other words, the nothingness that engages with the black woman fundamentally and violently changes the being of the black woman. Finally, this tension represents the (im)possibility of speaking about/seeing—bearing witness to—the nothingness that is occupied by the black woman.

In all, the first stanza shows a gendered encounter with “nothing.” It is almost as though the mannequin is a proxy of nothing, that the only way to encounter nothing is though the proxy. It is the act of poetic writing, writing that exists outside of form and pattern, that provides the proxy for to the —. As such, there is always an infinite distance between the encounter to —. In order to “encounter” the symptom of death, one must take the violent position of the Other.

Stanzas 2 & 3

The medics come and turn her with pitchforks.

Her gaze shoots past him to nothing. Nothing

is explained. How many black women

have been turned up to stare at us blankly,

in weedy fields, off highways,

pushed out in plastic bags,

shot, knifed, unclothed partially, raped,

their wounds sealed with a powdery crust.

The second and third stanzas are combined here first for formal reasons, but also for subject-matter. The end of the second stanza is a comma, not a question mark, yet the tone is in

an interrogative form. This absence of a signal to the question fundamentally links the two stanzas together, even though they are separated by a line break.

More specifically, the second stanza is perhaps one of the most important in the poem. Here, we witness three significant themes: distance, presence, and recognition. These themes culminate to fundamentally question the exposure of nothingness and "recognition" of such. The opening line of the stanza supports the notion that there is some sort of temporal schema; that this moment is "present" within Modernity. The fact that they touch the body of a black woman with a three-pronged poker is not only the reversal of saving and support, but also shows that "The medics" are not actually encountering the body itself. This argument is parallel to the question of encountering in the first stanza in the fact that because they turn her body with a pitchfork, there exists some sort of compulsory distance between the subject and —. Whether through proxy or in actuality, there is always a distance in the encounter with nothing and the subject. Moving to the next line, the question of the gaze prompts the reader to think about the difference between a *look* and a *gaze*. Where a look is active, a gaze is static and dispossessed. As such, the word choice of a "gaze" illustrates a sort of double objectification, where, as we have seen in the first stanza, she is the "mannequin" and as such, has a *gaze*, not a look. The second line is curious because the inclusion of a period at the end of the sentence is a rupture in the continuity of the line. This rupture signals a repetition of nothing. It's almost as though the text is suggesting that the act of a poetic rupture can attend to the nothing that is the black woman.

Although the third stanza's presence is incidental, it is important to note that it is another incredibly tense moment in the text. With the "weedy fields" versus the "highways" and the "unclothed partially," the text presents these tensions as a device for foreshadowing. The long

list rhetorical strategy is employed here, where the poet uses a litany of commas to link the violence done onto the black woman. The importance of the third stanza lies in the fact that it is a continuation of the second, but, as with the stanza's prior, does not end in a question mark, but a period. The statement is said as just that—a statement, thus leaving no room for other consideration on the matter.

In the distance from the —, the encounter with the — becomes clear. "The medics" must have distance from the position of the black woman. The figure of the hieroglyph must have a gaze, for how can she see or look? It has been my ultimate project in this chapter to show how the act of writing poetry provides a grammar for the —, but I must query, is this even possible?

Stanzas 4 & 5

Last week on TV, a gruesome face, eyes bloated shut.

No one will say, "She looks like she's sleeping," ropes

of blue-black slashes at the mouth. Does anybody

know this woman? Will anyone come forth? Silence

like a backwave rushes into that field

where, just the week before, four other black girls

had been found. The gritty image hangs in the air

just a few seconds,

The fourth and fifth stanzas, as with the third, are quite incidental, so not much time will be spent on them. Despite that, it is important to include them because it represents that the symptom of death for the black woman in Modernity is a pattern, is continual. Additionally, these two stanzas question the role of poetic address and speaker. “No one will say, “She looks like she’s sleeping…” is a peculiar utterance, for if the poem is telling us no one is speaking, yet it signals that by including quotations, then *who is speaking*? The hieroglyph reveals a failure in poetic address.

For me, this contradiction within the text demonstrates a breakdown in poetic address—that the normative I/Thou structure of address is ruptured by the —, but more on this in a moment. Before coming back to the idea of poetic address, we must pause on the “gritty images” of the “Unidentified Black Female Corpse.” The image, the view of death is blurred, unclear, thus begging the question: Is it possible to truly see, to bear witness to this symptom of the Symbolic? I’m not convinced. Furthermore, the grittiness of the images demonstrate that they are gruesome, frightful, terrible and substantiates the claim that there is a distance between death, because it is an *image* and not *reality* (but how dissimilar are images from reality in the first place?). The final line of the fifth stanza gets back to the question of poetic address. The poem illustrates that there is the ability to proclaim the “I,” but who has that ability? It is not specified in the poem who this “me” is, but perhaps the speaker of the poem is in an act of self-writing. That this poem is self-reflexive, and as such, is a mis-recognition of the —.

The fourth and fifth stanzas represent an intermediary position in the text where the action of the text is moved from outside to inside. They represent a shift in the poem, where the

“speaker’ is in reciting an experience, then turning that experience onto itself. We cannot assume that the ability to proclaim the “I” is the black woman. Although the experiences may align, the privilege of being able to proclaim the “I” is barred from the —.

Stanza 6

a black woman, there is a question being asked

about my life. How can I

protect myself? Even if I lock my doors,

walk only in the light, someone wants me dead.

If the fifth stanza introduces the question of poetic address and the poetic speaker, then the sixth presents an inquiry into the “I.” The section with the fourth and fifth stanzas are separated because the distance between the “me” of the final line of the fifth stanza the proclamation of “a black woman…” in the sixth must be highlighted structurally.

The first line of the stanza does not begin with a capital; there is no formal pattern of capitalization throughout this poem, and as such, the significance created by the capital letter shifts throughout the poem. As stated above, direct reference to the “…but it strikes me” and “a black woman…” is broken, fissured. Therefore, the poetic assertion of black womanhood must be made distinct from the possessive pronoun of “me.” The next line, “about my life. How can I,” further elicits the question of the act of poetic writing. It’s almost as though the poem is aware of the uncertainty of the ability to claim the “I.” It’s

almost as though the poem is engaged in self—reflexivity, almost self—aware. The question then becomes: How? Is this possible within nothingness? How can the black woman really be a subject, have the capacity to have the "I" if they are the —? The final line, "walk only in the light, someone wants me dead," the Symbolic symptom of death is further underscored. The tendency toward the death of the black woman is only "comprehensible" through the symptom, and further represents, as with chapter two, the inability of the American Symbolic to confront the —, the distinction between the Symbolic and the Real. Where reality and the Real are confronted, death is imposed. To "walk in the light" connotes the capability to be in "truth" and "reality." However, because the figure of nothingness as the hieroglyph that the black woman occupies is a fundamental nothing, "truth" and "reality" become incomprehensible.

Stanzas 7

Am I wrong to think

If five white women have been stripped,

broken, the sirens would wail until

someone was named?

This stanza, like the fourth and fifth, acts as a transitional one between the beginning of the poem to the end. As a transitional stanza, not much needs to be interpreted, but it is important to pause over it for a moment to discuss the ways in which it highlights the suffering of and violence perpetuated onto black women. The word

choice of "stripped" and "broken," are understatements and represents a distinction between how violence is perpetuated onto women. For the text, the violence that white women go through is not as severe as it is with black women. That black womanhood is showered with grave, perpetual, gratuitous, a/effective violence. The stanza connects the moment of reflection of violence with the encounter with "the medics" from the beginning. For the "sirens to wail" demonstrates a call to attention, a recognition of the pains and suffering of white women. Finally, the ability to give voice, presence, naming, to the bodies of white women that have had violence enacted onto them is further highlighted in the final line. In all, this stanza makes an important distinction between the violence onto white women versus black women.

Stanza 8

Is it any wonder I walk over these bodies

pretending they are not mine, that I do not know

the killer, that I am just like any woman—

if not wanted, at least tolerated.

The second to last stanza represents further represents a distinction amongst the category of "woman." Looking to the overall structure of this point in the text, we notice that there is a repetition of "that." As a determiner, it gives reference, testimony, to the rest of the stanza. It is a way to connect the ideas within the stanza. The first line is a connection to the first stanza with the Man's farm. It's almost as though the "three acres" is representative of the entire earth. As

such, the bodies found in the farm are *deader than dead*. Then, the speaker of the poem "pretends" that they are not theirs. That because of nothingness is *exposed*. Next, for "the killer" to be placed at the beginning of the line and separated by a comma, the significance of the position is outlined. "The killer" is unnamed, and as such, the violence becomes universal, therefore violence cannot be located, grounded—it is ever-present. Finally, at the end of the stanza, the reader is confronted with the — itself, for it is demonstrated by "woman—." This pronouncement must be included at the *end of the line*, must be attached to the empty, ungendered signifier of "woman."

Stanza 9

Part of me wants to disappear, to pull

the earth on top of me. Then there in this part

that digs me up with this pen

and turns my sad black face to the light.

The significance and act of poetic writing becomes extremely clear in the final stanza. At the beginning, we notice a split within the speaker, where it is entwined in a double-bind in which the earth is a form of protection and a form of violence. The ending of the first line, "to pull" demonstrates an attempt at agency, an attempt at taking charge. The entire poem culminates into the final two lines, where the speaker fully articulates the notion of the self—reflexivity of the act of writing poetry. Evidently, poetry—that fundamentally sits at the borders of language,

of what can be known by and through language—and the method of writing it, is an attempt at articulating nothing.

The fact that Toi Derricotte's poem remains undated is significance because it asserts the universal state of nothingness that black women occupy. Throughout this sustained reading of Derricotte's poem, we have seen that it is the act of poetic writing that provides a grammar of the hieroglyph, explores the "Wonders" of such. How does it do so? This chapter is imperative to the understanding of the entire project because it shows that there is no way to truly encounter the space between the Symbolic and the Real. It is a necessity to expand our notions of black womanhood because of the —. Although this poem has pattern, it does not have form, and as such, the poem itself is the ultimate test of what can be related and communicated through language. In all, the presence of the — and a usage of the word "nothing' within the poem itself is the assertion of the position of nothing.

CONCLUSION

MOVING ~~FORWARD~~

It's all over the news; Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson has been nominated to the highest court in the land. Spanning across (one side of) the wide wide web, praise and acclaim fill my feed. As I am watching the masses, I cannot help but notice the hieroglyph in action, the indeterminacy that is infused within black womanhood. It would be simple to read the questions posed by (certain) senators as representative of violence, because they simply are. Instead, what I would like to pause on is a moment with Cory Booker, a black man, a Democrat, where he proclaims to Judge Jackson, "'It's hard for me not to look at you and not see my mom,'…'Not to see my cousins, one of them who had to come here and sit behind you. She had to have your back. I see my ancestors and yours.'" Reported by Today News (but found through the wide wide web), his "tearful speech" to Judge Jackson is ultimately the exposure of the hieroglyph, the indeterminacy that Judge Jackson's existence is founded upon. Booker gives the rouse of empathy by shedding a single tear, though his voice "shaking with emotion." This *fantasy* of empathy is inherently violence, for how can he truly attend to the pains of black women? He doesn't. He can't. For Booker to see a lineage of woman behind Judge Jackson is a direct reference to the "mother's touch" that Spillers references, and as we know through my reading, this effectively reifies violence. Finally, we can map the relation between Bigger and Bessie directly onto that of Booker and Judge Jackson because it is fundamentally defined by a/effective, discursive violence[xi]. I've chosen this "real world example" (as if a record of literature isn't enough) because it fully encapsulates what I am arguing in *Reading the Hieroglyph*, that even in our

every day, most impassioned moments of "connection," violence exposes the nothingness that black women occupy. The question then becomes, how do we move "forward?"

Throughout this text, it has been my main project to attend to the violence that permeates through black womanhood. As I have shown through my readings of *Native Son* by Richard Wright and "On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black Female Corposes" by Toi Derricotte, the —, the hieroglyph, the nothing is what the black woman occupies. This nothing suspends the black woman into a state of *indeterminacy*, where their existence is defined by a state of the indeterminate. Throughout this text, I have proposed radial re—readings of black womanhood that *requires a new system of grammar, a new way of encountering the Symbolic* because of the fact that the hieroglyph *unravels* the *point de caption* of the signifier and the signified. The black optimists will say that as language changes, we can alter our way of relating to and encountering the Symbolic (if they even "believe" in the Symbolic in the first place), that as language changes, so do we. To that, I wonder, will the mechanisms of violence that support and uphold the Symbolic change?—I do not think so. This dedication, the "enslavement by" the system of language is a limitation that, not unlike myself, theorists at large encounter.

"Forward" is crossed out in the title because I am not convinced that is possible to conceive of a way "forward," of a new relation within the Symbolic. Even in our most "liberal" or "best" moments (as shown by the relation between Cory Booker and Judge Jackson), our current signifiers of existence fail black women. Another question: "Why should we do this work if we are just perpetuating violence?" We need an archive. We need a record. We need to hold our signifiers of existence accountable and *call out* their subversive violence. *Reading the Hieroglyph* is the impetus for such a project.

As for the field of black studies at large: this question of the — or the hieroglyph tests the limits of our awareness of black women within the field. Even the most prominent of scholars, ooking back to my reading of da Silva and Spillers, fall into the trap of language, cannot fully attend to the position of the black woman within our societal epoch. Every time it is written, it's just used without a second thought, but it is the project of *Reading the Hieroglyph* to take that second thought, to pause for a moment and really interrogate the hieroglyph in writing. I have been confined by my study of literature, so something to be explored further would be the function of the hieroglyph in other disciples: Does the — mean the same thing in philosophy? Sociology? History? The — is the future of black studies, to move away from our normative signifiers of existence and to move to something more radical, something that we can't even begin to conceptualize.

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[i] Affective violence as emotion, sentiment, feeling, and effective violence as structural, physical.
[ii] Spillers states, “…[the] materialized scene of unprotected female flesh - of female flesh ‘ungendered’-offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediation” (68).
[iii] Where the subject, as Lacan puts it, is the “speaking being,” and the Other as the entity that is *completely distinct* from the subject.
[iv] As a *fantasy*, lack cannot be solved for, but can be infinitely propelled towards.
[v] I’ve left it in the French so as to not confuse readers, for it has a multitude of translations.
[vi] This is in Lacan’s third Book. Further citing Bruce Fink, he reads the Lacanian notion of psychosis as the state in which the split in the subject is not there. In other words, the splitting of the subject by that of language has not occurred for the psychotic (45).
[vii] The em dash here is important because they, unbeknownst to them, open a space where the hieroglyph can be highlighted.
[viii] The “stealing of her milk,” in other words, her rape by the overseer and his “disciples” (19-20)
[ix] See Chapter 1
[x] *Mot* in French, since Marriott is so dedicated to it.
[xi] I’ll admit that the violence in *Native Son* is much more overt, but that does not take away from the gravity of the violence of the relation between Booker and Judge Jackson