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Dominick D. Rolle Date

Properties of Confinement in African Diasporic Autobiographies (1966-1987)

By

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Properties of Confinement in African Diasporic Autobiographies (1966-1987)

By

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An abstract of A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, 2016.

Abstract

Properties of Confinement in African Diasporic Autobiographies (1966-1987)
By Dominick D. Rolle

This dissertation examines the multifaceted ways in which select black female and male autobiographers from the United States and Cuba challenge and redefine the notion of human property while serving as slaves, as military personnel, and as prisoners during the Black Arts Movement. This study considers autobiographies including Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966); Chester Himes's *The Quality of Hurt* (1973); Assata Shakur's *Assata*: *An Autobiography* (1987) and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*, *An American Slave*, *Written By Himself* (1845). Drawing from the fields of African American literary theory, critical race theory, black queer theory, disability studies, autobiography studies, and black feminist studies, I ask: 1.) How do the cultural intersections of slavery, the military, and prison--and the particular laws and regulations governing each--structure and impede opportunities for black advancement and citizenship across the African Diaspora? 2.) How and why is autobiography an effective genre of self-possession to challenge the ongoing project of turning humans into property? I choose my selected narratives because their authors have served time in slavery, the military or prison and provide intriguing accounts of their experiences while *bearing witness* to the oppression of people of African decent across the diaspora. Their protagonists enrich current discourses concerning black heroism and subjugation in relation to the white establishment's efforts at positioning them as human property. When examining these autobiographies, I interrogate the strategic ways in which these authors experience conversions when they enter or escape from various spaces of confinement such as plantations, barracks, and prison cells. My project is particularly alert to the disparate ways in which they experience moments of freedom in the most imprisoning spaces and sensations of captivity in the most liberating. I trace these lines of inquiry within the subgenre of confinement literature. My study demonstrates the ongoing relevance of questions concerning black citizenship and self-possession in relationship to property ownership across the African Diaspora. Furthermore, it harkens to the *current* ways in which black men and women redefine their status as human property as slaves, as military personnel, and as prisoners.

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of English, 2016.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people for supporting my academic and personal journey to this culminating moment of completing my doctoral program. To begin with, I extend my deepest appreciation to my family whose unwavering support has sustained me over the years: my brother Dion Rolle, my brother Drexel Armbrister, my aunt Georgianna Rolle, and my mother Miriam E. Rolle. In particular, I express my deepest appreciation to my mother who has always believed in me, always supported me, always loved me, always encouraged me, and always provided for me. When I consider all that you have achieved in your lifetime, I am deeply humbled and appreciative. Your narrative inspires me, and to be your son, I am forever thankful. Thank you to my military family including Adam J. Lemere, Rochelle Powell, Audrey and Robert Cooke, and Lamarr Dingle. You have proven to be exceptional friends. Many thanks to Aruni Mahapatra—my soul brother and confidant.

I am forever indebted to the gracious scholars and community builders who have enriched my time as a graduate student including: Brett Gadsden Ph.D., Natasha Trethewey, Dean Lisa A. Tedesco, Corinne Kratz Ph.D., Mark Risjord Ph.D., Cathryn Johnson Ph.D., Heather A. Williams, Ph.D., Herman Beavers, Ph.D., Dona Yarbrough, Ph.D., Melvin Rahming, Ph.D., Ulester Douglas, MSW and BriGette McCoy. You have encouraged and empowered me during this process—I am thankful. Many Thanks to my Mellon Family for their continued support.

I would like to especially thank my dissertation committee for all of their time, intellectual contributions and support during this challenging process. Valérie Loichot's thoughtfulness, encouragement and brilliance will forever be appreciated. Mark Sanders'

diplomacy, mentorship, and unwavering commitment to supporting my professional development has earned my respect. Benjamin Reiss' sheer desire to see me succeed, by any means necessary, has incited my deepest appreciation. Marlon Ross' encouragement and insights during my undergraduate and graduate school years has been a blessing. Lastly, I would like to thank God; with Your guidance all things are possible. Many Thanks and Praise.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Property and Personhood in Black Autobiography

> First consul, father of all military men, honest judge, defender of the innocent, decide on my fate. My wounds are very deep, employ the salutary remedies to prevent them from ever opening. You are a doctor, I rely entirely on your justice and your fairness.
>
> General Toussaint Louverture[1]

As a scholar of twentieth-century African Diasporic literature, I am also a U.S. Navy veteran who served from 1997-2003. I enlisted in the military at seventeen years old to earn the Montgomery GI Bill to help fund college expenses, but I was also enticed by patriotic commercials--tantalizing in their lure--that appealed to my youthful sensibilities as they beckoned to me by casting daring men and women on panoramic screens. By enlisting, I imagined that I could fashion a persona—as a confident sailor—who would move with the tide from Miami, Florida to experience new vistas while traveling to unknown parts. While laboring as an air-traffic control radar technician onboard the naval aircraft carrier U.S.S. Harry S. Truman (CVN-75), I experienced combat during Operation Iraqi Freedom. During this war, I was a supervisor who learned to lead troops during one of the most politically-riven periods in American foreign policy, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon rocked the nation on September 11, 2001. Coupled with my informal learning gleaned during my military years, I enrolled in my first English composition courses, which ignited my passion for further study, onboard a naval aircraft carrier—an island of steel and stealth.[2] In this

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[1] Louverture, Toussaint. *The Memoir of General Toussaint Louverture*. 1863. Ed. Philippe R. Girard. New York: Oxford UP, 2014. 169. Print.

[2] Through the Navy College Program for Afloat College Education (NCPACE), sailors are provided the opportunity to take undergraduate and graduate courses, taught via technology and traditional classroom

context, while taking a composition course, I read Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*): *A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945).

As a Petty Officer Third Class (PO3), an enlisted rank that signifies that a sailor is beginning to exercise leadership, I read *Black Boy*, a classic bildungsroman, during this pivotal moment in my educational growth. Under a shadowy light in the ship's library, I wrestled with the words and emotions which captured Wright's challenges--erected on the precipice of black manhood--which he often frames as warfare in the Jim Crow South and Chicago. Returning to my regular duties, I recall feeling torn after delighting in the music that happens in literature as you read it, and it reads you, in a circumscribed space—like the sound and sense of jazz ebbing and flowing in a Juke joint. In class, I had the rare opportunity to discuss my insights while being exposed to new worlds of experiences as I listened to my peers' points of view and ruminated over diverse episodes of their life stories.

Black Boy opens in Natchez, Mississippi during the 1920's. The author depicts his childhood and adolescence as besieged by poverty, stark hunger, child abuse, an absentee father, an ailing mother, the threat of state-sponsored violence and lynching among other obstacles. Simultaneously, Wright portrays his family's constant movement from Mississippi to other southern locales and eventually to Chicago to ameliorate their poverty. In Chicago, he establishes a burgeoning writing career and discovers the redemptive power of art as he becomes involved with the Communist Party. For young Richard, words are a balm. Yet, he soon learns, as I discovered, then, words are *weapons*.

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instruction, during sea duty. Civilian instructors, from diverse institutions, facilitate these courses. The United States Department of Defense. *Navy College Program*. Web. 3 July 2016. <http://www.navycollegepace.com/>.

Richard Wright's experiences differed significantly from mine, and yet, I related to his self-portrayal as an outsider in his own country. Though I was born in Miami, Florida, I resided in the Bahamas (the country from which my family descended) until the tenth grade. After leaving Nassau, Bahamas in pursuit of wider educational opportunities, I lived in the United States with four different families in 3 years before graduating high school and joining the military at 17 years old. Thus, as a dual national, I first recall feeling American patriotism while singing "I'm Proud to Be an American" with my boot camp division, in a military barracks, as we were huddled together in a circle. This moment of *esprit du corps*, in this captive space where I transitioned from boy to man, from civilian to sailor (and to some) from Bahamian to American is reminiscent of Wright's juxtaposition of two scenes in his narrative—black soldiers gallantly marching and black prisoners toiling on a chain gang. In the former scene, young Richard, playing in a field near his Granny's house in Jackson, Mississippi, beholds the dazzling spectacle of World War I soldiers marching to prepare for war in one of my favorite passages of literature:

> Suddenly a strange rhythmic sound made me turn my head. Flowing threateningly toward me over the crest of a hill was a wave of black men draped in weird mustard clothing. Unconsciously I jumped to my feet, my heart pounding. What was this? Were these men coming after me?...I wanted to fly home but, as in a dream, I could not move. My heart was beating so strongly that it shook my body. I tried to run, but I could not budge.[3]

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[3] Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*): *A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper Collins Books, 1945, 65. Print.

At this pivotal moment when black soldiers are preparing for war, and eventually become *New Negroes* following World War I, Richard experiences a powerful vision of American democracy that was "too vast" and alien for him to comprehend.[4] As Wright elucidates this moment, one can imagine the lad's sheer curiosity. Despite his mother's explanations, he is speechless. Reading this enchanting passage onboard a military vessel, such an image of awakening, in my own experience, borders on the sublime as I recall the moment, at seventeen years old, when I stepped off the yellow school bus that carried me to Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, IL. In the cool and hazy morning, I walked on a dewy field in the crisp of daybreak and beheld Navy recruits of different races, genders, ethnicities, and religions donned in glimmering dress whites—left, right, left—marching smartly like guardian angels. As my patriotic sentiments and idealism would soon be disrupted—so too would young Richard's. This scene of army soldiers striding accompanies another that brings African Americans' wrestling with patriotism, and their access to the liberties of American democracy, into sharp relief.

Immediately after describing black soldiers marching, Richard recalls seeing a chain gang of black prisoners, wearing striped uniforms, which he mistakes for a herd of elephants stomping—slowly—toward him.[5] During our classroom discussion, I remember the communal sense of intrigue as we discussed *Black Boy*. Years later, I still find it perplexing that Wright pairs these scenes to capture the liminality between black advancement and subjugation during World War I--the changing same--and the growing

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[4] To read more about the "New Negro" see the introduction of Alain Locke's seminal collection *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997, 1-23. Print.

[5] Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*): *A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper Collins Books, 1945, 65-66. Print.

interconnections of the military and prison industrial complexes which continue to subjugate blacks from across the African Diaspora.[6] When reading these passages and considering my own experiences as a U.S. Navy sailor, years later, I became fascinated by the overlapping characteristics among slavery, the military and prison and particularly the disparate ways in which black autobiographers strove to become heroes, in each institution, despite their regulations.[7]

From this perspective, I recall these scenes from my years of military service, alongside Wright's emergence into a tender and tough black manhood, with a bittersweet appraisal. That period of my life brought new freedoms, new adventures, and a newly found confidence that transformed a bookish boy into a military man. However, that period also marked for me, in the most intimate ways, a direct experience of being treated as government property—Dominick Rolle, (PO3) Petty Officer Third Class.[8] I battled to

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[6] Angela Davis is one of the most vocal critics of the intersections between the military and prison industrial complexes—a peculiar arrangement in which the military, prison, local and federal governments, and corporations profit from the disenfranchisement of people of color. Davis renders these collusions as particularly strategic—to increase profit—when she notes that the military and prison share technologies and products which are designed to enact violence. See Angela Y. Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. Print.

[7] In my dissertation, I am particularly interested in the challenging ways in which black women and men endeavored to become heroes despite the racialized ways in which heroism is characterized in American society. To read more about this see Jerry H. Bryant. *Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. 1-25. Print.

[8] In considering the differing ways in which military personnel are treated as government property, my intellectual perspective follows that of the political science scholar and U.S. Navy veteran Christopher S. Parker whose remarkable study reveals that black service members occupy a particularly challenging position. Their status as government property affords them various legal protections—in accordance with civilian and military law. However, because they are subject to both legal systems they can also be prosecuted by both for various infractions. Furthermore, the resilience of *de facto* segregation and racist customs has historically impeded the advancement of blacks in the service while positioning them as vulnerable to racist violence. For example, racist whites have particularly abhorred beholding the spectacle of black military personnel in uniform. While the uniform is a national symbol of patriotism, it suggests to racist white service members that black military personnel are equal to them. The images of black military personnel in uniform also angers racist white civilians because these black men and women who are serving their country occupy a national position that is considered above the station of civilian whites. Racist whites have historically lynched black military personnel to avenge their wearing of military

serve as a sailor and endeavored to exemplify the US Navy's tenets of honor, courage, and commitment while performing in the theater of combat as a leader and lever in the military's war machine during Operation Iraqi Freedom—an immensely "unpopular" war. It was this ongoing fascination with the disparate ways in which black women and men continue to be treated as property that brought me to this dissertation.

This dissertation examines how select black female and male autobiographers from Cuba and the United States challenge and redefine the notion of "human property" as slaves, or *chattel*; as military personnel, or *government property*; and as prisoners, or *wards of the state* in autobiographies during the Black Power Movement. From this perspective, my project asks 1.) How do the cultural intersections of these institutions, and the particular laws and regulations governing each, structure and impede opportunities for black advancement and citizenship across the African Diaspora? 2.) How and why is autobiography an effective genre of self-possession while it challenges the ongoing project of turning humans into property? The primary autobiographies I study include Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966); Chester Himes's *The Quality of Hurt* (1973) and Assata Shakur's narrative *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987). I chose these three texts because their authors served time in slavery, the military or prison and provide insightful accounts of their experiences, which each autobiographer

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uniforms and to reinforce fear in black communities. Furthermore, while blacks were treated as chattel during slavery, they often joined the military to seek protections as government property. Regrettably, their status as government property empowered and disempowered them considering that they gained new freedoms, experiences, and a formal and informal education but often performed menial labor reminiscent of their prior enslavement. See Christopher S. Parker. *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 1-60. Print.

The prospect of blacks occupying a superior position in the armed forces is even more egregious for racist whites when they behold black women in military uniform because of the entrenched ways in which black women have been particularly treated as property in American society. See Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*: *Knowledge*, *consciousness and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 1-65. Print.

explicitly links to a tradition of black autobiography that originated in the slave narrative—writing as an act of *bearing witness* to the oppression of people of African decent.[9] Furthermore, these writers have actually endured challenges in one or more of these institutions while often providing incisive critiques of the obstacles which blacks face in other institutions.

In selecting these particular autobiographies, I was influenced significantly by reading prison narratives such as the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*: *As Told to Alex Haley* (1964) and *Soledad Brother*: *The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970). Both narratives expose the supposed conversion of the inmate into a law-abiding, respectable citizen through the prison's "rehabilitative" measures as an ideological fiction.[10] Their accounts of life in prison also highlight the prevalence of homosexuality in prison and the prospects of heterosexual men becoming homosexuals because of prison rape and the absence of women for romantic affairs. For both authors (and black nationalists more broadly) homosexuality is considered both pathological and counter-revolutionary as it supposedly represents the corruption of the black family unit by the incursion of

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[9] Henry Louis Gates Jr. discusses the tradition of black autobiographers bearing witness through their narratives as intimately connected with the preservation of historical memory in *Bearing Witness*: *Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991. Print.

[10] In Malcolm X's narrative he describes his conversion to Islam in prison as a redemptive measure that gives him the fortitude to turn from a life of debauchery, pimping prostitutes and drinking. From this position, he characterizes prison as possessing the ability to rehabilitate black criminals and to reform the illegal and unholy practices that they have developed from indulging in illegal and immoral activities while living in urban ghettos. See Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: *As Told to Alex Haley.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1964. 129-239. Print.

On the other hand, George Jackson depicts prison life as horrendous and lacking in any ability to rehabilitate prisoners. For Jackson, prison life can only be empowering for black revolutionary figures because it forces them to overcome their fear of death and therefore enhance their desire to fight against the white establishment. See George Jackson. *Soledad Brother*: *The Prison Letters of George Jackson.* New York: Coward-McCann, 1970. 1-55. Print.

Eurocentric values.[11] Therefore, these writers attempt to reclaim self-possession, regrettably, through the abjection of queer subjectivity. They castigate prison life as having the potential to ensnare black revolutionaries in homosexuality as they also depict incarceration as possibly enhancing their determination to fight against the white power structure. This theme of conversion in black autobiography is not only resonant in prison narratives, but also in slave and military narratives in which black autobiographers analyze and recall the challenging situations in which they transition from slave to freewoman or freeman, and from civilian to military personnel.[12]

These authors represent themselves as enduring trials in institutions in which they have not actually spent time because they attempt to empathize with other community members' experiences of entrapment while encouraging black solidarity. From this standpoint, my authors evince what the literary scholar Arnold Krupat terms "a *synecdochic* sense of self."[13] This is a mode of storytelling in which the autobiographer recalls her personal history as part of a larger relation to a particular group or community. Thus, the autobiographers I have selected often describe their experiences as slaves, military personnel, or prisoners as stories that reflect the challenges of their broader communities. Furthermore, they often portray their experiences of confinement in one of

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[11] For a broader discussion of this see Elridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice.* New York: Delta, 1999. 58-64. Print.

[12] Slave autobiographies which depict these transitions include *Frederick Douglass*. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Also see Harriet A. Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Boston, 1861. Reprint. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987. Military autobiographies that portray these transitions include James A. Daly., and Lee Bergman. *Black Prisoner of War*: *A Conscientious Objector's Vietnam Memoir*, with an introduction by Jeff Loeb. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000. Also, see Norman A. McDaniel. *Yet Another Voice*. New York: Hawthorn, 1975. Print.

[13] Krupat, Arnold. "Native American Autobiography and the Synecdochic Self." *American Autobiography*: *Retrospect and Prospect*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991. 171. Print.

these aforementioned institutions as comparable to the dire circumstances which other oppressed blacks endure in other institutions. Often, they employ metaphors which relate their interconnected experiences while expressing their allegiance to other members of their community. The literary scholar James Olney describes autobiography in relation to metaphor by suggesting that:

> An autobiography, if one places it in relation to the life from which it comes, is more than a history of the past and more than a book currently circulating in the world; it is also, intentionally or not, a monument of the self as it is becoming, a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition.[14]

Considered more broadly, the autobiographers I study create narratives that are conspicuous "metaphors of the self" through their multiple efforts to personalize the form of this genre while they draw attention to the fluidity of autobiography and personhood. The porousness of the captivity narratives which I study and the construction of self which the narrative displays is evident in the three constituent elements of the word "autobiography"—*autos* (self), *bios* (life) and *graphe* (writing).[15] My chosen authors, from this angle of ascent, use the fluidity of autobiography as a "metaphor of self" to disrupt their status as human property while they experience confinement in these institutions or create tropes to pay homage to a vexed history of racial, class, sexuality, disability and gender oppression that continues in the present.

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[14] See James Olney. *Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. 35. Print.

[15] William L. Andrews describes the three constituent elements of autobiography and their relation to the struggle of black communities in the 1960's, 1970's and beyond in William L. Andrews Ed. *African American Autobiography. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. 1993. 2. Print.

"Properties of Confinement" expands on the contributions of these studies through my analysis of black autobiographies that were penned in the United States and Cuba--a rich transnational nexus. This is a novel juxtaposition considering that African Americans during the Black Power Movement such as Robert F. Williams, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and others often traveled (and sometimes relocated) to Cuba to discover a supposed racial utopia that was unavailable in the United States.[16] With the exception of Assata Shakur who still resides there in exile, these authors and political figures often left the island nation slightly disillusioned after realizing the extent of Cuba's entrenched racism that is still maintained through a destructive colorblindness that emerges following the Spanish American War and reaches its zenith after Fidel Castro becomes President.[17]

The study begins with Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966), a classic *testimonio* in Afro-Cuban literature, to question from the outset what literary conventions and practices characterize and create an autobiography. A *testimonio* is: "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet form…told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or significant life experience."[18] The *testimonio*

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[16]To read more about these interconnections, see the introduction of Frank Guridy. *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 1-25. Print.
Also see Timothy B. Tyson. *Radio Free Dixie*: *Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 220-256. Print.

[17] This concept is explored in further detail in Alejandro De La Fuente. *A Nation for All*: *Race*, *Inequality*, *and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill, 2001. 1-60. Print.

[18] John Beverly. *Testimonio*: *On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Print.

is distinguished by a fascinating interaction between a writer and his or her subject, usually a marginalized figure, to create a narrative in which the amanuensis selects details from the subaltern's recollections to elicit the reader's empathy towards distant political circumstances.[19] The creation of the *testimonio* defies key expectations of the autobiographical genre including reliability given that the amanuensis' choice of details is invariably biased.[20] While this process is intriguing, so is the remarkable story of Esteban Montejo—the subject of this narrative. This centenarian of 104 recalls his life as a slave, runaway slave, and a Cuban rebel soldier who battled during the Cuban War of Independence. Montejo's daring conversions and his adamant self-ownership as a runaway slave from birth, regardless of his particular phase of life, suggests that his "metaphor of self" reveals a reciprocal interplay between Castro's political agendas following the broken promises of the 1959 Cuban Revolution and the formation of "resistance literature" in the 1960's.[21]

Compared to this *testimonio*, Chester Himes's *The Quality of Hurt* (1973) extends the discussion of autobiographical form through its lack of coherence—another key principle of autobiography.[22] Although *Biography of a Runaway Slave* at times also lacks coherence, by virtue of its creation from tape-recorded interviews, I select Himes's narrative partly to query the disparate ways in which black writers subvert the

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[19] Ibid 32.

[20] To read more about typical conventions of autobiography see Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*: *Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 28-56. Print.

[21] See James Olney. *Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. 35. Print.

[22] Ibid 28-56.

autobiographical genre by purposefully defying its Eurocentric tenets. In selecting *The Quality*, my analysis reveals that incoherence is not simply poor form, but a generative political and artistic strategy in which black writers can reveal the horrendous ways in which racist institutions--slavery, the military, prison and law enforcement agencies—subjugate black bodies. I choose *The Quality* because Himes renders his suffering and prospects for healing so palpably through the incoherence of his narrative. Furthermore, this autobiography also grapples with the abjection of disability and queer sexuality in the prison system while Himes recasts law-enforcement agencies (including the military) as anti-heroic because of their devaluation of black lives.

Lastly, Assata Shakur's narrative *Assata* (1987) greatly expands the dialogue because while her inclusion of many poems throughout her narrative creates a rich polyvocal text, she utilizes an artistic strategy to emphasize that there is beauty in diverse voices which strive towards black solidarity. Furthermore, *Assata* explores the ongoing need to support black political prisoners in general, and specifically black female political prisoners. Her depiction of the cruel treatment meted out to black female inmates also reminds us of this growing prison population. Her autobiography's connection to her ongoing struggle as a political prisoner in Cuba alerts us to the significant personal and political implications involved in telling one's story as a form of testimony against the American legal establishment. Also, her use of tropes emphasizes the continuance of various forms of slavery in the present and the ongoing need to challenge the compartmentalization of slavery, the military and prison through her "metaphors of self" which include her representation as a modern day maroon and prisoner-of-war.[23]

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[23] See James Olney. *Metaphors of Self: the meaning of autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972. 35. Print.

My selection of narratives is highly strategic, but it is by no means exhaustive. If time and space permitted, I would include other autobiographies in my study such as Amiri Baraka's *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (1983) and Angela Davis's narrative *Angela Davis*: *An Autobiography* (1974). Baraka is one of the founders of the Black Arts Movement, and despite his relatively brief consideration of his military serve in his narrative, his characterization of his service in the United States Air Force would enrich this study. In particular, his experience of feeling "herded" during boot camp—with its animalistic connotations—would have extended my analysis of the "synecdochic self" which my selected authors present and also provide another focal point to query further the utility of discipline and regimentation imposed upon blacks—for various ends--in slavery, military, and prison.[24] A chapter on Angela Davis would extend my analysis to include notable experiences of black female political prisoners from another perspective than that offered by Assata Shakur's. Indeed, comparing Davis's experiences of life in Cuba to Shakur's would provide a novel counterpoint in this study given that Shakur currently resides there in exile and Davis continues to support her from a distance.[25] These are only a few possibilities for chapters that were not included, here, but will be included the future scholarly monograph.

I endeavor to trace these lines of inquiry within the subgenre of confinement literature. According to the literary critic Tara Green, this sub-genre of African Diasporic

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[24] Amiri Baraka. *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1984. 137-178. Print.

[25] Angela Davis describes her challenging experience in Cuba in her narrative. See Angela Davis. *Angela Davis: An Autobiography.* New York: Random House. 1974. 78-85. Print.
By comparison, Assata Shakur recalls her experience in Cuba as blissful one. See Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987. 203-211. Print.

literary studies comprises established genres such as slave narratives, black military narratives, prison writings, and others that capture the diverse experiences of blacks within and across different eras who experience "boundaries—either seen or unseen—but always felt."[26] Green's work presents a novel way of categorizing texts that represent blacks' overlapping experiences in slavery, during Reconstruction, and while incarcerated. Contributing to this sub-genre, my dissertation portrays the rich experiences of black male and female autobiographers who travel among various sites of confinement--either in actuality or metaphorically--including the plantation, a military stockade/prison camp in the woods, prison cells, prisoner-of-war camps, military barracks, and battlefields among others. In addition to examining the continuities which protagonists experience across various settings of entrapment, I am interested in the authors' experiences in these settings and how they use multiple strategies to evince "structures of feeling" to depict their self-creation while providing snapshots of various cultural *milieus*.[27] Exhibiting powerful voices through literacy, these autobiographers *fight back* in their narratives--exhibiting *remixed* versions of selfhood--despite the strictures of racism that seek to objectify them. Battling against systemic oppressions, they are concerned with control of the historical record, control over their own public images, and control over the portrayal of the resistance movements in which they participate.

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[26] Tara Green. Ed. *From the Plantation to the Prison*: *African American Confinement Literature*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008. 4. Print.

[27]Raymond Williams first employs this term to describe the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts. See Raymond Williams. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.1-30.

My study interrogates the differing ways in which black male and female protagonists are objectified as property, and yet strive for self-possession, in each of these entrapping "total" institutions which are shadowed by the totalizing brutality of slavery.[28] From this vantage point, I will consider how discipline reinforces boundaries in each institution while querying how black protagonists foment strategies to defy the threat of violence which accompanies their transgression of institutional regulations. [29] In slavery, the master exerts brutal force, including corporal punishment and sexualized violence, to discipline slaves thereby attempting to reinforce their dehumanization as chattel—moveable property. This intolerable violence helps to ensure that slave bodies remain the means of production as slave women are positioned as the engine of this egregious capitalistic machine because of their reproduction of the labor supply.[30] In comparison, military discipline arguably turns civilians into military personnel who can be deployed as agents of war while gaining skills that build confidence.[31] Yet, this confidence

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[28] According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, in such organizations the "inmate" experiences various rites of passage in which his or her self-hood is stripped through practices designed to make the "inmate" identify with the group. These institutions break down the normal boundaries that exist among different sites where people sleep, work, and play in support of an overall "rational plan." Though both institutions are developed to meet contrary ends, the military and prison have cultural characteristics that reflect one another as they demand that the "inmate" exchange safety for danger, comfort for physical hardship, and familial integrity for familial separation. Prisoners and military personnel also possess overlapping representations. See Erving Goffman. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 35-47. 1961. Print.

[29] In this project, I analyze discipline according to Michel Foucault's description of it as a coercive, threatening force which controls people's actions through societal hierarchies and physical structures that reinforce psychological subservience to the state. See Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*: *The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1-90. 1975. Print.

[30] To read more about this see Saidiya V. Harman. *Scenes of Subjection*: *Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 38-40, 1997. Print.

[31] To read more about how military discipline functions in this way, see Christopher Parker. *Fighting for Democracy: Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Post-War South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1-15, 2009. Print.

produced by the military's training also inadvertently affords black military personnel with the martial ability to fight against white supremacy after their service.[32] Lastly, disciplinary measures in prison are designed to strip black inmates of their basic citizenship rights so that they become wards of the state through the prison's constant policing and dehumanizing tactics.[33] Ironically, many black prison writers describe prison life as horrendous, but also empowering as it renews their determination to *speak out* and *fight back* against the racist white power structures that endeavor to disempower them before prison life, and more so during and following their sentences.[34] In other words, many protagonists in prison narratives describe their inner-city ghettos as training grounds for prison and battlefields in which white police officers assault black bodies during undeclared wars; and then the prison trains them to intensify that struggle once they return.[35] This characterization of embattled space is particularly apt during the Vietnam era and Black Power Movement—a period in which the police often harassed

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[32] Ibid. 1-55.

[33] The egregious ways in which black men and women are subjugated by the prison officials' various tactics are described further in Auli Ek. *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives*. New York: Routledge, 1-16, 2005. Print.

From another viewpoint, read Julia Sudbury. Ed. *Global Lockdown*: *Race, Gender and the Prison-Industrial Complex.* New York: Routledge, 1-19, 2005. Print.

[34] See George Jackson. *Soledad Brother*: *The Prison Letters of George Jackson.* New York: Coward-McCann, 1970. 1-55. Print.

[35] See Assata Shakur. *Assata: An Autobiography*. Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987. 1-55. Print.

Also, see George Jackson. *Soledad Brother*: *The Prison Letters of George Jackson.* New York: Coward-McCann, 1970. 1-60. Print.

Malcolm X describes this also in *Malcolm X. The Autobiography of Malcolm X*: *As Told to Alex Haley.* New York: Ballantine Books, 1964. 1-90. Print.

blacks in their own neighborhoods to squelch the rising influence of black militants and black self-determination.[36]

The primary autobiographies I study are published during the Black Power Movement—a social and political movement which lasted from about 1966 through the early 1980's. During this period, blacks from across the African diaspora emphasized racial pride and the creation of black political and cultural institutions to nurture and promote collective interests and values.[37] During this period, the Black Panther Party—which was founded in Oakland California by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale—spread an ethos of black self-determination and militancy as necessary to promote racial equality by any means necessary. The brutal demise of prominent black civil rights leaders including Medgar Evers (1963), Malcolm X (1965) and Martin Luther King Jr. (1968) sent waves of despair, anger and frustration through black communities and incited blacks to enlist in paramilitary organizations to fight against white oppression through violence if necessary.[38] This movement was largely urban-based and possessed strong bases of support in other cities besides Oakland such as Philadelphia, New York City, and Detroit.

This notable period is also characterized by the political impact of the Black Arts Movement. During this literary movement, black authors and artists created artwork with the intention of overtly discussing political issues--by speaking truth to power--without fear of the backlash from the white establishment. A flourishing of creativity in black arts--particularly drama and poetry--typified this period. Ed Bullins and Bob Macbeth's

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[36] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* New York: Norton, 2004. 1831-1849. Print.

[37] Ibid 1831-1849.

[38] Ibid 1835.

New Lafayette Theater, Amiri Baraka's Umbra Workshop, The Harlem Writer's Guild, and black magazines and journals such as *Liberator*, *Black Dialogue* and the *Journal of Black Poetry* created powerful venues for social critique.[39] Black autobiography increased in popularity as the years between 1965 and 1976 witnessed the ushering of new voices into print including notable figures such as poets Maya Angelou, Nikki Giovanni and Gwendelyn Brooks; Black Panther leaders Eldridge Cleaver, Bobby Steale, and Huey P. Newton; and prison activists George Jackson and Angela Davis. Since the 1980's, prominent black autobiographers have published seminal autobiographies including Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Elaine Brown, and Stokely Carmichael.[40] Black autobiography has remained an important literary genre since slavery, and these aforementioned authors have enriched the genre during a period in which decolonization movements unsettled the power structures of developing countries across the African Diaspora. This upsurge of black autobiographies in this period is partly due to the increase in the number of black presses as well as one of the important legacies and goals of the Black Arts Movement: the mass communication of black artwork.[41]

This period witnessed the rapid erosion of apartheid in South Africa by the 1970's and numerous countries in the West Indies gained independence during the Black Power Movement including Jamaica (1962), Barbados (1966), the Bahamas (1973), and

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[39] Ibid 1831-1833.

[40] Ibid 1831-1849.

[41] Ibid 1839.

Grenada (1974) to name a few.[42] In the last fifteen years, several critical studies of this period have been produced including William Van DeBurg's *New Day in Babylon*: *The Black Power Movement and American Culture,* 1965-1975 (1992), Hugh Pearson's *The Shadow of the Panther*: *Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (1994), Charles E. Jones' *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered* (1998), and James Smethurst's *Black Arts Movement* (2005). Though each of these studies helps to enrich our understandings of this turbulent period in U.S. and African diasporic literary history, my dissertation complements and expands this scholarship. My nuanced interrogations of how race, gender, sexuality, and disability are constructed and inflected by the American prison system enrich this scholarship. Furthermore, while the aforementioned monographs employ historical and cultural analysis, my literary perspective and attention to tropes, writing strategies, and the interrelations between literature and political activism during the Black Power Movement complement these studies.

Despite the recent proliferation of scholarly works covering this period, there is still a significant gap in critical scholarship of the contributions of black autobiographers whose work covers this fascinating historical period. That said, notable studies which enrich our understandings of seminal black autobiographies produced during the Black Power Movement include Kenneth Mostern's *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*: *Racialization in Twentieth-Century America* (1999) and Margo V. Perkins' A*utobiography as Activism*: *Three Black Women of the Sixties* (2000). Both of these works have significantly influenced this dissertation. Mostern's study provides an insightful chapter called "African-American autobiography and the field of

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[42] See William Van DeBurg's *New Day in Babylon*: *The Black Power Movement and American Culture,* 1965-1975. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. 1-50. Print.

autobiography studies" which situates black autobiography in the larger discourse of Western letters while this essay develops a useful foundation for his discussion of how autobiographies which were written by black men and women have enhanced our understandings of identity politics in the twentieth century.[43] To date, Perkins' monograph is the only book-length study that considers the rich contributions of three of the major black female activists who wrote autobiographies during this period including Angela Davis, Assata Shakur and Elaine Brown.[44]

Scholars have written extensively on the connections between slave and prison autobiographies including Sidonie Smith's *Where I'm Bound*: *Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography* (1974); William L. Andrews' volume *African American Autobiography*: *A Collection of Critical Essays* (1993); Johnnie M. Stover's *Rhetoric and Resistance in Black Women's Autobiography* (2003); Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad's important edition *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (1988); Tara Green's *From the Plantation to the Prison* (2008) and H. Bruce Franklin's Prison Writing in 20th Century America (1998) to name a few. However, there is a dearth of scholarship on black military autobiographies and autobiographies that fit more neatly into the sub-genres of slave and prison autobiography but presents the challenging experiences of protagonists who have served in military or paramilitary arenas. Jennifer C. James notes the irony of the shortage of literary criticism on black veterans despite the unique status of the military as a supposed gateway for blacks to gain

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[43] See Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*: *Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 28-53. Print.

[44] Elaine Brown's autobiography is called *A Taste of Power*: *A Black Woman's Story*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. Print.

citizenship across the African Diaspora. She helps to fill this void in *A Freedom Bought with Blood*: *African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II*, which develops a foundation for understanding literature of black warfare during this period by employing disability studies and a Foucauldian lens.[45] These perspectives are important because James's monograph alerts us to intricate ways in which the bodies of black service-members were often regarded as tropes of national abjection which thereby reinforced the state's ability to create physical structures and legal frameworks to discipline them for seeking integration in the military and broader society. My dissertation expands the existing literary criticism on the experiences of black military and paramilitary figures presented in black autobiographies from Cuba and the United States by considering, in greater detail, the protections and challenges of the treatment of black soldiers as government property. Furthermore, I also discuss the intersecting conventions, forms, and themes present in slave and prison autobiographies while exposing various tactics which black autobiographers employ to aspire towards heroism.

Autobiography has historical roots in a tradition of heroic individualism.[46] "Properties of Confinement" interrogates the lives of exceptional protagonists who strive to remain the arbiter for their group's racial uplift. They navigate this tension by creating strategies to take ownership of their texts, representing themselves as heroic, and downplaying their merit. The *testimonio* that serves as the primary text for chapter 1, Miguel Barnet's *Biography of a Runaway Slave* (1966), is an excellent vehicle for

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[45] See Jennifer James. *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2007. 1-30. Print.

[46] See Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics*: *Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 1-53. Print.

considering these issues. This narrative reveals Barnet's competing interests as he selects Esteban Montejo as the subject because he is exemplary, and yet, he simultaneously attempts to position him as a common, illiterate slave who represents the tenets of Fidel Castro's post-1959 Revolution.[47] *Testimonios* became popular as a subgenre in the 1960's as a form of "resistance literature" that develops alongside the rising tides of nationalist liberation movements and radical cultural shifts.[48] My dissertation bolsters the current scholarship on *testimonio* as "resistance literature" by bridging a dialogue between resistance literature in a North American and Caribbean context during the Black Power Movement. To this end, the autobiographies that I study each participate in a broader discussion of the challenging ways in which black men and women are treated as property in the three-pronged institutions in Cuba and the United States. However, each autobiographer also employs various tactics to portray her or his empowerment as commensurate with a desire to re-create self by writing a narrative to effect personal healing while suggesting the need for community restoration and solidarity. Furthermore, the storyteller not only endeavors to exact ownership of the self by writing his her narrative, but also attempts to transgress key tenets of the autobiographical genre to exercise authority over their tale's form.[49]

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[47] See Barnet, Miguel. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Trans. W. Nick Hill. Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1994. Print.

[48] John Beverly, *Testimonio*: *On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 30-31. Print.

[49] To read about key characteristics of autobiography (in general) and black autobiography see Kenneth Mostern. *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics: Racialization in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 28-56. Print.

Crucial to my analysis is Cheryl Harris' influential essay "Whiteness as Property" which argues that whiteness became co-extensive with property rights—and the dislocation of blacks and Native Americans from citizenship—as she systematically traces how America's founding documents supported a propertied interest in whiteness. She traces this displacement from the nineteenth century through the late twentieth century.[50] Her argument and those of other critical race scholars will provide a theoretical framework to interrogate how a propertied interest in whiteness was repeated and revised in the United States from the country's earliest beginnings through the Black Power Movement. Harris' article will also provide a counterpoint for my analysis of how whiteness operated as property in Cuba from the nineteenth century through the Castro regime. This movement was accompanied by white Cubans espousing a colorblind ideology of racial fraternity that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.[51] This ideology reified the displacement of Afro-Cubans *as* property during slavery, and *from* property ownership following the Cuban War of Independence and enduring to the present.

In "Properties of Confinement" I analyze select passages of my primary texts to focus on the representations of autobiographers' various forms of resistance in institutions that strive to objectify their bodies as property. While analyzing their narratives, I will consider 1) How and why do these autobiographers' voices change in their respective texts in relation to their emerging personhood? 2) How and why do these autobiographers emphasize and resist their statuses as property through strategic acts such as wearing uniforms and prison numbers, *marronage*, resisting arrest or foregoing a

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[50] See Cheryl I. Harris. "Whiteness as Property." Harvard Law Review 106, no. 8. June 1993. Print.

[51] To explore this notion in greater detail read Alejandro De La Fuente. *A Nation for All*: *Race, Equality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 1-25. Print.

court trial, stealing possessions from whites, actively avoiding sexual assault, and marching? While highlighting critical questions such as these, my dissertation will also pay close attention to the *effects* of these representations. I am interested in how authors portray their empowerment materially while paying attention to the intangible possessions shared by individuals and groups: the sensations of being in a particular place, the status of honor, feelings of patriotism and access to citizenship rights.

Chapter Descriptions

The epigraph that precedes this introduction comprises the last words of General Toussaint Louverture's memoir. The life and demise of this freedom fighter reflect several of the rich intersections and themes which "Properties of Confinement" elucidates, and it provides a historical precursor for the chapter descriptions which will follow. Toussaint Louverture was born a slave in Haiti around 1743 on the Breda sugar plantation near Cap-Français.[52] However, in his memoir he provides only a brief account of his origins when he asserts: "I was a Slave, I dare to declare it."[53] Rather than belaboring his background of enslavement, Toussaint's narrative is an intricately composed account of his exploits as a General who helped to usher Haiti into independence during the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Despite his monumental pronouncement of himself as governor general of the colony of Saint-Domingue by 1801, his political aspirations were thwarted when he was deported to France in June 1802 to

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[52] Louverture, Toussaint. *The Memoir of General Toussaint Louverture*. 1863. Ed. Philippe R. Girard. New York: Oxford UP, 2014. 3. Print.

[53] Ibid 3.

face imprisonment.[54] Napoléon Bonaparte, the first consul of France, suspected him of galvanizing troops to support independence. However, Toussaint repeatedly suggests in his memoir that he was treated unfairly—in a manner unbecoming a military officer—because of his race.[55]

Arriving in France on August 24, 1802, the stately Toussaint does not enter a castle suited for royalty, but is escorted into the Fort de Joux—a medieval castle located in the Jura Mountains near the French-Swiss border.[56] After he passes five layers of fortifications, he enters his prison cell which is as dark and dreary as a dungeon. Despite the bleakest circumstances, the valiant Toussaint writes an intricately composed memoir to document (obliquely) his role in Haiti's independence and to persuade Napoleon of his right to a trial by court martial and, if proven innocent of charges, possible release.[57] Regrettably, Toussaint's cries for justice and mercy--which resound in this excerpt--were met by Napoleon's reproach. Though the fallen leader pleads with Napoleon to assuage his "deep wounds" by providing him with a fair trial, the first consul of France provides him with no relief.[58] Still, what is fascinating is that General Toussaint Louverture—the leader of the first successful black revolution in the Western Hemisphere—was born a slave, thrived as a politician and military man, and died in prison. Furthermore, his

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[54] Ibid 1.

[55] Ibid 22-23.

[56] Ibid 1.

[57] Ibid 1-12.

[58] Ibid 169.

memoir serves as a testimony to his valiant efforts to defy his status as property by declaring his nobility and uprightness—until his lonely death on April 7, 1803.[59]

Scholars have grappled over whether to characterize Toussaint as a Creole, a son of the French Revolution, or a black nationalist.[60] However, what is certain is that this impassioned and charismatic black political figure helped to embolden black freedom fighters in the Caribbean and the United States to wage war against the oppression of whites following Haiti's successful revolution.[61] I suggest that Toussaint's legacy helped to foment a spirit of heroism continuing into the era of Black Power. Along the way, his influence led to key events in African diasporic history such as Nat Turner's Rebellion in Southampton, County Virginia in the early nineteenth century and the series of wars which led to Cuba's independence from Spain.[62] From a broader vantage point, Toussaint's legacy created the blueprint for the self-determination and militancy that eventually characterized the Black Power Movement. Toussaint's memoir, therefore, serves as a remarkable precursor for "resistance literature" such as the *testimonio*.

In Chapter One, "Spirited *Play* in *Biography of a Runaway Slave*" I examine one of the most well-known *testimonios* in Afro-Cuban literature—a narrative that helps to enrich our understandings of the "resistance literature" which developed in the 1960's. Miguel Barnet, a white folklorist and anthropologist, transcribes from tape-recordings the

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[59] Ibid 32.

[60] Ibid 2.

[61] Ibid 34-36.

[62] To read more about these events see William Van DeBurg's *New Day in Babylon*: *The Black Power Movement and American Culture,* 1965-1975. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992. 1-50.

story of an illiterate Afro-Cuban centenarian of 104, Esteban Montejo. This elderly man, during a series of interviews, recalled his life as a slave, a cimarrón (runaway slave), and a mambí (rebel Cuban soldier) who fought during the Cuban War of Independence. Throughout my analysis, I consider the intriguing ways in which Afro-Cubans prepared to become victors during the Cuban War of Independence through their participation in games and sports. I suggest that Afro-Cubans developed the confidence to defy their status as property (and to effeminize the Spaniards during war) by honing their physical skills and mental sharpness through *play*. Throughout my analysis, I also consider the competing motives of the amanuensis and subject given that Barnet selectively describes games and sports to elicit a patriotic ethos that undercuts the losses following the 1959 Cuban Revolution. While Barnet's strategy is intended to ingratiate himself to Fidel Castro through these patriotic renderings, Esteban Montejo aggrandizes himself through descriptions of *play* to depict himself as heroic and to reclaim this *testimonio* as his rightful property.

In Chapter Two, "Carceral Horror in Himes's *The Quality of Hurt*" I turn my attention to an understudied and remarkable autobiography written by Chester Himes—a closeted, queer, disabled criminal who becomes a writer during a lengthy prison term. Himes's rich autobiography provides a fascinating glimpse into the challenges which black queer men face behind bars. Furthermore, the autobiographer's anxiety concerning his sexuality and his reception by black male heterosexual writers leads him to pass for heterosexual, in his narrative, to maintain solidarity with the black *literati*. Himes's narrative affirms that during the Black Power Movement many black women and black

queer men often lamentably ignored their needs for respect and equal treatment by other members of the black community while attempting to strive for racial equality.

From this standpoint, I argue that Himes battles for self-ownership by maintaining sexual privacy in his narrative. Emphasizing the absurdity of his life's course, due to racism, he also presents the absurdity of creating a rational narrative that implies to his reader that he is content with his life's lessons. In this chapter, I examine Himes's insecurities concerning his ability to situate himself as a black hero because he is the descendant of Confederate soldiers. This anxiety leads him to critique whiteness as bearing the privileges and protections of property. From this position, I explore how this lively character becomes a criminal, in part, to protest the inequalities perpetuated by the white establishment. These insights set the stage for my analysis of Himes's rhetorical strategies for concealing his same-sex relationship in prison and his possible experience of same-sex rape behind bars. I not only query Himes's possible sexual violation through his metaphoric language, but also the potential for his "sexual healing" through his prison romance. Like Toussaint, Himes's wounds are deep and the writing of autobiography provides the only glimmering possibilities for healing and release. Lastly, I compare the differing ways in which Himes interrelates the military and prison in his *oeuvre* to emphasize that both institutions are uncanny in their respective abilities to strip blacks of their self-ownership while attempting to dispossess them of their capacity for heroism.

In Chapter 3, "*Marronage* and Re-Creation in *Assata*" I focus on an audacious political prisoner--Assata Shakur--who brings into focus the dire challenges which black female revolutionaries faced during the Black Power Movement and beyond. While Shakur's narrative is connected intimately to her ongoing struggle as a political exile in

Cuba, I argue that this heroine fights for self-possession in her autobiography by representing herself as a maroon who escapes the restrictions of the American judicial system which attempts to objectify her as a prisoner-of-war. Assata's *movement* in her narrative disrupts her status as property of the state while she presents her marronage to castigate the horrendous ways in which black women are ungendered by an American prison system whose conventions reflect the ungendering of slaves from the moment of their seizure in Africa.

Shakur composes her narrative as a form of *textual healing* to emphasize the beauty of black female bodies despite the ongoing attempts of the white establishment to debase them. She critiques the pervasive inequalities that disbar blacks from citizenship during the Vietnam era by representing herself as a prisoner-of-war--captured property--to suggest the absurdity of American democracy and its valences for disenfranchising people of color across the African Diaspora. In contrast to Toussaint who appeals to Napoleon as a doctor who can heal his inner wounds through the "salutary remedies" of mercy and justice, Shakur is constantly terrorized by doctors and police officers during her detainments.[63] Regardless of these attempts to devalue her, Shakur finds love and a renewed sense of purpose as a black mother in prison. Her child, Kakuya, inspires the revolutionary mother to escape the clutches of incarceration as her pregnancy and motherhood—even in the most reprehensible conditions—becomes exemplary of the enduring possibilities of a black revolutionary ethos.

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[63] Louverture, Toussaint. *The Memoir of General Toussaint Louverture*. 1863. Ed. Philippe R. Girard. New York: Oxford UP, 2014. 169. Print.

The coda that concludes my dissertation, "Providence and Self-Possession in Frederick Douglass'1845 *Narrative*," introduces this classic black autobiography in discussion with the three other primary narratives analyzed in this study. Illuminating Douglass' symbolic depiction of ships as representing the prospects for his *marronage*, I will also analyze a notable scene which reveals that he imagines his freedom as imbricated by the intersections of slavery, the military and prison through his depiction of ships battling at sea. My coda will also set sail various issues concerning the future possibilities of black autobiography. These issues include (in part) key areas for the emergence of new black autobiographies which depict: current forms of neo-slavery; women's perspectives on front-line combat; the burgeoning movement to educate inmates in prison to write their own narratives; and the relationship between black autobiography and the current #BlackLivesMatter movement as interconnected forms of protest.

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Chapter 1

Spirited *Play* in *Biography of a Runaway Slave*

In 1963 Miguel Barnet, a white Cuban ethnographer and poet, was struck by a newspaper interview. It featured the daring story of Esteban Montejo, an Afro-Cuban centenarian of 104, who recalled his life as a slave, as a cimarrón (runaway slave), and as a mambí (rebel Cuban soldier) who fought during the Cuban War of Independence.[1] Born in 1860, Montejo was immediately sold to a plantation to provide backbreaking labor and he recalls that he never knew his parents as he was forcibly separated from them at birth.[2] He reminisces about his experiences as a wage laborer in the sugar mills following the war, the United States' takeover of Cuba by troops in 1898, and the intentions and outcomes of the revolution.[3] Barnet was so struck by Montejo's life story that he decided to conduct tape-recorded interviews of him over a three-year period. He transcribed and edited these interviews to create a narrative that mitigated the failures of the 1959 Cuban revolutionary project to ingratiate himself to the Castro Regime. By publishing this narrative, Barnet enhanced his stature among other Cuban ethnographers as a defender of the revolution.

These events marked the emergence of an exemplary *testimonio* in Latin American literature, a subgenre of autobiography whose development raises pertinent

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[1] Cuba obtained its independence from Spain after three bloody wars: the Ten Year's War (1868-1878), the Little War (1879-1880) and the Cuban War of Independence or Spanish American War (1895-1898). William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 1-3. Print.

[2] Ibid 33.

[3] Ibid 32.

issues regarding authorial control, reliability, and property ownership.[4] This subgenre became popular in the 1960's as a form of "resistance literature" and develops alongside the rising tides of nationalist liberation movements and radical cultural shifts.[5] The unusual process of constructing the *testimonio* has caused significant disagreements about its characteristics. However, critics generally agree that it is: "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet form…told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or significant life experience."[6] The *testimonio* is characterized by a remarkable interaction between a writer and his or her subject who is typically a marginalized figure. The subaltern's narration--mediated by the amanuensis--is meant to engender the reader's empathy towards distant political circumstances.[7] It is noteworthy that Barnet did not invent this subgenre, as *testimonio*-like texts have existed for a long time.[8] In the case of *Biography*, Barnet claims that he intended for Montejo to represent not only his story but that of the post-1959 emerging Cuban nation.[9] This characteristic of

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[4] Ibid 32-36.

[5] John Beverly, *Testimonio*: *On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 30-31. Print.

[6] Ibid 31.

[7] Ibid 32.

[8] Raymond Williams describes t*estimonio*-like texts which were developed by the British working class because autobiographical accounts were accessible to them even as these writings existed on the margins of literature by representing subaltern figures. See "The Writer: Commitment and Alignment." *Marxism Today* (1980):24-26. Print.

[9] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 32-51. Print.

the *testimonio*—the positioning of the subject as a mythical arbiter of history—has led to decades of argument and debate.[10]

Because the writer has tremendous authority over the shaping of the subaltern's story, critics have waged intellectual battles regarding the *testimonio*'s reliability.[11] These disputes concern not only issues of textual representation, but also pertain to matters of authorial control and property ownership. The unique interaction between writer and subject often makes it difficult to distinguish either's voice. Furthermore, the writer chooses a subject based on his or her exceptionalism as a person of interest though the writer and subject often minimize this paradox.[12] The marginalized figure's subjectivity—when depicted in the *testimonio*—gets called into question because the form relies on diminishing the exceptionalism of the subaltern while aggrandizing the national story. In this case, Barnet describes Montejo as simply an "informant" of history because the poet and folklorist claimed Montejo's narrative as *his* from the initial

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[10] For thought-provoking interrogations on these matters please read Robert González Echevarría, ""Biografía de un cimarrón and the Novel of the Cuban Revolution," *Novel*, 13, No.3 (1980), 249-263. Print.; Gerard Arching, "on the Creation of National Heroes: Barnet's Esteban Montejo and Armas's Julian del Casal," *Latin American Literary Review*, 22, No. 43 (Jan.-Jun. 1994), 31-50 Print.; Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal, "Spanish American Ethnobiography and the Slave Narrative Tradition: "Biografía de un cimarrón" and "Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú," *Modern Language Studies*, 20, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), 100-111. Print.

[11] John Beverley, *Testimonio*: *On the Politics of Truth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. 30-31. Print. *Biography*'s publication history attests to the challenges of defining this text. It has been classified as a biography, autobiography, and documentary novel. In fact, this text is an edited volume of an oral narrative. The difficulty associated with defining this text's genre attests to the challenges of authorial control in a text written by an amanuensis who claims ownership of a subaltern's account of his life's story.

[12] Barnet attests to this in his prologue when he says: "nuestro trabajo no es histórico. La historia aparece porque es la vida de un hombre que pasa por ella." (Our work here is not historical. History appears in it because it is the life of a man who passes through history): See William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester, 2010. 32-51. Print.

interview.[13] Though vital, the discussions concerning the ownership of *Biography* often overshadow important analyses of slave resistance. Upon closer inspection, scholars often evade more subtle examinations of how Montejo lays claim to the *testimonio* despite Barnet's biases. These issues are germane when considering Afro-Cubans' participation in or exclusion from quotidian activities that appear unremarkable on the surface, but subversive when examined—their playing diverse games and sports. Despite their ubiquity in *Biography*, critics have not studied the intricate ways in which Barnet and Montejo depict these activities.

Barnet selects Montejo's descriptions of games and sports to evoke an ethos of civic participation in a post-1959 Cuba.[14] However, Montejo recollects his participation in these activities to create an alternative narrative that positions him to exert ownership of *Biography*. Following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Castro adopted policies which bolstered Cuba's sporting infrastructure because he firmly believed that a physically fit public was better prepared for civic participation.[15] Barnet hoped to gain favor with the Castro Regime by rendering masculinist games and sports as communal activities that sharpened participants' wits while sculpting muscles. However, what is most conspicuous

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[13] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 32-51. Print.

[14] Barnet's inclusion of these activities as promoting civic participation in a post-1959 Cuba is reminiscent of CLR James' memoir *Beyond a Boundary* which provides a social commentary on the intricate ways in which West Indians, broadly, and Trinidadians in particular adopted their own style of cricket as way of challenging colonial rule. See C.L.R James. The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution. New York: Vintage Books, 1963. Print.

[15] Pettavino, Paula J. and Geralyn Pye. *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994. Print.

is that Barnet ends the narrative on high note of the Cuban Independence and fails to include Montejo's views on the Cuban Revolution. Throughout the narrative, Montejo's memories often challenge Barnet's desire to present Cuba as an egalitarian state because the centenarian at times airs the dirty laundry of Cuba's racial, class, and ethnic disparities during slavery and beyond. However, Montejo's descriptions of these inequalities would likely reach a crescendo if Barnet included his comments on the failures of the revolution. Barnet strives to construct Montejo as a simple fellow who becomes a national hero while representing an exceptional movement. However, the centenarian represents himself as even more laudable in each phase of the narrative and he accomplishes this through his exemplary performance in playing certain games or sports, on the one hand, or through his cavalier attitude when he is excluded to the sidelines.

In this chapter, I argue that Afro-Cubans, perhaps unwittingly, gained the confidence to subvert their statuses as property while sharpening their physical and mental acumen through their participation in select games and sports. The dexterity they exhibited through play—and their self-possession as victors who effeminize the Spanish—prepared them for their culminating victory in the Cuban War of Independence. I query Montejo's and Afro-Cubans' playing of these activities during his various life phases through an examination of his period of training as a cimarrón, his participation and depiction of a capoeira-like plantation game called maní, and his portrayal of the Cuban War of Independence as possessing elements of a sport. My objective is to deconstruct how Montejo and other Afro-Cubans strive for self ownership, despite the constraints of the slave market, through their prowess honed by playing select games and

sports. Slave owners attempted to control slaves' participation in these activities as a reciprocal way of coercing their labor. Thus, work and play--often considered separately--interpenetrated the colonizers' modes of coercion and the slaves' resistance against the colonial regime. From a broader perspective, Barnet chooses snapshots of games and sports to gain esteem from Fidel Castro who was an ardent supporter of these activities. Barnet hoped that his portraits of these events would mitigate the failures of the Cuban Revolution as they attested to the competitive zeal and fighting spirit of the Cuban population. However, Montejo emerges as the victor because he describes his participation in these games as part of a strategy to aggrandize himself while reclaiming this *testimonio*—through *play*.

Theorizing Play and Resistance

Play is central to *Biography* because it informs the ingenious ways in which Afro-Cubans feigned subjection to Spanish rule while they created physical and psychic spaces of possibility that helped destabilize their status as property. This subversion helped them win the War of Independence. In this chapter, I employ the characterizations of play delineated by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play, and Games* to summarize this activity as one which is non-obligatory, done for fun; circumscribed within limits of space and time, which are normally defined and fixed in advance; unpredictable and possesses some latitude for innovations based on the player's initiative; unproductive in terms of producing goods, though property is often exchanged; governed by rules, while ordinary laws are often suspended; and accompanied by make-believe.[16] If tangible property can be exchanged during games,

[16] Roger Caillois. *Man, Play, and Games*. Paris: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc. 1961. 1-15. Print.

it is not surprising that games position slaves to trade distress for courage, physical weakness for combat readiness, and mental sluggishness for vigilance. During play, slaves temporarily enter a suspended moment where they can re-imagine their roles as empowered participants in their confining society. According to Tara Green, blacks experienced confinement across different times and places through physical and mental boundaries.[17] Afro-Cubans challenged their experience of confinement through play, an effective mode of subversion, because rather than diffusing their revolutionary impulses it channeled their fighting impulses and prepared them for the crucible of war.Their participation in games and sports appeared harmless to the colonizers because of the circumscriptions and rules governing them, but these facets disguised the potential of subversion.

Montejo's storytelling possesses the innovation of play and informs his radical self-possession. He bolsters his ownership of the narrative by facilitating an exchange. He recalls his story for Barnet to publish (and supposedly own), but he attempts to reclaim his story by emphasizing his self-mastery throughout. His storytelling is a form of play because it is loosely structured, unpredictable, and (most importantly) innovative. Critics have often remarked about *Biography*'s time gaps.[18] However, these time gaps characterize *Biography* as playfully structured despite the narrative's horrendous portrayals of slavery. This playful structure affords Barnet the opportunity to elide

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[17] Green, Tara. Ed. *From the Plantation to the Prison*. *African American Confinement Literature*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008. 4. Print.

[18] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 32-51. Print.

capturing key moments of racial tension and violence against blacks that resonate with the marginalization of blacks during Castro's regime. However, the playful structure provides Montejo the opportunity to delight in a nostalgic recollection in which he constantly recalls the good old days as he yearns to recuperate his youth through the playfulness of his storytelling.[19]

Barnet attempts to confine Montejo's role as an "informant" while bolstering the post-1959 Cuban revolution. However, Montejo limits Barnet's objectives by widening the revolutionary ethos of this *testimonio* to include his efforts at being the hero of the narrative while taking ownership of it. The *testimonio* is a confining genre because its objective is to emphasize a social movement while stationing the protagonist as a mere reporter of history. Barnet attempts to position Montejo as a witness to various games and sports to encourage Castro's revolutionary ethos. In this vein, Barnet attempts to emphasize Afro-Cubans' and slave masters' participation in these activities as evincing a racial fraternity which emerged during the Ten Years' War.[20] However, Montejo

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[19] I was fortunate to discover the remarkable way in which Montejo strives for a perpetual youth through storytelling in a lecture by Prof. Mark Sanders. "Lecture on Biography of a Runaway Slave." Afro-Cuban Literature and Culture Graduate Seminar. Candler Library, Emory University. Atlanta, GA. 18 Mar. 2013. However, this insight is also reiterated in Claude du Font's interview with Montejo in which he asks the centenarian recalls his finest period of life as his youth. (This exchange is found in Miguel Barnet, "The Untouchable Cimarrón," *New West Indian Guide*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (1997), 281-289. Print.

[20] Alejandro De La Fuente discusses this concept in *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 25-44. Print. He proposes that during the Ten Years War (1868-1878), white Cuban elites recognized that Cuban independence from Spain could only be achieved with the military and social support of Afro-Cubans. Thus, they transitioned from an opportunistic defense of slavery to supporting abolition. Also, the experience of war and the presence and leadership of blacks within the army reinforced the image that independent Cuba would have to be egalitarian and inclusive. White elites, led by the activist and intellectual José Martí, crafted an ingenious, nationalistic, colorblind ideology to encourage blacks to support independence. Martí and his supporters claimed that racial fraternity was forged on the battle fields of the Ten Years War as black and white troops supposedly served together equally and died together to create a new Cuba. This (mis)representation of black and white equality reverberated to depictions of subsequent wars such that the mambises were depicted in nationalist propaganda as an imagined community of warriors who served equally, treated each other equally, and were exemplary of a new Cuba that was "for all."

challenges the confines of this genre through an oral performance in which he recollects the exceptionalism of Afro-Cubans while playing games and sports. These memories unsettle the *testimonio* because he not only highlights their marginalized status while playing, but he also emphasizes *himself* as heroic whether on or off the playing field. [21]

When slaves participate in games and sports they unwittingly prepare themselves to assume new roles as soldiers who fight for their citizenship rights. These activities galvanize them into a fighting unit. Game theory's definitions of games and sports gesture towards their ability to instill solidarity. Games are "a description of strategic interaction that includes constraints on the actions that the players *can* take and the players' interests, but does not specify the actions that the players *do* take." [22] This definition is notable because when Afro-Cubans participate in games they are empowered to make strategic choices regarding their existence. They form bonds while disrupting the existing power structure as they play not simply games, but *games of strategy*.[23] In these games, players assume roles that they conceive and perform with the effect of possibly upsetting codified laws and the social order.

Sports are a specific type of game in which both players and teams are equally matched (supposedly), have equal chances of winning, and are motivated to compete in

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[21] William Luis alludes to Eugene Vance's description of the commemorative process as a part of oral culture when Luis notes that the repetitions in this *testimonio* are part of African oral tradition and Montejo's memories. (See William Luis, "The Politics of Memory and Miguel Barnet's *The Autobiography of a Run Away Slave*." *MLN* (Mar. 1989): 475-491. Print. Also see Vance's "Roland and the Poetics of Memory," in *Textual Strategies*. Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1979. 379. Print.

[22] Martin J Osborne et. al. *A Course in Game Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994. 1-4. Print.

[23] Ibid 1.

public and combative display."[24] War and sports possess overlapping characteristics as public, agonistic events in which the chance of victory spurs on the participants. Afro-Cubans developed bonds of solidarity when they were hindered from playing various games and sports, and conversely when they participated in these events. This solidarity was forged by the recognition that they lacked equal access to emerging as victors in these activities. Thus, they strove for equality in the sporting arena, in civic life, and eventually on the battlefield. Games and sports prepared Afro-Cubans to fight as soldiers because they instilled physical and mental characteristics such as discipline, courage, resistance to pain, and teamwork. Afro-Cubans developed strong bonds of solidarity in recreational activities despite the Spaniards' concerted efforts to dislocate them in this slave society.[25]

The Training of a Hunter

Barnet depicts Montejo's cimarronage as vital to the centenarian's selfhood and to the construction of a post-1959 revolutionary ethos. During this period, Montejo valiantly defies slavery's laws and its egregious social practices. While doing so, his militancy became linked to the patriotism of Cuban revolutionaries who challenged long-established racial and class systems. However, despite Barnet's attempts to represent Montejo as the ideal patrotic subject, the centenarian's isolated period in the woods reveals limitations to this depiction. Barnet attempts to represent Montejo's training as a warrior in the woods as a form of civic participation that foreshadows his fighting during the War of Independence. However, Montejo foils these constraints by stressing his inability to participate in any kind of civic group because of his penchant

[24] Roger Caillois. *Man*, *Play*, *and Games*. Paris: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc. 1961. 11-15. Print.

[25] Ibid. 15.

for being alone. Montejo's cimarronage is characterized by his expertise as a hunter in the woods. Barnet depicts this period as vital to Montejo's self-fashioning because it gives him the opportunity to prove himself as an exemplary warrior and sportsman.[26] Barnet emphasizes Montejo's facility in both activities to appeal to Fidel Castro who made a strident effort to use propaganda that portrayed him as an unrelenting fighter and sportsman after the 1959 revolution. For example, Fidel was often portrayed in posters wearing military garb and he helped to perpetuate a longstanding rumor that he was a highly regarded baseball player who was even offered a contract by the New York Yankees.[27] Narratives such as these not only immortalized Castro's allure, but also suggested that the 1959 revolution was perpetual regardless of its failures. Castro's wearing of the uniform suggests his perpetual youth, fitness, and readiness for battle whereas his assertion of being a skilled baseball player created an inextricable connection between the success of Cuba's baseball players globally and the possibility of Cuba emerging as an economic superpower as promised by the supporters of the revolution.[28]

Despite Barnet's efforts to position Montejo's cimarronage as mediating in this

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[26] The relationship between hunting and sports is an age-old one. To the extent that hunting involves using violence to capture, to overpower, and to kill a living creature, it has similar characteristics to war. From antiquity, hunting has often been used as a form of military training. Both activities require: strategy, chance, expertise with weapons and the readiness to shed blood outdoors among other similarities. However, hunting is an interspecies rather than an intr-species activity that involves pursuit. Thus, in English, hunting is also called the "chase," based on its French origins *chasse*, or "pursuit." Hunting is also semantically related to its opposite, "to escape." These distinctions reinforce Montejo's bifurcated status as a hunter who also risks being hunted by slave catchers. Ibid 14.

[27] Pettavino, Paula J. and Geralyn Pye. *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994. For striking images of Fidel Castro photographed in uniform please see Norberto Fuentes' *The Autobiography of Fidel Castro.* Norton: New York, 2010, 2, 4. Print.

[28] For a detailed analysis of the important ways in which Cuba's baseball teams have helped to forge the peoples' national identity please read Perez, Louis A. "Between Baseball and Bullfighting: The Quest for Nationality in Cuba, 1868-1898." *The Journal of American History*, 81.2. (Sep. 1994):493-517. Print.

nationalistic discourse, the centenarian's unrelenting desire to remain alone disrupts the writer's attempts to ingratiate himself to Castro's ethos of group solidarity. Montejo stresses his daring and solitary nature when he recalls the tactics he used to evade slave catchers:

> Since I've always liked to be my own boss, I kept myself away from…everyone. I even stayed away from animals…I used knives and short Collin machetes which were the ones the rural police used. Those weapons were used to cut down the forest or to hunt animals. And I had them ready in case some slave catchers wanted to catch me by surprise. Though that would have been hard because I kept on the move.[29]

Unlike the majority of maroons who lived in communities called *palenques*,[30] Montejo adamantly defies living among other escaped slaves as he explains "cimarron con Cimarron vende Cimarron."[31] These communities not only present the opportunity for him to get sold out by other escapees, but they are also physically and mentally entrapping.[32] Montejo's insistence that "I've always liked to be my own boss, I kept myself away from…everyone" suggests that his period in the woods is characterized by his own self-rule—a status he's relished since his plantation days—despite the confines of slavery. Furthermore, he prefers to live outside of the *palenque*'s customs

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[29] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografia de un Cimarron*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 52. Print.

[30] *palenques* literally means "stockades." see Price, Richard. Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978. Print.

[31] This is translated as "Cimarron with Cimarron sells [out] Cimarron."

[32] For more information about the entrapment of the *palenques*, see Price, Richard. Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978. Print.

and the laws of Cuba's slave society.

Barnet's keen interest in researching Afro-Cuban religions at the time when he wrote *Biography* informs the subtext of Montejo's cimarronage and foreshadows his status as a warrior on the battlefield during the War of Independence. When Montejo describes his wielding of weapons to clear paths in the forest and hunt, Barnet depicts his prowess as preparing him physically and spiritually for war. Later in the narrative, Montejo reminisces that "I think the thing I did best during the war was stealing livestock," and he even recalls that his theft of pigs for food during the war was "a game." [33] Though Barnet wants to depict Montejo's game-playing as representative of a nationalistic ethos, Montejo ingeniously bolsters his self-sufficiency as a game player through strategic acts of survival. However, Barnet takes his game-playing a step further by suggesting that his survival games in the forest, such as hunting, provide him the opportunity to exercise spiritual domination over the landscape. Barnet accomplishes this by depicting Montejo's rulership as orchestrated by Ogún Arere. This facet of Ogún (the orisha of war) depicts his lordship over all the forests.[34] Earlier in this section, Montejo describes how the physical threats in the forest combine with supernatural ones. To this end, he recalls that Afro-Cuban witchcraft practioners (Congos) use vile snakes ("majases") during séances to locate cimarrones for slave catchers.[35] Montejo seeks protection from not only physical threats posed by *rancheadores* (slave catchers), but also spiritual ones. Therefore, he brandishes his

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[33] William Rowlandson. Ed. Biografia de un Cimarron. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 52. Print.

[34]Lachatañere, Romulo. *Afro-Cuban Myths: Yemaya and other Orishas*. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006. Print.

[35] William Rowlandson. Ed. Biografia de un Cimarron. Manchester: Manchester UP 2010. 22. Print.

knives and short machetes in the forest while dominating the forest as a site for training before he wields his machete as an empowered mambí on the battlefield during the War of Independence.

The Cockfight

Cuba's bloodsports—including cockfighting—occupy a checkered history. Following Cuba's War of Independence the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, under the auspices of "American middle-class, WASP standards of morality," argued for a ban on bullfights and cockfighting claiming that they were inhumane.[36] The Cuban government did so (and banned gambling also) but immediately reinstated cockfights after the American occupation terminated in 1902. Currently, cockfighting and other forms of gambling have not only been re-established in Cuba but protected by law. Considering that the United States' intervention in Cuba promoted the ban on cockfighting, the Castro government's reinstatement of it serves as a direct affront to this interference. Barnet depicts cockfighting in *Biography* to characterize this event as supporting a nationalist agenda because its brings together diverse groups of Cubans through a sport that highlights Cuba's post-1959 revoluntionary zeal. However, Montejo seizes the moment to create an alternative interpretation of cockfighting as a sport which accentuates enduring racial and class disparities while he simultaneously positions himself as having the ability to move beyond these strictures through his prowess as a womanizer.

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[36] Gems, Gerald R. *The Athletic Crusade*: *Sport and American Cultural Imperialism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 86-87. Also, for more information on this matter please see Pettavino, Paula J. and Geralyn Pye. *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994. 32-36. Print.

Since Clifford Geertz' classic anthropological study "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight," scholars have given remarkable attention to the cockfight as an exhibitionist sport in which male bravado helps to ignite the nationalistic fervor imbued by two sparring cocks.[37] That Barnet, the anthropologist, selects a cockfighting scene from copious interviews is not surprising because he is likely well acquainted with Geertz's seminal work. Recalling the splendor of the matches Montejo says:

> The best entertainment was the cock fight. It was held on Sundays in every town. In Calabazar de Sagua, which was closest to Purio, there was a large cock pit. The pits were all made of wood and painted red and white[.]…The fights were bloody. But there wasn't a man in those days who didn't go to see them. *The blood was an attraction and a diversion, strange as it may seem*. It worked to get money away from the sugar cane farmers who were beginning to get rich back then. The laborers also bet. Cock fights were a vice. They still are. Once you got inside the pit you just had to keep on gambling. That's no place for cowards. Or bums. During the fights anyone could go wild. The shouting was worse than the blood. You couldn't stand the heat. Even so, men went to try their luck. Both whites and blacks would go to gamble. The problem was having the gold coins to bet. What black man had any! It was better to go with *a woman* into the woods and have sex.[38] [my italics]

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[37] Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 33.Print. For more recent scholarly treatments on cockfighting in a Caribbean context please see Wucker, Michelle. *Why The Cocks Fight: Dominicans, Haitians, and the Struggle for Hispaniola*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1999. Print.

[38] See William Rowlandson. Ed. Biografia de un Cimarron. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 75. Print.

In the spirit of Geertz, Barnet selects this passage in which the excitement of the cockfights possess the fury of war. The passage at first suggests that all men were unified in their thirst for violence as cocks sparred with metal spurs on their legs. For Barnet, the cockfighting arena alludes to the ongoing nature of the post-1959 revolution because in the ring the fowl have two choices: either fight until the death or runaway and be chided as "una gallina."[39] Montejo's recollection of the battle in the gallodrome (or cockfighting arena) becomes reminiscent of his previous time in the woods. In the forests, he recalled the impending danger and thrill of protecting and providing for himself while he ruled the landscape. In comparison, he depicts the galladrome as an erotic site of combat in which men gained a thrill by watching fowl fight until the death. Despite this air of excitement, Montejo offers here one of the few critiques in the *testimonio* of the endurance of racial and class inequalities in Cuba. The cockfighting ring is represented initially as a fraternal space—suggesting an ethos of Cuban nationalism--given that both whites and blacks supposedly participated in the gambling. However, Montejo's critique and voice becomes resonant when he expressed that both groups could not partake equally in making wagers. He emphasizes that despite the prevailing fun many blacks could not participate in the action as players because they lacked the money to bet. The inability of blacks to afford gambling reflects, on a larger scale, their displacement from owning land and possessing other property. Furthermore, Montejo suggests that this displacement also

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[39] This means "hen." See Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 25-40.Print.

prevented black men from asserting their masculinity. According to Montejo, if you couldn't place a bet, then you were displaced as "cobardes" or "ruines." [40] However, Montejo later recalls—in the most sexist register—that men such as himself could regain their fledgling sense of masculinity by philandering with women.

Montejo's sexist representations of chasing after women are not merely the tall tales of an elderly man seeking to relive the exploits of his youth. Rather, Montejo's recollections of womanizing intimate that his sexual activities were part of a larger effort to take ownership of his sexuality in a slave economy. After Montejo exclaims that blacks often didn't have the money to bet, it is remarkable that he follows by saying: "Era major irse con *una gallina* al monte y recostarse/It was better to go with a woman into the woods and have sex [my italics]."[41] It is telling that Montejo uses the term "*una gallina*"[42] to describe women in this context. After all, when cocks who fought in the gallodrome chose to flee rather than fight they were often derided as "*gallinas*."[43] Considering that "el gallo"[44] is represented as the dominant sex of the species, it can be inferred that Afro-Cuban men feel marginalized as losers, and effeminized as "*gallinas*," because they often lacked the money to bet in cockfights.

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[40] These terms literally translate as "the cowards" or "the dastardly." Geertz characterizes this term as "cowards" or "bums." Montejo's characterizations suggest that blacks were not only disenfranchised by not having the money to bet during matches, but were criminalized for being in the space—perhaps as potential thiefs—while gambling was occurring. Ibid. 25.

[41] See William Rowlandson. Ed. Biografia de un Cimarron. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010. 75. Print.

[42] "a hen." Ibid 25.

[43] Clifford Gertz makes this point in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 24. Print.

[44] "the rooster." Ibid 25.

Montejo intimates this because he describes Afro-Cuban men as attempting to recuperate their feelings of inadequacy by having sex with "*una gallina*" in the woods. In short, Afro-Cuban men strive to become venerated as "*gallos*" rather than derided as cowards or bums by having sex with "*gallinas*." From a larger vantage point, Montejo recalls earlier how slave masters "breeded" slaves to replenish the labor supply. Thus, Montejo's incessant descriptions of his philandering to regain his sense of masculinity were meant to challenge, inadvertently, the ability of slave masters to control the sexuality of slaves for their pleasure and profit.

In Pablo Riaño's study of cockfighting in nineteenth century Cuba, he presents a detailed account of gender construction in these matches that suggests that the sexism of the sport was part of a larger effort for men to gain public esteem. Similar to Montejo, he depicts cockfighting as imbued with a confluence of symbolic meanings for the trainers, cocks, and various participants:

> The game is translated as the representation of transcendent values and symbols for the participating crowd. This manifests in a markedly sexist society: the winning rooster is celebrated as spokesperson for the dominant sex[.]…When a bird wins, those who betted on him feel superior to the others because in the combative prowess of the animals the virtues of their master's confidence is represented and they need this for victory. Training cocks for fighting supposes a complete investment in human resources, money, time and time that needs to be rewarded[45] [author's translation].

[45] San Marful, Pablo Riaño. *Gallos Y Toros en Cuba.* Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba : Fundación Fernando Ortiz, 2002. 67. Print.

The gallodrome is an emotionally charged space in which the victor appears as the champion. Cockfighting is similar to battle as both are agonistic activities characterized by spectacularly colorful and violent displays, cutting weapons, and frenzied crowds. The gallodrome becomes a microcosm for the battlefield during the War of Independence as opponents who enter approach the prospects of winning as an all or nothing pursuit. San Marful's description of the owner's painstaking care of gamecocks coincides with Montejo's description of it as "a passion from way back. It wasn't just an obsession, it was almost a vice. They [owners] loved gamecocks more than people."[46] Both writers' descriptions advance that *some* participants experienced the possibilities of becoming transformed as victors when their cocks reigned victorious in the gallodrome. However, Afro-Cuban men were limited from participating in these modes of masculine assertion because of their inability to buy well-pedigreed fowl or to bet during cockfights. Their frustrations reached a simmering point during the War of Independence, and it is telling that black Cubans often carried both guns and little cocks with them as they approached the battlefield.[47] After the war began, rebel troops also staged cockfights by goading roosters that they found or stole while traveling.[48] Afro-Cuban troops, previously denied access to many forms of

[46] William Rowlandson. Ed. Biografia de un Cimarron. University of Manchester: Manchester, 2010. 87. Print.

[47] San Marful, Pablo Riaño. *Gallos Y Toros en Cuba.* 2002. Ciudad de La Habana, Cuba : Fundación Fernando Ortiz. 43. Print.

[48] Ibid 42.

prestige before the war, took up arms while symbolically carrying totemic symbols of their might—young cocks—to fortify their courage during the War of Independence.

The Spirits are in Play

When Barnet discovered Esteban Montejo's interview in a news piece, he had an agenda of investigating African derived religions in Cuba. Interestingly, he was so captivated by Montejo's narrative that he bypassed the opportunity to interview a 100-year old woman who had been born a slave and was a "santera y espiritista."[49] However, Barnet doesn't shift his intellectual interests markedly. Rather, he channels them by selecting passages from the interview that incorporate African-derived, syncretic religious practices that empower various ritualistic games and sports.

Barnet depicts Afro-Cubans playing maní, a pugilistic sport, as a rite of passage for boys and as a courtship ritual. The poet and anthropologist intends for Montejo's recollection to support the communal fighting ethos of the post-1959 Cuban revolution. However, the centenarian magnifies himself by asserting that he does not need to take part in maní. He eschews playing in this game and therefore rejects its importance as a rite of passage and a form of civic participation. After the revolution, African-derived religions symbolized a nationalistic fervor because of their ubiquity and the political leanings of Castro who strengthened political alliances with decolonizing African countries. Derived from the Central African stick-fighting tradition, maní is a courtly war game that was mainly performed in Mantanzas (in the west), Marianao in Havana, and Las Villas in Cienfuegos province where it was called

[49] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester. 2010. 32-51. Print.

bombosá.[50] This dynamic game was enlivened by a man beating *yuka* drums, while a dancer, with his body bandaged, stepped into a circle of forty or fifty men. Attempting to take over the space, he contorted his body, flexed acrobatic dance moves and attacked the men in the ring with quick jabs. The victor hit a fighter in an unguarded moment while the loser counter-attacked and could hit anybody in the ring while everyone kept dancing.

In keeping with the nationalist agenda for the text, Barnet describes boys as yearning to become men by aspiring to play maní. Yet, Montejo reaffirms that he has no need to participate because he is not only a man, but an exemplary fighter. Boys observed maní while they prepared for it as a rite of passage tantamount to warfare and an adult courting ritual. Boys and most women were excluded from playing maní in the same manner as they are excluded typically from fighting in war. Though Montejo describes women as typically standing on the sidelines to prepare these men, they sometimes participated in maní as combatants. Montejo describes the perilousness of this game and infers why they were usually relegated to the sidelines when he narrates: "I don't know if it was a dance or a game because the punches given out were serious." While broken bones, battered noses and chipped teeth were common, he describes the harshness of this war game in which "[the men's] wrists [are]…charged up with any old kind of witchcraft." Montejo describes maní as a cruel game—empowered by witchcraft—that was enveloped in mystery and terror as its participants camouflaged their techniques which blurred the boundaries of it as a game, as a dance, and as a fight. It was likely that slave masters would frown upon this game if they recognized its

[50] See Patrick Bellegarde-Smith. Fragments of Bone: Neo-African Religions in a New World. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 35-55. Print.

martial potential. Furthermore, the physical damage to slaves' bodies meant that it reduced their capacity to work. Barnet describes these games as played in spaces away from the slave masters' gaze. By participating, Afro-Cubans challenged their slave masters' ownership of their bodies as merely beasts of burden. Rather, Afro-Cubans honed their martial ability in the fighting ring before defeating the Spanish on the battlefield.

Though Montejo recognized maní as an important rite of passage, he forgoes participating in it to either impress women or to refine his fighting skills. When challenged by a fighter to play he says: "The man who hits me will get a taste of my machete."[51] Montejo wants to remain uninjured, but his greatest desire is to prevent himself from being embarrassed and effeminized if he is beaten in front of the crowd. His remark also suggests that he has no need to prove himself (either to the crowd or to Barnet) because he is already a consummate fighter. Though maní possesses the grace of rhumba and the fierceness of the cockfight, Montejo does not take the opportunity to impress the crowd, here, and instead rejects this opportunity to uplift civic participation. Rather, he later delights in recalling to the reader that he was a pro at playing a game that bears his name: Monte.

"Who Has the Upper Hand?"

Initially published in 1966, *Biography* is imbued with a revolutionary ethos which espouses an enigmatic return to the pastoral as a challenge to bourgeois, capitalistic interests that were antithetical supposedly to Castro's socialist principles.[52]

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[51] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. University of Manchester: Manchester, 2010. 60. Print.

[52] For example, Che Guevara's notion of the "Nuevo Hombre" or "New Man" was very much in line with these principles. Guevara believed that in order for class disparities to be disrupted revolutionaries needed to espouse this principle which advocated that the New Man would be "selfless and cooperative, obedient

In line with this perspective, Barnet selects various passages from his interviews with Montejo which promote idealistic representations of the pastoral because Montejo's nostalgic tone beckons to these principles. Moreover, these passages support Castro's romanticized self-portrait as an enigmatic leader, from the countryside of Cuba, who comes into power with military flair to defeat the Spanish.This is evident in Barnet's description of the "old fashioned cards" that players of a sophisticated card game played during slavery. When Barnet describes the cards that players of monte used during slavery, he appeals to Castro's nostalgic venerations of the pastoral as a part of his post-1959 revolutionary rhetoric. On the other hand, Montejo highlights his exceptionalism as a card player and womanizer to foreshadow his might on the battlefield. Monte is a card game in which a player rests two cards on the table and guesses which of those two is higher than the three cards he or she keeps in hand. Describing these cards as possessing an antiquated charm Montejo remembers:

> Each card had its own name. Like nowadays, but it so happens that cards nowadays are not as colorful. In my day, there were queens, jacks, kings, aces, and then came the numbers from two to seven. The card had pictures of men on them with crowns or on horseback. You could easily see they were Spaniards because those types with the lace collars and long hair never existed in Cuba.[53]

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and hard working, gender-blind, incorruptible, non-materialistic, and anti-imperialist." One of Guevara's most important tenet's for the New Man was that he would be interested in class-based egalitarianism and therefore he would be part of a nationalistic movement to challenge material incentives in favor of moral ones. As part of this change, Guevara promulgated a return to agrarian work (often without pay) and the pastoral as deeply moral and a suitable way of proving one's allegiance to eradicating class disparity. To this end, agrarian movements in Cuba and the Caribbean, called "zafras" were often premised on the veneration of sugar cane cutters as self-less patriots who possessed a revolutionary spirit. This was particularly the case in Cuba following the post-1959 revolution. This is elucidated in Hansing, Katrin. *Race, Rasta and Revolution: the Emergence and Development of the Rastafari Movement in Socialist Cuba*. *LIT Verlag Münster*. Berlin: 2002. 1-35. Print.

Rhetorically, Barnet's description of present day cards as lacking the luster of cards from the "good old days" suggests that the revolution was a crowning moment in Cuban history and therefore lessens the failures of the revolution to live up to its promises of equality. Barnet further appeals to the Castro regime by emphasizing the inadequacy of the Spanish. They were naive because although they supported a capitalistic system in which they ruled Cuba, they could not even produce images on playing cards that connoted their masculine strength rather than their status as feminine. In this misogynistic text, their feminine images suggest that they are already predisposed to become effeminized during war because their representations attest to their lack of dominant notions of masculine strength.

When Montejo equates his skill at playing cards as commensurate with his skill at womanizing, he presages his might on the battlefield and his inability to become effeminized in combat. The centenarian recalls that gambling was the big attraction of playing monte. While he intonates that gambling and womanizing are compulsive activities, he yearns to play a "slick hand" of oil-coated cards: "The truth is that monte was my vice. Monte and women. And not for nothing because you would have to look around a lot…[to find] a better player than me." The syntax of this sentence affirms that Montejo considers himself an ardent player of both cards and women. The wistful old man, through this correlation, reiterates a sexist calculus in which he yearns for the vestiges of youth because it afforded him the chance to objectify women and exercise male bravado before fighting on the battlefield. Later in the narrative, Montejo correlates the mambises superiority in battle with their capacity to place "[a]ll the

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[53] Ibid 62.

cards…on the table."[54] Montejo's skill at playing Monte and womanizing is premised on his courage. This courage not only serves him well as a skilled player of the card game, but also bolsters his fighting abilities during the throes of war.

War is (Not) a Game

At the climax of the *testimonio*, Montejo recalls the War of Independence as possessing the thrills and dangers of a game despite its horrific dangers and casualties. Whereas Barnet depicts the camaraderie among *mambises*[55] and their fighting spirit as evocative of the post-1959 revolutionary ethos, Montejo insists on positioning himself as a lone warrior on the battlefield despite serving in the fighting unit. The *testimonio*'s account of the Afro-Cubans' decisive victory against the Spanish comes into full view at the infamous Battle of Mal Tiempo held on December 15, 1895. This battle served as a crucial turning point for the War of Independence. It gave the Cubans a significant boost in morale after their victory, while it forced the Spanish troops to reconsider their poor fighting strategies. Mal Tiempo was one of the bloodiest conflicts during the Cuban War of Independence (1895-1898). Several reasons combined to culminate in the defeat of the Spanish.[56] They used unsuccessful fighting strategies and ill-chosen weapons which made them vulnerable to assault. Moreover, the Spanish received little training in the use of their firearms before fighting on the Cuban battlefields.

In *Biography*, Montejo comes into his manhood as a mambí while depicting himself as an exemplary game player during the war and particularly at Mal Tiempo.

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[54] Ibid 66.

[55] The Cuban liberation army were given the pejorative term "mambises" by the Spanish army. The Cubans appropriated the term as a form of empowerment as will shortly be elaborated.

[56] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. University of Manchester: Manchester, 2010. 60.

Montejo readily acknowledges that the tremendous loss of life in battle make the stakes of war incredibly grave.[57] However, he is also aware that war requires the ingenuity, discipline, courage and persistence that typify game-playing. He characterizes the Spanish as novice game players who not only lack these qualities, but also will be punished for their inability to compete:

> They had been figuring that the war was a *game*. So when the *game* got rough, they began to fall back. They started to think we were animals, not men—that's how they came to call us Mambises. Mambí means the child of a monkey and a buzzard. It was a taunting phrase, *but we used it in order to cut off their heads*. At Mal Tiempo they realized that. So much so that Mambí became a lion. That was seen at Mal Tiempo better than anywhere else[.]...It was the worst slaughter of the War. It happened that way because it was *predestined*…[.] Mal Tiempo was necessary to give courage to the Cubans and to give strength to the revolution. Anyone who fought there left convinced he could face the enemy [*my italics*].[58]

The narrative voice changes in "Life During the War," the chapter from which this passage is derived. Beginning the chapter with "I," Barnet emphasizes Montejo's full transition from cimarrón to mambí, and from boyhood to manhood by bringing him into a renewed subjectivity. Montejo was previously a "spoiled child" and loner while hunting for his food and surviving in the woods. Now, he emerges from the forests after slavery is over and dons a military uniform, cuts his hair, and undergoes a rite of passage as a soldier in the Cuban rebel army. The cimarrón's movement from the

[57] Ibid 69. Print.

[58] Ibid 118.

forests is a notable moment of re-creation. However, Montejo does not fully become a team player as a mambí. Unlike his moments at the sidelines during the cockfight or while watching maní, in this crucial chapter Montejo voices his participation in this battle as self-promotional rather than suggesting commitment to his fellow troops.

Barnet is concerned with making Montejo an arbiter of this historical moment in which the mambises—through their *esprit du corps* and fighting prowess--defied the odds. This *esprit du corps* resounds with Castro's insistence on civic participation in a communist Cuba. However, this is not the centenarian's concern. Indeed, Montejo makes a striking parallel to his desire to remain alone as a runaway slave and his wish to avoid other mambises during war—he is anxious about others selling him out. Therefore, the centenarian does not begin this chapter by framing the events as experienced by his unit, but rather commences from his unique perspective. From the beginning, Montejo intentionally sets the stage to depict his fighting spirit as the fulcrum on which the unit pivots.

Barnet's description of how the rebel Cuban soldiers re-appropriated the derogatory term "*mambí*" to defeat the Spanish is telling. Their subversion employs many elements of play while Barnet's representation of their inevitable victory is analogous to that of the Cuban state emerging as a global power. Because the rebel Cuban army consisted of mainly Afro-Cuban soldiers, the Spanish attempt to deride them through the hybrid image of the mambí. For the Spanish, the combination of mambises as half-monkeys and half-buzzards characterizes them as caricatures of men who are non-threatening because they are playful and vile. The Spanish depict the rebel Cuban army as possessing the spirited nature of monkeys and the

primitive instincts of buzzards--despicable creatures who feed on rotting flesh. This pejorative term is intended to emasculate them and its hybridity suggests they are unable to reproduce even while the savagery of their appetite for decaying flesh resonates with colonial anxieties of so-called primitive people as harboring cannibalistic impulses.[59]

The rebel soldiers engage in a clever form of mimicry whereby they exacerbate the fears of the Spanish troops by rendering their appearances as even more threatening while playing a witty game of cat and mouse with the Spanish in the woods. While this game possesses religious overtones, it also reaffirms Barnet's desire to represent the perpetual nature of Castro's revolutionary zeal. Mambises engage in mimicry when they make believe that they are as vile and threatening as the Spanish anticipate during the Battle of Mal Tiempo. They do this by becoming illusory characters who play hide and seek in the woods while camouflaging their machetes by attaching to them long shafts of guava branches. Riding their horses and extending their primitive appearing weapons, mambises terrify the novice Spanish soldiers who are not only poorly trained and ill-equipped, but also possess anxieties regarding the savagery of the rebel troops. They then unleash their machetes and guns and leave headless white men in their wake. Barnet includes this description of the shafts of guava because it mythically derives from the sacred tree of Eleguá also known as *el guerrero travieso* or the warrior trickster. His hooked dance wand derives from the *guayaba* tree.[60] Eleguá is the god of translation and transition. By possessing a foot in

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[59] See Robert Young. *Colonial Desire*: *Hybridity in Theory*, *Culture and Race*. London. Routledge, 1995. 1-10. Print.

[60] Lachatañeré, Romulo. *Afro-Cuban Myths: Yemaya and other Orishas*.Trans. Christine

each of these worlds, he mediates between the two. In this context, the *mambises*' were "predestined" to win Mal Tiempo because, as the symbolism of the guava branches infers, an interlocking physical and spiritual battle is occurring between the *mambises* and the Spaniards. The enigma of mambises carrying guava branches, reverberating in the air, suggests that they possess physical and supernatural might as they infuse Mal Tiempo with the capacity of spirited play. Mal Tiempo is a battle that the *mambises* are fated to win. The ominous weather sets the stage for the power reversal in which rebel troops will impart dread into the novice Spanish soldiers. The *mambises*' glaring machetes become emblematic of their power.

In *Biography*, Montejo venerates the machete as the most powerful weapon for helping the mambises succeed during the war. Though this is not historically accurate, Barnet emphasizes the importance of the machete because it served as a nationalistic symbol of the resilience of Cubans after the 1959 Revolution.[61] The machete was a versatile tool that helped the mambises, and eventually the Spanish, perform numerous activities during war such as clearing fields, hunting, and fighting. However, mambises succeeded in defeating the Spanish during the war mainly through their skillful use of the Spanish Mauser. They valued this gun so highly that they would even fight Spanish soldiers unarmed to take one. Ricardo Batrell, a young Afro-Cuban mambí, recalls their "sacred" value when he describes his compatriots as equally

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Ayorinde. Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2006. 53. Print.

[61] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 1-12. Print.

mourning the loss of the Mauser as the loss of a comrade.[62] Despite the historical accuracy of these guns as empowering the mambises to succeed in defeating the Spanish, the mambises' use of machetes invoked terror because they connoted subaltern resistance as William Rowlandson notes:

> The machete, thus, became a clear mark of distinction for the independence of soldiers, so much so that later in the conflict the Spanish themselves began to develop machete use. It became a totemic warrior image bearing a specifically Cuban cultural heritage, with ethnic and subaltern overtones. The Spanish would have been keen to promote the legend of the machete in order to bear out racially-tinged tales of a savage and brutal enemy. Furthermore, later, the US would have had good reason to uphold this image, in order to justify the paternalistic narrative of intervention over a people too underdeveloped (and too black) for self-governance.[63]

The Spanish recognized the unique potential of the machete as a useful tool and—under certain conditions—a dangerous weapon during battle. Thus, they readily began to bear them. However, the machete still remained an important symbol for the mambises during Mal Tiempo because it was used to butcher Spanish infantrymen and conspirators from the rebel army. It is credible that Afro-Cubans from the countryside and former cimarrones were able to use this tool proficiently. Thus, it became the tool associated with the underdog and mambises wielded it with a patriotic lure. This

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[62] Batrell, Ricardo. *A Black Soldier's Story. The Narrative of Ricardo Batrell and the Cuban War of Independence*.Trans. Mark Sanders. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 50. Print.

[63] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester , 2010. 60. Print.

representation supports the Spaniards' and Americans' associations of the machete as a savage and primitive tool that was fit for the Cuban rebel army—a savage and primitive people who needed to be civilized. However, Barnet presents the machete as a revered symbol of Cuban might at the close of the narrative to advance an ideology of Cuba as insurmountable.

Barnet appeals to the Castro Regime by positioning the machete, at the end of the narrative, as bolstering a mambí ideology.[64] This ideology situates Montejo's desire for a perpetual youth as parallel to the continuous ability of the Cuban nation to redefine itself. Throughout *Biography*, the centenarian delights in a nostalgic recollection in which he yearns to recuperate his youth through storytelling. During an interview in which Claude du Font asks Montejo to recall "the finest period of his life" the centenarian responds: "When I was a slave." After du Font prods him to elaborate on his baffling answer Montejo wistfully notes: "[B]ecause I was young." [65] Montejo's response suggests that his desire to recreate himself, characteristic of youth, exceeds his awareness of the violence and entrapment of his former status as a slave. This desire for perpetual youth positions Montejo as the arbiter of the mambí ideology which is further enhanced by his image at the end of the *testimonio* as wielding a machete. The machete's status as a phallic sign also enhances the centenarian's perpetual youth as he wields this potent and continuously erect symbol of masculine

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[64] Alejandro De La Fuente discusses this concept in *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. 25-44. Print. While he asserts that racial fraternity became a popular ideology following the Ten Years War, as noted earlier, the mambi ideology is an extension of this and, as La Fuente explains, it represents Cuba as a perpetual mambi figure (destined to regain its greatness) from the Ten Years War and beyond in part because of its racial fraternity.

[65] Miguel Barnet. "The Untouchable Cimarrón," *New West Indian Guide*, 71, No. ¾ (1997) 281-289. Print.

authority.

In this narrative, Montejo's desire to recuperate the physical mastery and mental acumen of youth is not only exhibited in his passion for play, but also through his brandishing of the machete. This passion is evident in the last sentence of the *testimonio*: "That's why I say I don't want to die so that I can fight all the battles yet to come. I won't get into the trenches or use any of these modern weapons. A machete will do for me."[66] In the dénouement, Barnet's and Montejo's voices blend so that Montejo's valor can forever symbolize the enduring revolution. Barnet chooses this as the final note because while it uplifts Montejo, it also helps to aggrandize the Cuban nation as able to stand the test of time. The allure of the machete is bolstered after the 1959 revolution in which the weapon served as an emblem of Cuba's nationalism, and its versatility suggested that Cuba would continuously adapt and become a preeminent world power.

While Barnet considers his ownership of *Biography* as supporting Cuba's perpetual development into a global power after Castro's revolution, he ironically describes his desire to write Montejo's story as a beneficent activity in which the centenarian willingly gave him the details of his life story as property. In the article "The Untouchable Cimarrón" Barnet compares his ownership of Montejo's story to the contractual transfer of a plot of land that the centenarian gave him before his death:

> …I own the land in Santa María del Rosario that he [Montejo] bought with his earnings (it took him forty-six years to pay it off). Three years before he died, we

[66] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 235. Print.

> arranged the transfer of property with a solicitor and a lawyer and he gave me the plot of land. I later gave it to the Revolutionary Defence Committees, and there is still a kitchen garden there for the neighborhood in Santa María del Rosario, because I did not do anything with that land. He gave it to me. He saved up all his life for it. Esteban Montejo never held an important position in the Republic. He was always a cane-cutter, a school porter, working in different jobs, but nothing compared with the life he had in the last century; that is what I wanted to mould with a sense of the epic and with an anthropological vision.[67]

Barnet responds to the historian Michael Zeuske's suggestion that a second part of the *testimonio* should be written about Montejo's life following the war. However, Barnet disparages this suggestion because he wants his mythological rendering of Montejo to stand in perpetuity. However, it is also likely that Zeuske's account would reveal important lacunas in Barnet's account regarding racial, class, and ethnic disparities in Cuba as Montejo experienced them. Comparing Montejo's narrative to a plot of land, Barnet reinforces that he owns Montejo's story. He also intonates that if this *testimonio* is left untouched, like the plot of land, it will serve as an infinite source of (re)creation for future generations. Ever the self-promoter, Barnet represents himself as so entrusted with Montejo's and the revolution's legacy that he selflessly took all that the centenarian possessed—even the meager yet exemplary details of his life--and shaped it, in a divinely inspired sense, into an astounding vision. That Barnet describes this vision as anthropological is no small claim. Rather, *Biography* has become an important text for scholars of Cuban history and literature who seek to understand slavery in colonial Cuba

[67] Miguel Barnet. "The Untouchable Cimarrón," New West Indian Guide, 71, No. ¾ (1997) 281-289. Print.

and scholars often use evidence from this text to re-create events in this period. However, Barnet's scholarly and artistic pursuit in publishing this text is far from self-less. What Barnet mitigates is that by shaping Montejo's narrative, he emerges as a writer of import following the post-1959 revolution. However, it is not only Barnet who becomes a cultural hero by publishing this story as his. Rather, Montejo also re-creates the strictures of the *testimonio* genre by taking greater possession of his story through his depiction of games and sports. By taking possession in these ways, Montejo challenges Barnet's authority as the primary arbiter of truth—and (his)story--as he selects from the interviews.[68]

In this chapter, I have asserted that Barnet attempts to present the re-creation of Cuba as a global power by portraying games and sports as empowering Afro-Cubans to redefine their status as property. Simultaneously, he positions Montejo as an arbiter of Cuba's post-1959 revolutionary ethos. Barnet intends to be the sole owner of *Biography* and he presents Cubans' participation in games and sports to appeal to Castro. This political leader believed that these events could inculcate civic participation in the population because they affirmed that all Cubans were indomitable fighters despite the losses following the revolution. By selecting various passages of games and sports, Barnet encourages the reader to empathize with the discipline, determination, courage, and *esprit du corps* that this revolution ignited. While he intended to exercise authorial control over this autobiography for his political ends, Montejo was a participant in and witness to a particular period of history in which his participation in games and sports

[68] To read more about about the intricate ways in which ethnographers engage in "truth making" by writing ethnographic accounts please read Clifford, James. *The Predicament of Culture*: *Twentieth-Century Ethnography*, *Literature*, *and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard, 1988. 21-54. Print.

emphasized his stature. Montejo invokes a spirit of play to reclaim the *testimonio* while opening a space of possibility for his image to be recreated in perpetuity.

In Barnet's classic anthropological study, *Afro-Cuban Religions*, he describes Montejo's perpetual youth as evident the playfulness of children in Cuba: "When I go out into the as yet unpaved street, I see some children playing with cassava balls. I wonder whether Esteban Montejo, who died in Havana at the age of 113, has perhaps been reincarnated in one of them."[69] Here, as in *Biography*, Barnet delights in the rustic depiction of the countryside—as represented by the unpaved streets—to suggest the capacity for future generations of post-1959 revolutionaries to pave the way for Cuba to become a global power. Montejo's and Barnet's *testimonio* attests to the Cuba's perpetual youth which is exemplified through the ingenuity of slaves as game players--guardians of Cuba Libre--through "the alchemy of memory."[70]

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[69] Miguel Barnet. *Afrocuban Religions*. Markus Wiener Publishers: Kingston, Jamaica, 2001. Print.

[70] William Rowlandson. Ed. *Biografía de un cimarrón*. Manchester: University of Manchester, 2010. 22. Print.

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Chapter 2

Carceral Horror in Himes's *The Quality of Hurt*

> *The Quality of Hurt* is a fantastic, masculine work…American writers don't produce manly books…Himes's autobiography is that of man.
>
> --John A. Williams. [1]

Chester Himes embarked on his career as a writer while serving a seven-year prison sentence in the Ohio State Penitentiary between 1929 and 1936 for armed robbery.[2] Reflecting on his incarceration, he published *The Quality of Hurt* in 1971--the first autobiography in his two-volume set.[3] Himes's autobiographies, among his other autobiographical works, recall key events of his life while tracing his familial legacy as part of the third generation of descendants emerging from American slavery.[4] In the final lines of his second autobiography he notes: "For all its inconsistencies, its contradictions, its humiliations, its triumphs, its failures, its tragedies, its hurts, its ecstasies and its absurdities; that's my life—the third generation out of slavery."[5] Himes expresses the ambiguities, obstacles, and tremendous expectations of achieving meritocracy not only

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[1] Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner. Eds. *Conversations with Chester Himes*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press,1995. Print.

[2] H. Bruce Franklin. *Prison Literature in America*: *The Victim As Criminal and Artist*. Westport: Lawrence Hill and Company. 1982. Print. Franklin provides a fascinating overview of Himes's earliest writings and their status within the subgenre of prison literature.

[3] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972. Print.

[4] Himes's interest in tracing his genealogy and accompanying prospects for heroism is most explicit in his autobiographical novel *Third Generation*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1989. Print.

[5] Chester Himes. *My Life of Absurdity*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 2*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976. Print.

for himself, but also for the advancement of future generations. His efforts are compounded by his fraught status as a descendant of slaves--a people who were positioned as chattel, dislocated from the benefits of American citizenship, and typecast as savage and lacking merit.

In this context, *The Quality* covers the "early years" of his life, up to 1954, and captures defining events. These include his turbulent childhood, his brother's accident and subsequent blindness, Himes's accident and disability, and his recurring periods of imprisonment. By comparison, *My Life of Absurdity*, Himes's second autobiography, details his life after 1954, which encompasses his experiences as an expatriate writer in Paris. What is novel, for our purposes, is that Himes' emphasis on the absurdity of his racist experiences reaches its zenith in the second volume.[6] Absurdity is reiterated throughout *The Quality* not only through the work's harrowing content, but also its disjointed form. Thus, Himes queries the confining nature of autobiography by challenging its conventions. When transgressing the reader's typical expectations of the genre, he shows disdain for his readership since he positions the autobiography as a restraining genre for elucidating racism.

The many vignettes in the autobiography detail the absurdity of being black in America while the work's form challenges the reader's expectations concerning autobiographical conventions. The text is filled with asides and can be difficult to follow.[7] The author does not conclude by ruminating on the necessity of his trials for

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[6] To comprehensively interrogate the majority of Himes's short stories read *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. Calvin Hernton, Ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990. Print.

[7] Himes defies a key convention of the autobiography by elaborating on unimportant details. Furthermore, the work does not follow an Aristotelian curve in which there is a beginning, middle, and end. Roy Pascal asserts that the autobiographer's pursuit of "special unity" is a key convention of the genre as it "imposes a

creating a sense of wholeness and peace after reviewing his life lessons. After all, Himes is unmoored from security not just financially but relationally as a closeted, bisexual black male writer who feels trapped in an interracial marriage. Furthermore, while he feels ill-equipped to serve Alva (his white wife) dutifully by being a chivalrous provider, what is most intriguing is his final lines of the narrative: "But what about me? I asked myself. Where could I find that was safe?"[8] The expatriate's final utterance conjoins his failure to enjoy physical safety, whether in America or abroad, with his incapacity to feel secure enough to express his deepest thoughts, emotions, and actions in his *own* autobiography. Himes exhibits a profound guardedness despite his attempts to be vulnerable in his monograph because he feels defenseless and unfit to live up to conventional codes of heteronormativity and masculinity. Thus, his final refrain leaves the reader as baffled as he is—perplexed that there is danger in telling too much of one's story and a rueful safety in self-censure. He is insecure in *coming out* in his life and writings whether in America or Paris because he essentially asks the reader: "Who will serve, honor, and protect me?"

Himes's overwhelming sense of disorientation and anxiety not only inspires his wanderlust, but prevents him from narrating any experience of wholeness. Yet, *The Quality* is a captivating narrative which exudes Himes's *joie de vivre* through the many twists and turns he experiences as he travels from one place to another seeking financial

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pattern on a life, [and] constructs out of it a coherent story." See Roy Pascal. *Design and Truth in Autobiography*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960. Print.

For a thought-provoking interrogation of Himes's departure from the autobiographical form read "Slaying the Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes" in Charles L. P. Silent (ed.) *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, 241-255. Print.

[8] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 351. Print.

security, self-discovery, and community. The many asides that appear in the narrative emphasize his psychic and physical journeys while leading the reader to deviate from important lines of intellectual inquiry. At times, this writing strategy makes the narrative challenging to read but it does not constitute an aesthetic or intellectual failure of the work. I propose a more textured analysis by suggesting that Himes diverts the reader's attention, through this strategy, to avoid telling key details concerning his life's path and to reinforce the absurdity of presenting a coherent life narrative in a racist and chaotic world. His divergent musings also fragment any sense of coherence in the narrative—a typical convention of the autobiographical genre--and instead infer that Himes has not arrived at a sense of wholeness when contemplating his life's course.[9]

Himes, though, stridently disrupts the reader's comfort by failing to rationalize the outcomes of his various challenges. The author dismisses writing a narrative that offers closure by leaving the reader slightly dissatisfied, in his recollections of pivotal moments, such as during his incarceration. This writing strategy discourages complacency with lofty tales of the exceptionalism of particular black figures. This may prevent greater deliberation on the vestiges of racism and prevent the white establishment from recognizing the need for greater measures of social justice. Given the paradoxical ways in which he weaves his splintered narrative any claims regarding his intentions are at best tenuous. For example, he comes to voice as a writer in prison. Yet, his elisions in

[9] Commenting on the quest for wholeness, Georges Gusdorf in "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" notes: "Autobiography…requires a man to take a distance with regard to himself in order to reconstitute himself in the focus of his special unity and identity across time." Please see Georges Gusdorf. "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography." Trans. James Olney. Olney, *Autobiography* 28-47. 1980. Print.

his autobiography about his experiences there, and particularly his prison romance with another male inmate, resonate with his formidable silences elsewhere.

Though Himes does not speak openly about his prison romance in his autobiography, he confirms that the same-sex relationship conveyed in *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*, his semi-autobiographical prison novel, is a stand in for his love affair even though his protagonist (Jimmy Monroe) is white. The illusive author describes his perplexing desire to conceal his prison romance—an open secret—behind the thin-veil of a tender and at times gritty *roman-à-clef*: "I had made the protagonist of my prison story a Mississippi white boy; that ought to tell me something, but I don't know what—but obviously it was the story of my own prison experiences."[10] Though *Yesterday* captures the love affair between the white Jimmy Munroe and his Latino partner Prince Rico, these figures represent Himes and the actual prisoner Prince Rico—the black man from Georgia whom the author met in 1933 about the time the other inmate entered prison.[11] Though Himes does not go to great lengths to disguise his prison romance as represented in *Yesterday*, he still fails to discuss this openly in *The Quality*. Himes can not find peace in *coming out* and *coming to voice* because he experiences safety in the most dangerous places and danger in the safest.

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[10] This quote is found in Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 117. Print. Also, for a detailed interrogation of the complicated publication history of Yesterday Will Make You Cry, and further insights into the book's critical reception, see Clare Rolens's article *Write Like a Man: Chester Himes and the Criminal Text Beyond Bars*, Callaloo 37.2 (2014). Another incisive account of these matters can be studied in H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Literature in America*. *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. Westport: Lawrence Hill & Co. 1982, 206-232. Print.

[11] Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre discuss this in their biography. Even though Himes disguises this relationship by presenting protagonists of different races, he includes in *Yesterday* entire sections of love letters which he and Prince Rico exchanged when they were incarcerated and the biographers further substantiate this relationship by drawing on archival findings. See Margolies, Edward & Michel Fabre. *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997. Print.

Therefore, he exacts ownership of his autobiography by guarding his portrayal of his sexuality as his exclusive property because he desires to maintain a "manly" reputation as a black writer who produces a "manly book."[12] In the epigraph, John A. Williams, one of his closest friends, describes *The Quality* as a "fantastic, masculine work" to encourage the reader to sympathize with Himes because he produces a gendered autobiography—one that reflects the supposedly unimpeachable masculinity of the writer. Williams's repeated characterization of this author and text as "manly"[13] attests to the anxiety surrounding black masculinity, not only with regard to race, but also gender and sexuality. From this perspective, Himes foregoes disclosing his prison romance in either of his autobiographies to represent himself as living up to heteronormative codes of masculine conduct particularly during the Black Arts Movement.[14] The tormented writer strives for racial solidarity with other black male heterosexual writers, such as Williams, by disavowing his bisexuality through sexual privacy.[15] In turn, Williams vouches for Himes's masculinity and by extension dismisses critiques concerning his bisexuality.

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[12] Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner. Eds. *Conversations with Chester Himes*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, 33. Print.

[13] Ibid 33

[14] The Black Arts Movement was the literary period which accompanied the Black Power Movement in which black artists produced literature to encourage black solidarity and to nurture black collective interests without regard for the white literary establishment. During this period, black nationalists often denigrated the sexuality of black queer writers as antithetical to racial progress. For further exposition on these concerns, read Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice. New York City: Delta, 1999, 84-109. Also consult the introduction to this period. See Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie McKay, Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* New York City: Norton, 2003, 420-429. Print.

[15] By sexual privacy, I am referring to Himes's deliberate efforts in taking ownership of the depiction of his sexuality in his autobiography, as his property, to safeguard (supposedly) his reputation as a writer during the Black Arts movement. For a historiographical analysis of the emergence of privacy in the nineteenth century and its relationship to life writing and black self-hood read the introduction to Katherine Adams's *Owning Up*: *Privacy, Property, & Belonging in U.S. Women's Life Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press: 2009, 1-30. Print.

Himes's incongruent attempts to convey queerness and heteronormative masculinity at the same time is a peculiar balancing act which is made more perilous because he aspires to be recognized not only as a manly writer, but a black hero. The black hero (or race man) is a person of courage who is willing to fight, stimulate revolt, and possibly die for the black community to promote its rights and privileges.[16]

Indeed, Himes's status as a black hero is tempered by one of the most disturbing aspects of his relational life and corpus—his sexist abuse of women in his life and art.[17] His bisexuality not only provokes his deep-seated anxiety but psychically drives his abuse of women who are victimized because of his displaced aggressions. Furthermore, he attempts to mask his queerness by instead calling attention to his misogyny in his works.[18] He feels torn. Though he strives to be a heroic race man, his status as a black (queer) writer is antithetical to black heroism. Heteronormative codes of conduct position black queer men as effeminate or deviant because of their unspeakable sexual liaisons.[19] Regarding his sexuality, Himes is speechless—saying too much and woefully little--as his moments of vulnerability, evident in *The Quality*, oppose the characterization of the

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[16] This definition, however, calls into question the elusive nature of heroism in general and specifically black heroism. Any action maybe considered heroic in one context and barbaric in another. However, the prevailing typology of blacks as innately savage and violent only highlights and puts pressure on the moral relativity of their feats. Furthermore, discussions concerning heroism often emphasize male deeds while objectifying women (when they are mentioned) or they discount their accomplishments through erasure.

[17] To learn more about this important issue read "Slaying in Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes" in Charles L. P. Silet. Ed. *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. Print.

[18] Evidence of Himes' misogyny can be found in several of his autobiographical works including, to name a few, his protest novels *Lonely Crusade*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1947. Another graphic representation of Himes' mistreatment of women can be found in *End of The Primitive*. New York: Norton, 1955. Print.

[19] See the introduction to Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr.'s *Sexual Discretion*. *Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014. Print.

black hero as a fearless race man. In his corpus, he not only expresses vulnerability by describing the horrendousness of prison life, but also queries the prospects of other institutions to serve, honor, and protect the lives of blacks in America and abroad. From this vantage point, he depicts the military in his *oeuvre* as possessing overlapping conventions with the prison. While Himes is classified as unfit for military service because of his broken vertebra, the author challenges the conventional narrative of military service as supposedly serving as a gateway for blacks to achieve meritocracy and full citizenship rights.[20] Rather, Himes represents the military and prison as predicated—in different ways—on dispossessing black men of their self-ownership and right to privacy.

In this chapter, I assert that Himes fights for self-possession through sexual privacy in his autobiography while he disrupts this genre's insistence on reflecting on the rationality of life's vicissitudes. My purpose here is threefold. First, I offer an analysis of the intricate ways in which Himes castigates American law for positioning blacks as fungible property while it esteems whiteness as having the privileges of property.[21] This framework will be generative for my discussion of *The Quality* more broadly. However, I will also examine one of Himes's most intriguing short stories "There Ain't No Justice" and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice,* which respectively provide a microcosm and model for *The Quality.* Both literary artifacts attest to the duplicitous ways in which the law subjugates and confines blacks as property.

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[20] See Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 25. Print.

[21] For an in-depth analysis of how blacks are treated as property read Sandy Alexandre's incisive analysis of tis multifaceted theme in *The Properties of Violence*: *Claims to Ownership in Representations of Lynching*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012. Print.

Secondly, I analyze the rhetorical strategies that Himes employs to guard his sexuality as his rightful property both in the construction of his autobiography and in his veiled descriptions of his arduous prison experience where his love affair, sexuality and body are policed. While Himes invokes figurative language in *The Quality* to suggest that he may have experienced same-sex rape, I illustrate that Himes's possible victimization is connected with the propensity of the prison system to rob inmates of their property in themselves while it often denigrates homoerotic love affairs and forces inmates to relinquish their sexual privacy. Furthermore, I query the figurative language of Himes's possible sexual assault to suggest that while Himes's body and psyche are texts which maybe scarred by sexual violation, they, like his autobiography, also require "textual healing" from manifold layers of hurt. Furthermore, I consider the possibilities of him experiencing "sexual healing" in his prison romance, that is, sexual enjoyment following his possible sexual violation.

Lastly, I compare the disparate ways in which Himes interconnects the military and prison in his *oeuvre* to emphasize that both institutions are constructed—in differing ways—to strip blacks of their self-possession. Himes's covert expressions of his sexuality are not only an expression of that dispossession, but an attempt to reclaim allowances of privacy that are otherwise systematically violated. Disrupting the conventional narratives of prisoners as villains and service members as heroes, he also critiques both institutions as positioning blacks as property since they reinforce ablest, heteronormative subcultures that hinder the queer, disabled felon from achieving heroism.

Whiteness as Property in *The Quality*

In *The Quality*, Himes critiques American law for positioning blacks as disposable property while it dislocates them from property ownership and property rights. By examining the contingent factors concerning his incarceration, he exposes the contradictory legal and ethical systems that safeguard whiteness as a form of protected property while it excludes blacks from vital citizenship rights. In this chapter, I interrogate Himes's representations of blacks as property in relation to the preservation of white dominance by engaging Cheryl Harris's *Whiteness as Property*.[22] In this seminal article she argues that whiteness became co-extensive with property rights—and the dislocation of backs and Native Americans from citizenship—as she systematically traces how a propertied interest in whiteness was supported by America's founding documents. She traces this dispossession from the nineteenth through the late twentieth centuries. Harris's essay asserts that whiteness came to possess all of the social, legal and economic protections and benefits of property—both tangible and intangible--while it has historically dislocated blacks and Native Americans not only *from* but *as* property.

Throughout Himes's corpus he queries whether or not black men can challenge their status as property and emerge as heroes despite the confining nature of American racism. Though the troubled author strives to be a bold race man, he feels trapped as a black, queer, disabled felon who not only feels hindered from owning property during Jim Crow, but also disenfranchised because his sexuality is policed by homophobic blacks and whites who uphold normative sexuality as the standard for masculine empowerment. Therefore, Himes's works explore the difficulties of black men aspiring towards heroism in a society in which the narrow constructions of black masculinity coerce black men in general and particularly black queer men to walk a tightrope. Balancing conflicting desires, heterosexual black men must weigh the

[22] Cheryl I Harris. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993). 1008-1078. Print.

prospects of acting upon and consequently paying the price for sexual intimacy with white women. On the other hand, queer black men may have to balance their attraction to and repulsion toward white femininity and their attendant homo-erotic urges. Both groups risk denigration because they may be castigated by other blacks as having sexual proclivities that are counter revolutionary.[23] Regrettably, Himes—who struggles with bisexual urges--often objectifies women partly because of his feelings of inadequacy as Mark Sanders notes:

> Himes questioned whether the black hero could ever affect his predicament, or was destined simply to be victim of it. Predictably, anxiety over black masculinity produced a rather conventional chauvinism; Himes and his protagonists fought to be "men" in the traditional sense, a struggle which often resulted in the physical and psychological abuse of women. In turn, a patriarchal construction of masculinity betrays Himes's anxiety over sexuality and the political, psychosexual dynamics of interracial relationships.[24]

Himes and his male protagonists grapple with their difficulties in living up to a heroic status, and while they feel disempowered from gaining tangible and intangible property, they often displace their aggressions and terrorize women. Furthermore, Himes

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[23] Himes often avoids depicting queer characters in his works, to some extent, and when present he castigates their sexuality and marginalizes them as minor characters to belie his own preoccupations with black queer sexuality. For example, in *The Quality* Himes describes his period working as a bellman in the Majestic Hotel and the areas surrounding Fifty-Fifth Street and Central Avenue in Cleveland as a memorable one for encountering "homosexuals galore." He disdains their sexual proclivities while further explaining that their attraction to him was likely based on his youth and good looks rather than his likely mutual attraction to some of these men. He suggests this as a precursor to him recalling his eschewing any homosexual liaisons in prison. See Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 60-62. Print.

[24] Mark Sanders. "Chester Himes, an Ever-Changing Portrait: A Review of The Several Lives of Chester Himes," *African American Review*, 33.2. (1999): 368-369. Print.

experiences conflicting emotions because of his sexual attraction and repulsion towards white women. For this troubled author, white women are pawns in his sexist battle against white patriarchy.[25] Though their bodies remind him of his supposedly inferior status as black, his ability to overpower them, and take them as the forfeited property of white men, enthralls him with feelings of masculine dominance. Himes's theft of white women from their male counterparts is part of a larger scheme in which he seeks to exact revenge, on white society, for the disenfranchisement of blacks through America's theft of their rights and privileges.

From this perspective, I consider Himes's theft of the property of whites as a form of resistance in which he aspires to heroism by committing crimes—and particularly robberies—to overcome personal and systemic challenges. Himes's robberies in *The Quality* are acts of resistance that support his aspirations towards heroism and his desire to make whites accountable for their subjugation of blacks. Furthermore, they help to situate Himes's disposition towards local and federal law enforcement institutions. Himes

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[25] Himes's descriptions of his encounters with white women regrettably infer that any sexual encounter between black men and white women are pornographic rather than erotic. Therefore, *The Quality*'s treatment of interracial sex follows in the intellectual tradition of other writers such as Danny Laferrière who examines this issue in *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired.* Toronto*:* Coach House Press, 1993.

Another interlocutor for Himes's exploration of this issue, in a misogynistic vein, is Frantz Fanon who discusses Himes's protest novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. Fanon indicts American race and gender relations in the Interwar Period by depicting the tempestuous relationship between the black shipyard worker Bob Jones and the white shipyard worker named Madge. She falsely accuses him of raping her. Fanon suggests that this relationship is indicative of the egregiousness of racism in America and the propensity for interracial sexual liaisons to be depicted pornographically because of the interlocking power structures of race, gender, and class. Fanon's sexist and homophobic critiques are reflected in his analysis of homosexuality in Martinique. After first declaring that homosexuality did not exist in there, he describes drag queens who live there as "lead[ing] normal sex lives" and "[T]hey can take a punch like any 'he-man' and they are not impervious to the allures of women." He describes homosexuals have having a psychic disorder while he declares that transvestites are simply seeking a livelihood through performance. His infamous homophobic and sexist comments, though noteworthy, are part of a more nuanced analysis of the psychological condition of blacks in the Antilles and beyond because of the ravages of racism. Fanon's pornographic descriptions of these conditions are captured in Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, Inc. 1967. 140, 180. Print.

To read further about Himes's depiction of the relationship between Bob Jones and Madge see Himes, Chester. *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1945. Print.

alludes to the disparate ways in which blacks and whites are treated by the Cleveland police in 1928:

> [T]he purpose of the police in Cleveland [was] to protect the persons and the property of the rich.
>
> It is worth noting that in rich white neighborhoods there is an altogether different interpretation of the term "law enforcement" than in the poor black ghettos. In the black ghettos, "law enforcement" means whipping the heads of the inhabitants and making them obey the law; in rich white neighborhoods it means protecting the inhabitants' privileges, property, and privacy and defending them against the lawless, which is to say, everyone outside of that neighborhood.[26]

In this passage, Himes contextualizes the broader circumstances concerning his attempted armed robbery of a white-owned residence. His characterizations of Cleveland police officers illuminate the unequal treatment of whites and blacks by local law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, Himes situates the police as an institution that serves as an intermediary for the military and prison as it possesses the regimentation of both institutions and an almost all-encompassing authority to make life or death decisions in the civilian world. Though the white agents in each of these organizations take oaths to serve and protect all citizens, Himes describes them as thieves of the liberties of black Americans and he denounces the legal system—and specifically the police--for its abuses on black bodies even in their own neighborhoods.

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[26] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 49-50. Print.

However, the author does not simply indict white police officers, but also black policemen and other workers who reinforce white authority. During an interview with the noted French author François Bott, Himes declares that "[b]lack policemen in the ghetto are pretty violent characters" when describes their assaults on black bodies in Harlem neighborhoods.[27] The author suggests the insidious ways in which the white establishment, and particularly the police department, weakens black solidarity by positioning blacks to fight against each other while preserving white dominance. Himes is alert to the ingenious ways in which whites preserve their interests while encouraging blacks to "sell out." For example before he robs the aforementioned residence, he learns the schedules of the homeowners from an unsuspecting black chauffeur, who serves in the home, and boasts of the family's possessions. The author repudiates this worker for being too content with surrounding himself with the property of whites, and never stealing any of it, though he likely lived a modest lifestyle as Himes notes: "Like many blacks still possessed of a slave mentality, he boasted of his employer's possessions as though they were his own, or as though he at least had a vested interest in them."[28] The author's characterization of the chauffeur underscores his complacency with white domination. Furthermore, the worker's unwillingness to challenge white domination, by theft, characterizes him as owned by whites. On the other hand, Himes is very comfortable challenging racial subordination through theft.

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[27] Himes says this during an interview with François Bott, the well-established French writer. Himes continues to emphasize their heinousness by suggesting that the black police officers' nicknames capture their brutality: namely, "Pistol Pete, Big Six, and "Gravedigger." These names emerge in Himes's popular Harlem Detective Series. See Michel Fabre and Robert E. Skinner. *Conversations with Chester Himes*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995, 12-16. Print.

[28] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 47. Print.

Therefore, his description of his thwarted robbery, which follows this passage, is tantamount to an act of resistance against societal discrimination as he suggests that his subversion attests to a reparations narrative. Himes portrays his robbery as pay back against the domination of whites when he describes the images of his terrified white victims during the burglary: "Stick your hands up, I said. Their heads wheeled about; their eyes stretched; and they turned as white as the outside snow. There was no doubt of their race then—they were white."[29] Himes delights in committing his crime because it disempowers whites and renders *them* as property. He wants them to acknowledge somatically and psychologically that the violence that they have inflicted on blacks derives from their overwhelming, cold-hearted fear of black resistance. In a larger sense, he attempts to exact revenge on institutional authority by forcing suburban whites to relinquish their possessions as recompense for the propensity of whiteness to position blacks as property while depriving them of civil liberties.

In a broader sense, Himes depicts his criminality in *The Quality* as the byproduct of his difficulties in lawfully achieving noteworthy goals because of the unjust social conditions for blacks, which deprive them financially and hinder their advancement. In this autobiography, he recalls that he commits robberies partly because of his inability to gain enough income to escape Cleveland, and his wayward friends there, in an era of widespread racial segregation.[30] Thus, Himes frames his theft as a subversive means to gain property so that he can strive towards the possibility of living a decent life in another place. Descriptions of blacks who commit insurrection through theft abound in African

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[29] Ibid 51.

[30] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 27-60. Print.

American letters, as explored by Lovalerie King, who delineates two definitions of theft as it relates to distinct ways in which blacks challenge their societal deprivations:

> The first involves the inalienable right to selfhood and liberty, which has been "stolen" or expropriated from black Americans through laws that accommodated slavery and race-based discrimination…Theft can thus be defined—for purposes of this investigation—as the many deprivations of tangible and intangible property that black people in America suffered under chattel slavery and institutionalized racial discrimination. The other notion of theft involves accounts of Blacks (whether enslaved or not) taking property that legally belonged to their oppressors.[31]

King suggests that whiteness, a valued social identity, served as a form of racialized privilege which stole the rights of blacks who were thereby stripped of their personhood—and their right to own property--through state sanctioned laws and The Constitution. While her definitions gesture towards how whites have dislocated blacks from owning tangible property, they also reiterate that the white establishment has attempted to strip blacks of intangible property—such as access to meritocracy and heroism. Considering that racist whites often denied blacks their status as human, they also created barriers—both materially and psychically—which prevented blacks from becoming heroes. Though these boundaries included various constraints on blacks'

[31] Lovalerie King. *Race, Theft, and Ethics*: *Property Matters in African American Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007, 29. Print.

access to and service in the U.S. military, they also comprised the disenfranchisement of blacks (particularly as felons) by relegating them to prison.[32]

In this register, Himes casts the military and prison as criminal enterprises which strip the rights of blacks. Black military personnel often enlist and become government property[33] to claim—albeit in limited ways—the citizenship rights that the white establishment stole from them while they were civilians. However, when they literally sign away various rights typically accorded to them as citizens, in hope of gaining others, the military establishment often steals other rights—and protects them as the privileges of whites--by federal law and custom. Even more regrettably, the military establishment sustains their crime by imposing disciplinary measures on black troops—such as curtailing their freedom of speech--which hinder their ability to fight back against their oppressors.[34] However, black military personnel also gain political learning[35] and key

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[32] Ironically, Himes depicts the collusions between the military and prison in his autobiography, as it relates to theft, when he portrays his first thwarted robbery in Cleveland Ohio in 1928 when he was nineteen years old. This event was orchestrated by his friend Benny and a black accomplice who was employed in the central offices of the Ohio State National Guard. The accomplice has secret knowledge of a case of arms and ammunition which are in the basement of the Negro Branch of the YMCA on Cedar Avenue and Seventy-Sixth Street. Though they manage to steal the .45-Caliber Colt weapons from this location successfully, they are later arrested and Himes receives a suspended prison sentence. Himes's specificity about the accomplice's employment status demonstrates that military affiliated personnel are not only capable of being criminals, despite society's pretenses of their honor, but that they can also influence others to become criminals and eventually prisoners. This incident is recalled in Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 39-42. Print.

[33] The status of US military personnel as government property can be readily understood when considering that they are required to submit to another legal system when they enlist—the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). Please check out further information about this legal system at http://www.ucmj.us/

[34] To read more about this, please refer to the introduction of one of the most thorough books for theorizing the diverse roles of black soldiers as agents of the U.S. Federal Government—Christopher S. Parker. *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Print.

[35] To read about "political learning" see the introduction of Parker's *Fighting for Democracy*. *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Print.

skills which reinforced their abilities, in some cases, to fight as black militants—soldiers of a different cloth—who fight for black empowerment. While black militants often serve prison sentences for their efforts, black prisoners often become fierce agents of social change while incarcerated. They relinquish their fear of death and punishment to take possession of their voices as freedom fighters to radicalize others inside and beyond the prison walls.[36]

When Himes's work brings into relief the interlocking structures and strictures of the military and prison he expresses concern about how and why blacks should achieve citizenship. For Himes, blacks may be limited in their ability to foment resistance by striving for greater citizenship rights through conventional channels of meritocracy. The obligations inherent in American citizenship, governed by prejudicial laws and social customs, often displace blacks from exercising resistance rather than ensuring their privileges. American society was founded upon and continues to uphold citizenship rights to protect the interests of whites. Thus, Himes's black protagonists become increasingly militant across the spectrum of his works as he interrogates how the duties of American citizenship create restraints that further construct blacks as property by sapping their ability to foment resistance and even *revolution*.[37] His characters also become increasingly heroic, from a black militant perspective, as they challenge white authority by stealing physical goods and challenging the boundaries of their citizenship rights not

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[36] To find out more about this phenomenon, please read the introduction of H. Bruce Franklin. *Prison Literature in America*: *The Victim As Criminal and Artist*. Westport: Lawrence Hill and Company. 1982. Print.

[37] The militancy of Himes's characters reaches an apogee in the race warfare that characterizes *Plan B*—Himes's uncompleted, black revolutionary novel in which he depicts an all-out race war. To read more about this, please see Gilbert H. Muller. *Chester Himes*. Boston: Twayne Publishers. 106-122. Print.

only through riots but revolution.[38] From this perspective, King's analysis juxtaposes black Americans as victims of theft and formidable heroes while she recasts their supposed criminality. Rather than serving as evidence of their innate immorality, their transgressions demonstrate their aptitude for heroism despite the overarching ways in which whiteness has been validated as property.

Her definitions of theft serve as a generative lens for querying the provocative ways in which Himes portrays American society as itself a prison. Himes feels this sense of entrapment so strongly that when he describes his prison novel to his friend Richard Wright he remarks in a letter: "This book is a simple story about life in prison; maybe the boys can stand the truth about life in a state of prison better than they can stand the truth about life in the prison of being a Negro in America."[39] Himes's wry comment infers that perhaps men who ascribe to heteronormative values can better withstand his depiction of a homoerotic relationship, between a white man and his Latino lover, than the stinging truth about the disenfranchisement of blacks. Furthermore, his sarcastic remark presents blacks as living in the boundaries of their own skin in an American society that is itself a massive prison. This comment provides insight into Himes's fearlessness when committing robberies because he already considers American society as informing fear and hate in the psyche of blacks to limit their advancement.[40]

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[38] Other novels in Himes's body of works feature protagonists who steal for economic gain and as a form of resistance such as Chester Himes. *Run Man Run.* New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc. 1995. Print.

[39] Clare Rollins discusses this in *Write Like a Man: Chester Himes and the Criminal Text Beyond Bars*, Callaloo 37.2 (2014). The letter written by Chester Himes: Letter to Richard Wright. 19 Oct. 1952. Richard Wright Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beineke Book and Manuscript Library. Box 99, Folder 1393. Print.

[40] Much of Himes's work was inspired by the pioneering psychological investigations of Horace Cayton. A friend of Himes, Cayton coined the "fear-hate-fear" syndrome in which he asserted that the racism of whites fills blacks with a debilitating psychological condition in which blacks feared white oppression,

In one of his most provocative short stories, "There Ain't No Justice," he depicts the plight of Oscar Harrison—a parolee whose experience captures a thinly-veiled version of Himes's incarceration and subjugation by the American legal system.[41] After Oscar serves eleven years in prison, he gets released by the parole board ironically before he begins carrying out plans to escape this ensnaring institution. The story opens at the moment of his release when Oscar, onboard train, realizes that he has left his "possessions"—a bag of tools to facilitate his escape—in the prison. He returns to claim them and bribes a prison guard with fifty dollars to search for them rather than bothering to petition the governor for a pass to re-enter the prison or requesting permission from the warden. The guard supposedly searches for them diligently but to no avail. After concluding that the prison officer did not search for them properly, Oscar breaks into prison to find the tools in his former cell but he is caught within the prison barracks by the warden and must explain his actions.

In a profound twist, the warden is not upset about Oscar's daring entrance, but is agitated about the tools and coldly informs him that "there is a penalty of five years for jail breaking, and the law don't designate whether it's breaking out, or breaking in."[42] The story ends on the dismal note of Oscar receiving a five-year sentence for a law that cuts both ways. Attempting to reclaim his property, Oscar (like Himes) becomes trapped *as property* and confined once again as a ward of the state. This story is a microcosm for

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hated their immobilization because of it, and feared their brutalization if they revolted. To read more about this, see Horace Cayton. "The Psychological Approach to Race Relations." *Reed College Bulletin*. Nov. 1946: 25 (1): 3-27. Also read Lawrence P. Jackson. *The Indignant Generation*: *A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics*, 1934-1960. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2013. 125-127. Print.

[41] Chester Himes. "There Ain't No Justice." *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. Calvin Hernton, Ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990, 242-244. Print.

[42] Ibid 243-244.

The Quality. Both indict the American legal system as inherently corrupt because it imprisons its citizens as disposable property within and outside prison walls such that freedom for blacks is relegated to a liminal status of parole. This story also characterizes America as a prison because its segregation is as painful as his egregious period of incarceration. Yet, Himes's descriptions of prison life emphasize that the propertied value of whiteness in a Jim-Crowed society renders incarceration as a mere reflection of black life in the outside world.[43] Himes suggests that his prison time was a quotidian experience—one of fear and terror—that mirrored his life outside.

In this context, Himes's autobiography invokes a plea to the reader to be merciful rather than legalistic when considering his shortcomings and indiscretions because his experiences of racial oppression have left him with unbridled hurt. Therefore, the author exercises sexual privacy by not confessing his bisexuality to his readership because he is anxious about the possibility of being effeminized. Furthermore, when Himes relates the intricate ways in which the white establishment polices its rights, privacy and property, he is also keenly aware that prominent white political officials have historically policed the sexuality of dissenting black writers in an attempt to discredit them.[44] Himes pleads

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[43] Himes's depiction of American society as a prison for blacks is not new. Rather, Richard Wright promotes this critique in *Native Son* via his infamous protagonist Bigger Thomas. At the beginning of the novel, Bigger and his friend Gus play "white," a game in which they imitate what they consider the mannerisms and privileges of white people. During several comical exchanges they pretend to be the President of the United States and an Army General. At the end of their fantasizing, Bigger exasperates: "We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail." Sadly, this opening scene serves as a harbinger for Bigger's final life-sentence in jail at the novel's close and reiterates that the life chances of blacks because of segregation are so bleak that they exist in various spaces of imprisonment (including the ghetto) which are so policed, restrictive, and violent that they serve as precursors for blacks to enter the prison system. See Richard Wright. *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005, 44-45. Print.

[44] J Edgar Hoover, the first Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) is infamous for keeping secret files that detail the sexual exploits of black writers while alluding to their possible communist ties during his time in office from 1935-1972. To read more about this please check out this noted biography by

with the reader to be gracious concerning his foibles and the liberties he exercises when crafting his checkered autobiography with its divergences in form and tactical silences.

The author's plea for mercy is evident when he signifies on a key passage of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* to create the title of his intriguing autobiography--*The Quality of Hurt*. Himes prefaces his autobiography with this passage:

> The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
> It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
> Upon the place beneath; it is twice blest;
> It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
> 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
> The throned monarch better than his crown;
> His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
> The attribute to awe and majesty,
> Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
> But mercy is above this sceptered sway;
> It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
> It is an attribute to God himself
> And earthly power doth then show likest God's
> When mercy seasons justice.[45]

Anthony Summers. *Official and Confidential*: *The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*. New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2012. Print.

[45] William Shakespeare. *The Merchant of Venice*. Eds. Harold F. Brooks and Harold Jenkins. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1955, (IV.i.179-197). Print.

Himes chooses this title from a passage in which Portia (an Italian lawyer) pleads to Shylock, a Jewish usurer, to spare the life of the defendant, Antonio. The defendant signed a contract which the Jew created for a loan on behalf of another Christian friend (Bassanio) who desperately needs money to impress a young lady. Antonio signed a contract as a guarantor which stipulates that Shylock can exact a pound of flesh from him, "nearest the heart," if Bassanio fails to repay the loan according to its exact terms.[46] However, Portia begs the Jew to exercise grace and forgive the debt and its dreadful terms. Himes alludes to one of the most famous courtroom scenes in English literature to admonish and plead with his readership to reason that he deserves their mercy because he is constantly attempting to play diverse roles in his quest to be a black hero.

Because women could not serve as lawyers in Elizabethan England, Portia is dressed in drag (as a male lawyer) during the court room scene. Himes, the consummate play actor, performs various roles every day—*in drag*—as he strives to be a black hero despite the society's propertied interest in whiteness.His marginalization is similar to Portia's because he feels unable to *come out* in a society in which his bisexuality conflicts with heteronormative codes of heroism. Similar to Antonio, Himes feels entitled to a reprieve from judgment because he attempts to be noble—as a race man--when he strives to bear the heavy burden of representing other community members in a quest for black advancement. Even more pointedly, Himes's role can be likened to that of Bassanio. Both figures desperately crave for someone to safeguard their vulnerable reputation among their peers. As my epigraph suggests, John A. Williams attempted to protect Himes's reputation by emphasizing his masculinity while downplaying his bisexuality.

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[46]Ibid (IV.i.21).

More boldly, Himes *is* Shylock in drag. At first glance, the disgruntled Jew's desire for revenge against Christians—at any cost—marks him as a villain even though Christians have maligned Jews as greedy and immoral because of their practice of usury at exorbitant interest rates. However, by the end of the play Shylock, not Antonio, is victimized by the inhumane justice system. The Jew is stripped of his property because Portia finds a glitch in the contract in which she challenges Shylock to exact a pound of flesh from Antonio without drawing blood—which is itself against Venetian law. Portia then punishes Shylock by providing him with an ultimatum in which he must either break the law, by shedding Antonio's blood, or must convert to Christianity and abdicate much of his property to Antonio and to Shylock's estranged daughter—Jessica. Jessica has eloped, against her father's wishes, to marry a Christian (Lorenzo). Portia's duplicitous use of the law to disenfranchise Shylock at the climax of The *Merchant of Venice* echoes the cross-cutting law which traps Oscar Harrison, a thinly-veiled Himes, in "There Ain't No Justice." Compared to Himes who is forced to submit to ghastly prison terms, Shylock acquiesces to the power of the law by disavowing his faith and relinquishing his property. He is duly punished, ostensibly, for his greed and thirst for revenge. While the Christians celebrate their victory at the trial's culmination, Shylock's desire to challenge their xenophobia—which was at the root of his insistence--is a lost opportunity and the audience often views the Jew as sympathetic.

The dénouement of *The Merchant of Venice* helps to characterize the play as a tragicomedy and provides the model for *The Quality*'s profound absurdity. The Christians celebrate the revival of their faith and Jessica's redemptive marriage to Lorenzo becomes legitimated by Shylock's inheritance and forced conversion. For an enraptured audience,

the play ends on the blue note of satisfaction and discord. In this framework, Himes—the ingenious shape-shifter--*is* a masked Shylock. The author's troubled life is imbued with moments of zest and turmoil, as evident in his autobiography, and can be characterized as a tragicomedy[47] because of its absurdity. Though Himes enjoys romantic affairs with white women, whiteness often discredits and dislocates him—as a disabled, black (queer) convict. Furthermore, whiteness forces him, like Shylock, to surrender his self-respect *as* property of the state and the author's body becomes policed like a pound of flesh during and after his incarceration.[48]

Himes is sensitive towards his readership's opinion of his life and writing because he occupies an ever shifting quadrangular status. He is a defendant with a blighted criminal history; a plaintiff who expresses contempt for having his citizenship rights continuously stolen; a witness to the brutal atrocities of other blacks at the hands of racist whites; and an advocate who fights for black advancement by writing his autobiography as a bitter form of social protest. Clearly, Himes feels inadequate to play each of these roles with distinction and still be regarded as a black hero. On a personal level, his "hurt" when living in a racist America is so unrelenting that he feels entitled to mercy—as an

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[47] According to the Oxford English Dictionary a tragicomedy is: "A play (or later use) other literary or dramatic work which combines the qualities of a tragedy and a comedy, or contains both tragic and comic elements." See "Tragicomedy." Def.1.OxfordDictionaries.com. Oxford Dictionaries, Aug. 2000. Web. 8 Oct. 2015. Web.

[48] Clare Rolens notes that Himes can be considered as performing in drag by representing himself as the white Jimmy Monroe in his prison novel *Yesterday.* She alludes to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* when she offers that Himes presents himself as a white male to "denaturalize these interlocking identity categories [whiteness, blackness, queerness, Latino and exotic]. In his prison novels, Himes performs a sort of racial drag, casting an exaggeratedly white protagonist in a text about his own prison experiences." My assertion that Himes performs in drag as Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, extends her analysis of Himes's querying of identity categories. I suggest that the black author emphasizes how whiteness is positioned as property not only by his casting of Jimmy Monroe as a prisoner who possesses the epitome of an effeminized white beauty—because of his long lashes, pearly white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes—but by Himes's insistence on reinforcing that despite his valued features, his queerness debases him in the prison system and the society's insistence on heteronormativity imprisons him. See *Write Like a Man: Chester Himes and the Criminal Text Beyond Bars*, Callaloo 37.2 (2014).

abusive lover, convicted felon, autobiographer, and daring race man--considering the wretched history of American injustice towards blacks which deserves its own trial in the court of public opinion.

Sexual Privacy and Self Possession in Prison

Himes depicts his coming of age as a writer in prison as imperative to his growth as a race man. However, his omissions concerning his prison romance and bisexuality suggest that he enacts ownership in the construction of his autobiography by guarding his sexuality as his rightful property in *The Quality*. Furthermore, the author's desire to maintain sexual privacy and self-ownership in his autobiography are representative of his efforts to protect both in a prison system which often deprives inmates of their sexual privacy and self-ownership. My analysis of Himes's attempts to defend his sexuality from public scrutiny is informed by Jeffrey McCune, Jr.'s evocation of "sexual discretion." McCune employs this concept to describe the intricate ways in which black men living on the "down low" (DL) orchestrate gender performances as strategic choices regarding "how, and with whom...[they] choose…to engage in homoerotic desires."[49] Let me hasten to offer that the term "down low" is slightly anachronistic for describing Himes's closeted bisexual performances. This term is currently used to describe a group of black men who have sexual liaisons with other men while having intimate relations with women. I offer it to inform my interrogation of Himes's dismissal of his bisexuality by passing as heterosexual without anachronistically invoking into my analysis the black community's current fears regarding the spread of HIV supposedly by down low black men. In employing this term I acknowledge the adept ways in which race, class, and

[49] Jeffrey Q. McCune, Jr. *Sexual Discretion*: *Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014, 5-7. Print.

gender intertwine in the criminalization of black queer masculinity both during the period of Himes's prolonged incarceration (the late 1920's and mid 1930's) and in the present.

McCune's insightful historiography of the epistemology of the DL connects this gender performance to the intriguing ways in which blacks have always orchestrated tactics to attempt to reposition themselves outside of the juridical order to avoid detection by the white authority. These enactments—including Negro spirituals during slavery, cabarets, vice districts, and balls in the 1920's—created spaces where queers and blacks and whites mingled.[50] These spaces were disreputable according to members of the black bourgeoisie. However, they were also spaces where black queer men employed tactics of resistance through secrecy to avoid the possibility of their bodies being controlled and confiscated. McCune illuminates the DL by tracing it through a framework of other subversive activities that are "kept very quiet and secretive; also …done on the sly."[51] These activities enhance their self-possession. Interestingly, Himes delights in recalling prostitution and vice in the Cleveland ghettoes following his brother's accident. And yet, his glaring omissions concerning the sexual proclivities of black queer men in these spaces—and possibly his own involvement in this community—attest to his anxiety concerning his desire to obfuscate his bisexuality while making strategic choices to maintain sexual discretion.

Along these lines, I read Himes's dissemblance through McCune's double use of "discretion." This term combines black men's "use of secret and privacy" (discreet) and their individual partner selections (discrete) to take control of their sexual choices and the

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[50] Ibid 6.

[51] Geneva Smitherman. *Black Talk*: *Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 109. Print.

representation of their private affairs to maintain a reputational interest in being regarded as heterosexual. My analysis of Himes's strategies of discretion and discrete choice is informed by the longstanding ideological constructions of the closet paradigm, but it is not limited to it because discussions of the "closet" as a universal trope for understanding "coming out" often dismiss racial and class based discrimination and exploitation.[52] From this perspective, Himes guards his sexuality as his cherished possession and he depicts his choice of sexual partners as strategic acts which emphasize his heroism rather than pigeonhole him as effeminate. For example, he leaves open the possibility that Jimmy and Rico's relationship is an intimate friendship rather than a love affair because he does not portray both men as consummating their relationship in his a *roman à clef*. Furthermore, the author is so anxious about being considered queer that he does not even recall any friendships in prison in either of his autobiographies because he fears raising the specter of his bisexuality.

Himes seeks to engender sympathy for his traumatic experiences of racism while he disclaims that he is in *the life*. To this end, he focuses on the vulnerability of the human condition—as evidenced by the profoundness of his suffering--as he resists disclosure of his sexual mores. Himes begins his autobiography by creating intense silences concerning his reasons for moving to Europe and his prison experiences in America. His rumination on an implacable sense of hurt, which he layers throughout his narrative, further characterizes America as a prison:

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[52] To read more about how and why the ideological constructions of the closet obfuscate racial and class based considerations see Marlon Ross' "Beyond The Closet as Raceless Paradigm." *Black Queer Studies*: *A Critical Anthology*. Ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson. Duke University Press, 2005. 161-189. According to Ross, Eve Sedgwick's well known text exemplifies the ways in which the closet has been theorized as an ideology that often disregards these groups. See Eve K. Sedgwick's *Epistemology of The Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. Print.

> I suppose there were many reasons for my coming to Europe, but I don't remember them clearly. It was very [much] like the many impressions my seven and one half prison years had made on me: I knew that my long prison term had left its scars, I knew that many aspects of prison life had made deep impressions on my subconscious, but now I cannot distinctly recall what they are or should have been. I find it necessary to read what I have written in the past about my prison experiences to recall any part of them. I have almost completely forgotten prison, what it was like and what I was like while there. The only *impression* it left absolutely and irrevocably is that human beings—all human beings, of whatever race or nationality or religious belief or ideology—will do anything and everything. And I think it has partly convinced me—at least I have tried to convince myself that it has convinced me—that I can never again be hurt as much as I have already been hurt, even though I should live one hundred thousand years [My italics].[53]

Following several shorter prison sentences for theft, Himes is incarcerated in Ohio State Penitentiary from 1929 to 1936 for the foiled burglary of a jewelry store. In this first paragraph of his autobiography, the author diminishes the reader's trust in his recollections because he positions himself as an unreliable narrator.[54] Himes infers that

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[53] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 1. Print.

[54] Himes's unreliability as an autobiographer challenges a key convention of this genre as expressed by Philippe Lejeune in his famous essay "Le Pacte autobiographique" or "The Autobiographical Pact." In this essay, Lejeune, one of the most important critics of this genre, asserts that autobiography should be distinguishable from a novel based, in part, on "sincerity"-- the reader's ability to trust the identity of the author and his or her willingness to express "the story of his personality." Though Lejeune conveys discomfort with this concept, he employs it to develop a fuller description of the autobiographical pact as a textual criterion to identify autobiography. According to this critic, it is the author's "intention to honor" the "signature" of the autobiographer which is identifiable by the exactness of the

his recollections can not be trusted because they are often so painful that his soul has assuaged and concealed them—even from himself--over time. Therefore, Himes abdicates responsibility for any mistakes or falsehoods because of his reported lapses in memory. This strategy of supposed forgetfulness, masked by trauma, helps him to minimize his bias for leaving out stories that question his heteronormativity because of his self-interest in preserving his reputation among his peers. To facilitate this, he eludes key questions concerning his lengthy period of incarceration and particularly his romantic bond with a male inmate despite his intimate tone that suggests that he is being truthful in his recollections. As an autobiographer, he is expected to create a narrative that offers a rounded sense of conclusion regarding his life's path. However, the author pretends to forget poignant, tragic memories to cope with his suffering and the loss of faith in humanity which often characterizes key moments in life. By extension, these disheartening episodes reinforce Himes's desire to maintain sexual privacy as they foreshadow the dismal prospects of spiritual wholeness, psychic disintegration, and loss of physical ability at our life's close.

To emphasize these dimensions of suffering as tangible and palpable, he blurs the lines between writing and scarring in the construction of his narrative. By presenting both as inextricable, Himes queries the possibility of black autobiographers to encourage racial advancement if they discuss unpleasant memories which could offer evidence for racist whites to substantiate their claims regarding the inferiority of blacks. In *The Quality*, Himes suggests that writing and scarring are inextricable when he discredits Wright and his more famous autobiography, *Black Boy*, as evidence that his "soul brothers" have

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author/narrator/protagonist as verifiable on the title page of any given book. Please see Philippe Lejeune. *On Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 11-132. Print.

humiliated him in the eyes of whites to gain money and the affections of white women by "bragging about their scars, their poor upbringing, and their unhappy childhood, to get some sympathy[.]"[55] Himes projects an intense distrust of being too vulnerable to his readership in *The Quality* by castigating Wright, his close friend. The writing of black autobiography, for Himes, is a bittersweet endeavor. Blacks can use this genre to stimulate personal healing and to reinforce their humanity to racist whites. However, the inner scarring of black authors, because of racism, conveys the tenuousness of their healing and their inability to suppress or conceal their painful failures from judgmental whites. Therefore, the secretive author is suspicious that the white establishment's ingrained racism will prevent them from eliciting genuine compassion for blacks. Racist whites may instead examine black autobiographies for evidence of racial inferiority.

Himes infers that the wounding caused by black authors' painful experiences when grappling with white dominance leaves scars—gritty, ugly, remainders of episodes—which have been suppressed over time but are forever palpable. According to Himes, these scars are ingrained in the psyche of black autobiographers and he suggests that their contours and jagged edges are conveyed on thin pages for whites to consume voyeuristically. In short, although black autobiographers may believe that they are leaving an indelible mark on the genre by having their voices enrich it, they may unwittingly be complicit with racist whites in hindering black advancement when they

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[55] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 224. Though Himes endeavors to be a preeminent race man, he distrusts his closest friends, such as Richard Wright. Though Himes venerated Wright's famous protagonist Bigger Thomas, he was jealous of Dick's literary success and felt uncomfortable about an intimate friendship with the more established writer because of Himes's insecurities about his bisexuality. To read more about Himes's complicated relationship with Wright see "Slaying the Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes" in Charles L.P. Silet. Ed. *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999, 241-255. Print.

discuss the underbelly of their experiences. From this perspective, Himes foregoes discussing intimate details of his time in prison.

His imagery of "scarring" during his prison term shrouds his experiences in mystery. Yet, the author protests too much. His figurative language betrays slippages that infer that he may have endured sexual assault during incarceration. While this possible attack is a personal violation, he infers that it is reflective of the broader ways in which blacks are displaced from property in themselves while they are forced to relinquish sexual privacy in American society. When the beguiling storyteller describes the primary lesson he learned in prison he notes: "all human beings…will do anything and everything." This telling phrase, along with other graphic language, suggests that he may have endured forced sodomy. My suggestion is further enhanced by the forceful overtones of Himes's description of prison as leaving within him "deep impressions" and "scars" because of an overwhelming sensation of "hurt." While the term "rape" connotes a forceful theft, it positions his bodily integrity as possibly violated while his faith in humanity has been plundered by his distrust in the wholesomeness of his fellow human beings. Adding to the mysteriousness of Himes's disturbing prison experience, he later declares: "nothing happened in prison that I had not already encountered in outside life."[56] This assertion collapses the distinctions between the prison and American society. Yet, it also infers that Himes's possible sexual violation in this institution is reflective of the disparate ways in which blacks have been violated physically, mentally, and spiritually in an American society, which hinders them from exercising self-ownership and the protection of their sexuality.

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[56] Ibid 61.

When describing his prison sentence, he presents the metaphor of an incurable wound to help characterize his autobiography as open-ended, characterized by open secrets, and filled with unbridled suffering. Himes presents an image of his psyche as so "hurt" and injured that he must rely on his notes to spin a tale, that is necessarily selective, because of his lapses of memory and his need to keep certain experiences--hushed. He therefore creates the metaphor of the incurable wound to suggest his vulnerability even as the image paradoxically affords him the opportunity to conceal shameful memories in an imperfect life. In Himes's *The Quality* there is not one but many open secrets which reflect the porousness of what is said and kept silent in the strategies which inform discourses. As Foucault says:

> There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things…There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.[57]

From this perspective, Himes's silence regarding his prison romance is part of a larger scheme of secrecy which he employs as he strives for ownership of his story and sexuality. This love affair, an open secret, presents an inextricable nexus of speech and silence regarding his bisexuality and it helps to characterize scarring and the open wound as mutually constitutive in his narrative. According to D.A. Miller, the open secret presents a startling paradox: "I cannot, therefore, resolve the double bind of a secrecy that must always be rigorously maintained in the face of a secret that everybody already knows, since this is the very condition that entitles me to my subjectivity in the first

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[57] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. *Volume I*: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Pantheon, 1978, 27. Print.

place."[58] As mentioned, Himes's relationship with Rico is well-documented even though the author fails to mention it in *The Quality*. However, the secrecy of this affair presents a double bind because though it is well known, maintaining it affords Himes the opportunity to possess his subjectivity and to guard his sexual affairs as his private property. This relationship is a highly sensitive matter because society's insistence on heteronormativity wounds Himes's psyche even as his sexual encounters with Rico may awaken pain if he was in fact sexually violated in prison. Himes's psyche is so riddled with "hurt" that he can not fully lay bare the origins or limits of his wound and the warmth of the pain he experiences. The boundaries of his veracity are traceable by examining the contours of his painful experiences—including his possible sexual violation--as scars that present his "hurt" and the accompanying prospects of healing.

Himes's body and psyche may be scarred by sexual violation, and like his autobiography, require textual healing. I coin the term "textual healing" to signify the prospects of Himes experiencing healing, from many layers of hurt, through the writing of his autobiography. My term takes into account his emphasis on his scarring—replete with physical, sexual, and psychological overtones—and it offers that his body and psyche are vulnerable texts, which have experienced pain, and need restoration.[59] This textual healing (and the textual brokenness that the term brings into relief) is highlighted by the temporal and thematic gaps in the narrative and Himes's crafty language when he tells open secrets—such as his prison romance and likely sexual violation. Furthermore,

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[58] See D.A. Miller. *The Novel and The Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, 195. Print.

[59] While this term is certainly a pun on the singer Marvin Gaye's Hit song "Sexual Healing," Farah Jasmine Griffin previously coined the term "textual healing" to signify the descructive ways in which dominant culture objectifies black women's bodies and her efforts to reveal the ways in which prominent black female novelists attempt to encourage healing and psychic restoration for black women through their works. See Farah Jasmine Griffin. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery," *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 519-536. Print.

my term gestures to the prospects of Himes's "sexual healing." That is, his enjoyment of sexual intercourse following his deep ambivalence towards sex because of his possible sexual trauma. The specter of prison rape complicates his experiences of sexual intimacy with his chosen partner--Rico. Sexual pleasure and pain shape the author's body and psyche—as palimpsests—through inscriptions of joyful and at times troubling memories. These private moments are captured for the reader to decipher on the written pages of a narrative that is replete with sorrow between its lines and pain at its margins. My term "textual healing" also takes into account his narrative's disjointed form and his body's broken vertebra. While both are broken, my term emphasizes that Himes's personal healing is as insurmountable as the healing of blacks in America from centuries of racial trauma.

From the opening paragraph of the narrative, Himes describes the bleak prospects of his sexual violation and his fraught attempts to maintain his composure despite his victimization. He strategically uses dashes to convey the liminality between textual healing and sexual brokenness when he describes the "impression" which prison life leaves on him. Indeed, Himes's startling lesson gleaned from his time in prison, which I discussed earlier, is even more elusive when considering the structure of the sentences: "[t]he only impression [prison life] left absolutely and irrevocably is that human beings—all human beings, of whatever race or nationality or religious beliefs or ideology—will do anything and everything."[60] I earlier suggest that the term "impression" could infer the possibility of his sexual violation in prison because of its forceful overtones. However, I further assert that it also conveys that Himes may have experienced sexual brokenness, or

[60] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 30. Print.

a deep ambivalence towards sex, because of sexual trauma. In the passage, the repeated dashes that follow "impression" create subordinate clauses that reiterate this possible trauma. These clauses are rhetorical forms that reinforce a hierarchy within a sentence's structure. The dashes, by extension, could accentuate Himes's veiled recollection of sexual assault because they further underscore the disruption of power balances between male bodies in a single unit such as a prison cell. Himes's claim intonates, then, that men from any background are capable of the most despicable acts—including rape—particularly because they have different access to power and therefore to sexual domination.

The dashes also create tensions between brokenness and orderliness in the construction of the sentence. This emphasizes, thematically, that prisoners walk a fine line to maintain the appearance of good order in the aftermath of sexual assault, or, following their consensual sexual liaisons. The form and content of this sentence does not foreclose the possibility of consensual prison sex between men and Himes pleads to the reader to dismiss judging him for what may be deemed sexual improprieties because he suggests that anyone is capable of any unthinkable act depending on the circumstances. Himes's distrust of his readership results in a narrative that lacks cohesion, in certain respects, because he desires for the gaps and silences to reiterate that his body and psyche are deeply wounded and require healing. In this vein, Himes's opening utterance comingles the possibility of his sexual violation with the systematic ways in which blacks have been positioned as property and brutalized by American racist institutions—through strategies and designs too heinous to disclose fully.

Himes fails to discuss his bi-sexuality openly as he describes himself as coming into manhood during his time in prison. His emergence as a hero in prison is distinguished by his ability to be self-reliant and to protect himself--through writing and fighting—and by whatever means necessary. He describes the invaluable survival skills which he learns in prison—a horrific period of his life and yet a notable rite-of-passage:

> I grew to manhood in the Ohio State Penitentiary. I was nineteen years old when I went in and twenty-six years old when I came out. I became a man, dependent on no one but myself. I learned all the behavior patterns necessary for survival, or I wouldn't have survived, although at the time I did not realize I was learning them. On occasion, it must have seemed to others that I was bent on self-destruction.[61]

Himes becomes a man as he learns to protect himself—often through violence. During his prison sentence he experiences a desperate inner turmoil while he gains the essential skills that will enhance his heroism. Though he is small in stature and unassuming, he is careful to exhibit a tough prison masculinity in which he exercises resilience, cunning, and adaptability to the codes of the institution that enable him to thrive while locked up. Prison is heinous, and yet, he presents it as ameliorative for the emerging hero as his violent bouts are tempered with sexual restraint (apparently) and his development as a writer. Himes spends very few pages detailing his prison experience though this period was so imperative to his coming of age and lasted for seven years.[62] He does not openly discuss his bisexual proclivities—there or elsewhere. Instead, he demonstrates the unerring ability to retell his sexual encounters with women through pornographic

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[61] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 60. Print.

[62] Ibid 60-66.

descriptions to circumvent discussing his sexual experiences with men. For example, earlier in the narrative, he proposes his disdain for "fornication" and people who openly discuss their sexual behavior:

> I must have been a puritan all my life. Then as now, I consider the sexual act private. I do not want my sexual experiences to be made public. I do not care for women who discuss the sexual behavior of men in public, or vice versa. I don't want to hear about it.[63]

Proffering his nobility, he supposedly avoids disclosing *all* of his sexual indiscretions. More boldly, he suggests that he is conservative in upholding the sacredness of sexual affairs. However, he openly exposes certain experiences that reinforce his conventional, chauvinistic masculinity and avoids illuminating those which fill him with guilt, shame and anxiety. Though he does not want his readership to judge him punitively, he derides others as immoral based on their lascivious recollections rather than their debauched deeds. The author hypocritically disdains "fornication" and is so closeted about his bisexuality that he reserves judgment about the possibility of homosexuals discussing their sexual encounters because he will not tolerate being associated with *them* even by inference. Ironically, Himes depicts all sex as pornographic by collapsing distinctions between erotic encounters and pornographic captions in his descriptions. It is noteworthy that his self-portrayal is positioned in an overarching context in which black people have been derided as oversexualized and only possessing the ability to partake in pornographic encounters because they supposedly lack the ability to display genuine emotion.[64]

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[63] Ibid 13.

[64] This discourse is as longstanding one. See chapter fourteen of Thomas Jefferson. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1999. Print.

Furthermore, black men have been continuously feared as rapists in American society and this trepidation is magnified inside prison walls. Therefore, Himes downplays his investment in sexual bliss to position himself as a moral black hero—despite his mishaps—even during his period of lock up. He attempts to aggrandize himself, in this fashion, by describing himself as a fighter with incredible restraint.

Though he can not recall experiencing any homoerotic feelings or sexual encounters during his time inside the prison walls, he does remember that incarceration offered to homosexuals a depraved jungle filled with clandestine encounters between men. By focusing the reader's attention on descriptions of their animalistic subculture of brutal sex, he aggrandizes himself by attesting to his sexual restraint and diminishes the possibility of his participation. Himes vividly describes other prisoners as animalistic perverts of a completely different "species" as he depicts their prison-sex as running the gamut from titillating seduction to vicious rape. These seedy participants are adept gender-benders who prey on their victims by coaxing the sexual desires of caged men while manipulating their neediness for intimacy and attention. Camouflaging their will to power, they engage in a battle *royale* to effeminize each other and to dominate the carceral space.[65] Himes's descriptions of these men as various types of animals unwittingly suggest his preoccupation with sexual positionality during homosexual intercourse in the penitentiary. [66] Simultaneously, he recalls these sexual encounters as pornographic rather than erotic to feign homophobia and to suggest that these activities

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[65] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 61-62. Print.

[66] Himes describes these homosexuals as wolves (ruthless tops), wolverines (bisexuals), and boy-girls or effeminate men who all preyed on each other. Ibid 64.

were as revolting then as during his time on the streets of Cleveland as Himes notes: "[t]he pansies had called it 'pussy without bone.' But I had always preferred my pussy with all of its pelvic bone intact, whether it was sharp or cushioned."[67] This peculiar world of sexual exploitation in Cleveland red light districts—and the forbidden experiences of prison sex—belie Himes's obsession for the tender intimacy of his prison romance. Though he acknowledges that other prisoners fancied him because of his good looks, he deftly eschewed any interest (he claims) as he dismisses the possibility of his queer romance as unthinkable because this period is so unremarkable. Further bolstering his representation as disciplined is Himes's portrayal of his development as a prison author.

The author describes his writing and fighting as heroic acts that protected him during his incarceration because the inmates feared and respected his prowess. He recalls his emerging fame as a writer in prison and suggests that his self-possession as a prison writer uniquely positions him as a tough race man:

> I began writing in prison. That also protected me, against both the convicts and the screws. The black convicts had both an instinctive respect for and fear of a person who could sit down at a typewriter and write, and whose name appeared in newspapers and magazines outside. The screws could never really kill a convict who was a public figure, or else convicts like Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver would never have gotten out of prison alive.[68]

[67] Ibid 61.

[68] Ibid 64.

Himes is careful to locate his heroism in prison as comparable to that of Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver—prominent race men during the Black Power Movement. These warriors for black liberation used the pen to battle racism particularly after they recognized that prison life offered a somewhat protected space to foment resistance. During their prison time, they lost their fear of death, and because their other civic rights were mainly abolished, they defiantly *wrote back* against the strongholds of white supremacy to spur freedom fighters inside and outside the prison walls.[69] Comparably, Himes depicts white prison guards or "screws" who, because they detest his emerging fame as a writer who promotes black resistance, starve him during solitary confinement until his hair drops out and his nails fall off. The term "screw" refers to a phallic symbol and vulgar sexual intercourse; Himes employs it to emphasize that prison guards often take advantage of inmates not only through physical punishment, but also sexual abuse. Therefore, Himes's depiction of Malcolm X and Cleaver as resisting control by "screws," because of their publicity, also implies that these black heroes possessed enough power to defend themselves against the prospects of being raped in prison. By associating with these two figures, Himes attempts to bolster his image as a strong heterosexual man who can galvanize black resistance because his commitment to black solidarity is as an impenetrable as his body.

Despite Cleaver's and X's courageous efforts to promote black solidarity, these venerated (and reviled) black revolutionaries did not accept all blacks equally into the

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[69] To learn more about the spiritual quests on which these authors embarked during their incarceration periods read Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (*As Told to Alex Haley*). Ed. Alex Haley. New York: Ballantine Books, 1964. Print.

Also, read Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Delta, 1999. Print.

folds. While they often marginalized the roles of black women in the movement, they also vehemently denigrated homosexuals and disparaged homosexual activity in prison as counter revolutionary.[70] Therefore, Himes ingratiates himself to the ideological legacies of X and Cleaver to obfuscate his bisexuality while suggesting his heteronormativity. He further denies his bisexuality by elaborating on the predatory nature of homosexuality in prison and his ability to defend himself against any same-sex contact—including rape--because the other convicts reportedly fear his education and constant fits of violence.[71] Himes's sexual frustrations in prison are channeled, as he recalls, towards gambling, fighting, and writing. To combat his feelings of powerlessness, the author strives for heroism in prison and adopts a new identity in a threatening space. Indeed, he is so adamant about his sexual denial that upon exiting the prison he relates his unquenchable desire for the opposite sex: "I wanted women, women, women."[72] His insistent denial attests to a well-spring of passion for queer intimacy—within and outside the captive space. It also reinforces his tacit desire to be accepted by a community of heteronormative black male writers. Predictably, Himes abandons his sexual restraint in prison—as he depicts it—and he solicits prostitutes immediately following his release.[73] An ever perplexing figure, he feels entitled to augment his status as a black hero—and to

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[70] Eldridge Cleaver blatantly suggests that black gay men are so pathologically envious of white women that they have sex with white men in hope of having their offspring. He depicts their sexuality as antithetical to a black revolutionary ethos. Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Delta, 1999. 20-25. Print.

[71] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 61. Print.

[72] Ibid 66.

[73] Ibid 66.

overemphasize his compulsive heteronormativity—by figuring women as sexual objects that boost male bravado.

During Himes's incarceration, he becomes intimately aware that prisoners have the capacity to become heroes and rogues under certain conditions. During one formidable moment of his imprisonment, the Ohio State Penitentiary fire of 1930, Himes considers the societal conditions which encourage heroism under certain institutions. He recalls surviving the calamity of one of the most horrendous prison fires in history:

> Convicts stabbed, cut, slashed, brained, maimed, and killed each other almost every day for the most nonsensical reasons…And yet they were capable of attaining high degrees of heroism, as in the Easter Monday fire of 1930, in which three hundred and thirty-odd convicts were burned to death in their cells. Given freedom of the yard when the fire got out of control, convicts from other blocks braved death, asphyxiation, and injury to climb the steep steps of the burning cellblock through the dense black smoke, scorching heat, and leaping flames to rescue those convicts locked in the infernos of their cells.[74]

Himes juxtaposes the everyday ruthlessness of the prisoners with their bravery as they combat the attacking flames to save their fellow inmates. During this horrifying moment, the prisoners harness their conviction in the preciousness of life as the carceral space transfigures them—in a realm of dancing shadow and light--into soot-colored heroes. Himes's account reaffirms that there is evil in the best of people and good in the worst. He indicts the prison system for caging inmates like animals and creating the treacherous conditions that encourage this massive loss of irreplaceable life. Simultaneously, his

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[74] Ibid 63.

description underscores his interest in how blacks can gain the ability to aspire towards heroism in institutions that reinforce their subjugation through violence. From this standpoint, he becomes particularly interested in the comparable ways in which the military and prison are legally sanctioned with the ability to confer or disqualify black heroism. [75]

The Absurdity of Heroism in the Military and Prison

In Himes's wider corpus—including his novels, short stories, and autobiographies--he indicts the U.S. military and prison system as confining blacks as property—in varying ways--while stealing their rights on a massive scale. The paradoxes concerning these institutions' commonalities suggest that black men are significantly impeded in their capacity to become race men who can promote collective advancement by challenging white supremacy. Himes portrays both institutions as possessing overlapping characteristics as he offers a larger critique about the limited prospects for blacks to achieve heroism, through meritocracy, in a racist American society. Although the military and prison differ significantly in how they position blacks as citizens, they reinforce that black bodies are the property of the egregious American legal system.

The autobiographer depicts the disparate ways in which blacks are treated as property in the military and prison—two institutions in which their privacy rights are stripped away. His scanty recollections of prison life emphasize his attempts to safeguard

[75] In Himes's short story "To What Red Hell," which he first publishes in the October 1934 issue of *Esquire* magazine, he fictionalizes this incident and suggests the fine line between criminality and heroism by depicting the bravery of some convicts who risk their lives to save others from the flames and the treacherousness of another convict who sets the fire. The nexus of bravery and criminality and the overlaps between the military and prison are further explored in Himes short story "Prison Mass" in which he blurs the image of prisoners marching with an image of heroic American soldiers marching gallantly to fanfare in France as World War I heroes. Both of these short stories are in Chester Himes. *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. Ed. Calvin Hernton. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1990), 242-244. Print.

his sexual privacy--particularly after his traumatizing experience as an inmate—a period when this right was suspended. Furthermore, he brings together the prison and military in his *oeuvre* to extend his critique of the disparate ways in which blacks lack sexual privacy even in an institution, such as the latter, in which they supposedly deserve respect for defending the liberty of all. Both institutions are characterized not only by their dis-ownership of disabled black bodies, but also by their espousal of heteronormativity. Therefore, Himes's self-image is destroyed by both institutions because of his broken vertebra and queerness.[76] Furthermore, he critiques the accepted script that presents both institutions as designed to facilitate the subordination of blacks for supposedly different ends. According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, the military and prison are two organizations which can be classified as "total institutions." [77] In such organizations, the "inmate" experiences various rites of passage in which his or her self-hood is self-mortified to enhance a strong identification with the group.[78] These institutions break

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[76] In considering the nexus between heterosexuality and disability I turn to Robert McRuer's coining of "compulsory able-bodiedness" in which he suggests that both identity categories intersect because of society's insistence on masquerading able-bodiedness and heterosexuality as the "natural order of things." Therefore "the system of compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, is thoroughly interwoven with the system of heterosexuality that produces queerness: that in fact, compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, and vice versa." Himes's safeguarding of his sexuality as property, by masking as heterosexual and able-bodied in his autobiography, leads him to reify the connection between both identity categories. See Robert McRuer. *Crip Theory*: *Cultural Signs of Queerness*. New York: New York Press, 2006. Print.

[77]Erving Goffman. Asylums: *Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1961, 15-67. Print.

[78] Ibid 14-43. In my analysis, I consider "self-mortification" as reinforcing the "inmate's" status as property through: (1) barriers that the total institution places between the "inmate" and the outside world. The inmate is dispossessed of particular roles that are part of his self. (2) admission procedures—in this case, "inmates" are stripped of several of their personal possessions and their full name. Because these items are associated with their sense of selfhood, their loss increases a curtailment of the self; (3) deference requirements—the "inmate" must show physical and/or verbal deference to the institution's staff. These acts, which include forced etiquette, produce feelings of humiliation and an accompanying loss in self-esteem; (4) verbal and/or gestural profanations—the staff or fellow "inmates" may call an "inmate"

down the normal boundaries that exist among different sites where people sleep, work, and play in support of an overall "rational plan."[79] Though both institutions are developed to meet contrary ends, the military and prison have cultural characteristics that reflect one another as they demand that the "inmate" exchange safety for danger, comfort for physical hardship, and familial integrity for familial separation. Prisoners and military personnel also possess overlapping representations because both groups wear uniforms, march, and are exposed to contrary norms of discipline for varying ends. In my consideration of Himes's portrayals of the military and prison in his corpus, I am interested particularly in how he critiques the absurdity of conventional narratives of discipline in both institutions. He exposes the contradictions of discipline as possessing the ability to reform blacks into good soldiers who are ready to go to war without hesitation or, conversely, to subjugate them as prisoners.[80]

Furthermore, in *The Quality* Himes depicts the U.S. military as complicit in reinforcing his anxiety over his capacity to become a black hero. Himes's status as the descendant of Confederate soldiers instills a profound unease concerning his patrimony

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obscene names, curse at him, deride him, or tease him. (5) contaminative exposure such as violation of information regarding one's self, physical contamination (such as unclean food), interpersonal contamination such as forced social relationships, and the bringing of an outsider into contact with the individual's "significant others"; (6) disruption of the usual relationship between the "inmate" and his individual acts, such as "looping" (where the responses of the "inmate" are taken as the "target for the next attack" by the staff) and a loss of "personal economy of action" (where the "inmate" cannot schedule his activities to fit into one another).

[79] Ibid 14.

[80] My consideration of discipline is informed by Foucault's analysis of this concept. In this chapter, discipline is a mechanism of power that regulates the behavior of individuals in the social body by the organization of space (architecture), and people's activities and behaviors (drills, postures, movements). It is enforced with the aid of a complex system of surveillance. Foucault emphasizes that discipline is one way in which power can be exercised. Foucault also uses the term "disciplinary society" to discuss the history of institutions such as prisons, asylums, schools, and army barracks. In Himes's context, he depicts America as a prison to emphasize that, for blacks, segregation creates added boundaries and regulations to an existing disciplinary society. To interrogate the concept of discipline more thoroughly, please read Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish*: *The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1975, 1-90. Print.

and sense of black masculinity. His flawed ancestry leads him to question his authenticity as a race man, while it also positions him as the benefactor of shame and pride regarding his familial legacy. Himes opens *The Quality* by recalling that he was born into a racist America, and after dealing with white supremacy, he moves to France to escape this and to squelch his desire to kill his white partner, Vandi. He believes that living in France will offer him the opportunity to escape the shackles of American racism. However, he quickly notes in his second autobiography that these illusions collide with the reality of racism against blacks in France. His move there, to be released from a preoccupation with racism, will only compound the absurd circumstances of his life's journey. In contrast to the convention of a slave narrative in which the writer declares humanity and refutes his or her status as chattel, Himes asserts his self-hood from the outset by voicing that he was born black and defiant. Early in his narrative—partly a reflection on his prison life—Himes boldly states: "I am black and I was born and raised and lived in America."[81] Himes's declaration follows the slave narrative's convention of asserting a claim to citizenship and racial resistance based on *Jus soli*.[82]

Yet, he revises the typical assertion by emphasizing that as an expatriate writer he is still wedded to an experience of alienation as a black American who not only lives in a relative state of exile in France, but who also felt like a stranger in his own country. After he decides to leave America he notes: "The whites rejected me, the blacks didn't want

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[81]Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 1. Print.

[82] *Jus soli* or ("right of the soil") is the right of anyone born in the territory of a state to a nationality or citizenship. To read more about this in relationship to black autobiographers asserting their claim to selfhood based on the Constitution please read Karla Fc. Halloway. *Legal Fictions*: *Constituting Race*, *Composing Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, ix-xv. Print.

me. I felt like a man without a country, which in fact I was."[83] Stranger still, for Himes, is his perplexing ancestry. His declaration is also a defense against his readership's possible objections concerning his legitimacy as a race man because of an "open secret" in his lineage which he will shortly reveal—that he is the descendant of Confederate soldiers. Highly sensitive concerning his light-skinned complexion, Himes is also insecure about his masculinity because he venerates his mother—who is especially proud of her Confederate roots and light skinned complexion—whereas he disdains his dark skinned, passive father.[84]

Himes's esteem for his light-skinned mother (Estelle) and his repudiation of his dark skinned father exacerbate his racial and gender anxiety. Although he gravitates towards her feistiness and willingness to resist white oppression, he worries that his identification with her could express that he is effeminate. Furthermore, her adoration for her Confederate roots and light skin—her "heritage"—exacerbates Himes's inner turmoil.[85] Consequently, he struggles with his light-skinned complexion and the propertied value of whiteness in his family.Himes is insecure about the prospects of becoming a full-fledged black hero because of his family's Confederate roots. Similar to Cheryl Harris's exploration of whiteness as property in her ancestry, Himes describes the racial passing of some members of his mother's family, the Bomars.[86] In both cases, their

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[83] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 102. Print.

[84] Ibid 2-5.

[85] Ibid 5.

[86] Please read the introduction to Cheryl I Harris's "Whiteness as Property." Harvard Law Review 106, no. 8 (June 1993), 1710-1714. Himes's tracing of his genealogy is found in Chester Himes. *The Quality of*

families so revered whiteness as a social status that they were willing to deny the existence of their darker-skinned kindred. The autobiographer describes his mother as an "octoroon" as he notes that her light skin and her ancestors' ability to pass ironically goad her passion for racial resistance.[87] Estelle considers herself a proud benefactor of the Lost Cause Movement—the egregious crusade in which southern whites commemorated the supposed heroism of Confederate troops through statues, memorials, and other art forms.[88] Lamentably, she venerates this legacy despite the Confederates' commitment to fight until the death to maintain a slave holding South.[89] While these symbols of white Southern might often suggest that the South never lost the Civil War, they also represent the war as ongoing while reifying the elusive permanence of the racism that fomented this massive bloodshed. For Himes, his mother's twisted valorization of her "heritage" exacerbates his estrangement from the ideal of black manhood because his family's history can be considered queer because of miscegenation and the inability to place his ancestry into any received categories. His mother's glorification of this heritage begs: to what extent should Americans, and black Americans in particular, be willing to honor fallen soldiers for their loss of life and limb regardless of the reprehensible causes for

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Hurt: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 4-7. Print.

[87] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 4. Print.

[88] To read more about the Lost Cause Movement see David W. Blight. *The Race and Reunion*: *The Civil War in American Memory*. New York: Belknap Press, 2002. 255-299. Print.

[89] For an intriguing, fictionalized account of Himes's grappling of his familial lineage from the antebellum era and his prospects for becoming a black hero read Chester Himes. *The Third Generation*. New York: Thunder Mouth's Press, 1972. Print.

which they fought and died on the battlefield?[90] Indeed, for Estelle Himes, heroism is so seductive as an ideology that even racist iterations of it can empower her sense of indignation and protest against white supremacy. The gallantry of soldiers marching into battle—even if inspired by racist sensibilities—can still resound as pride in her family's history and traditions and possibly effect successive generations.

Whereas her incongruent conflation of black empowerment and Southern-bred racism motivates her rage against white supremacy, throughout *The Quality*, it also creates discord in her immediate family. Estelle repudiates her husband—the darker skinned Joseph Sandy Himes--who was often accommodating towards racial segregation. Disparaging his father's political sensibilities, Himes recalls that Joseph Sandy Himes was wedded to the Booker T. Washington tradition: "As a child I often heard my father quote the famous saying of the great educator: 'Let down your bucket where you are.' "[91] While Himes disdains his father's political sensibilities, he can not fully embrace his mother's brand of racial protest because it stems from a pride in memorializing Confederate soldiers as fallen heroes. He feels torn between multiple allegiances. If he identifies with his mother too strongly, it could suggest that he is effeminate and also a benefactor of Confederate heroism. However, he is unwilling to pattern himself after his accommodationist father.[92] Even more complicated, Estelle often insists on harsh

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[90] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 5. Print.

[91] Ibid 4.

[92] For a thought-provoking interrogation on Himes's love-hate relationship with authority figures, both literary and familial, please read "Slaying the Fathers: The Autobiography of Chester Himes" in Charles L. P. Silent. Ed. *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. 241-255. Print.

disciplinary measures for her children to encourage them to live up to their "heritage."[93] Throughout *The Quality*, she represents a force of unyielding authority for Himes, and after an ill-fated accident, he associates her disciplinary measures with the capacity to destroy their family.

Himes recalls that his mother prohibited him from providing necessary assistance to his brother Joe in a scientific experiment. Joe was blinded shortly after the First World War because when he attempts to build "torpedoes" the mortar explodes in his face and destroys his eyesight.[94] This accident accelerates the disintegration of Himes's family and further polarizes his relationship with his mother. Although he loves Estelle, her ruthless discipline instills in him a hatred for unyielding authority in other institutions such as the military and prison that, for Himes, enact destruction in black life. This unyielding authority produces a form of blindness in which the author castigates whiteness as distorting any vision of the appreciable humanity of blacks even as they often become complicit in the destruction of their communities when they mistakenly venerate the power to hurt others. The author recalls that in 1922 or 1923 he and Joe were afforded the opportunity to perform a chemistry demonstration of their choice at Branch Normal School, a segregated black state school in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. The youth—no doubt captivated by the abysmal bloodshed of the First World War--decide to create "torpedoes."[95] They intend to mix several grounded compounds, stuff the powder into an empty shotgun shell, and place the shell on toy railroad tracks so that the engine of the

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[93] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 5. Print.

[94] Ibid 10-14.

[95] Ibid 10.

train could run over it while the onlookers gasp at the explosion. Though Himes was supposed to assist his brother in conducting the experiment, his mother punishes him for what he describes as some trivial folly—which he vaguely remembers--and she forbids him to participate as punishment. Himes believes that his assistance may have prevented the failed experiment and its destruction of his brother's eyesight:

> That one moment in my life hurt me as much as all the others put together. It still does, half a century later. I loved my brother. I had never been separated from him and that moment was shocking, shattering, and terrifying. I vaguely remember the confusion. I leaped to Joe's aid and fell down a flight of stairs. Next, I remember, we were squeezed into the back seat of a Stutz touring car—my mother and father and Joe and myself—and were hurtling through the night. Lights of other cars followed. We pulled into the emergency entrance of a white people's hospital. White clad doctors and attendants appeared. I remember sitting in the back seat with Joe watching the pantomime being enacted in the car's bright lights. A white man was refusing; my father was pleading. Dejectedly my father turned away; he was crying like a baby.[96]

Years after this incident occurs, Himes reflects on his subjection to ludicrous prison regulations. For example, even though he was registered as partially disabled, the prison guards physically assault him, and locked him out in the bitter cold, because he refused to dig out more shavings under the snow because he claimed he was totally disabled.[97] This incident is reflective of the cruel treatment which he experiences in his

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[96] Ibid 11.

[97] See Edward Margolies and Michel Fabre. *The Several Lives of Chester Himes*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997. Print.

home environment during his youth in which the adolescent was besieged by similarly mindless rules. Describing the soul crushing nature of his mother's discipline as a "mistake" with unimaginable repercussions, he laments at his feelings of inadequacy because he is unable to protect Joe from his mishap and can not defend himself from the engulfing hurt that will follow in the accident's wake.[98] The images of his brother's wounds—and the scarring of Joe's eyes--are fresh in Himes's mind and echo the wounding that he and his brother experienced because of his mother's callous rules. On the surface, Joe's scarring represents the potential for healing and the capacity for pain to be assuaged over time. However, this scarring foreshadows Himes's own accident and terrifying prison sentences which occur later in a narrative in which the author is unable to heal, to forget or to extricate himself from manifold layers of hurt.

This passage repeats and revises images of whiteness as co-extensive with blindness and hurt. The brothers' lauding of the white-led military and the destruction that accompanies the First World War leads to Joe's loss of sight—indeed it is *stolen* from him--because of the destructive lure of warfare and his rejection by the segregated white-only hospital which may have saved it. This scene foreshadows the disintegration of their family because of unmitigated power. The Himes family's victimization becomes a synecdoche of the unprecedented, massive casualties of The Great War. Himes describes the "shocking, shattering, and terrifying" nature of the accident as itself creating a bomb that creates blindness—coterminous with death—which leaves him and his brother separated and creates an irreparable rift in his parents' marriage.[99]

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[98] Ibid 11.

[99] Ibid 11.

Blindness, in this scene, does not simply convey his brother's ensuing physical condition. It has a metonymic quality as Himes interweaves shadow and light to emphasize his inability to convey the cataclysmic pain of this incident. Himes's presentation of blindness characterizes the eye as a "hostile, destructive organ, including the equation of eye with piercing phallus and with devouring mouth" and "blindness as castration, [and] as punishment for sin."[100] While the boys' limited vision of the destructiveness of war and the phallic power of the torpedo inevitably lead to Joe's blindness, Estelle's unwillingness to allow Himes to assist his brother is a sin with unimaginable consequences. Furthermore, the event is compounding in its cruelty because he loses respect for his father who appears to be castrated by the events and does not *fight* for Joe and challenge the white hospital authorities to gain access to their services.

Instead, Joseph Himes becomes as helpless as a baby and symbolizes, to the author, the limits of black heroism in a segregated America. Himes depicts his father as incapable of recognizing the decisive moment to stand up and *fight* against white domination because he is not simply overwhelmed by grief, but made too subservient to white authority.[101] Himes consequently will take issue with the capacity of white-led institutions—such as the military and prison—to effeminize black men and create lasting legacies of hurt in black communities. He fears inheriting his father's passivity against

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[100] H. Robert Blank. "Psychoanalysis and Blindness." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 26.1 (1957): 1—24.Print

[101] Himes depicts Joseph Sandy Himes, his father who serves as a professor, as disempowered specifically by the white dominated academy and finds himself constantly moving the family from one place to another for employment. Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 1-102. Print.

racial resistance and is reticent about his mother's misguided heroism and henpecking of her children. The author depicts his self-loathing, which partly derives from his flawed ancestry, as instilling a profound sense of inadequacy and blindness towards his own failings and potential. Thus, the author's selection of painful episodes to include in his autobiography, and the blueprints for black masculinity that his parents create are, at best, experimental—"delicate and dangerous performance[s]."[102]

Himes employs blindness to critique the dehumanization of blacks through segregation in white dominated institutions. Furthermore, he presents it as a trope for castigating whites who deny blacks full access to public education while he presents a larger analysis of the dire prospects of them becoming integrated into other vital institutions. The writer extends his critique of the segregated hospital system's refusal to treat Joe in Pine Bluff, Arkansas to a consideration of their flawed vision of the appreciable humanity of blacks. For Himes, the segregated white hospital refuses to treat Joe because its authorities can not envision him as fully human. The trope of blindness conveys the ignorance of the well-intentioned black health practitioners. However, it more pointedly brings into clarity that black health professionals, because of segregation,[103] often have limited access to education, training, and first-rate equipment. These gaps often resulted in disparate social and economic outcomes for blacks and whites. Himes reflects on Joe's accident, later in *The Quality*, to note that although whites segregate public institutions based on race, the white establishment provides blacks who are vision impaired with better access to public education because they do not perceive

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[102] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 11. Print.

[103] Christopher S. Parker discusses this in *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 29-39. Print.

the visually disabled as a threat to the status quo. In a key passage, Himes describes his animosity towards this practice of selective integration. He follows this by discussing his aggressive playing of games and sports as a way of dealing with his feelings of displacement in a segregated St. Louis and his feelings of helplessness following Joe's accident:

> Although the public schools in St. Louis were strictly segregated, both white and nonwhite males and females attended the school for the blind. Revealing, isn't it?
>
> I remember St. Louis as a strange big city where I played football, baseball, soccer, basketball, any game that you can name, with suicidal intensity. The other boys on the playground either ganged up on me or refused to play with me; the gym teacher stopped me from playing all games in school. I broke my right shoulder blade, which healed out of place and still looks deformed; my left ear was half torn from my head; all of my teeth were chipped. I cut classes and roamed alone through the strange big city, spending hours in the railroad station watching the trains come and go. I was unpopular with my teachers, disliked by the students; I was lonely, shy, and insufferably belligerent.[104]

Though blacks were strictly prohibited from attending "white-only" schools in St. Louis, Joe's blindness and his educational acumen afford him the opportunity to gain unprecedented access to integrated educational institutions. Himes's assessments of Joe's rich educational opportunities suggest an ongoing sibling rivalry particularly because of the author's criminal past. Still, he is constantly suspicious of the possibility that whites

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[104] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 13-14. Print.

only accept Joe into their elite circles because they pity and feel comfortable around him because of his disability. In this perplexing situation, even Joe's disability, at first glance, seems to trump his race with regard to his inclusion by whites. Himes's disgust at his father's racial accommodationist sensibilities make him particularly wary of the prospects for whites to only include acquiescent blacks into spaces of privilege so they can excel. Thus, the author laments at the limited vision of the white establishment. They only recognize their common humanity with blacks, and create open access to important institutions, provided that they are unlikely to encourage resistance.

Himes reflects on the segregation of public education in St. Louis to develop a larger critique about the bleak prospects for blacks to integrate fully into other institutions in which they may be perceived as a threat—such as organized sports and the U.S. military. He recalls playing games and sports to assuage his frustrations concerning his inability to change the ramifications of his brother's accident and to challenge his dire sense of entrapment in a segregated St. Louis. His brutality when playing these activities and his truancy from school are cries for assistance in dealing with his overwhelming circumstances. Himes depicts his hostility during play—and the concurrent material damage--as reminiscent of a war. The conflict begins internally and transforms into heinous action as he and other boys assault each other on playgrounds which become battlefields where their mettle is tested.

Himes's description of his "belligerent" playing of games and sports, in segregated playgrounds, evokes a broader critique of the exclusion of blacks in the military during this period.[105] The World War I era is a key moment in sports and

[105] Ibid 14.

military history. While most organized sports were still heavily segregated, Pres. Woodrow Wilson made a declaration before Congress to commence a war against Germany to safeguard democracy."[106] Many notable black figures, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, made sweeping endorsements for blacks to "close ranks" with whites and to enlist in the military during the First World War. Du Bois asserted that if blacks dutifully served their country they can expand their citizenship rights by proving themselves on the battlefields.[107] However, the author's characterization of white supremacy in the St. Louis public school system is analogous to the strident ways in which racist whites maintained segregation in the U.S. military by preventing black soldiers from fighting directly in battle and relegating them to menial labor.[108] Racist whites attempted to prevent blacks from engaging in direct combat—and instead confined them to menial labor—to help ensure that they could not be honored if they were injured or died in battle. This would challenge their tenuous status as government property—a status compounded by their race. It is telling that not a single black soldier received the Medal of Honor for distinguished service during World War I until seventy-two years following the conflict.[109] From this perspective, Himes questions the possibility of blacks achieving merit—and possibly becoming heroes--by blindly attempting to integrate into white-dominated institutions. As previously noted, Joe's accident leads Himes to indict unreasonable authority and white supremacy. Shortly following this event, he attempts to

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[106] Christopher S. Parker discusses this in *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Postwar South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 39. Print.

[107] Ibid 33.

[108] Ibid 20-28.

[109]Michael Lee Lanning. *The African-American Soldier*: *From Crispus Attucks to Colin Powell*. New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1997, 143. Print.

cope with his frustrations by engaging in an escalating spree of petty crime. Though Himes believes that his dabbling in prostitution in the black ghettos will assuage his grief, his tragic accident will only exacerbate his feelings of inadequacy.[110] His occupationally-related accident, when he falls down an elevator shaft, will disable him and become the impetus of his bourgeoning criminality and subsequent imprisonment.

Himes describes his accident and consequent disability as dehumanizing him and forcing him to recognize his subjection to the law and to his father's racial accommodationist sensibilities which together help reinforce his status as property. Despite the heavy impediments to blacks attending institutions of higher education, Himes recalls that any graduate of a public high school in Ohio in 1926 could attend Ohio State University.[111] Thus, Himes obtains a job as a busboy in the Wade Park Manor hotel to offset the cost of his matriculation fees. It was at these premises, on an ill-fated day, that he opens some elevator doors while chatting with a couple girls, and after stepping in, he falls down the shaft:

> I fell past the floor below and the high-ceiling basement, between thirty and forty feet. I landed upon the heavy steel plate of the springboard that is at the bottom of every elevator shaft. I didn't lose consciousness. I remember the sensation of falling through space and landing on a solid platform with the feeling of my body splattering open like a ripe watermelon. I remember calling for help

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[110]Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 20-25. Print.

[111] Please note that although blacks were permitted to attend this university, they were not fully integrated on campus as I will shortly describe. Ibid 24.

> with a tiny voice. My mouth felt as though it were filled with gravel. Later I discovered that it was only my teeth.[112]

Shakespeare's enduring metaphor for the heinous terms of Shylock's and Antonio's contract—the infamous pound of flesh—is echoed in this moment as Himes describes his fall as mangling his body like a ripe watermelon as he literally and figuratively loses his voice.[113] In *The Merchant of Venice* blood is not shed because of the defaulted contract. However, the specter of Antonio's brutalization stains the plot from the moment when Shylock presents these heinous terms until the end of the play in which his willful desire for revenge becomes the harbinger for his loss of property. While Himes's broken vertebra metaphorically suggests that he loses his will power, his broken teeth compounds this because he can not bite (or offer any challenge to his predicament). The author becomes relegated to a pound of flesh not only by the accident, but by his father's advice to sign away his rights to seek additional legal redress from the hotel which was found liable for the accident by the Ohio State Industrial Commission.[114]

Fittingly, the commission awarded worker's compensation benefits to Himes for his broken spine and other injuries. However, he could have also sued the hotel for additional damages but his father dissuaded and encouraged him to settle for a pension allotted by the commission and the hotel's offer to continue paying his salary. Instead of seeking further restitution, Himes signs waivers and rejects all rights to make additional claims. Afterwards, he feels cheated out of his rightful property. He regards his father's

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[112] Ibid 20.

[114] Ibid 21-22.

stance as further indication of his racial accommodation and cowardice. While Himes recalls that he respects his father despite his spinelessness, he boldly affirms that: "I loved my mother with a strange fierce love which survived everything[.]…And while I loved my mother I obeyed my father. On his advice I signed away my rights."[115] Himes regards himself as inheriting his mother's fighting spirit and unwillingness to submit to white authority. Though his father's advice predictably creates a wedge in his parents' marriage, it further inculcates within Himes a deep suspicion regarding any form of authority that discourages blacks from resisting white superiority by signing away their rights.

For Himes, his father's encouragement to sign waivers to give up additional claims becomes representative of the ingenious ways in which naïve blacks are misled into assisting whites in creating and sustaining a "racial contract" to reinforce their subjugation.[116] Charles Mills coins this term to capture the tacit, insidious, and at times explicit agreement among members of the tribes of Europe to maintain the ideal of white supremacy as against all other tribes of the world. From Himes's perspective, Uncle Sam's military is a huge culprit for disempowering blacks by drafting them via the Selective Service System or by encouraging them to enlist and to sign away their rights to become part of the war machine. In both cases, the military steals the rights of blacks who thereby sustain the racial contract. Blacks voluntarily join the armed forces to increase their citizenship rights by gaining further education and skills, learning how to bear arms, and attempting to fight and risk death for their fellow soldiers as

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[115] Ibid 22.

[116] See Charles Mills. *The Racial Contract*. New York: Cornell University Press, 1997. 9-40. Print.

evidence of their bravery and commitment to their country. However, black soldiers at times weaken the bonds of global black solidarity because their participation in the U.S. military supports America's capitalistic interests that are often at the expense of people of color at home and abroad.[117]

Furthermore, Himes's work brings into focus that blacks are often coaxed into enlisting because of the seduction of the military's *homosociality*, which often excludes them from exercising power in the ranks because the military reinforces what Marlon Ross has called *homoraciality*. Ross deploys homoraciality to revise Eve Sedgwick's prominent notion of *homosociality*, "indicating how in United States culture homosociality historically relies on the systematic exclusion of black men, as well as the central targeting of women as sexual objects and homosexual men as scapegoats."[118] Himes's works explore the multiple ways in which black soldiers and workers are often excluded from camaraderie with their white counterparts.[119] White men who are

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[117] Ibid 9-40.

[118] To read more about this see Marlon Ross' *Manning The Race*: *Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*. New York: New York University Press, 2004. Print.

Himes's prison novel *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* critiques *homoraciality* because Himes's re-presents his experiences in feeling ostracized from white heteropatriarchy by presenting a disguised version of his prison romance to not only emphasize his sexual privacy through authorial distance, but by promoting what John C. Charles calls a "queer relationality" because in *Yesterday* "the path to white manhood, and by extension white privacy, runs directly through queer sympathy." See John C. Charles. *Abandoning the Black Hero*: *Sympathy and Privacy in the Post-War African American White-Life Novel*. Rutgers University Press, 2012. Print.

[119] Himes also demonstrates what Ross calls *homoraciality* in the autobiographer's protest novel *Lonely Crusade.* In a pivotal scene of this novel, Himes portrays a white Army officer (Lt. Gregory) having sex with a white woman, in a park, while his friend (the white Lt. Roberts) watches or waits for his turn. A black man named Rasmus Henry Johnson stumbles upon this scene, and when he attempts to walk by, Lt. Gregory forbids him to pass and orders the black man to leave. After the black man resists, Lt. Gregory calls the cops and reports to them that the black man attempted to rape the white woman and rob them. A ludicrous trial occurs and both Army officers and the white woman take the accuse the black pedestrian of rape. Rasmus is convicted of rape, robbery, and lewd acts with a child. Himes includes the complete transcript of the trial which reinforces the heinous ways in which the law disenfranchises blacks. Furthermore, this scenario vividly portrays Ross's concept of homoraciality because the white officers—military men of the highest order--reinforce their brotherhood through their sexual access to the white

committed to heteropatriarchy often marginalize these blacks while positioning the so called protection of white women (which includes white men's sexual access to their bodies) as coinciding with their dutiful efforts to protect the "home front."[120] In *The Quality of Hurt*, Himes depicts his rejection from the U.S. military as leading him inevitably to seek brotherhood with criminals.

Though urban black youth are particularly encouraged to enlist in the armed forces to avoid imprisonment, Himes depicts his inability to join the military as emphasizing his dehumanization and making him susceptible to criminality. Following Himes's accident and settlement he matriculates into Ohio State University in Columbus in September 1926. Himes notes that black students could not live in the school dormitories and that they were also excluded from the fraternity houses on campus except to perform manual labor. Therefore, he lived off campus and began to embrace his "cool" status as a college student:

> I bought a coonskin coat for three hundred dollars, a knickerbocker suit, a long-stemmed pipe, and a Model T Ford roadster, and I became a collegian.

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woman's body and by displacing the black man. See Chester Himes. *Lonely Crusade*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1947, 110-119. Print.

[120] While the U.S. nation is often represented as feminine, Himes queries the disparate ways in which the U.S. military often marginalizes and effeminizes blacks in a manner that brings their *homoraciality* into view. For example, in Himes's short story "Two Soldiers" he tells the story of the encounter between two soldiers who fight against the Nazis, in some unspecified location. The white soldier, Private Joshua Crabtree, is from Elmira, Georgia and the unnamed black soldier responds to "George"—a common derogatory name of enslaved men. While George is represented as Pvt. Crabtree's subordinate, in both race and rank, his wearing of the Army's uniform angers Pvt. Crabtree. At the end of the story Pvt. Crabtree risks his life for the wounded George who gets injured by Nazi gunfire. The white soldier carries George, who eventually dies while over the Private's head, away from the battlefield. Himes notes that Pvt. Crabtree reminisces about George's death years after the white southerner returns to Georgia. Himes's depiction of the relationship between Pvt. Crabtree and George highlights Ross's concept of *homoraciality* because the white southerner can not even think of George as a human being who deserves sympathy, much less acceptance into the military's fraternal order, until after George is horribly wounded and dies. See Calvin Hernton. *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991, 61-64. Print.

> Because of my injury, I was exempted from ROTC, which was compulsory for two years, and I did not have to buy the ROTC uniform, which other freshmen wore. Freshmen were also required to wear felt beanies with the school colors, but the white upperclassmen who enforced this rule could not tell I was a freshman because I never wore a uniform, so I didn't have to wear a beanie either; many students thought I was an upperclassman.
>
> I would have been a great success with the pretty black coeds if I had had more experience. Also, having to wear a backbrace humiliated me. It wasn't long before I discovered the whores in the ghetto.[121]

Himes's broken vertebra disqualifies him from military service and he is exempt from ROTC. Though he delights in not having to wear the ROTC uniform, he is likely ashamed of his shattered body image and his lack of fitness which disqualify him from joining the armed forces. His wearing of the coonskin coat, however, helps his efforts at "disability passing" and foreshadows his downward spiral into criminality because this relatively expensive article of clothing was often worn by gangsters.[122] Himes feels

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[121] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 25. Print.

[122] According to Jeffrey A. Brune and Daniel Wilson "disability passing" is, in part, "a complex and wide-ranging topic. Most often, the term refers to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as 'normal.'" In this lens, I consider Himes's wearing of his particular accoutrement to suggest that he is overcompensating for his physical impairment, particularly after his rejection from ROTC, to pass as able-bodied and heterosexual. See Brune, Jeffrey A. and Daniel Wilson. *Disability and Passing*: *Blurring the Lines of Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Also, for a fuller account of the nexus between disability and queerness see Robert McRuer. *Crip Theory*: *Cultural Signs of Queerness*. New York: New York University Press, 2006. Print.

For a vivid description of how the coonskin coat still reverberates in popular memory as a symbol of gangster performance watch *Coonskin*. 1975. Ralph Bakshi. Bryanston Distributing Co., 1975. VHS. Also, it is noteworthy that while Himes paid six hundred and fifty eight dollars for the cost of his room and board, books, deposits, and other fees (in 1926) he paid three hundred dollars for his raccoon skin coat. This comparison places into perspective the expense of the article and the importance of it, to Himes, to project a cool, able-bodied, threatening image that supposedly dismisses any hint of the femininity which is often ascribed to queer black men. To read another account of Himes's matriculation into Ohio State University see James Sallis. *Chester Himes a Life*. New York: Walker & Co., 2000. Print.

excluded from the popular crowd on campus despite his cool pose and desire to pass as able-bodied. Though he attempts to dress and carry himself with masculine ease, his swagger is an elusive and perilous act because he feels ill-equipped to seduce college coeds and instead embarks on a life of criminality by soliciting prostitutes. The youth's rejection from military service hastens his decline into a life of crime and imprisonment. Though his rejection by black coeds leave him jaded, his encounter with a prominent white lady makes him feel inferior and creates a lasting impression of his experience in America before he leaves for Paris.

Years after he becomes an established writer, Himes portrays a traffic accident with a prominent white military wife as leading to his incarceration. From a larger perspective, he selects the episode to indict the interconnections between the military and prison industrial complexes that reinforce the subjugation of blacks. Scholar and activist Angela Davis describes the prison industrial complex as a vast network of institutions which seek the disenfranchisement of people of color world-wide through the links among corporations, government, correctional communities, and the media. This nexus also proliferates because of the exploitation of prison labor by private corporations for the benefit of these institutions.[123] The military industrial complex—which consists of the links among the military, corporations, and government--is connected symbiotically to the prison industrial complex. Both networks often share technologies and important structural features that increase their capital as people of color suffer longer prison

[123] Angela Y Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. 84-104. Print.

sentences and become disproportionately convicted of various crimes (such as felonies) compared to their white counterparts.[124]

Following Himes's lengthy imprisonment for a foiled jewelry robbery, he depicts a car accident with a white, military wife and his wrongful imprisonment in a local jail and county prison afterwards. The author recalls that he got into an accident with this esteemed white lady who was driving under the influence of "excellent cocktails" and on the wrong side of the street before she crashes into him.[125] Though Himes was clearly not at fault, he was arrested by a police officer, and rather than being released on his own recognizance, the desk sergeant at the police station sets his bail at twenty-five dollars. Because his wife did not receive word of his need for bail, and because of other ludicrous rules and regulations in the legal system, he is forced to spend a night in the local jail before he is shuffled to a county prison. Himes indicts the police as having the ability to steal black bodies from their communities under the auspices of law and racist historical customs. The police in effect steal him away from his wife who can not locate him and is therefore deeply worried.

The autobiographer notes that he is marched off to his county prison cell because he is accused of reckless driving, whereas the military wife, who clearly violates the traffic laws, is not even charged with an offense and instead becomes an absentee plaintiff at his trial. Lamentably, his court case for reckless driving must be postponed because she fails to show up due to "shock" following the accident. The author's

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[124] Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow*: *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2012. 1-58. Print.

[125] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 112-115. Print.

characterization of her physical and mental condition gestures to the sinister ways in which black men have been historically violated to protect reportedly effete white women who lack defense against their so called barbaric sexual designs.[126] Himes is then returned to prison to bear the rest of the ordeal. Spending a couple days there, he recalls that he endures being: "mugged, fingerprinted, given a uniform of blue denim with a number stenciled on the shirt, and locked in a cell on the third tier."[127] He is stripped of any semblance of personhood during the insufferable processing phase of his incarceration where he loses any privileges of being a famous writer and is instead relegated to a third tiered cell and debased citizenship status. Himes's stay in prison becomes even more intolerable because when his wife seeks to pay his bail, a significant sum at the time, she encounters tremendous regulations that result in an extended stay. Adding further insult to injury, Himes meets a traffic ticket on his windshield for

[126] The protection of white female virtue from violent, over-sexualized black men is a theme that Himes will return to frequently in his works. In his most widely known novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, his protagonist is a shipyard worker named Bob Jones. He gets indicted for rape (a crime which he did not commit) at the hands of a white shipyard worker named Madge. The novel ends with Madge refusing to press charges against him. However, Jones goes to court for gun possession and the judge offers him two telling options as punishment: go to prison or join the US Army. He chooses the latter. Given that lynching was a common punishment meted out to black men accused of raping white women, Jones's sentence suggests that the American legal system's extra-legal punishment of black men by lynching is comparable to a prison sentence (a form of civic death) or conscription in the military which may also result in a horrible demise. Himes collapses the distinctions between black men who fall to a heroic death in the military and those who experience civil death in prison to depict the absurdity of the legal system and its positioning of black men as property. See Chester Himes's *If He Holler Let Him Go*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972. Print.

In *The Quality*, Himes also describes a lynching as any violent act which subjugates blacks without the protection of fair trial when he notes: "[A] lynching was a lynching by any name, whether by armed natives or by armed soldiers, as long as it consisted of the unlawful killing of a person or persons without benefit of trial." Himes's assertion suggests that legal and extra-legal forms of violence similarly marginalize blacks while they inform the disparate ways in which various institutions (such as the military) possess the ability to sanction black heroism through violence while others (such as the military) possess the ability to disqualify blacks from meritocratic uplift. See Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 261. Print.

[127] Ibid 113.

unauthorized overnight parking at the police headquarters when he returns to pick up his car.

He painstakingly details this experience to suggest a series of wretched collusions between the military and prison industrial complexes to subjugate blacks. The white military wife, police officers, local jail and county prisons, corporate entities that benefit from the processing of prisoners, and the court system all demonstrate the interlocking ways in which these complexes join forces to exacerbate "hurt" within black communities. Regrettably, the ticket left of his windshield suggests the possibility of further prosecution—and a renewed cycle of prosecution, conviction and detainment—if he does not pay or challenge it according to its stipulations. While this incident further encourages Himes's love-hate relationship with white women, it leaves a deep impression on him as he recalls that his sense of entrapment during this ordeal was the last memory he carried with him of America before he leaves for France.

Chester Himes is deeply scarred by the confining nature of racism, and to effect psychic restoration, he writes his autobiography as a radical act of self-possession while he paradoxically guards his sexuality as his cherished property. His reticence in declaring his queerness and the "hurt" he has experienced because of societal discrimination attests to his profound sense of insecurity and distrust of his readership. Moreover, the curious Himes attempts to represent himself as a black hero to subvert the legal system's efforts at subjugating him as property. The absurdity of his strides to become a black hero attests to the tremendous obstacles which blacks endure as they struggle for advancement in a society in which the color-line brands the boundaries of personhood and property. This perplexing situation is evident in a country in which *The Constitution* has consistently

assured "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for whites by safeguarding whiteness a form of sheltered property while reifying black bodies as disposable.

In *The Quality* and his larger corpus, Himes captures black bodies as fungible property by conveying the differing ways in which the military and prison situate black men as peculiar bedfellows—heroic and villainous inmates—despite the intersections of both institutions. For Himes, whiteness positions the military man and the prisoner as pounds of flesh that carry the weight of fighting for self-possession and black advancement despite a brutal legal system. His works are often misogynistic, and the author's blatant sexism is disturbing on multiple levels and attests to his tremendous anxieties. Yet, Himes's characters grapple with their insecurities and the efficacy of violence to enact social change. The male protagonists are often autobiographical stand-ins for the illusive penman whose inner wounding and scarring typify him as a sympathetic figure who struggles, undauntedly, to become a black hero. Regrettably, Himes's wounds can never heal fully because he fails to commit genuinely to an intimate bond with another person. For example, Himes never establishes a deeply trusting relationship which Richard Wright, even though both hunger for intimacy, because of the less established author's insecurities. The quality of hurt can never be constrained if another person gets close enough to scar him.

Yet, in the climax of his prison novel, Himes positions his protagonist, Jimmy, as *speaking out* in defiance of the prison's insistence that Rico go to the "degenerate's ward." The once reticent Jimmy decides to *fight* for his lover even if it means sacrificing his early parole because "the way he thought of it, he could not have waited to have been

a man."[128] Himes laments at the co-existing, horrifying relationship between disability and queerness. Simultaneously, his profound vision for a definition of black masculinity that includes *coming out* and *coming to voice* to defend his lover—in fiction rather than autobiography—suggests an aspiration to greater boldness in his life and art. Attempting to tell a narrative of fear and hurt to his readership, Himes reinvents a different narrative of his hunger for intimacy and his intense suffering in every work. Still, he *fights* on: "[A]s long as I write, whether it is published or not, I'm a writer, and no one can take that away. A fighter fights, a writer [must] write ..[.]"[129] The *Quality of Hurt*, an emblematic work in his corpus, advances to his readership that black lives matter.

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[128] Chester Himes. *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*. New York: Norton, 1998, 360. Print.

[129] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 117. Print.

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Chapter 3

Marronage and Re-Creation in *Assata*

"My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave." On October 5, 1998, Assata Shakur, who was born JoAnne Chesimard, declared these words in an open letter she presented to Pope John Paul II during his historic visit to Cuba.[1] This black female revolutionary currently lives there, in exile, under the protection of Fidel Castro after the Cuban government granted her political asylum in 1984 following her daring escape from an American prison. In 1987, Lawrence Hill & Co. published the author's lyrical and poignant autobiography, titled *Assata*, five years following her escape in 1979 from the maximum-security wing of the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey. While Shakur's first name--Assata--literally means "she who struggles," she presents her harrowing escape from the clutches of incarceration as possessing the spirit of a slave revolt.[2] The Black Liberation Army (BLA) task force orchestrated her daring flight from the confines of the prison's walls. In this context, she portrays herself as a runaway slave—a *maroon.* She escapes the captivity of a prison, which she refers to as a plantation, after serving six years out of a life sentence.[3] She was convicted on March 25, 1977 of the slaying of a white police officer, Werner Foerster. On May 2, 1973, she and two other members of the BLA, Zayd Shakur and Sundiata

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[1] Pope John Paul II visited Cuba from January 21-25, 1998. It was the first time a Pope has ever visited this island nation. Please see Assata Shakur's letter on her official website: *Assata Shakur Speaks*! 24 Apr. 14, 2016. *http://www.assatashakur.org/*.

[2] "Assata" is a name derived from West Africa and from the Yoruba language. See Evelyn Williams. *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. 77. Print.

[3] Shakur expresses this in *Eyes of the Rainbow*. Gloria Rolando. Perf. Assata Shakur. Imagines del Caribe, 1997. DVD.

Acoli, garnered national media attention after they were brutally apprehended by New Jersey State Troopers on a turnpike. In the aftermath of this incident, Shakur was seriously wounded and Zayd Shakur and Werner Foerster both died.

The details of this event and the subsequent legal trial suggest reasonable doubt concerning Shakur's physical ability to cause Foerster's death because her arm was seriously injured during this incident and her wounds were consistent with being assaulted with her hands raised while in the car—before Foerster's death.[4] Describing her dreadful apprehension she recalls: "I felt myself being dragged by the feet across the pavement. My chest was on fire. My blouse was purple with blood. I was convinced that my arm had been shot off and was hanging inside my shirt by a few strips of flesh. I could not feel it."[5] During an interview conducted by an anonymous interviewer, Shakur describes her brutal assault in even more striking detail when she notes: "I was half dead—hospital authorities had brought in a priest to give me last rites—but the police would not stop torturing me."[6] Similar to the omnipresence of death which pervades the genre of the slave narrative, Shakur's narrative reiterates her brushes with a possibly violent demise at the hands of the police who "tortur[e]" her. This description of her apprehension and interrogation as "torture" frames the New Jersey State troopers' vicious assault as not only extrajudicial but also protected by law and social customs when they punish her to avenge the loss of their fellow officer. Their heinousness ushers a barrage

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[4] See Evelyn Williams. *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. 77-120. Print.

[5] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 3. Print.

[6] This interview is found in *Still Black*, *Still Strong*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1993. 22. Print.

of unfair legal maneuvers that helped to ensure that Shakur could not receive a fair trial.[7] Furthermore, under New Jersey law her mere presence at the crime scene as a supposed accomplice amounted to sufficient cause to convict her.[8] In the months following her apprehension, she was indicted on several charges including armed robbery, murder, attempted murder and kidnapping.[9]

Shakur's affirmation of her status as a tortured, modern-day slave brings into focus the intricate ways in which American law and law enforcement continue to position black women's bodies as property—and therefore vulnerable to subjugation—in a socio-economic system in which the vestiges of American slavery are not relegated to the past but inform the current system of incarceration. This global system of exploitation disproportionately marginalizes people of color and there is an increasingly number of women who are incarcerated. Regrettably, this system treats them as expendable property who are violently brutalized during police interrogations and while incarcerated.[10] Lamentably, in this scheme prisoners are only valued as poorly compensated producers of everyday goods when they serve as a vital link in the horrendous prison-industrial

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[7] To consider the state's unfair legal maneuvers read the account given by Evelyn Williams, Shakur's aunt and attorney. Williams discusses this in her autobiography. See Evelyn Williams. *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. Print.

[8] Angela Davis describes this in further detail in the introduction to *Assata.* See Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. Print.

[9] Details concerning this are found in Margo V. Perkins. *Autobiography as Activism*. *Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000. Print.

[10] There are ubiquitous literary and public responses to the violence done to black bodies. For example, Rankine's bold statement about the brutality of black men can be applied to black women also, "because white men can't police their imagination black men are dying." See Claudine Rankine. *Citizen-An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014. 135. Also, Jesmyn Ward chronicles the loss of four black men who were close to her in her memoir. Jesmyn Ward. *Men We Reaped*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

complex. [11] From this vantage point, Shakur pens her autobiography to illuminate that the American prison system is a massive assemblage of plantations that support the global exploitation of people of color--modern day chattel--who are enslaved in this broader capitalistic network. Therefore, the autobiographer positions her *marronage* as a radical act of self-assertion of a current political prisoner. While Assata Shakur's narrative was published following her exile to Cuba, she defies a key tenet of the autobiographical genre--coherence--by incorporating many poems into the narrative. These poems render the narrative as polyvocal and characterize it as a defiant work in form and content because she opposes the law of genre while transgressing the American legal system.[12]

The FBI aggressively harassed Shakur because of her membership in the Black Panther Party and later the Black Liberation Army both of which were considered terrorist organizations. To fight against these allegations, she presents herself in her autobiography as a political prisoner who is tortured repeatedly by an unjust legal system that positions her as a prisoner-of-war. According to Evelyn Williams, Shakur's attorney and aunt, a political prisoner is "someone who has been illegally incarcerated because of his or her opinions or who, having been convicted of a crime, is brutalized while in prison because of his or her opinions or who is convicted of committing a crime for political

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[11]To read more about the increasing number of women of color who are becoming incarcerated see Stormy Ogden's Essay "The Prison-Industrial Complex in Indigenous California" where she notes that whereas Native American women comprise 34 percent of the prison population, they only make up 8.3 percent of the general population. Julia Sudbury. Ed. *Global Lockdown*: *Race*, *Gender and the Prison-Industrial Complex*. New York: Routledge, 2005. 55. Print. Also, Michelle Alexander notes that the number of black men who are incarcerated is staggering. For example, in Washington D.C. it is estimated that three out of four young black men (mainly from the poorest neighborhoods) will likely serve time in prison. See Michelle Alexander. *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press, 2012. 1-10. Print.

[12] Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell express that one of the main tenets of genre is that "genres are not to be mixed." Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronnell. "The Law of Genres." *Critical Inquiry*: *Narrative*. 7, No. 1. (Autumn, 1980). 55-81. Print.

reasons."[13] Throughout *Assata*, the protagonist is subjected to discriminatory legal tactics employed by the police and judicial system to punish her because of the autobiographer's commitment to political activism both inside and outside of prison. To emphasize the egregiousness of her treatment, she vacillates between describing herself as a political prisoner and a prisoner-of-war who is tortured by agents of the American legal system before and after incarceration.

Her descriptions of the violence which the state enacts on black bodies, and specifically women, is disturbing when considering the larger political context in which the U.S. military orchestrates the Vietnam War to promote democracy, supposedly, by harassing and killing people of color both at home and abroad. In her narrative, Shakur disparages the U.S. government's drafting of black soldiers--who die or are disabled in record numbers--to fight in this misguided war.[14] She depicts the white establishment as mobilizing blacks as soldiers—property *sine qua non*—in a capitalistic scheme in which they are situated as pawns to increase their oppressors' property ownership and wealth.[15] Her indictment is particularly searing because black soldiers were often forced to serve as infantrymen in Vietnam where they were routinely captured as prisoners-of-war.[16]

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[13] Evelyn Williams. *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. 23. 2005. Print.

[14] To read more about this, see James E. Westheider. *The African American Experience in Vietnam*: *Brothers in Arms*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008. 1-50. Print.

[15] Shakur suggests this when she reflects on learning that George Washington wasn't simply fighting for the freedom of all races during the Revolutionary war, but was actually fighting to secure the interests of rich, land-owning whites. See Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 33. Print.

[16] Shakur relates this when she notes that "My friends were dying from OD and going into the Army." Her statement is telling because it suggests that a war was occurring in inner-city neighborhoods as well as in Vietnam. Whereas many blacks veterans became addicted to drugs following military service, many were also plagued by this blight while remaining imprisoned in their neighborhoods. See Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 33. Print.

Therefore, the autobiographer repudiates American democracy when she challenges conventional notions of military heroism by demonstrating that this institution readily mobilizes black soldiers as property and predisposes them to becoming prisoners-of-war when they are conscripted to fight in the frontlines. The torture which black soldiers experienced during Vietnam, as prisoners-of-war, reflected the sheer cruelty which political prisoners endured when they were interrogated, disciplined, and constantly policed as modern day slaves of the state.[17] To illuminate this discourse, Shakur positions herself as a tortured prisoner-of-war whose *marronage*--as a political exile living in Cuba--continues to defy her status as property. This black revolutionary figure continues to distrust that she can ever receive a fair trial in New Jersey and the Castro government faithfully protects her from extradition despite the United States' efforts to prosecute her as an American citizen.

Shakur additionally offers her narrative as a testimony of protest against the United States' discriminatory legal system, which hinders blacks of lower socioeconomic incomes from obtaining equal access to adequate legal representation even as this blighted system uses unfair legal maneuvering to prevent black revolutionaries from obtaining fair trials. By representing herself as a modern day slave and prisoner-of-war, her autobiography also develops a case for her insubordination to the state's horrific means of disciplining black revolutionaries through violence. Her narrative becomes a testament to the resilience of black revolutionaries to challenge the state's apparatus of

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[17] Though there are not many narratives of black prisoners of war in existence, to read about their torture and the different ways in which they deal with the ideals of patriotism which pervade U.S. military culture, see "Faith's Fickle Covenant: African-American Captive Narratives from the Vietnam War" in Tara T. Green. *From the Plantation to the Prison*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008. 55-85. Print.

violence through insubordination against the white power structure. Shakur notes that physical resistance is often necessary to promote the social empowerment of blacks. However, her narrative also emphasizes that physical violence is not the most effective means of orchestrating social change for blacks.[18] Rather, she invokes *marronage* as a form of physical and ideological resistance against white dominance that often denigrates black subjectivity in general, and black womanhood in particular.

To combat the ubiquitous marginalization of black culture and black womanhood, Shakur represents her decision to become a mother, despite her incarceration, as emblematic of her heroism. In her rendering, female black beauty and black motherhood are weapons that defy the positioning of blacks as property in American society. Throughout Assata's narrative, she promotes her status as a race woman--a black heroine or lady of courage who is willing to battle, encourage dissent, and possibly die for the black community to support its rights and privileges.[19] The author's self-referential naming of her narrative supports her enduring legacy as a race woman through a rhetorical act whereby she collapses the distinctions among her name, body, persona, and the form and content of her narrative. The autobiographer's first name brings into focus her ongoing struggle as a black female heroine. However, her middle name "Olugbala"

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[18] The autobiographer notes this in *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 111. Print.

[19] This definition, however, calls into question the elusive nature of heroism in general and specifically black heroism. Any action may be considered heroic in one context and barbaric in another. However, the prevailing typology of blacks as innately savage and violent only highlights and puts pressure on the moral relativity of their feats particularly if they are black militants. Furthermore, Assata's status as a black woman, aspiring towards heroism, presents the compounding threat of her race and gender to white patriarchy and to black men, such as black male nationalists, who often perceive themselves as benefitting from keeping black women in their so called inferior societal position. To read more about the challenges of characterizing black heroism see Jerry H. Bryant. *Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. 1-20. Print.

and her last name "Shakur" mean "Love for the people" and "The Thankful" respectively.[20] From this perspective, Shakur's naming of her narrative is a strategic act of self-promotion and community affirmation. Although Shakur depicts the wretched conditions that black revolutionaries endure, she also portrays black womanhood--similar to her name--as having a salvific capacity when she depicts black motherhood as promoting the enduring self-determination of the Black Power Movement. Furthermore, Shakur's decision to become a mother while imprisoned renders the personal as political when she reclaims her body from the clutches of the criminal justice system which attempts to destabilize her femininity by repeatedly detaining her as a ward of the state in both women's and men's prisons. Despite these terrifying circumstances, the protagonist challenges the degradation of the penal system by creating bonds of solidarity with other black women and by becoming a mother while incarcerated. Though her status as an incarcerated mother is fraught with sorrow, her motherhood offers her hope and she re-creates black motherhood as central to the Black Power Movement by presenting it as evoking the ongoing nature of black revolutionary zeal.

In this chapter, I assert that Assata Shakur fights for self-possession in her autobiography by depicting herself as a female maroon who escapes from the confines of the American legal system that attempts to subjugate her as a prisoner-of-war. I first examine Shakur's representation as a maroon who is subjugated repeatedly by the confining American legal system, particularly during her bouts of incarceration, before she escapes and gains political asylum in Cuba. Her continuous *flight* to evade the legal

[20] While "Olugbala" is derived from Yoruba, a West African language, "Shakur" derives from Arabic. See Evelyn Williams. *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. 77. Print.

boundaries posed by the white establishment suggests the capacity for blacks to emerge as heroes—and to disrupt their status as property--by fomenting militant resistance and by promoting their community's physical, psychological, and spiritual movement despite their subjugation.

Then, I turn my attention to the ingenious ways in which Shakur depicts herself as not only a maroon, but a prisoner-of-war during her detainment in the hospital and various prisons. She presents both tropes to challenge conventional narratives that justify the utility of disciplinary measures in prison and the violence that accompanies American notions of military heroism. From this standpoint, I will analyze the disturbing ways in which Shakur depicts the white establishment as torturing black bodies—through police interrogation and consequent incarceration—as a recursion to the subjection that occurred in slavery. While analyzing this objectification of black bodies, I will explore how this dehumanization was informed by the ungendering of slaves from the moment of their capture in Africa. Therefore, I suggest that Shakur's narrative critiques the legal system as complicit in perpetuating a system of modern day slavery when it attempts to ungender her by torturing and detaining the inmate during her hospitalization in both men's and women's prisons.[21] From a larger perspective, Shakur critiques the racial, class and gender inequalities in the United States during the Vietnam era by presenting herself as a prisoner of war—seized and tortured property—to suggest the absurdity of American democracy and its complicity in debasing people of color across the African Diaspora.

In the next section, I will interrogate Shakur's fraught status as a mother in prison, and while doing so, I consider how the health challenges that she experiences as a female

[21] To consider this ungendering, I will engage later in this chapter Spillers analysis of this concept in her foundational essay Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17, no. 2. (Summer, 1987). Print.

inmate are exacerbated by her pregnancy. Shakur frames the austerity of her prenatal care as similar to that of pregnant slaves of another era and she depicts her separation from her daughter, following birth, as resonant with the disintegration of family bonds which slaves experienced during their ordeal. Despite these continuities, Shakur heroically decides to become a mother during her incarceration and she finds love and a renewed sense of purpose despite her entrapment. She represents her pregnancy and right to bear a child as coinciding with her ownership of her body, the prospects of black motherhood to engender black female solidarity, and the re-centering of black women's roles as pivotal to the ongoing revolutionary ethos of the Black Power Movement. The autobiographer's heroic depiction of black motherhood as a form of re-creation attests to her narrative's overarching goal of encouraging textual healing—a pedagogical form of resistance in which she guides readers to examine the destructive ways in which white dominance has marginalized black femininity.[22] By affirming the beauty of love as a force that mobilizes black female solidarity, she suggests that self- and community-affirmation can serve as powerful buffers against white supremacy. Lastly, I will consider Shakur's continued significance as a black female revolutionary figure whose *marronage* through political exile informs the current diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba.

Marronage **in** ***Assata***

In her autobiography, Shakur depicts herself as a female maroon to critique the American legal system for stripping away the citizenship rights of blacks in general, and

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[22] Griffin coins the term *textual healing* in a signature article. Although I will elaborate on this concept in further detail, she suggests that several black women writers have created a tradition in which they defy the racist and sexist ways in which the white power structure positions black women's bodies by reimagining their bodies as beautiful and empowered in contemporary black fiction. See Farah Jasmine Griffin. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery." *Callaloo*. 19. 2. (Spring, 1996). Print.

notably black women. As a freedom fighter, she characterizes the criminal justice system as torturing and enslaving blacks by stealing their rights and privileges as part of a broader objectification of black women by the criminal justice system and mainstream American culture. Furthermore, her *marronage* symbolizes her valiant efforts to strive for personhood and black female solidarity while defying the brutality of the white establishment. Shakur characterizes her aspirations toward black heroism as informed by the legacy of Harriet Tubman—the African-American abolitionist, conductor of the Underground Railroad, and former Union spy during the Civil War. Shakur recalls: "Harriet Tubman had always been my heroine, and she had symbolized everything that was Black resistance for me."[23] Shakur's statement is telling because her reverence for Tubman's brand of heroism implies that the narrator embraces an image of the race woman as a courageous runaway slave, soldier, and militant mother. While motherhood often connotes a softer image of femininity in dominant culture, Tubman is often imagined as the mother of the Underground Railroad—a militant mother who protects, defends, and releases slaves from the bondages of life on the plantations while guiding other runaways to safety.[24] Shakur's venerates Tubman as a sister, black power revolutionary figure--a race woman who through a spirit of maternal resistance encourages others to fight against racial and gender oppression as a female maroon.

The autobiographer's veneration of Tubman's *marronage* is part of a broader appreciation of black women warriors who fight against white domination. She describes

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[23] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 175. Print.

[24]Assata defies this "softer" depiction of motherhood by challenging the notions espoused by the "cult of true womanhood"—a proscriptive set of feminine virtues which arose during the Victorian era and which still affects American gender relations. These virtues included piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. See Trimiko Melancon. *Unbought and Unbossed*: *Transgressive Black Women*, *Sexuality*, *and Representation*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. Print.

this rich tradition in a pivotal scene in Gloria Rolando's documentary on Shakur--*Eyes of the Rainbow.* Early in the movie she says:

> I come from a tradition of women maroons, cimarrons, who didn't just try to escape from oppression, but were totally—mind, body, spirit—committed to resisting and committed to winning. Whether it was Nanny in Jamaica who fought against the enslavers; whether it was Harriet Tubman who helped to free more than seven hundred slaves…I think I come from a very strong history…[.][25]

Shakur proclaims her *marronage* to attest to the insurmountable ethos of black power that not only stirs within her but also resounds in Tubman, Nanny, and other black female heroines from other time periods and places across the African diaspora. The protagonist—a black woman warrior—commits to an ethos of maternal resistance that coincides with her self-promotion as a race woman in her narrative. More broadly, she strives to position black women as powerful and beautiful--daring and dancing maroons--in light of the egregious ways in which they have been characterized by American popular culture.

Critics analyze *marronage* in various ways.[26] However, I analyze Shakur's *marronage*—her all-encompassing battle for liberation against the white power structure—by engaging Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage*. In this monograph, Roberts claims that scholars often define captivity and freedom as static ontological states while they disregard what he deems to be the most salient characteristic of *marronage*—

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[25] *Eyes of the Rainbow*. Dir. Gloria Rolando. Perf. Assata Shakur. Imagines del Caribe, 1997.

[26] To read further on this concept see Cynthia James. *The Maroon Narrative: Caribbean Literature in English Across Boundaries, Ethnicities, and Centuries. Portsmouth*: Heinemann, 2002. Another foundational text on marronage is Richard Price. *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in The Americas*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1979. For a consideration of black female *marronnage* see Karla Gottlieb. *A History of Nanny*: the Mother of Us All, *Leader of the Winward Jamaican Maroons*. Asmara: Africa World Press, Inc., 2000. Print.

flight. Roberts positions flight at the nucleus of defining freedom and unfreedom and he presents *marronage* as a multifaceted, continuous act of flight that involves four interconnected elements. Movement, or the capacity of actors to regulate the chosen directions of their actions, is the *modus operandi* of *marronage* and is the dominant principle to which the others are intimately linked. From the beginning of Shakur's narrative, she situates movement—both physical and ideological—as vital to her *marronage* by opening the narrative in *medias res*. Yet, Shakur's strategy of employing *medias res* is not confined to her prose, but also her poetry. For example, the autobiographer situates the poem "Affirmation" as a preface to the story. This poem is structured with the anaphora "I believe" and it forwards Shakur's optimism in the beauty of life and love to conquer all. The poem's radiant images of nature inspire hope despite the harrowing images of war and law enforcement personnel who broadly comprise America's military and prison industrial complexes which she captures as "bloodthirsty maggots prayed to and saluted." The autobiographer interweaves many vivid stanzas of poetry to create a moving narrative—both emotionally and thematically—to create a rich heteroglossia. This dynamic form situates her holistic strivings as an exemplary race woman as a synecdoche for the ongoing revolutionary fervor of the Black Power Movement.

The second "pillar" of *marronage*, "distance," is theorized as the spatial and temporal quality that divides a person or group in a current place or circumstance from a future place or circumstance. The kinetic ethos of liberation that empowers Shakur's *marronage* is reiterated in various time periods across the African diaspora. Her forbearers—a rich ancestry of woman warriors—create the multidimensional pathway for

her flight from Clinton Correctional Facility in New Jersey to her ongoing fugitive state as an exile in Cuba.

According to Roberts, "property" is the element of *marronage* that may be defined as a tangible, legal, and material object that is owned by a person, organization or state. Shakur's status as a modern day *maroon* is particularly disturbing in light of the ongoing ways in which black women have been objectified and fight against their status as property in an America in which their bodies once served as the engines of capitalistic production during slavery. In this vein, this revolutionary figure exacts ownership of her self-hood, her sexuality, and her desire for motherhood by resisting--through movement--the state's ability to confine her as a slave and prisoner-of-war. The white establishment attempts to strip away her rights and privileges while destabilizing her gender formation through violence in spaces of captivity including men's and women's prisons. However, Shakur relentlessly resists this subordination and encourages others to do so despite her incarceration.

Purpose is the ultimate pillar of *marronage* and it refers to the overarching goal initiated by a person or a group.[27] I suggest that Shakur's primary goal is to encourage blacks from across the African diaspora to continue to fight against racial oppression in all forms even as she seeks to empower black women through her autobiography's ability to affect textual healing. As a black female revolutionary, Shakur's image is denigrated in an American society in which black women have been debased as unruly, licentious, crafty and ugly.[28] To challenge these and other stereotypes associated with black

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[27] Neil Roberts. *Freedom as Marronage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. Print.

[28] Ibid. 67-90.

femininity, I suggest that Shakur writes her narrative to encourage *textual healing* by representing black femininity as powerful and beautiful. While I riff on textual healing in chapter two, here I embrace Farrah Jasmine Griffin's coining of this term to signify the writing strategies which Shakur uses to document the pain, domination and exploitation imposed upon black women and their methods for encouraging readers to re-imagine black female bodies as sites of healing, pleasure and resistance.[29] Therefore, I employ textual healing to consider how Shakur reaffirms the black female body and black female solidarity as beautiful and valuable while eschewing the efforts of the white power structure to debase them. I also utilize this concept to uplift black women in a system that was designed to wholly reject them while benefiting from their labor.[30]

Assata Shakur: Prisoner of War and Freedom Fighter

Shakur represents herself as both a maroon and prisoner-of-war in her autobiography to critique the prison and military as part of a larger system of law enforcement agencies whose disciplinary measures strip blacks, and black women specifically, of their rights and privileges while ungendering them. This attempt to erase the gender of black women has vestiges in slavery. According to Hortense Spillers, black men and women became ungendered from the moment they were captured as slaves in Africa through designs intended to debase them as chattel. These strategies, including the dismembering of the captives' bodies, created an ideological shift whereby black bodies

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[29] See Griffin. "Textual Healing: Claiming Black Women's Bodies, the Erotic and Resistance in Contemporary Novels of Slavery." The John Hopkins University Press 19, no. 2. (Spring, 1996). Print.

[30] In this case, I refer to the dual meanings of black women's "labor" as both work and the act of giving birth to not only suggest the historical ways in which slavery relegated black women's bodies as sites of economic profit through reproduction, but also the continued ways in which black women are exploited by an economic system which relies on compensating their work on the cheap. To read more about this interconnection, see Dorothy Roberts. *Killing the Black Body*: *Race*, *Reproduction*, *and the Meaning of Liberty*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997. 22-56. Print.

were stripped of their personhood and gender identities while being relegated to flesh. Spillers notes that this ungendering had lasting repercussions for black women who continue to be objectified and were disenfranchised from citizenship rights because of the cruel system of patrimony which excluded them from inheritance rights and doubly jeopardized them as black and female.[31] Therefore, Shakur portrays herself as a captured slave and a prisoner-of-war to indict the American legal system and military establishment as possessing overlapping structures of discipline that dehumanize blacks in ways reminiscent of slavery and the plantation.

When Shakur is apprehended by the New Jersey police and imprisoned for Foerster's murder, she represents the police and prison guards as complicit in torturing her as a captured slave and prisoner-of-war. This black revolutionary figure characterizes police officers and other agents of the state and federal government as torturers to indict America, during the Vietnam era, for supposedly attempting to preserve democracy overseas while sanctioning the savage treatment of blacks, both at home and abroad, for capitalistic ends. When discussing Shakur's torture, I define this concept based on Article 1 of the United Nation's Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.[32] This legal framework defines torture as not only physical acts but also mental acts of intimidation, punishment, and coercion. Following this definition, I characterize torture as the systematic infliction of physical and mental torment on detained individuals by state or federal officials for the purposes of policing

[31] See Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17, no. 2. (Summer, 1987). Print.

[32] The Convention against Torture, available at www.un.org (accessed June 1, 2016).

and it includes terrorizing individuals and groups to elicit confession, information, or intimidation.[33]

Early in Shakur's account, after the skirmish between the Black Liberation Army and the New Jersey police, Shakur is hospitalized because of her severe injuries. During her stay on the ward, she describes being handcuffed to the bed as police officers interrogate her. Depicting them as Nazis—and likely Ku Klux Klan members—Shakur suggests that these law enforcement officials are part of a larger system that victimizes blacks as prisoners-of-war. After her arrest, these officials use an assortment of tactics to intimidate her:

> Every day there were three shifts of police. When they changed shifts, the two troopers would salute the sergeants. Some saluted an army salute, but others saluted like the nazis did in Germany. They held their hands in front of them and clicked their heels. I couldn't believe it. One day one of them came in and gave a speech about how he fought in World War II on the wrong side. He went on and on and there was no question that he believed everything he said. He talked about how messed up the world is. How decent people couldn't walk the streets. He said that if Hitler had won, the world wouldn't be in the mess it is in today, that niggers like me, no-good niggers, wouldn't be going around shooting new jersey state troopers.[34]

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[33] My definition derives from the aforementioned article and from Pallitto's exploration of this concept in his introduction to *Torture and State Violence in the United States*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Print. However, my analysis also considers torture as informing a stripping of the "inmate's" personhood in a total institution as defined by Erving Goffman. Asylums: *Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1961. 1-45. Print.

[34] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 10. Print.

The hospital room becomes a militarized zone, similar to a prison cell, as Shakur recalls that she is assaulted and violated as property of the state. Further exacerbating this situation, the autobiographer recalls that the New Jersey police officers perform Nazi and U.S. Army-styled salutes. She infers that each of these organizations employ pageantry--as artifices of patriotism--to conceal physical violence while psychologically terrorizing people of color. The autobiographer's comparisons suggest that the U.S. military is part of an expansive network of hate groups that not only subjugates people of color internationally, but also locally. Shakur intimates that the New Jersey police officers, the military, prison and legal system are comprised by a hate group with a global network—the Ku Klux Klan. The author not only suggests this by recalling the police officers' symbols and gestures which invoke loyalty to the Nazis, but she emphasizes this at the textual level where she strategically replaces the letter "c" with "k" in key words such as "Amerika" and "kourt" to reflect that the Klan's social and political influence is well-concealed and adept at shape-shifting so that its remains a lasting fixture which disenfranchises blacks at every level in our society. Nazi-fashioned groups such as the Ku-Klux Klan have lynched and tortured blacks since slavery while attempting to elicit confessions of guilt from them for supposed crimes. Therefore, Shakur recasts the "good order and discipline" mantra of police agencies during this period as veils of horror which are created to mask the modern day lynching of black bodies in police detainment, the military and prison.

While paramilitary groups such as the Ku Klux Klan often wore gleaming white robes and hoods and Nazi emblems while ceremoniously burning black bodies, they also symbolically attempted to ungender blacks during torture by removing their sexual

organs. In this passage, Shakur captures the police as attempting to ungender her while she lies in a hospital bed and when they deride her as a "no-good nigger" rather than offering the civil protection that they normally accord to white women.[35] Patriarchal notions of heroism are often maintained by the military and law enforcement agencies through the supposed preservation of white women from supposedly barbarous black men while situating black women as sexually accessible.[36] From this perspective, the Ku Klux Klan was often comprised of and protected by the legal apparatus of many states because it was often depicted as a heroic organization that sought to preserve white male superiority while supposedly protecting white women. However, Shakur indicts this brand of heroism as particularly disturbing because these racist and sexist dynamics tend to pervade the very fabric of institutions that are reportedly created to protect all American citizens—the military and prison.

Shakur's recollection leaves no doubt that this racialized violence even pervades the everyday experiences of blacks when she describes its pervasiveness in a seemingly mundane hospital which becomes a scene of subjection. The autobiographer captures the whiteness of the hospital setting—white bodies, white lab coats, and bright lights—to portray the insidious ways in which medical discourses are racialized in Western culture. Scientific ideals of cleanliness and sterility reinforce Manichean notions of racial value that uplift whiteness as the apex of civility while degrading blackness. For Shakur, this hospital scene is harrowing because her sense of vulnerability, due to her wounding, is

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[35] Ibid 10.

[36] See Jerry H. Bryant. *Racial Violence in the African American Novel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. 1-20. Print.

further compounded by the images of whiteness that mentally reinforce that she is under surveillance and dominated by the white establishment while she appears to be stripped of all human and legal rights as property.

Shakur's later descriptions of the tactics police officers used to intimidate her even more explicitly suggest that she is a prisoner-of-war when she recalls that these "Nazis" tortured her by preventing her from sleeping, spitting in her food, toying with their guns, and turning down the temperature in the room to a freezing point to such an extent that it becomes as ghastly as a torture chamber. Presenting her experience as that of a captured slave, Shakur recollects providing her attendant nurse her "slave name" followed by her patient number to facilitate her care. The autobiographer's descriptions of these offenses also create overt comparisons to the subjugation of Jews at the hands of Nazis in concentration camps during WWII.[37] She represents her victimization as so thoroughly orchestrated that she does not even appear to possess the rights (often ignored) that are accorded to prisoners-of-war. After the detainee illuminates this scene of interrogation, she depicts the hospital room as a site of arraignment—in effect, a court room—as a judge enters the room and a policeman bombards her with charges related to Foerster's death. She is forced to enter pleas despite her requests to be represented by counsel.

Her recollection implies that if wounded black revolutionaries can not gain reprieve from law enforcement's punishment, then their able-bodied comrades are at dire risk for egregious harm. Furthermore, her description of being hospitalized because her arm is nearly torn from her body is striking. She undergoes medical treatment to fix it

[37] To read about the atrocities which Jews endured during the Holocaust in comparison to the struggles of slaves see Thomas, Laurence M. *Vessels of Evil*. *American Slavery and the Holocaust*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993. Print.

while she is also being "strong-armed" or coerced by the police who attempt to badger her into admitting culpability for Foerster's murder. These corrupt officials also hope that they can break her willpower so she can incriminate other revolutionaries and divulge sensitive information about the operations of her paramilitary group.

After Shakur's wretched hospital visit, she later experiences repeated bouts of incarceration in both men's and women's prisons en route to her trial for Foerster's murder. The autobiographer portrays the carceral system's harsh measures as part of the legal system's objective to dehumanize and torture her as a slave and prisoner-of-war. On the first day of her imprisonment in Clinton Correctional Facility for Women, Shakur recalls the overwhelming sense of entrapment that she experiences upon entering her prison cell after she is released from the hospital. Her recollection suggests the intricate ways in which her prison cell is designed to torture her:

> I was put in a cell with two doors. A door of bars was on the inside, and directly outside of that was a heavy metal door with a tiny peephole that i could barely see through. The cell contained a cot with a rough green blanket on it and a dirty white wooden bench with a hundred names scratched on it. Adjacent to the cell was the bathroom, with a sink, a toilet, and a shower. Hanging above the sink was the bottom of a pot or pan. It was supposed to serve as a mirror, but I could barely see myself in it. There was one window covered by three thick metal screens facing a parking lot, a field, and, in the distance, a wooded area.
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> I walked around the cell, to the bath, to the window, to the door. Back and forth until I had tired myself out.[38]

[38] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 45. Print.

The prison cell contains layers of entrapment that are designed to torture and humiliate the inmate. Caged like an animal, she feels taunted by the prospects of escape and the glimpses of freedom conveyed by the parking lot and the broader landscape. The bareness is reminiscent of the bleak accommodations of slave quarters, military barracks, and prisoner-of-war camps that have entrapped black women and people of color. Yet, Shakur recalls that names were scratched on the wooden bench to commemorate the identities of the many women who occupied this space and who attempted to exert ownership of their bodies and minds despite the uniform efforts of the prison system to destroy them. Furthermore, Shakur's recollection of the meager pots and pans that were afforded to the prisoners—to be used as mirrors—is telling. Considering that the inability of prisoners-of-war to adequately groom themselves is a key facet of torture, she excoriates the carceral system for attempting to subdue the beauty, resilience, and strength of black women by punturing their self-esteem in prison. The narrator describes this prison cell's design as equipped to taunt inmates with their freedom even as the prison's admissions procedures reinforce their subjugation.

The prison's entry requirements reflect those experienced by Jewish inmates held captive in concentration camps in Nazi Germany. She presents the sexual invasiveness of "processing" as not only reminiscent of those endured by Jewish inmates, but also reflective of the wretched "seasoning" methods endured by newly captured slaves.[39] When the protagonist enters prison, she details her strip search:

> There were two groups of women: those who were returning from kourt and those who, like me, were new admissions. We were directed to stand in little booths and

[39] To read about the "seasoning" of slaves see C.L.R. James. *The Black Jacobins*: *Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 1-70. Print.

> take off all our clothes. Then we were told to turn around, squat, run our fingers through our hair, lift up our feet and open our mouths. This was for everybody. The next step was only for the new admissions. They put us in shower stalls without curtains, we were told to take a shower, and then were given this stuff which they told us to put in our hair and on our pubic hairs and wash with it.[40]

The strip-search positions women—like products on a conveyer belt—to be sexually violated while they lose any semblance of sexual privacy. Ironically, the rigidity of the prison's hygienic requirements are reminiscent of those in Nazi concentration camps. And yet, the physical fitness tests that the inmates endure, while naked, are curiously similar to those which prospective military personnel must undergo before they are given physical clearance to enter the armed forces.[41] While the female prisoners must cleanse all bodily hair--including pubic hair--to assure the removal of any existing lice, they are sanitized like animals in this space of surveillance. Shortly after describing these requirements, Shakur notes that the most intrusive aspect of processing is the "internal search" in which: "You sit on the edge of this table and the nurse holds your legs open and sticks a finger in your vagina and moves it around. She has a plastic glove on[.]…"[42] This not only infuriates the protagonist, but emphasizes her status as a modern day slave when she describes the unkempt doctor as "ratt[ling] diseases off like he was an auctioneer and ask[ing] me if I had had them."[43] Shakur feels like a slave who must

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[40] Ibid 83.

[41] *Today's Military.* April. 2015. <http://todaysmilitary.com/videos/meps-physical-exam.htlm>.

[42] Ibid 84.

[43] Ibid 84.

forcibly submit to horrendous "seasoning" procedures to be made "fit" for servitude as her body is violated by these sexual, medical procedures that slave women often endured while their bodies were paraded on auction blocks. Furthermore, while she experiences her loss of sexual privacy as a theft, she also infers that her experience is reminiscent of the historical ways in which white slave-owners raped black women for pleasure and profit.

Shakur depicts key moments in her narrative when she defies the prison authorities' attempts to depersonalize her by using torturing acts similar to those exacted onto prisoners-of-war in concentration camps. Throughout her narrative, she asserts her personhood by insisting on being called by the name she chooses, and she particular insists on this during her incarceration when she is often challenged by the authorities to submit to the prison's etiquette which are designed to infantilize inmates. During one incident, the author recalls that while she is imprisoned in the Clinton Correction Facility, Mrs. Butterworth—the white female warden--strips her of her name and attempts to infantilize her by not only refusing to call the author "Ms. Shakur" or "Ms. Chesimard," but as "Assata" or one of her "girls," even though the prison warden forbids the inmates to address her by her first name.[44] This double standard is particularly acute when the warden also insists that the "girls…behave like ladies."[45] Though Mrs. Butterworth requires the inmates to respect her as an adult and authority figure, she diminishes them as wards of the state in need of rehabilitation and training. Her statement also reminds the reader that her leadership style in this prison is fashioned, from a historical perspective,

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[44] Ibid 47.

[45] Ibid 47.

by an institution with a benighted past--the penitentiary. This institution's cultural mores sought to re-educate inmates—who were often regarded as degenerates—through punitive measures. While the prison warden's refusal to call Shakur by her last name attests to the protagonist's depersonalization in prison, it also suggests the protagonist's dis-ownership from the benefits of patrimony--including civic protection--because of her race and gender.[46] Assata retorts to the warden that if she refuses to properly address her, then: "that's okay by me, if you can stand me calling you Miss Bitch whenever I see you. I don't give anybody respect when they don't respect me."[47] Assata insults and objectifies Mrs. Butterworth--by renaming her--while she asserts her equality and disdain for being positioned as property. The protagonist's renaming by the warden echoes the social conventions of slavery, the military and prisoner-of-war camps in which the individual is often renamed to reinforce a group identity and a status as property.[48] When captives are renamed, the authorities can readily torture members of the group with less corporate resistance because renaming likely decreases the affective ties among captured individuals. Despite the prison system's attempts to depersonalize the inmates, Shakur portrays black female solidarity and motherhood as powerful forces of self and community affirmation.

The Re-Creation of Black Motherhood in *Assata*

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[46] See Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17, no. 2. (Summer, 1987). Print.

[47] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987.48. Print.

[48] Erving Goffman. Asylums: *Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1961, 15-67. Print.

In Shakur's narrative, she recalls the tremendous challenges she faces when she takes ownership of her sexuality and body during her incarceration by deciding to become a mother. In her narrative, she represents the destructiveness of the prison system by portraying the horrific ways in which it separates black women from their children—a scenario that is reminiscent of the familial separation that occurred during slavery.[49] However, Shakur repositions black motherhood as empowering. She exerts ownership of her sexuality and finds romantic love while confined. Furthermore, motherhood inspires a renewed determination in the heroine to escape prison because of her commitment to her child. For the autobiographer, black motherhood is a vibrant force that promotes the affirmation of black female solidarity.[50] Therefore, Shakur places black women as central to the enduring perpetuation of a black revolutionary ethos. And yet, the narrator's efforts to encourage black women to take pride in themselves develops, in part, from the challenges she experienced in affirming her own self-worth.

In her narrative, Shakur presents influential maternal figures as unwittingly instilling self-hatred and promoting racial accommodationist values in her upbringing, which damaged her self-respect. Therefore, her desire to become a mother is informed, partly, by her yearning to inculcate pride and self-respect to her child and to successive generations of freedom fighters. The narrator recalls that during her youth her grandmother would often denigrate her physical features—and particularly her hair—as evidence of her inferiority and lack of beauty:

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[50] To consider the capacity of motherhood to inspire black female solidarity see Simone Alexander. *Mother Imagery in the Novels of Afro-Caribbean Women*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001. 1-55. Print.

> I hated for my grandmother to comb my hair. And she hated to comb it. My hair has always been thick and long and nappy and it would give my grandmother hell. She has straight hair, so she was impatient with mine. When she combed my hair she always remembered something I had done wrong the day before or earlier that day and popped me in the head with the comb. She would always tell me during these sessions, "Now, when you grow up, I want you to marry some man with 'good hair' so your children will have good hair. You hear me?" "Yes, Grandmother." …My grandmother just said what everybody knew was a common fact: good hair was better than bad hair, meaning that straight hair was better than nappy hair.[51]

Shakur relates that her grandmother tortured her into confessing her lack of self-worth due to the elderly woman's fixation with European standards of beauty. Regrettably, her grandmother often displaced her aggression by harshly combing the young girl's hair, and while doing so, the old lady's rough grooming practices become associated with punishment—and particularly the dehumanizing hygienic practices which she experienced during the processing phase of her incarceration. The dehumanizing strategies which the inmate experienced during admission are exacerbated by the institution's impeding of her ability to groom herself during confinement. The narrator depicts the grandmother's chastisement as meted out not only to avenge the child's earlier mistake, but also to punish her for her lack of beauty according to conventional western standards. Thus, in her grandmother's eyes, Assata's bad character is symbolized by the twisted knots of her kinky hair. From the old lady's perspective, the child's depravity and degraded looks are conditions which can only be ameliorated if the young

[51] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 31.

girl grows up and procreates with a white man who can thereby legitimate her through the union's interracial offspring which can improve the physical features of future generations and possibly lead to an enhanced social standing. While the old lady's admonishment suggests a eugenicist notion of racial uplift, her punishment of Shakur becomes an omen for the challenges which she is forced to endure in a society which will constantly attempt to diminish her self-worth.

During Shakur's imprisonment, she describes her initial choice to forgo having children as informed by the lamentable separation of slave women from their offspring. However, she also experiences a change of heart during her incarceration. After pondering this significant decision, she recognizes that if she exercises her right to bear a child she could further exert ownership of her body while creating future generations of black revolutionaries. When Shakur first considers whether or not to conceive a child in these bleak circumstances, she rejects the possibility because she can not envision herself as a black revolutionary figure *and* mother. She initially relates the pain and suffering which slave women faced when they were forcibly separated from their children as resonating with the broken family units which exited in the prison system and black communities during that period. This comparison at first stifles the black heroine who envisions her *marronage*--and desire for movement--as so thorough that she is unsure about her ability to withstand the challenges of motherhood.[52] For Assata, history appears to bleed into the present as soon as she ponders the challenges of black motherhood.

However, the narrator experiences a change of heart and decides to become a mother while imprisoned when she recognizes that comparing her options for

[52] Ibid 93.

motherhood to that of enslaved mothers unintentionally reinforces white superiority. In short, this analogy would not only lead her to forgo an important life decision based on fear, but also narrow the prospects for her personal empowerment and the perpetual revolutionary ethos of her community. Therefore, she avows to live her life as fully as possible, despite her confinement, and to embrace the challenges and possibilities of motherhood as co-extensive with *marronage.* For Shakur, black motherhood not only empowers her to become more forceful about leaving the entrapment of the prison—both psychologically and physically--but it also encourages her to create an emerging warrior (a precious child) whose revolutionary potential can not be owned by the state. Expressing the possibilities of black motherhood she declares:

> I'm about life," i said to myself. "I'm gonna live as hard as I can and as full as i can until i die. And I'm not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they are even born. I'm going to live and I'm going to love Kamau, and, if a child comes from that union, i'm going to rejoice. Because our children are our futures and i believe in the future and in the strength and rightness of our struggle."[53]

Shakur recognizes that her fear of having children derives from ingrained racist oppression and despite her arduous prison sentence, she decides to have a baby—a beautiful creation—to transgress the institution's attempts to destroy her subjectivity and capacity for motherhood. She decides to live and love out loud while optimistically pursuing romance and motherhood within the confines of the prison. In her poem "Love," Shakur expresses that her romance and motherhood empower her by making her open to

[53] Ibid 93.

love—a powerful emotion which not only bolsters her activist spirit, but also releases her psychologically from confinement.[54] Describing love as a "contraband in Hell," she suggests that it is restricted property in the penal system because it deepens the bonds of solidarity among the oppressed and enhances their ability to foment resistance against the white establishment because of love's capacity to encourage self-ownership and self-acceptance.[55] Therefore, love can exponentially increase the unity among freedom fighters as the final two lines of this poem note:

We are pregnant with freedom.

We are a conspiracy.

While Shakur and her lover decide to have a baby as an act of subversion against the carceral system, the speaker's last two lines bear the tone of a manifesto as "We" becomes a pronoun that unites multiple personas, including the reader, in a quest for disrupting the restrictions posed by the white establishment. The revolutionary's strivings for motherhood and romance are heroic, and she implies that when black female revolutionaries bear children they help to ensure the perpetuation of a black revolutionary ethos in successive generations.

Despite Shakur's hopeful exploration of the prospects of her motherhood while imprisoned, she vividly depicts the penal system's harsh treatment of black pregnant women as ungendering them. The narrator discovers that she is pregnant in a grueling physical in which she is taken to Roosevelt Hospital in Metuchen, New Jersey, shackled to a bed by her feet, and examined by a physician as she relates that armed guards

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[54] Ibid 130.

[55] Ibid 130.

constantly surrounded her hospital room.[56] Though the narrator explains that this traumatic episode threatened her mental health and possibly the well-being of her baby, her situation gets worse when she is discharged early from the hospital and imprisoned in Middlesex County jail. In this all-male institution, she is locked into solitary confinement for three months--from February thru May of 1974. In this institution, the prison authorities treat her as an ungendered subject, similar to a pregnant female slave, when they fail to adequately make significant provisions to ensure her healthy pregnancy and delivery.[57] After the narrator is detained in solitary confinement, she recalls that she experiences significant impediments to obtaining her own doctor and fights to see him because she is suspicious (and rightfully so) of the inadequate care provided by the prison's physician.[58] Furthermore, the "special" diet which she receives at Rikers was barely adequate and she often experiences significant difficulties in obtaining the doctor she requests because of the prison's regulations.[59] Shakur relates that she experiences significant gynecological problems during her pregnancy because of the prison system's inadequate health care.

Though her challenges during this period are dire, they are not unique. During her stay in Clinton correctional facility, Eva, another black female inmate, informs the narrator that during a police riot state troopers beat a pregnant woman so mercilessly that

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[56] Ibid 141.

[57] See Hortense J. Spillers. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Diacritics 17, no. 2. Culture and Countermemory: The "American" Connection. (Summer, 1987). Print.

[58] Ibid 141.

[59] Ibid 142.

she lost her baby.[60] The abuse of pregnant black women detained in the prison system echoes the ghastly ways in which enslaved black women, despite their pregnancy, were often punished and forced to work under dire circumstances.[61] Regardless of these perilous conditions, Shakur develops friendships with other female inmates. These relationships provide her with comfort and optimism during her incarceration.

Shakur depicts other resilient black women in prison as maternal figures who teach her to experience mental freedom despite her bondage. Amid the bleak conditions of these spaces of detention, the women create ties of solidarity that aid their survival and the continuation of the black power ethos within the prison. When Shakur meets Eva—a dark-skinned, obese, reportedly "crazy" inmate—the two women develop a friendship.[62] Eva had been imprisoned at Clinton Correctional Facility on several occasions and the prison authorities often treated her violently because of her size and supposedly degraded mental state. After the two women initially meet in Shakur's cell, Eva engages Shakur through storytelling by telling her that she has the capacity to travel to any destination she desires. For instance, she tells Assata that she has recently arrived from Jupiter and the outer orbits where she encountered little people who, according to the fanciful storyteller: "were purple with crocodile skin and blue hair."[63] According to Eva, she has the power to escape from her prison cell through "astro-space projection"—a spirited form of imagination in which she can transcend incarceration to discover unknown worlds while

[60] Ibid 60.

[61] To read more about this, check out the autobiography of J. Marion Sims—the so called "father of modern gynecology" in J. Marion Sims. *The Story of My Life*. Ed. H. Marion Sims. M.D. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1984. Print.

[62] Ibid 59.

[63] Ibid 59.

meeting new people.[64] Eva's recollection entertains Shakur and helps to forge an intimate bond between the women. However, Eva's narrative also suggests that powerful bonds of solidarity can be forged between black women when they allow themselves to become vulnerable enough to honestly share their own stories. Eva encourages her new friend to gain psychic freedom by teaching her that black women's narratives can encourage others to resist overlapping boundaries of confinement. However, when Shakur insists that she does not only want to be mentally but also physically free, the sage Eva offers a chilling reply:

> "You'll be in jail wherever you go," Eva said.
>
> "You have a point there," I told her, 'but i'd rather be in a minimum security prison or on the streets than in the maximum security prison in here. The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don't have the faintest idea how it feels to be free."
>
> Eva told me that she knew how I felt. She had to know. Any person in amerika, if they are honest with themselves, have got to come to the conclusion that they don't know what it feels like to be free. We aren't free politically, economically, or socially. We have very little power over what happens in our lives. In fact, a Black person in amerika isn't even free to walk down the street. Walk down the wrong street, in the wrong neighborhood at night and you know what happens.[65]

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[64] Ibid 59.

[65] Ibid 59-60.

In this exchange, Shakur represents the streets and prison as so policed by white institutional power that they are similarly entrapping. Freedom is simply an illusion for blacks--a dream deferred--because blacks are psychologically and physically imprisoned regardless of whether or not they are incarcerated. As such, they can never feel secure enough to exercise even the most basic civil liberties because racist white police officers (and racist whites who seek vigilante justice) attempt to maintain the color-line though violence. In an America where blacks are treated as property, Shakur notes that a black person can be assaulted by racist whites if they trespass the proverbial "white only" sign by crossing into the wrong neighborhood. This conversation brings into relief that black women can only gain a profound sense of freedom—and buttress themselves against white institutional privilege and violence—through solidarity. However, when Eva is forcibly separated from Shakur, the narrator positions her as a symbol that exposes the absurdity of racism and gender oppression in America. The narrator relates this in her untitled poem which she dedicates to the heroine:

> They hate you momma
> Cause you expose their madness.
> And their cruelty.
> They can see in your eyes
> a thousand nightmares
> That they have made come true.
>
> Black woman. Baad woman.
> Wear your bigness on your chest like a badge
> cause you done earned it.[66]

In these stanzas, the speaker critiques the society's classification of "momma" or Eva as "crazy." Women are often characterized as crazy when they do not follow gendered social conventions.[67] However, the speaker denounces the white establishment

[66] Ibid 63.

as wholly irrational for degrading Eva--a maternal figure--because racist whites project their uneasiness concerning their evil deeds onto her and terrorize her through violence. When the speaker describes the "Black woman" as a "Baad woman," she resituates the debased stereotypes of black women, and particularly those that indict black mothers, in popular culture. Eva, similar to the black woman in this poem, is castigated by the white authorities as a matriarch and mammy figure.[68] By depicting this figure in this poem as such, Shakur renders her as a dissident figure—a "Baad woman"—who should be proud of her physical stature and bearing.

While this figure's pride in herself and her body image resonate with Shakur's claiming of her own self-worth, the narrator also emphasizes that a vital vision of her motherhood is believing that her daughter can reach for greater measures of freedom through self-determination and pride. In "To My Daughter Kakuya," the poem which Assata dedicates to her child, she expresses this hope:

> i have shabby dreams for you
>
> of some vague freedom
>
> i have never known.[69]

The speaker takes ownership of the dreams which she desires for her daughter by envisioning the possibilities of a renewed world in the future—one re-created and set

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[67] See D. Bennett & M. Morgan. "Getting Off of Black Women's Backs: Love Her or Leave Her Alone." *Du Bois Review*, 3(2), 485-502.

[68] To read more about these tropes see Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought*: *Knowledge*, *Consciousness*, *and The Politics of Empowerment*. Cambridge: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1990. Also see Kimberly Wallace-Sanders. *Mammy*: *A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. Print.

[69] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987. 259.

beyond the color-line—in which the colors of life come alive--the red, orange, green, and indigo hues of the rainbow--in a world of infinite possibility. While this poem is set in an Edenic paradise, the speaker represents her motherhood as ushering a hopeful perspective on the prospects of life for her daughter in a world fashioned by a mother's "shabby dreams."[70] Indeed, Kayuku—whose name means "hope for the future"—inspires Assata to risk life or death to escape the entrapment of prison.[71]

Assata's Escape to Cuba

Shakur's unwillingness to detail her escape, though understandable, strikes the reader as frustrating. Yet, it is particularly intriguing that when she flees to Cuba she describes the country as one of hope and wide-opened doors.[72] The narrator's recollection of her life in Cuba is a provocative one, but she spends little time focusing on this important aspect of her life's story. The wide-opened doors that usher her into this exotic locale seem to leave the reader with only a brochure of her experience there. Yet, Shakur's recollection of this period is rendered strategically to portray the economic consequences of socialist Cuba in the best light while castigating U.S. foreign policy against this island nation. For the revolutionary, American foreign policy is largely to blame for victimizing and vilifying Fidel Castro and for displacing various groups from across the African diaspora who travel there seeking medical care after being tortured following the United States' war various efforts.[73]

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[70] Ibid 259.

[71] According to Evelyn Williams, Kayuku's name derives from the West African language Yoruba. See *Inadmissible Evidence*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993. 77. Print.

[72] Ibid 267-268.

[73] Ibid 268.

Shakur's narrative is connected intimately to her ongoing struggle. Therefore, she diminishes the race and class disparities in Cuba by instead depicting this nation as one fashioned by an ongoing sense of racial fraternity. For this modern day maroon, Cuba's history of military service—one in which whites and blacks fought together to defeat the Spanish during the Revolution—still pervades the current social ethos. Furthermore, her silence concerning race relations, there, may eerily suggest that they are similar to race relations in the United States.Her romanticized snapshot of life in Cuba is further enhanced when her aunt, mother, and daughter visit her there for the first time. After years of incarceration, the exiled Shakur is able to touch them, embrace them, and love them beyond the strictures of the prison. Cuba becomes a land of Freedom for her—as she presents it—a place where she can experience all that is creative, all that is beautiful, all that is African.

Shakur battles for self-possession in her autobiography by depicting herself as a maroon who escapes entrapment in the American legal system which endeavors to objectify her as a prisoner-of-war. While the revolutionary figure's *marronage* is characterized by her efforts to challenge her status as property through *movement*, her narrative also portrays the disturbing ways in which black women are ungendered by an American prison system whose conventions reflect the ungendering of slaves from the moment of their apprehension in Africa. Shakur writes her narrative, then, as a form of *textual healing* to affirm the beauty of black female bodies in light of systemic oppression. She critiques the racial, class, and gender inequalities in the United States during the Vietnam era by presenting herself as a prisoner-of-war—seized property—to suggest the absurdity of American democracy and its complicity in debasing people of

color across the African diaspora. And yet, despite the challenges posed by these circumstances, Shakur finds love and a sense of redemption as a black mother in prison. Though she becomes a mother amid dire conditions, her pregnancy and motherhood become emblematic of the ongoing possibilities of a black revolutionary ethos.

While this narrative becomes a testimony to Shakur's resilience despite a myriad of attempts to break her spirit, her battle continues. In recent times, there has been renewed interest, partly led by New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, to extradite her to face prosecution for Foerster's death among other charges. Christie's efforts come on the heels of America's renewed interest in strengthening U.S. and Cuban diplomatic ties under the Obama Administration. Critics question whether or not Obama will speak out against extraditing her, particularly after his recent visit to Cuba. One thing is certain: law enforcement's continued efforts to prosecute her suggest their determination to punish her transgression of the American legal system's efforts to detain her as property. Still, in an intriguing line in her narrative, as she looks at the ocean, she seems to foreshadow her recognition of the continuities of neo-slavery in both the United States and Cuba: "Looking at the ocean, I wonder how many of our people lie buried there, slaves of another era."[74] The ocean becomes the time-capsule which brings the history of slavery afloat and washes it into the present. However, Shakur's resilience and optimism, which we can glean from the closing of her narrative, is forged by the insubordination of militant slaves who refused to submit to their captors: "Our fighting had started on a slave ship years before we were born. *Venceremos*, my favorite word in Spanish, crossed

[74] Ibid 155.

my mind."[75] *Venceremos*—"we will win or overcome" is a battle cry which connotes the *movement* of black people marching and fighting together for freedom. As such, this rallying cry for black power characterizes Shakur's ongoing spirit of resistance through *marronage* and renders her and people of color from across the African diaspora as predestined to win the battles to come.

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[75] Ibid 274.

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Coda

Providence and Self-Possession in Frederick Douglass' 1845 *Narrative*

> Once let the black man get upon his person the brass letter, U.S., let him get an eagle on his button, and a musket on his shoulder and bullets in his pocket, there is no power on earth that can deny that he has earned the right to citizenship.
>
> Frederick Douglass[1]

"Properties of Confinement" began with my reflection on my initial reading of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* while serving as a United States Navy sailor onboard the aircraft-carrier U.S.S. Harry S. Truman (CVN-75). In particular, I interrogate young Richard's fascination when he beholds two scenes—the elegance and veiled threat of black soldiers marching during World War I followed by the horror and terror of black inmates toiling in a chain gang. Years later, my reflections on serving as a sailor (government property) and my reading of these key scenes and other works that can be classified as part of the subgenre known as confinement literature led me to this study.[2] Over the course of this study, we have seen writers subvert and redefine their status as human property as slaves, military personnel, and prisoners in Cuba and the United States during the Black Power Movement. However, at this juncture, I would like to offer another narrative for consideration—one regarded arguably as the most influential literary work published by the American Anti-Slavery Society besides Uncle Tom's Cabin—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself* (1845). In Douglass' narrative, he constantly affirms that he is predestined to be a free man. This self-determination—driven by an unrelenting faith in providence—

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[1] Frederick Douglass. "Should the Negro Enlist in the Union Army?" *Douglass' Monthly*. Aug. 1863. Print.

[2] To read more about this subgenre see Tara Green. Ed. *From the Plantation to the Prison*. *African American Confinement Literature*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2008. 4. Print.

situates Douglass as a forebear of Black Power ideology despite his longstanding status as an assimilationist in his life and writings.

Douglass' *Narrative* recalls his birth into slavery around 1817 or 1818; his separation from his mother shortly afterwards; his abandonment by his father who was likely their white master named Captain Anthony; his (and slave women's) brutal whipping by various slave masters; his feats of resistance while living on a series of plantations in Maryland; his acquisition of literacy; and his escape from bondage in Maryland to freedom in New York by an undisclosed route.[3] There are multiple points of departure for a discussion of Douglass' fine narrative. However, I would like to explore the captivating ways in which this autobiographer depicts ships in his narrative--replete with their glorious white sails that hold sway in shimmering blue waters--as emblematic of the theme of providence which resounds in his recollections. The Oxford English dictionary defines "providence" as: "Foresight; anticipation of and preparation for the future; prudent management, government or guidance, and as foreknowing and protective care of God (or nature etc.); divine direction, control, or guidance."[4] From their emergence in his autobiography, these vessels symbolize Douglass' evolving freedom while they beckon to him to strive for self-ownership through *marronage*. And yet, later in his narrative this leading nineteenth-century political and literary figure also captures the ripples of emotions following his escape from bondage through a peculiar calculus in which he resists his status as chattel by depicting a nefarious battle at sea among three ships.[5]

In this essay, I will explore how Douglass presents his *marronage* as constitutive of a daring act of bodily theft that interrelates slavery, the military, and prison through his

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[3] Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. Print.

[4] See "Providence." Def. 1a. and 2. a. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed.1989. Print.

[5] Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 225. Print.

depiction of a battle *royale* at sea. While this narrative repeatedly portrays slaves in the daring act of pilfering goods from their masters as recompense for their maltreatment during captivity, this culminating scene foreshadows Douglass' wrestling with patriotism in his future works.[6] Therefore, I will analyze this understudied scene while alluding to other works in Douglass' broader corpus in which he casts the United States military as providing black men in general and slaves in particular the opportunity to claim their rightful manhood and citizenship rights while it offers them protection from imprisonment. I will interrogate Douglass' narrative from these standpoints before I offer considerations for future critical assessments of black autobiography and particularly slave, military, and prison autobiographies.

In considering Douglass' *marronage*, I turn again to Neil Roberts' *Freedom as Marronage*.[7] As elucidated in chapter 3 of this dissertation, Roberts claims that scholars often define entrapment and freedom as fixed experiential states while they disregard what he deems to be the most intrinsic characteristic of *marronage—flight*. Roberts positions flight at the core of defining freedom and unfreedom, and he presents *marronage* as a multidimensional, incessant act of flight which empowers blacks to defy their status as human property through physical and ideological resistance that is facilitated by their ability to determine the directions of their actions—*movement*. In Roberts' monograph, he discusses Douglass' *marronage* and his vision of freedom in

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[6] Douglass describes slaves committing theft as an act of insurrection. See Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 123-124. Print.

[7] Neil Roberts. *Freedom as Marronage*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 1-55. Print.

chapter 2: "Comparative Freedom and the Flight from Slavery."[8] In this chapter, Roberts analyzes the scholar Angela Davis' and Douglass' conceptions of comparative freedom or the thresholds that serve as gradations between slavery—the absolute condition of unfreedom—and liberty. Roberts considers Douglass' detailed account of slavery and the strategies for overcoming it as intrinsic to his positioning of *movement* as the basis of reform and progress. Furthermore, this scholar is deeply interested in the ways in which both Douglass and Davis "imagin[e] liberation and elements of constitutionalism used by agents in founding a new order."[9] According to Roberts, constitutionalism is the act of creating principles, articles, and structural mechanisms applicable to a group of people in a political order.[10] He discusses Douglass' commitment to constitutionalism as a foundation for his espousal of assimilationism—"the striving for a color-blind society in which the economic, political, and moral facets of racial difference are irrelevant to human well-being."[11] In short, Douglass' assimilationist rhetoric in *Narrative* is premised on his belief that black men and women should be treated as equals to whites because he challenges the notions of manhood enacted in the United States' founding documents. Douglass espouses William Lloyd Garrison's brand of assimilationism in *Narrative* while promoting these virtues.

Roberts explores Douglass' conceptions of slavery from these perspectives. However, my discussion will extend this scholar's lines of intellectual inquiry through my analysis of how Douglass depicts the interrelations of slavery, the military and prison

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[8] Ibid 53-88.

[9] Ibid 57.

[10] Ibid 130.

[11] Ibid 59.

in imbricating his sense of freedom after his escape. Furthermore, I am interested in Douglass' representations of ships as bearing the prospects for his freedom while exacerbating his sense of entrapment. From this standpoint, the bondsman's perceptions of gleaming white ships in harbor, at various phases of his narrative, inspirit and incite his *marronage* while they connote providence. In Douglass' narrative, he depicts his flight as multifaceted while he delineates providence as a manifold, all-encompassing form of divine order that will lead him inevitably to physical and ideological freedom through resistance. His aspirations for literacy typify this resistance while the potential for ships to *move* with or against the currents--with their fate determined by providence--instills in him the fortitude to seek his freedom by any means necessary.

Midway through his narrative, the heroic Douglass portrays one of the most formidable recollections of providence as guiding his footsteps to liberty. He recalls his forced relocation from Colonel Lloyd's plantation in Talbot County, Maryland to another in Baltimore, when he was about seven or eight years old, as a fortuitous moment of "Providence":

> I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor…From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom.[12]

[12] 140.

Douglass regards his *marronage*—his capacity to exert self-ownership by *moving* and breaking the bonds of slavery—as empowered by providence. This divine interposition disrupts the affective bonds that sustain his enslavement, and impart a supernatural order to his path despite the chaos of slavery's relations, which are sustained by its restraining structures and strictures. Drawing on Manichean images of darkness and light, the autobiographer's recollections propose that his bourgeoning desire to gain freedom is characterized by his sensitivity to discerning and reading key signs in the universe as manifestations of providence. This uncanny ability to decipher key events and symbols from this divine map supports his ideological movement towards a "spirit of hope" and his physical movement due north. Furthermore, the author's declaration of providence as offering a compass and motive for seeking greater empowerment frames his quest for enlightenment through formal and informal education as divinely orchestrated and characteristic of his capacity for flight.

Shortly after describing this resolution, he situates his unremitting aspiration to break free from the shackles of slavery as even more palpable after he learns how to read and write. During a brief stint earlier in the narrative, he learned to read by the age of twelve and took lessons from Sophia Auld (his former master's wife) when he resided in Talbot County, Maryland. However, Mrs. Auld decided to quit providing him with instruction because Mr. Auld discovered these clandestine meetings and became anxious about Douglass' ability to become empowered through education. The slave master warned: "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become

unmanageable, and of no value to his master."[13] Mr. Auld proposed that education had the propensity to decrease Douglass' value as human property because it could provide him with an enhanced ability to resist oppression. However, Douglass' desire to gain an education proved relentless.

Later in the narrative, after he relocates to Baltimore, he spends time studying and copying alphabet with chalk while he imitates the letters that are marked on the timber which are used for building ships located in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard.[14] As the ships' sails become banners of liberty that sway in the wind, Douglass begins envisioning his ability to write on white pages while striving towards intellectual and physical freedom. In a dramatic scene of learning, the shipyard becomes a classroom for the young Douglass as he learns calligraphy and gains literacy through writing contests with young white boys. They challenge him to test his skills and acumen through artful *play*. Similar to Esteban Montejo's self-fashioning into a dexterous warrior through his participation in games and sports in *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, the spirited Douglass conveys his discipline and determination to master the craft of writing on the timber board fence, brick wall, sturdy pavement, and shiny surfaces of ships.[15] Mobilizing his wanderlust, the narrator presents ships, here, and later in his narrative, as emphasizing the limits of his status as chattel and the possibility of transgressing societal boundaries by claiming his rightful manhood. That is, a state of being in which he can earn wages for his labor, protect himself and his spouse with immunity, and move and live freely as a

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[13] Ibid 142. Print.

[14] Ibid 154. Print.

[15]See chapter 2 of this dissertation for more information or read Miguel Barnet. *Biography of a Runaway Slave*. Trans. W. Nick Hill. Connecticut: Curbstone Press, 1994. Print.

self-possessed individual among other rights.[16] Furthermore, these occasions in which Douglass constantly moves from one place to the next, while gaining literacy in the most unexpected ways, suggest to him that a divine order of providence has created a pathway and pattern to lead him to freedom. His freedom, then, is premised on his commitment to becoming a more sensitive reader and a more resilient fighter.

As the narrative develops, Douglass beholds the gleaming white sails of ships parading in the Chesapeake Bay as soaring above him like his prospects for escape. In a later passage, the autobiographer describes these ships as "beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition."[17] Here, the bondsman is not fascinated with the majesty of ships as bearers of dreams, but he is instead perplexed by their ability to remind him of his detainment in the belly of the beast--enslavement--as they effeminize him with a diabolical lure. The salty air that fills the ships' sails leaves him bitterly gasping. His feelings of anxiety, reinterpreted from a black feminist perspective, are reminiscent of the frustrations and confidence of Zora Neale Hurston, in a much later era, as expressed in "How it Feels to Be Colored Me":

> I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background…Beside the waters of the Hudson I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am

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[16] To read more about manhood in Douglass' *Narrative* particularly in relation to the status of black women in his autobiography see Deborah E. McDowell. "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the Afro-American Narrative Tradition." *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.: 1991. Print.

This collection of essays is an excellence resource and offers incisive reviews, articles and essays on Douglass' autobiographies.

[17] See Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 179. Print.

a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself.

When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.[18]

Hurston discusses her alienation and appreciation when she ponders her blackness and femininity when gazing at the gleaming waters of the Hudson. They reflect a tide of taunting white faces. In this essay, she recalls the culture shock that she experiences during her journeys when she provides a panoramic view of her *movements* to and through various geographical locations. In 1904, she leaves the relative safety of her hometown of Eatonville, Florida--one of the first all-black towns to be incorporated in the United States--and travels by river-boat to the predominantly white city of Jacksonville during her adolescence. She later leaves Jacksonville in 1925 and disembarks in New York City to attend Barnard College, Columbia University where she blossoms into a writer.[19] Despite her successes as an *avant-garde* lady of the pen, her feelings of estrangement as a dark face overwhelmed by a surging sea of white faces is reminiscent of Douglass' terror when he gazes at the majesty of the ships' sails. Their whiteness ushers a vision (through snapshots) of his potential to take *flight* through *marronage* while it also shrouds his ambitions with the stench of death.

However, neither Douglass nor Hurston are content to be simply "petals on a wet, black bough."[20] They emerge as resilient despite the vicissitudes that emerge. The horror and the glory of their ability to thrive as *movers* despite the encroachment of whiteness is similar to Chester Himes's recollections of his family's desperate and failed attempts to

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[18] Zora Neale Hurston. "How it Feels to Be Colored Me." *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*...Ed. Alice Walker. New York: The Feminist Press, 1979. 152-155. Print.

[19] Valerie Boyd. *Wrapped in Rainbows*: *The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2003. 1-80. Print.

[20] Ezra Pound. "In a Station of the Metro." *Personae*: *the collected shorter poems of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1971. 64. Print.

save his brother's eyesight in *The Quality of Hurt*.[21] The gleaming car lights that make young Chester cower while his family races to an all-white hospital send chills down his dislocated spine. In a revised scene, Assata Shakur offers another frightening description of the propensity of whiteness to assault the psyche of blacks when she describes the hospital room in which she is treated for her brutal injuries following the revolutionaries' skirmish with the New Jersey police. She characterizes them as veiled Ku Klux Klan members in her autobiography.[22] Considered in unison, whiteness does not wash away the revolutionary ethos of these black writers. Instead, as Douglass' narrative reveals, they imagine their blackness as ingraining a relentless self-determination in them that foreshadows the revolutionary zeal of the Black Power Movement. Despite the ghastly tremors of whiteness—their blackness is coupled with an ethos of resilience which characterizes them, and all of the authors in my study, through their self-possession--"a dark rock, overswept, but through it all, I remain myself."[23] Imagination, then, becomes the vehicle for political action.

Though scholars have long appreciated Douglass' documentation of his experiences as a slave in his narrative, they have often lamented at this autobiographer's decision to forego disclosing the exact route and details of his escape from bondage in Maryland to freedom in New York.[24] His purpose for maintaining these secrets is

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[21] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 12-15. Print.

[22] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987.1-20. Print.

[23] Zora Neale Hurston. "How it Feels to Be Colored Me." *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*...Ed. Alice Walker. New York: The Feminist Press, 1979. 152-155. Print.

[24] See Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 213-229. Print.

comparable to Assata Shakur's discretion when she avoids telling the particulars of her escape from Clinton Correction Facility in 1979, and the specific events which led to her flight to Cuba in 1984 after living as a fugitive in the United States.[25] Both autobiographers do not wish to threaten the safety of other blacks who endeavor to escape confinement in either prison (in Shakur's case) or the "prison-house of slavery" according to Douglass.[26] The lack of details concerning the mysterious pathway which Douglass follows to freedom often leaves scholars crestfallen because it presents a lacuna in an otherwise dashing narrative. However, in an understudied passage which he presents immediately after recalling his escape from bondage, Douglass's tale reaches a crescendo when he recollects his sentiments of relief following his safe arrival. He fulfills his escape after three attempts and during his successful effort he takes less than twenty-four hours to escape. He finds inspiration from his soon to be wife, Anna-Murray.[27] In an often-overlooked passage, the narrator describes his *marronage* and his overwhelming sense of freedom by describing a battle *royale* among three ships at sea:

> I have been frequently asked how I felt when I found myself in a free State. I have never been able to answer the question with any satisfaction to myself. It was a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced. I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate.[28]

Casting himself as an unarmed mariner, Douglass characterizes himself as defenseless and therefore effeminized during this battle. In this skirmish, two camps surround him.

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[25] Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987. 260-270. Print.

[26] Ibid 95.

[27] Ibid 190-229.

[28] Ibid 225.

The "friendly" man-of-war (or military vessel) represents the abolitionists and allies who support and protect him during his winding journey to freedom. The pirate ship symbolizes the blood-thirsty slave-owners and slave-catchers who would imprison him—like pirates who seize human bodies as stolen booty—and sell him once again into the "prison-house of slavery."[29] At sea, the laws that govern the appropriation of Douglass' body--by either ship--appear murky amid the treacherous, dark waters. Yet, Douglass fashions his *marronage* as a defiant act, and yet, a queer expression of his feelings of helplessness and relief because without the support of the man-of-war ship he is likely to be taken captive.

In this passage, he does not appear to be the insurmountable fighter who delights in brutalizing his former overseer Mr. Covey while reclaiming a sense of his manhood after being extensively victimized as chattel.[30] Stoking the embers of action before he narrates his victory against Mr. Convey--a crowning moment--Douglass offers the remarkable chiasmus: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."[31] This moment of high fervor, when considering his insubordination, seems discordant with his later description of feeling relieved after he is rescued as a defenseless unarmed mariner from the clutches of a well-equipped pirate ship. Its artillery represents the ultimate phallic symbol that can effeminize him.[32]

Similar to Chester Himes who presents the specter and possibility of his rape in prison as connoting a theft in *The Quality of Hurt*, Douglass too appears

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[29] To read more about theft in Douglass' collection of autobiographies see Lovlarie King. *Race*, *Theft*, *and Ethics*: *Property Matters in African American Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007. 1-24. Print.

[30] Ibid 170-181.

[31] Ibid 181.

[32] Ibid 225.

vulnerable.[33] Whereas slaves were punished in *The Narrative* for stealing goods from their masters as acts of defiance, Douglass' imagined scene curiously leaves open the possibility that although the pirates are brazenly attempting to steal the unarmed mariner, the military vessel appears friendly but could also be acting in its own self-interest when it rescues the defenseless ship—a relieved Douglass.[34] The autobiographer's later works (as I will shortly explore) attest to an ethos of patriotism regarding blacks serving in the military during the Civil War. However, the suspicion concerning this institution's ability to steal black bodies, in a coordinated effort with the prison system, is shared by Assata Shakur and Chester Himes in their respective autobiographies.[35]

Douglass' self-portrayal as effeminized is not an oversight, but a deliberate turn—a purposeful disruption in his usual pattern of emphasizing his heroism through his many attempts to reclaim his manhood, despite the oppression and backlash of racist whites, throughout his narrative. Instead, the autobiographer not only describes his freedom as interpolated through the intersections of slavery, the military and prison, but he offers an oblique critique of the United States military as bolstering the prospects of his *marronage* while it can empower blacks more broadly. Ironically, he downplays his capacity for *movement* and his physical and psychological prowess, characteristic of *marronage*, to emphasize the military's role as a possible defender of the liberties of blacks. Douglass depicts the military, a total institution, as possessing the salvific ability to empower blacks to reinvent their status as chattel.[36] Moreover, he also characterizes slavery as a

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[33] Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 1-70. Print.

[34] See Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 225. Print.

[35] See Chester Himes. *The Quality of Hurt*: *The Early Years*, *The Autobiography of Chester Himes VOL 1*. New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1972, 50-102. Print.
Assata Shakur also describes this. See Assata Shakur. *Assata*: *An Autobiography*. Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987. 260-270. Print.

[36] According to the sociologist Erving Goffman, in such organizations the "inmate" experiences various rites of passage in which his or her self-hood is stripped through practices designed to make the "inmate" identify with the group. These institutions break down the normal boundaries that exist among different sites where people sleep, work, and play in support of an overall "rational plan." Though both institutions

domicile--"a prison-house"--which suggests its ability to strip blacks of their humanity while it masks as a protective domicile or (according to slavery's apologists) a necessary evil which must be maintained to preserve the Union.[37]

Douglass' commitment to assimilationist values inevitably leads him to cast the military as possessing the ability to reinforce that slaves deserve full citizen rights because of the military's ability to confer heroism.[38] This institution's meritocratic and ranking structure hypothetically reinforces a colorblind system that could eventually promote racial uplift for blacks if they prove themselves heroic by enlisting and conforming to the institution's dictates. These include a willingness to die for their fellow military personnel.[39] In the epigraph, Douglass encourages black men to enlist and serve honorably in the United States military.[40] The patriotic orator declares that if black men wear the military's uniform, that if they arm themselves with weapons that exemplify their manhood, that if they fight and even die honorably on the bloody battlefields for their countrymen—then they can not and will not be denied their rights as full citizens of the United States. His romanticized vision of the United States military (and the military

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are developed to meet contrary ends, the military and prison have cultural characteristics that reflect one another as they demand that the "inmate" exchange safety for danger, comfort for physical hardship, and familial integrity for familial separation. Prisoners and military personnel also possess overlapping representations. See Erving Goffman. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co.,35-47. 1961. Print.

[37] See Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*: *An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*. 1845. Ed. Angela Davis. San Francisco: City Light Books. 2010. 225. Print.

[38] To read more about this see Christopher Parker. *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Post-War South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. 1-30. Print.

[39] See Jennifer James. *A Freedom Bought with Blood*: *African American War Literature from the Civil War to World War II*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 2007.1-50. Print.

[40] Douglass, Frederick. "Should the Negro Enlist in the Union Army?" *Douglass' Monthly*. Aug. 1863. Print.

more broadly) as the protector and defender of the rights of blacks is echoed in sound and spectacle in his later writings such as in his novella *The Heroic Slave* (1852) and in several of his famous speeches in which he encourages blacks to enlist in the military and serve the Union--with pride--during the Civil War.[41]

Douglass' optimism was understandable considering that blacks in the United States have served dutifully in all of this nation's wars since the American Revolutionary War in which Crispus Attucks (1723-1770) suffered the first death of the Boston massacre, in Boston, Massachusetts. His demise is widely considered to be the first American casualty of this great historical event.[42] After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued (1863), the North took the opportunity to enlist over 178,000 black soldiers and sailors to fight on their behalf to meet their shortage of manpower. 144,000 of these black soldiers were formally slaves. Altogether black troops comprised 10 to 12 percent

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[41] In Douglass' only work of fiction, the novella *The Heroic Slave*, the author creates an account derived from a well-documented historical incident--a slave mutiny that occurred on 25 October 1842 onboard the slave ship *Creole.* This ship left Richmond Virginia and headed to New Orleans while it carried 13 sailors and crew, 6 white passengers, many boxes of tobacco and 135 slaves. On 28 October 1842 a group of 19 slaves led a revolt while the ship sailed through the northern section of the Bahamas. In a few hours, they took control of the vessel and forced a crewman to sail to New Providence, the largest settlement in the Bahamas, which was populated by mainly blacks who had gained their freedom by Great Britain's 1833 Emancipation Act. After the brig reached Nassau on 9 November, the mutineers appealed to the British authorities insisting on leniency for their insurrection. The British authorities freed the 116 slaves who did not take part in the rebellion but they detained the mutineers, who were eventually freed in March 1842. Though it was terrifying event, 1 crewman and 2 slaves were killed. Considering the number of slaves who were liberated compared to the overall number who died, it was one of the most successful slave revolt in North American history. In Douglass' depiction of this event, he presents black soldiers from the Bahamas objecting to treating black American slaves as property in a powerful moment of black solidarity at the end of the novella. See Frederick Douglass. *The Heroic Slave*. Ed. Robert S. Levine. et. al. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Print.

Douglass presents a bold challenge to encourage blacks to enlist to fight for the Union during the Civil War in his classic speech. See Frederick Douglass. "Men of Color, To Arms!" (1863) *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Oxford: Oxford UP: 1996, 223-225. Print.

Douglass offers a searing indictment of patriotism on 4 July 1852. See Frederick Douglass. "What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852).*The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*. Ed. William L. Andrews. Oxford: Oxford UP: 1996, 223-225. Print.

[42] See Chad Williams. *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 1-25. Print.

of Union manpower.[43] Douglass so believed that military service would inevitably aid blacks in obtaining full citizenship rights that he even encouraged both of his sons to enlist in the Union Army.[44] It turns out, Douglass' assessment of the prospects for blacks to gain citizenship rights through military service had mixed results. In the North, the participation of African Americans proved to be a deciding factor of the war. Though blacks received freedom from slavery and were hailed as citizens following the war, these changes did not redefine (fully) the entrenched racism in the North, which was particularly magnified in the South.[45] The pervasiveness of racial gradualism still impacts the prospects for full citizenship for black veterans and their civilian counterparts.[46] America's treatment of black veterans is a litmus test for understanding the status of blacks more broadly. If black veterans are treated with full respect during and after their dutifully service, then the status of black prisoners is particularly fraught given that they are often stripped of vital citizenship rights in ways which reflect enslavement.

Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* offers an intriguing perspective on his regard for the military as a defender of the liberty of blacks. In the future, I anticipate that more critics--should they wish to engage Douglass' sentiments--will embrace the opportunity to analyze extant and forthcoming black military autobiographies written by black men and black women who admirably serve this country. For example, there is a significant dearth of scholarship that interrogates the autobiographies composed by black women who

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[43] See Christopher Parker. *Fighting for Democracy*: *Black Veterans and the Struggle Against White Supremacy in the Post-War South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009. Print.

[44] Ibid 35.

[45] Ibid 26-27.

[46] Ibid 26.

served in the United States Army Nursing Corps, which was founded by the U.S. Congress in 1901.[47] In the current political moment, U.S. government officials recently issued a decision from the Pentagon which permits women to serve in all combat roles.[48] This change in the military's policy will not only make waves in women's rights in the labor force, but also lead to the increased publication of rich autobiographies that explore front-line combat from women's perspectives.

While there is a significant lack of criticism on the experiences of black women who have served in front-line combat, there is also a significant lack of critical scholarship on autobiographies written by black veterans from the Vietnam era despite American popular culture's ongoing fascination with this particular war.[49] In the current moment, the proliferation of workshops and seminars held by the Veterans Writing Project--a non-profit which helps veterans to develop key critical and creative writing skills to tell their stories--offers the possibility that more black veterans will gain the requisite skills and network to publish their narratives.[50]

This emphasis on organizations which provide blacks who have experienced confinement with the resources and education to tell their stories is not limited to those who have served time in the military alone. The American prison system is continuing to increase funding which affords inmates the opportunity to gain an education so they can be better equipped to find employment after they leave detainment or experience an

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[47] Ibid 40.

[48] See Matthew Rosenberg and Dave Phillips' editorial. *All Roles Now Open to Women*. *Defense Secretary Says*. *The New York Times*. (2016): n. pag. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

[49] To read more about this see Jeff Loeb. "African American Autobiography of the Vietnam War." African American Review 31, no. 1 (Spring. 1997). Print.

[50] "Veterans Writing Project." 14. July, 2016. https://veteranswriting.org

improved quality of life behind bars.[51] Along with this increased funding, university and non-profit organizations are teaching inmates to read literature critically and to write their stories candidly while incarcerated. This will lead to the emergence of rich prison narratives written by blacks from across the African diaspora.

Critical race scholars often regard the prison system as a form of neo-slavery.[52] Thus, I anticipate that neo-slave narratives will continue to increase in popularity as the prison system continues to expand. There is a glaring absence of literary scholarship which interrogates the experiences of blacks who have suffered as modern day slaves as survivors of sex-trafficking or egregious labor conditions to support various manufacturing or fishing industries in America and transnationally.[53] These areas of scholarship are ripe for further investigation.

When considering the future prospects for black autobiography more broadly, I am fascinated by the constituent elements which comprise "black" (referring to people of African descent) and "autobiography"—*autos* (self), *bios* (life) and *graphe* (writing) in relation to the current #BlackLivesMatter movement.[54] This is a transnational, intersectional, political and social movement that not only highlights the prevalence of extrajudicial violence inflicted upon blacks by law enforcement, but also affirms that all people of African descent are entitled to respect, restorative justice, and community empowerment.[55] The orbits of "black autobiography" and #BlackLivesMatter converge

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[51] See "Correctional Education." 15 Jul 2016. http://www2.ed.gov.html.

[52] See Angela Davis. *Are Prisons Obsolete*? New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003. 1-40. Print.

[54] William L. Andrews describes the three constituent elements of autobiography and their relation to the struggle of black communities in the 1960's, 1970's and beyond in William L. Andrews Ed. *African American Autobiography. A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. 1993. 2. Print.

[55] BlackLivesMatter. 15 Jul. 16, 2016. blacklivesmatter.com

when considering that the media continues to *bear witness* to many narratives which emphasize that white law enforcement agents are increasingly apprehending or killing unarmed black men and women. These state actors brutalize these unarmed civilians while attempting to patrol jurisdictions as their rightful property. The roll call of these slain black women and men regrettably continues to lengthen—Philando Castile (--2016); Alton Sterling (--2016); Bettie Jones (--2015); Chandra Weaver (--2015); Eric Garner (--2014); Yvette Smith (--2014); Michael Brown (--2014); Trayvon Martin (--2012). This list is woefully partial.

The recent killings of these black women and men suggest that the Black Power Movement's alarming call for holding law enforcement agencies accountable for orchestrating violence in black neighborhoods deserves an immediate response.[56] Positioning literature as a form of social protest, my dissertation reflects the intricate ways in which people of African descent have written their autobiographies to transgress their status as disparate forms of human property—as slaves, as military personnel, and as prisoners. This precarious station historically and presently renders them vulnerable to racialized violence. As the #BlackLivesMatter movement currently highlights diverse forms of injustice which disenfranchise people of color, we continue to ask: What is the role of art in general, and the humanities in particular—in effecting social change? How can we, as scholars, make our work and our lives *matter* to help redress these societal ills? We must continue to imbue a spirit of social activism in our works and in our worlds to assert boldly that despite any critics' mistaken claims to a post-racial society:

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[56] See Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay,Eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: Norton, 2004. 1831-1849. Print.

Black Lives, are Forever At Risk.

Black Lives, are Forever Policed.

#Black--Lives--Matter.

As Richard Wright declares in the closing passage of *Black Boy*--as he strives for self-possession:

> I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all.[57]

Following Wright's call, I anticipate that more blacks from across the African diaspora will share their stories with the determination of Toussaint Louverture, Esteban Montejo, Chester Himes, Assata Shakur, and Frederick Douglass. I call upon other black autobiographers--oracles possessed by ineffable words of *fire*--to animate their stories as testimonies of hurt, as narratives of resilience, as chants of deliverance, and as *weapons* of love.

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[57] Richard Wright. *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*): *A Record of Childhood and Youth*. New York: Harper Collins Books, 1945, 448.

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