Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Trinity Tunstall March 21, 2023

(Im)Possible: A Critical Ambivalence for Black Female Sexual Subjectivity

by

Trinity Tunstall

Dr. Meina Yates-Richard

Adviser

English

Dr. Meina Yates-Richard

Adviser

Dr. Ross M. Knecht

Committee Member

Dr. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders

Committee Member

2023

(Im)Possible: A Critical Ambivalence for Black Female Sexual Subjectivity

By

Trinity Tunstall

Dr. Meina Yates-Richard

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English

2023

Abstract

(Im)Possible: A Critical Ambivalence for Black Female Sexual Subjectivity

by Trinity Tunstall

Fraught with paradoxes and burdened by social oppression, a liberated black female sexual subjectivity is uniquely difficult to imagine. In discourse, the word “impossible” is among the most common descriptors of black women’s subject position. This project addresses the intractability of black female sexual subjectivity. It intervenes in the discursive prescription of “impossibility” to posit a black female sexual subjectivity that embodies possibility and impossibility with ambivalence. This project navigates out of black women’s discursive conundrum using literary analysis centered on the intersections of pain and pleasure for black female characters. “(im)Possible” investigates an archive that begins with Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and includes Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976) and Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975). These three 20th-century novels grapple with the precarity of black female sexual subjectivity from its foundational injuries in the discourse of enslavement to its ambivalently erotic liberation. Case studying six black female characters from these works, this project surveys scenes ostensibly centered on pain, unintelligibility, and impossibility where writers subtly open space for pleasure, understanding, and possibility. I apply Michael Dango and Tina Post’s definition of “critical ambivalence” to approaching the discourse of sexual subjectivity with a disposition that can hold contradictory opposites as a “pair of affects that aren't just co-present, but co-constitutive.” Analysis of these selected works is set within the larger frame of “(im)possibility,” a conceit of critical ambivalence. The concept contests the mutual exclusivity of the perceived opposites that render subjectivity entirely unintelligible and impossible. The impetus of this work is rooted in contemporary black feminist efforts to account for paradoxes and rescript the totalizing prescription of impossibility. Specifically, this project mobilizes the scholarship of Kevin Quashie and Jennifer C. Nash, defining black women’s individual subjectivity in and through relational and citing moments of “ecstasy” wherein “possibilities of black female pleasures” can prevail in a normative (racist, sexists) discourse. This work avoids suggesting pain and pleasure are one, or, worse, that pain is a pleasurable experience for black women. Instead, this project carefully aims to open space for nuance. Intersecting so many oppressive systems, the logics of racism and sexism would define black female subjectivity exclusively by its pain. This project argues that resisting pleasure’s nullification when it comingles with pain is a crucial black feminist project in restoring human complexity and possibility to black women’s sexual subjectivity.

(Im)Possible: A Critical Ambivalence for Black Female Sexual Subjectivity

by

Trinity Tunstall

Dr. Meina Yates-Richard

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English

2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Meina Yates-Richard, my thesis advisor, for guiding me through this process and leading me to expand my ideas beyond what I thought was possible. Your teaching encouraged me throughout crafting this project. I feel grateful to say I can conclude this work more energized than when I started because of your consistent and meaningful support.

I would also like to thank Dr. Ross M. Knecht and Dr. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders for being on my committee and providing me with their suggestions and assistance. Taking your classes led me to start this project. Your counsel along the way encouraged me to see it through.

I would like to thank Dr. Laura Otis for guiding me in the earliest stages of this project and for her encouragement as my work morphed into what it is today.

Also, I would like to thank the students in the Fall 2022 section of ENG 490W for their continued support. Our bond that remained even after our Fall semester class ended gave this independent research the support of a community.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my friends, and my cousin for being there for me every step of the way. This project would not be what it is without you. Because of your help, my success is your success.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Intractability

In this cultural moment, a problem exists for black women that has burned since the inception of New World slavery. This problem has morphed over time, of course, but its urgency remains as sharp as a pinprick. In the 1980s, black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers, looking centuries behind herself and speaking to a contemporary, feminist audience explains the issue: "... the black female is, if anything, a creature of sex, but sexuality touches her nowhere" ("Interstices" 155). Her analysis is brazen and excruciating, but it is clearly told and true. Spillers cites the slave market as the originating locus of black women's ontological conundrum - the place that forged the social identity of the American black woman as an illegitimate "subject of female sexuality" ("Interstices" 155). The insidiousness of black women's subject displacement is not all that prompts Spillers's attention to such a distant historical moment. The endurance of this displacement makes thinking back to the auction block relevant and necessary.

I was in elementary school when I first encountered the Mammy caricature. I saw *Gone With the Wind* (1939) and immediately recognized Hattie McDaniel's iconic performance as more than the portrayal of a specific role in a film. Watching McDaniel, I felt a cement-like weight fall over me. It was suffocating and heavy, and, reflecting on it now, it was also revelatory. Back then, I probably could not cite a specific place I had spotted a "Mammy" figure but watching her so brazenly rendered on screen in *Gone With the Wind*, the cultural ubiquity of the figure came bursting forth like a dam that had been quietly accumulating for years. Well before the film, I knew this woman, even if only in parts. She was the "portly, desexualized

domestic," known principally for her obsequious care for others; she was everyone's "favorite grandmother," whether we knew her or not (Mitchell 18).

I was around the same age when older black women began to caution me about another figure haunting everyone's consciousness that equally endangers black women and girls. Mothers and aunties gave warnings familiar to any black girl child: "Go put some more clothes on: it's men coming over"; "I don't want you hanging around those *fast* little girls." They spoke of Jezebel: the exoticized black woman temptress with an "insatiable sexuality" and a penchant for the destruction of men (Mitchell 18). Well-meaning women instructed me that "Jezebel" was a stereotype of deviant hypersexuality of which I should be aware; she characterized the fallacious and insidious way others *conceived* of black women. At the same time, I was told not to *be* her. I was to beware of the myth that could become true.

Both Mammy and Jezebel were born in the discourse of antebellum history (Mitchell 18). Despite sharing a cultural homeplace, they could not be more different. Typically, Mammy is virtuously "nurturing and loyal," especially to the "white family" she served more faithfully "than her kin" (Mitchell 18). Jezebel, however, has no kin. She is fiercely "independent" and "is the antithesis of innocence and piety" reserved for the discursive construction of "true womanhood" (Mitchell 18). Where Mammy is laughably "desexualized," Jezebel is threateningly hypersexual (Mitchell 18). For their disparate configurations of black womanhood, these minstrel archetypes persist with unmitigated force. Perhaps, the reason for their preservation and indelible stain on black women's subjectivity lies in their pre-emancipation conception. As Spiller would contend, black women's "enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome" ("Interstices" 155).

As a child, I was unable to make sense of the abiding coexistence of these two prescriptive archetypes. My confusion was, however, instructive: I entered middle school with the understanding that being a black girl meant living in a world of different meanings; it was a world where paradoxical dichotomies can construct individual being, a world where myth can become true. For their contradictions, Mammy and Jezebel are archetypes that should cancel each other out, but, uncannily, they endure together through time. Normative (racist, heterosexist) culture hands black women a subjectivity constructed of fractured identities beyond intelligibility. Normative discourse withholds the logics to make oneness out of contradictory opposites. When the discourse of enslavement inscribed the discursive placement of black women's subjectivity, she "became instead the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world," her subjectivity lost in insoluble contradictions ("Interstices" 155). Black women's subjectivity, then, embodies the collapse of paradox: being both so much that you are neither, nothing, impossible.

In her 1984 essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Spillers asserts that "Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend to convince us, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of a highly profitable generative act" (155). For "the myth of the black woman," Spillers does not offer an exact definition or leave any footnotes for further meditation on its meaning. Instead, Spillers relies entirely on the context of cultural understanding; she leans on the full definition of the term "myth." The traditional story of black womanhood is as culturally pervasive as it is utterly fabricated. Perhaps, some of Spillers's audience would desire further explanation, but, as a black woman reader myself, I immediately understood her meaning and empathized with her frustration. As Spillers discloses, "Whatever my mother, niece, and I might say and do about our

sexuality (the terms of kinship are also meant collectively) remains an unarticulated nuance in various forms of public discourse as though we were figments of the great invisible empire of womankind" ("Interstices" 153). The "nuance" of being both black and female breaks the discourses defining sexual subjectivity. On the whole, "the drama of sexuality is a dialectic with at least one missing configuration of terms" - that is, adequate terms to account for the social subject who happens to be both black and female ("Interstices" 153). This lack of description in discourse spells illegibility, and this illegibility - this inability to understand and name - results in a discursive impossibility. Rescripting the "myth of the black woman" entails making legible a black female sexual subjectivity through its prescribed "impossibility." My research attempts to appreciate how subjectivity both is and is not possible. This project hopes to achieve a definition of a tenable sexual subjectivity for black women in terms of (im)possibility - to bring to light how black women writers advocate for understanding black women's sexual subjectivity as ambivalently possible and impossible.

A Discourse of Impossibility

"Impossible" is among the most common descriptors of black women's subjectivity. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg cites "the racist-heterosexist-patriarchal [discursive] containment" of black women's sexual subjectivity as enabling "the traumatic impossibility of female desire, and therefore of full female subjectivity," which is (of course) "resulting from torture's legacy" (446). A scholar of ethnic studies and critical gender studies, Sara Clarke Kaplan identifies the "collective trauma" of black women as "the incessant production and reproduction of the Black female as both a void of subjectivity and a surfeit of sexuality" (126). Going beyond questions of the individual, black studies and feminist scholar Kevin Quashie finds that the philosophical

trouble of romantic coupling "is amplified for the black female subject, whose access to ideological oneness is rendered impossible in the logics of antiblackness and patriarchy" (68).

My thinking about "impossibility" follows Jennifer C. Nash's black feminist application of Gayatri Gopinath's work which deploys the term to illustrate the "unthinkability of a queer female subject position within various mappings of nation and diaspora" and "scrutinize[s] the deep investment of dominant diasporic and nationalist ideologies in producing the particular subject position as impossible and unimaginable." (31). The discursive projects of "dominant" culture, as Gopinath reveals, marginalize certain identities past the limits of intelligibility. It renders certain identities more than "invisible"; their validity as full social subjects is illogical, "unimaginable," and "impossible" (qtd. in Nash 31). Black women certainly fall into this category. With black womanhood sitting at the intersection of so many systems of oppression, contradictions compound discursive renderings of black women to the point of unintelligibility. The black woman social subject is impossible to conceive of in the ideology of what it means to be an individual.

Discursively, a "black woman" is an oxymoron. Sojourner Truth attested to as much in 1851. Starting her infamously radical "Ain't I a Woman" speech, Truth notices the balance of things: "Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon." Prefacing the "negroes of the South" and the "women at the North" is an implied "male" and "white," respectively. As "the white men" respond to social upheaval from black men and white women demanding rights, black women's needs are not only unmentioned; they are left out of the discursive frame. "Ain't I a Woman?" must be asked because, for the black female social subject, it just is not a given. Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia

Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith co-edited a landmark black feminist anthology that attests to the problem's persistence over a century later, in 1982: *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave.* The title is an aphorism that cuts right to the specificity of black women's ontological dilemma. Perpetually, blackness invalidates womanhood, and womanhood cannot account for blackness. In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers initiates her argument by clearing the air; to address black women's subject position specifically, "Let's face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. 'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar,' 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother,' 'Aunty,' 'Granny,' God's 'Holy Fool,' a 'Miss Ebony First,' or 'Black Woman at the Podium': I describe a locus of confounded identities…" (65). Indeed, we need to face it. There exists a perilous mechanism of discourse wherein placement at a "locus of confounded identities" obscures the ability to "know my name." Black womanhood is replete with contradictions to the point of "impossibility."

(Im)possibility: A Critical Ambivalence

Impossibility is bleak. Yet, for all the finality and disillusion it implies, I cannot help but feel it builds an argument for its opposite. Unimaginability is perilous, but it is not the full story. As Spillers confesses, what black women "might say and do about our sexuality" is not reflected in "various public forms of discourse," but it exists elsewhere ("Interstices" 153). Despite this division of private experiences and public discourse, restrictive impossibility weighs on black women's lived experiences, and experienced possibilities seep into the discourse of subjectivity. Possibility and impossibility merge to describe the experience of the black female social subject, persisting in tandem and influencing each other without mutual destruction. Sara Clarke Kaplan endeavors at a solution, calling for "a necessary impossibility: a Black female subjectivity that encompasses both injury and agency" (129). Kaplan points to the urgency of defining a

subjectivity regardless of its seeming impossibility and despite its contradictions: a way to handle being paradoxically both that does not cancel out the fullness of either. To this end, I am inspired by Frederick Engels's meditation on dialectics:

> To the metaphysician, things and their mental reflexes, ideas, are isolated, are to be considered one after the other and apart from each other, are objects of investigation fixed, rigid, given once for all. He thinks in absolutely irreconcilable antitheses…For him, a thing either exists or does not exist; a thing cannot at the same time be itself and something else. Positive and negative absolutely exclude one another…
>
> At first sight, this mode of thinking seems to us very luminous, because it is that of so-called sound commonsense… sooner or later [it] reaches a limit, beyond which it becomes one-sided, restricted, abstract, lost in insoluble contradictions. In the contemplation of individual things, it forgets the connection between them; in the contemplation of their existence, it forgets the beginning and end of that existence; of their repose, it forgets their motion. It cannot see the woods for the trees ("Dialectics").

Engels puts pressure on the difference between perceived opposites. Opposition is not merely the absence of one in place of the other; opposition is a relation. It is Engels's logic about "the connection between them" that I wish to apply to black women's subjectivity.

Black womanhood is built upon contradictions. Dominant discourse renders their subjecthood through unaccountable paradoxes. Impossibility is oppressive and can be deterministic. As impossibility concretizes, we must remember "the connection between" opposites and recognize the inevitable possibility that coexists. Remember: as much as Mammy is utterly void of sexuality, jezebel is irredeemably inundated with it. So, this is a project about dichotomies: logics and illogics; the possible and the impossible; pain and pleasure. It is about

rejecting the finality and disillusion of contradiction and, instead, appreciating ambiguity. It aims to outline and embrace black women's sexual subjectivity as the state of being simultaneously both and neither – possible and impossible. Black women's subjectivity is fundamentally ensnared in paradox, equal and opposite contradictory truths. It is and has long been "itself and something else" in concept and in practice.

Itself and something else, "(im)possibility" combines two contradictory opposites. The paradoxes that plague black women's subjectivity risk discursively marginalizing black women's subjectivity into oblivion. Yet, if ontological contradictions render subjectivity impossible and illogical, dichotomies also then might provide solutions. Reframing discursive pairings from mutual exclusivity to coexistence is helpful in imagining possibilities for black women. My project introduces dichotomous pairings to the discourse of black women's sexual subjectivity and blurs their borders of separation. Impossible yet possible; illogical but logical; pleasurably and painful. Resisting the urge to choose one or the other, my project imagines each half existing alongside its opposite. One does not negate the other. Further, one half's perceived dominance does not necessarily mitigate the existence of the other half. To account for this, I proffer (im)possibility as a means of conceptualizing contradiction that resists mutual cancelation. Beyond describing the ambivalent viability of black women's subjectivity, (im)possibility conveys the coexistence of contradictory opposites generally. Through the frame of (im)possibility, my thesis examines the dialectic of logics/illogics and pain/pleasure as well as possibility/impossibility.

Literature Review: A Hermeneutics of Ambivalence

Mammy and Jezebel are no new figures in American culture. Likewise, scholarship investigating their meanings and black feminist pushback against their dominance are nothing new. In the present day, methodologies for re-reading black women's sexual subjectivity through their contradictory yet conflated archetypes are turning toward a critical hermeneutic. Research conducted within the past decade by scholars Jennifer C. Nash (2014), Sara Clarke Kaplan (2021), and contributing artists of the *Beyond Mammy, Jezebel & Sapphire* exhibit catalog (2018) investigate the discursive limits of personhood and offer a practice for challenging them. To shake loose oppressive definitions of black female subjectivity, they exercise a critical hermeneutic, reading cultural motifs against common interpretations. They endeavor to turn away from injury-oriented readings, and, instead, seek to bring forth instances of empowerment, fulfillment, and pleasure in circumstances typically read as exclusively oppressive/harmful. Black feminists like Jenifer C. Nash venture to "recover black female subjectivity" through "[t]he very site of injury" not despite it - "a necessary impossibility," as Kaplan suggests, "encompass[ing] both injury and agency" (46; 129). As evidenced by the recency of these scholars' works, black female subjectivity unshackled by prescriptive, contradictory cultural images still proves difficult if not impossible for some to imagine. These modern scholars attend to prescribed impossibility and seek to strike a discursive balance. They rescript a bold rendering of subjectivity for black women: one robust enough to handle the paradox of simultaneous possibility and impossibility. My research follows this scholarly directive, naming the method for reading and conceptualizing black female subjectivity as a "critical ambivalence."

My application of "critical ambivalence" is grounded in Michael Dango and Tina Post's definition of the term. In their 2022 essay "An Introduction to Ambivalent Criticism," Dango and Post employ ambivalence "to name one pair of affects that aren't just co-present, but

co-constitutive." Their approach intervenes in "the so-called method wars" which is defined by the "dispositional differences" critics take to their objects of study; "critical ambivalence," then, is an "openness" that rejects discrete conceptualization of theoretical approaches and methods (Dango and Post). This project utilizes a black feminist theory and affect theory. Still, by bringing a critically ambivalent approach to understanding black women's sexual subjectivity, the ambition of my project does not so much rely on synthesizing theoretical approaches. Instead, this project adopts Dango and Post's "ambivalence" as a distinctive quality of black women's sexual subjectivity that provides a necessary logic to that which is prescribed as illogical and, consequently, unimaginable. Contradiction ensnares black women's sexual subjectivity. Appropriately, "the foundational logic of ambivalence is actually more synchronic, its contradictory parts simultaneously and persistently embedded in one another" (Dango and Post). My analysis proffers that possibility and impossibility (as an emblematic frame) do more than coexist for the black woman social subject; they contain each other. My parenthesized combination of the words - (im)possibility - captures this embeddedness. Simply, impossibility does not necessarily negate possibility, and vice-versa. The same goes for pain and pleasure, logics and illogics, and so much more.

My research especially attends to the viability of black women's subjectivity in terms of sexuality - the discursive issues that arise when dealing with black women as desiring subjects and in romantic/sexual couplings. Theorizing around black women in relation to others is inextricably tied to thinking about black women's individual subjectivity. My understanding of this connection is indebted to Kevin Quashie's "To Be (a) One: Notes on Coupling and Black Female Audacity." To account for the black female subject, "whose access to ideological oneness is rendered impossible in the logics of antiblackness and patriarchy," Quashie appropriates

Martin Buber's philosophical calculus in *I and Thou* wherein "Buber argues for encounter as a superlatively open orientation to the world" (68, 73). An "I-Thou'" orientation is "the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another" (qtd. in Quashie 73). Relationality is the practice of superlative openness and the praxis of rendering subjectivity that mutually instantiates the essential integrity of both the *I* and the *Thou*. My project maps relationality onto black women literary characters to identify the problems and potential of black women's sexual subjectivity.

Furthermore, Kevin Quashie's work imagines an "audacious" black female subjectivity that, really, is contingent upon ambivalence. His thinking ties "oneness" and "relationality" together as Quashie explains, "The notion of a self-centered subjectivity might seem antithetical to an understanding of human dependency. But oneness is not incompatible with relation; rather, oneness is a relation, a habitat that facilitates one's being to the all that is around, beyond, within it—a capacious and transcendent inhabiting" (73). Pressing the necessarily mutual inclusivity of oneness and relation, Quashie's argument echoes the assertions undergirding this entire project. Mutual inclusivity is not enough. Oneness and relation are conceptually dependent: "audacious inhabitances of self as immanence… *make possible* the transcendence of surrender and relation" (Quashie 73, my emphasis). The inverse is true as well; an "I-Thou [orientation] is a capacity of oneness" (Quashie 73). Through this connection, Quashie locates an "audacious subject position for a black female human" in "a subjectivity that is at once of immanence and of transcendence" - self-centered and relational (76). The subjectivity Quashie proffers flies in the face of "the restricted subjectivity that is imagined for women," but that's not why it is so aptly described as "audacious" (80). Patriarchy and anti-black racism already hinder black women's access to subjectivity. Yes, achieving a self-centered/relational subjectivity in this mode is especially

difficult for the black female subject, but Quashie illuminates a subjectivity instantiated *through* paradox. My project brings this configuration into conversation with "critical ambivalence" and names it as another instance of (im)possibility.

Methodologies for unraveling black women's discursive paradox are still in flux, but black feminist thought could benefit from a more robust engagement with affect theory and taking to the realm of fiction. Firstly, affect theory offers black feminist thought a useful metric with which to measure the power of imposed social definitions. Secondly, a fictional domain, where reality is mediated through a black female protagonist's desire, reveals the internal logics and possibilities of black female sexual subjectivity. Historically, combining Black Studies and Affect Theory has resulted in an uncomfortable friction. Tyrone S. Palmer's 2017 essay "What Feels More Than Feeling?: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect" attests to as much in just its title. Palmer's work mobilizes a systemic undercurrent as he asserts that "theorization of affect" across the board of scholarship "often assumes a universal humanist subject and body," marking "affect theory's lack of interrogation of the particularities of blackness and its circulation within affective economies" (2-3). However, my project aims to showcase a workable connection between affect theory and black feminist theory by centering an affective approach on the black female social subject. J.L Austin's work in defining "performative utterances" in *How To Do Things With Words* (1955) is especially useful for imagining tangible possibilities. Grounded in real-world action, performativity offers a means of understanding where agency lies in limiting and liberating black women's sexual subjectivity. Still, some recent feminist and black feminist scholars interested in the discursive and ontological dilemma black women face have turned to black women's literature. Quashie (reading Toni Morrison's *Sula*, selections from Audre Lorde, and Beyonce's *Lemonade*) finds that audacity and self-centeredness are

characteristics unique to black women's ontology and capacity for relationality. Carla Kaplan (reading Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*) questions the possibility of fulfillment for "black female longing" (136). She suggests that its possibility is entirely contingent upon the two-way relationship between storyteller and listener, wherein the listener must learn to "listen differently" to create the necessary conditions for possibility (C. Kaplan 136). Alan Nadel (reading Alice Walker's *Meridian*) finds ambivalence written in the body of the black female subject; her "body becomes the territory that measures and tests the distinctions between theft and ownership, not only of property but of life, hope, and ambition" (61). My project builds on these works, excavating a new methodology for approaching dichotomies of discrete opposites that problematizes their very juxtaposition.

I frame my argument through the "critical ambivalence" of oneness and relation taking up Hortense Spillers's assignment "to supply the missing words in the discourse of sexuality" attending to the specificity of black womanhood ("Interstices" 173). To do so, Spillers submits that scholars must "try to encounter agent, agency, act, scene, and purpose in ways that the dominative mode certainly forbids" ("Interstices" 173). Reading subjectivity through contradiction requires this project to read differently. This analysis appreciates that paradoxes can be mutually destructive but aims to demonstrate that embracing contradiction can also "supply the missing words" to illustrate the fullness of black female subjectivity.

Chapter Summary: Literature of Pain, Pleasure, and Power

To locate the danger in a disjoint configuration of pain and pleasure, I analyze three novels written by twentieth-century black American women authors. These works privilege black women's interiority and grapple with the (im)possibilities that construct black female

sexual subjectivity. The novels include Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976), and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975). Superlative for how they illustrate the difficulty of black female sexual subjectivity, these novels host lineages of black female characters undergoing varying degrees of oppression and choice; these characters exist on a spectrum of intimacy and estrangement from themselves. Apart from Hurston's novel, one could easily describe the contents of my selections as brutal or unrelenting for their depictions of violence and sex. Dealing with pain and pleasure so candidly, these books make for ideal objects of study. For my own analysis, case studies are the ideal structure of study. Since my primary concern is black women's subjectivity, my chapters center literary analysis around a single character and how the author writes about her navigating the constraints of normative discourse.

Chapter One, "Utter Impossibility" illustrates how black female sexual subjectivity is made "impossible." This chapter takes Nanny from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Great Gram from Jones's *Corregidora* as case studies to showcase the mechanisms and consequences of rejected ambivalence. Focusing on the formerly enslaved grandmother figures in Hurston and Jones's texts demonstrates how black female subjectivity complicates and withers under the foundational institution of chattel slavery. Both Nanny and Great Gram are liberated from slavery in the narrative present, but the effects of their enslavement linger, nullifying sexual subjectivity interminably. Despite their similarities (situated as their families' matriarchs and living as survivors of slavery), Nanny and Great Gram represent two distinct ways sexual subjectivity is suppressed under the logics of slavery and the societal discourse forged thereafter. On the one hand, Nanny emblematizes how sexual subjectivity (via the ability to desire) is rendered irretrievably unthinkable. On the other hand, Great Gram recognizes - more accurately,

preaches - the inviolable connection between slavery and sex; for her, the impossibility of sexual subjectivity manifests as an inability to configure sexuality outside of trauma's legacy. For both characters, impossibility is a permanent state, shaping the subjectivities of their descendants and themselves alike.

Entitled "Approaching Ambivalence: Alienation and Relation," Chapter Two case studies the "daughters [who] labor even now under the outcome" of slavery's discursive rendering: Ursa of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and Meridian of Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Jones and Walker illustrate their novels' protagonists with narrative arcs that endeavor toward ambivalence through discursive impossibility. Especially grounded in Kevin Quashie's theorization from "To be (a) One," my second chapter attends to subjectivity through the issue of relationality and its opposite, alienation. Relationality, as Quashie theorizes and this chapter evinces, is an essential component of enabling black female subjectivity. Ursa and Meridian embody two roles distinctly burdensome for black female subjectivity: the daughter inheriting slavery's traumatic legacy and the self-sacrificial community advocate, respectively. Attending to these characters together showcases the fraught journey out of discursive impossibility even when relationality is desired. Utter impossibility of subjectivity is a central conflict throughout each text, but in the end, both authors resist foreclosure. Jones and Walker guide readers to imagine a tenable ambivalence in the end, even for characters so jostled by impossibility.

My final chapter is titled "(Im)Possibility Through Paradox," and it case studies characters who do more than seek an ambivalent subjectivity. Feather Mae of *Meridian* and Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* embrace an ambivalent approach to their sexual subjectivities and live in (im)possibility. Attending to this pair enables this project to identify how black women characters find sexual/romantic fulfillment and outline how they negotiate oppressive

imposed definitions. Boldly, Feather Mae and Janie construct a self-authorized subjectivity that balances paradoxes of perceived opposites. Using their act of self-authorization, this project theorizes about a unique affective power available to them and what the authors find necessary for a self-authorized sexual subjectivity of (im)possibility.

A Black Feminist Project

The logics of patriarchy and antiblack racism that "validate" sexual pleasure render black women's sexual subjectivity illogical if it dares to exist between the inhuman extremes of archetypal caricatures, possibility and impossibility, & pain and pleasure. Ultimately, I do not construct (im)possibility as a solution. Instead, I endeavor to account for paradox without capitulating to its utter impossibility. Even so, my project resists aligning with/advocating for its opposite, possibility. The intractability of black women's subjectivity rests in ambivalence. The task of making legible black women's subjectivity entails acknowledging both its possibility and impossibility - not reading impossibility as an absolute obliteration of subjectivity nor accepting possibility as the disillusionment of impossibility. Similarly, it is not my aim to suggest that for black women pain and pleasure are one, or, worse, that pain is a pleasurable experience for black women. Instead, I carefully aim to open space for nuance. Locating and making legible a possible black female sexual subjectivity means resisting pleasure's nullification when it comingles with pain. Given black women's social location at the intersection of so many oppressive systems, the logics of antiblack racism and sexism would define black female subjectivity exclusively by its pain. Thus, negating the division between pleasure and pain is a crucial black feminist project in restoring humanity to black women's sexual subjectivity. My thesis will not shy away from those parts of black female pleasure historically discarded as too perverse or purely violent. It is my view that the omission of these aspects in conceptualizing

black female sexual subjectivity enables the illegibility of black female sexual pleasure. My project aims to bring to light a black female sexuality that has been written off conceptually as too brutally sexual to be sensual and human; too perverse to utter aloud; too contradictory to imagine; and too oppressed to blossom gracefully.

Chapter 1: Utter Impossibility

This chapter is about (im)possibility and (il)logics. It takes a look at Nanny from Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Great Gram from Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. Both matriarchs and heavy influences for their respective novels' main characters, Nanny and Great Gram model the difficulty of adopting a critical ambivalence toward one's sexual subjectivity. Hurston and Jones pose questions rooted in these characters' discursive renderings as sexual subjects: for these formerly enslaved black women characters is sexual subjectivity possible or impossible; what are the logics of their discursive renderings? To answer, the characters bargain with the dialectics of possibility/impossibility and logics/illogics. Their struggle reveals a divide between experienced ambiguity and embraced critical ambiguity. Although Nanny and Great Gram encounter the mutual inclusivity of pain/pleasure, possibility/impossibility, and logics/illogics in their lives, they cannot find a tenable embrace for these perceived opposites. While the novels deal with themes of inherited trauma, the discourse of marriage, and female liberation, this chapter focuses on collating moments in each text where Nanny's and Great Gram's sexual subjectivities manifest. From there, it aims to uncover how the boundaries between opposites break down in lived experience and explore the consequences of rejecting critical ambiguity.

Case Study 1: Nanny

Narrative Perspective and Dreaming

In his 2018 essay entitled "To Be (a) One," Kevin Quashie offers timely commentary regarding black women's fraught ontology. Quashie asks how coupling reacts with a person's nature of being; how does coupling reinforce, complicate, or invert features of oneness? As his essay centers its investigation on black women, the word "impossible" crops up time and again.

Quashie readily admits that whatever trouble coupling engenders, it is "amplified for the black female subject, whose access to ideological oneness is rendered impossible in the logics of antiblackness and patriarchy" (68). Again, a black feminist scholar concedes the persisting problem: black female subjecthood is "impossible" under normative (racist sexist) discourse.

Continuing, Quashie poses the discursive trouble of yoking together coupling and black women: "Relation is impossible to achieve, even more so for one jostled by social ideas about blackness and femaleness, though relation can be a horizon" (Quashie 84). However, achieving (or coming close to) the horizon despite its "impossibility" reveals a silver lining concerning black women's discursive positioning. Inverting paradoxes and eroding the line between dichotomous pairings falls exactly within the purview of restoring humanity to black women's sexual subjectivity. Perhaps, black women, discursively positioned at the nexus of impossibility, are uniquely equipped to travel to horizons and negotiate the impossibility of relation.

Taking up the same metaphor of horizons, Zora Neale Hurston's most-read novel is primarily concerned with relation. Main character Janie is on a "journey to the horizons in search of *people*" (Hurston 86). Hurston builds the world of the book using images of horizons, dedicating the first few paragraphs to their meaning. Hurston's foregrounding her novel with horizons gives my analysis the liberty to follow suit. On the surface, horizons embody (im)possibilities - that is, both possibility and impossibility at the same time. Horizons evoke hopefulness; they signal promises of things to come. At the same time, horizons epitomize that which cannot be achieved. Horizons are an ever-unfurling distance; no amount of effort or distance puts the traveler any closer than when she first starts. In the specific context of *TEWWG*, horizons become synonymous with "desire itself" (C. Kaplan 127). The issue of (im)possibility as it pertains to desire structures the very basis of the book's meaning.

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens, "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time" (Hurston 1). "That is the life of men," and what follows in the novel (Janie's story, her style of storytelling, her perspective) is categorically dissimilar. Introducing the perspective of the central narrative through contrast, the novel's next paragraph posits, "Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (Hurston 1). In the next paragraph, Janie enters: "So the beginning of this was a woman…" (Hurston 1). With the construction of this opening scene, Hurston orients her audience away from a distinctly masculine worldview to a feminine one, then zeros in on her singular protagonist. Hurston's first move, a 180-degree turn, serves a critical function. First, Hurston assumes a normative perspective and grounds her audience firmly in opposition to it: the world of women. Beginning broadly, the opening refrain "[s]hips at a distance" looks outward and feels vast. "[E]very man" and "Time" (capital "t") are sweeping concepts. Hurston establishes the "life of men" as generalizing - enforcing what is normative. Indeed, if there exists an "every man" and a uniformly experienced "Time," "women" exist decidedly outside of this framework. By prefacing her novel with this gendered dichotomy, Hurston does not let a moment lapse without directing her audience to read against the normative grain.

With the opening paragraphs, Hurstons constructs a dialectic of "two models for evaluating life" (Wolff 29). "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board"; in contrast, for women, "The dream is the truth." The composition of dreams - read as desire, discursive possibilities – is, for Hurston, an issue of social subjectivity (in this case, gender). This project

does not dismiss this discursive frame for its seemingly essentialist approach to gender; instead, this chapter seeks to follow Hurston's framing directive in earnest to unearth how Hurston conceptualizes the pressing issue of (im)possibility for black women's subjectivity. Digging into Hurston's dreaming differences also reveals a marked difference in possibility for men and women. In the masculine vision of dreaming, the "ships" hold men's desires, not the men themselves. The dreams aboard are fixed on "the horizon" - a taunting length of distance, representing impossibility in man's inability to ever achieve it. And in Hurston's analysis, men never do achieve it; they are either resigned to hold their dreams only in sight, or they passively allow their dreams to roll in "with the tide." Women, however, have considerably more power. While "life is given not made" for men, women's lives embody the inverse (Wolff 29). Their dreams reside in their own minds, and their desire determines what is made real (ie. is possible). In short, feminine dreaming embodies possibility while masculine dreaming embodies impossibility.

Janie, the novel's protagonist, evidently aligns well with the paradigm of feminine dreaming. Hurston signals this fact through the tone with which she introduces feminine dreaming. Where "the life of men" is eternal and generalizing, feminine dreaming evokes immediacy and intimacy. Notice, for instance, how talk of women begins with a casual and immediate "Now." Similarly, the conjunction "So," initiates Janie's formal entrance into the narrative, linking the feminine dreaming paradigm to the main character. So, Janie, who is identified as "a woman" before she is ever called by name, aligns with feminine dreaming. In these first few lines, Hurston simultaneously acknowledges impossibility and makes space for possibility. Masculine dreaming accepts given parameters of impossibility, and feminine

dreaming makes its own rules. Having oriented the audience toward the prospect of possibility, Hurston allows Janie's perspective to lead the story.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is Janie's "great journey to the horizons" (Hurston 85). The narrative's opening finds Janie, a woman "full of the oldest human longing - self revelation," returning home *after* her trip to the horizon and back to tell her Pheoby all of what she has seen (Hurston 6). It is "a many-voiced text," long criticized for its style of narrative voice (McCredie 25). As the main character - and as a woman dreaming - Janie's point of view dominates the narrative and mediates its reality. The novel follows not merely Janie's "historical account or narrative of event alone"; the storytelling takes on the "lyric formulation of a personal vision" (Wolff 29). More than a personal perspective, the novel gazes through the lens of Janie's personal desires. Consequently, locating any other character's desire must be done second-handedly.

Nanny's Perspective

One character is uniquely voiced: the subject of this chapter's first case study, Janie's grandmother Nanny. As with other side characters, Hurston reveals Nanny's characteristics (and more to the point, her *desires*) through interactions with Janie. Additionally, though, Hurston clears a distinctive space for Nanny's perspective. Hurston briefly relinquishes Janie's reins on the storytelling in Chapter 2 when Nanny's voice overtakes the narrative. Nanny's uniquely independent narrative voice makes Nanny's dreams, desires, and (im)possibilities uniquely visible.

As a consequence of Janie's general narrative dominance, Nanny is easy to dismiss. Nanny is a former slave and Janie's primary maternal figure, and as many critics easily concede, she "plays a major role in shaping the heroine's life" (duCille 116). But critical investigation

generally stops there. Nanny tends to fall into the category of antagonist characters who simply get in Janie's way. As Lillie P. Howard says, "Whenever the novel is discussed, Nanny is often hurriedly dismissed as one of those desecrators of the pear tree who spit on Janie's idea of 'marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think'" (Howard 405). Nanny commits the sin of impressing her beliefs about relationships onto a young Janie "by cluttering up her life with materialism, security, and other stifling trappings supposedly necessary to a happy marriage" (Howard 405). In short, Nanny is generally brushed past or reductively mischaracterized as Janie's foil. However, this chapter attends closely to Nanny's perspective to uncover Nanny's subjectivity independent of her granddaughter's. While the novel centers Janie's sexual subjectivity, my analysis will collate two instances of Nanny's given perspective in order to show how (im)possibility manifests for a woman character positioned so diametrically to Janie. My investigation will examine Nanny's broader worldview of black women's social position and the possibility of her sexual subjectivity being both black and female.

In Chapter 2, Nanny envisions a better world for Janie. The details of Nanny's rendering are quite revealing for Nanny's character and for the limits she perceives for black women's subjectivity. Tellingly, Hurston uses the issue of desire as a springboard to launch the story from Janie's perspective into Nanny's. A child still under the guardianship of her grandmother, Janie's budding awareness of sexual desire unveils Nanny's personal negotiations with its impossibility. It is a teenage kiss between Janie and a schoolmate, actually, that provokes a beating and a careful warning about black women's position in the world. After striking Janie across her face, Nanny says, "Yo' Nanny wouldn't harm a hair uh yo' head. She don't want nobody else to do it neither if she kin help it. Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything so far as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we

don't know nothin' but what we see" (Hurston 14). The most liberated possibility Nanny can imagine is one where the "black man is in power". The ideal is obviously - near ironically - limited. The fact that Nanny cannot fathom an idealized world ungoverned by patriarchy speaks much to the doubled displacement of black women as social subjects. Having to choose between racial and gendered oppression means complete liberation for black women is entirely out of the question.

Her fixation on a landscape wherein "de black man is in power" reeks of black nationalist ideology. It is a political framing that dominated much of the art and activism of Hurston's contemporaries and echoes forward into the motifs of a debate published in 1984 between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin. Lorde is primarily concerned with the intimate occurrence of violence both racialized and heterosexist. She states, "Okay, the cops are killing the men and the men are killing the women. I'm talking about rape. I'm talking about murder" (48). Baldwin, however, grounds his argument in the ideal of nationalism: "Du Bois believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I" (43). The invariable male-ness of Baldwin's roster of dreamers is as important to his philosophy as the American Dream itself. Baldwin speaks in the same tradition that elevated the named dreamers to the status of community leaders and cultural icons to explain his viewpoint: "We are behind the gates of a kingdom which is determined to destroy us… Part of the horror of being a Black American is being trapped into being an imitation of an imitation" (50). The *true* "horror" visited upon black people in this country, as Baldwin sees it, is their lack of access to the treasures of the "kingdom"; black men, particularly suffer because they cannot relish in the fullness of normative (white) masculine privilege. In establishing racial hierarchy, discourse visits the "principal crime in this republic" onto "the Black man" who can only hope to be "an imitation of an imitation" of normative masculinity;

and when racial violence takes a gendered angle, “it’s not him who is my enemy even when he beats up his grandmother. His grandmother has got to know” (48). Even for its heterosexism and misogynoir, Baldwin does not see the discourse - the nationalist patriarchy - as the issue; instead, the “blame” lies in the fact that the “kingdom’s” gates remained locked to black men. Baldwin’s thinking is the kind of singular-oppression model that prompted one black feminist, Kimberle Crenshaw, to coin the term “intersectionality” as a politically necessary framework of conceptualization. It is the same kind of thinking that undergirds the title of Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith’s anthology *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave*. Understandably, Nanny's subscription to this normative ideology leads many critics to cast her as simply a “conformist,” especially when juxtaposed with Janie’s “romanticism” (Hajjari et al. 41).

However, Nanny’s black nationalist ideology reveals more than her consideration of black men; for its obvious limitations, her thinking illuminates how she conceptualizes black women’s subjectivity. “Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything so far as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it’s some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see.” It is an oddly existential response to seeing one’s grandchild share a mutual peck on the lips with her schoolmate. However, the intensity of Nanny's reaction reveals how deeply troubled she imagines desire to be for black girls/women. Nanny’s verbal response to Janie’s kiss implies the impossibility of desire’s fulfillment for black women. Nanny’s emotional reaction to Janie’s expression of desire (including the slap) indicates that sensual desire for the black female subject (even as innocent as a schoolgirl’s kiss) portends danger. The way Nanny sees it, the fact that Janie “didn’t mean nothin’ bad” by her kiss does not absolve her; indeed, it is the very cause for concern. Janie kisses Johnny Taylor out of curiosity,

playfulness, desire, and "Dat's what makes [Nanny] skeered" (Hurston 13). Marriage assuages these fears. It offers protection through status. When Nanny says "Ah can't be always guidin' yo' feet from harm and danger. Ah wants to see you married right away," she illuminates the simple calculation of her logic (Hurston 3). The problem? Danger. The solution? Marriage. The effects of marriage go beyond providing protection, though. As Kevin Quashie states, "the domestic authorizes a normative tragedy of black maleness and reifies black women and children as objects of communal recuperation" (Quashie 70). Marriage, in Nanny's rendering, is also a practice in upholding the conceits of black nationalist discourse. In the domestic space of marriage, Nanny uses Janie to reify the misogynist, "normative tragedy of black maleness" that ignores the necessary objectification of black women as "objects of communal recuperation."

Nanny's allegiance to black nationalist discourse gives the deceptive impression that Hurston is trying to align her with the novel's configuration of masculine dreaming. Admittedly, for Nanny's perspective on dreaming, Hurston aligns the novel's matriarch more closely with masculine dreaming than with feminine dreaming. However, the fit is not perfect. Nanny's ideal rests firmly out of grasp at "some place way off in de ocean" beyond "what we see." Nanny's description illustrates an image strikingly similar to the one Hurston paints of masculine dreaming at the very start of the novel - some desire-holding landscape/vessel fixed in the ocean and out of reach. Worse, though, is Nanny's situation. While masculine dreaming allows for some men's dreams to "come in with the tide" toward realization, unrealized dreams for men still bob on the horizon "never out of sight." Derealization happens only when "the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation." Nanny's ideal, though, exists in an unimaginable space *beyond* the horizon. The possibility of black masculine power does not even imply the prospect of moving toward being realized. It is not a "ship"; it cannot move from across the ocean to the hands of the

dreamer. Out of sight, Nanny's ideal sits in "some place way off in de ocean." If it is a ship, under the waves, or representing another continent entirely we cannot know. After all, according to Nanny "we don't know nothin' but what we see."

Notably, Nanny's deferred utopic vision implies an even further disillusion with possibility. In truth, Nanny does not fit easily into either method of dreaming. Hers is a method constructed *entirely* of impossibility - there is no prospect of rolling in with the tides or even holding in sight. Since Hurston articulates dreaming through gender, Nanny's subject position is important to consider when placing her within the dreaming binary. Somehow Nanny – as a black woman – is displaced from the binary modalities of gendered dreaming. Impossibility is a greater burden for Nanny's dreaming than it is in either masculine or feminine dreaming. From her earlier life in slavery to now, Nanny's oppression impairs her to see only that "de white man is the ruler of everything." But, of course, it is a mistake to assume that what is seen defines what is real and what is possible. Nanny justifies her perspective saying, "so far as Ah been able tuh find out," confessing that sight restricts her way of knowing. Since her ideal of black men's power is decidedly unseen, it is, in effect, *utterly* impossible.

Condemning Nanny for the utter impossibility she imagines for black women's subjectivity would be an ungenerous and short-sighted claim. Nanny, at least in part, realizes the pitfalls of her outlook, even asking Janie for her patience. At the close of Chapter 2, Nanny shifts her tone from didactic to pleading; "Have some sympathy fuh me… Janie, Ah'm a cracked plate," Nanny implores (Hurston 19). It is tempting to read Nanny's ideological impositions on Janie as expressions of love, as her trying to protect her granddaughter. Lillie P. Howard claims, "Nanny's only flaw is that she wants to keep the romantic Janie from finding out about living for herself. Living, experience has taught Nanny, is a hard burden to bear" (Howard 405). However,

it is unfair to dismiss the impossibility of desire that Nanny holds as a consequence of her oppression that affects only Nanny as an individual. Nanny still serves Janie off her "cracked plate," and the result is violent. Taking "the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon" and tying "it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her" is still a brutal act on Nanny's part (Hurston 85). Nanny, "who first turns Janie from the horizon and, hoping to protect her from the consequences of her own sexuality, in effect sells her into a sexual bondage sanctioned by marriage vows" (duCille 120). Nanny's subscription to and remaking of black nationalist ideology on Janie's life constitutes a re-rendering of the utter impossibility of black women's subjectivity. Asserting that "[t]he important and obvious thing, however, is that Nanny meant well; she had Janie's best interest at heart, though, unfortunately, Janie never seems to realize this" is not enough (Howard 411). This appeal to Nanny's intentions fails to consider the discursive violence she recycles into Janie's life and for which she apologizes, in the end.

Nanny's Sexual Subjectivity

For the utter impossibility she imagines black women's sexual subjectivity to have, Nanny makes it difficult to spot any sign of experienced eroticism or desire. Indeed, the easier reading of nanny would account, not for her subjectivity, but for her symbolism. Nanny, exclusively read against Janie's perspective, is notable among critics for her "realism" (to Janie's romanticism) and "conformism" (to Janie's radicalness) (Hajjari et al. 41-42). Effaced in utter impossibility, Nanny's sexual subjectivity is easily and often missed. However, an impossible ideal still suggests a desiring imagination; likewise, Nanny's imposition of values onto Janie, directly points to values Nanny holds dear.

Later in Janie's life, Nanny discloses what qualities are desirable in a husband in the affirmative. When Janie confides in her grandmother that she does not desire, or "wants to

want," her first husband Logan, Nanny argues her perspective of what is valuable (desirable) in a man (Hurston 22). Nanny lists out the material comforts, house, and land Janie enjoys because of her husband - as if that is all that matters in a marriage. Rising in frustration, Nanny exclaims: "Lawd have mussy! Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love!" (Hurston 22). Nanny's retort to Janie's complaint is unsurprising. Still, for its lacking comprehension of Janie's romantic/sexual desire, the response uncovers a different type of desire that Nanny does understand. Evidently, Nanny values security and freedom from want, not so much "Dis love." Howard suggests that Nanny's "Dis Love!" speech evinces that "Nanny *pretends* that love is not important" (Howard 409, my emphasis). Attending closely to Nanny's sexual subjectivity, my analysis of the "Dis Love!" speech agrees with Howard's; Nanny is holding something back in her speech to Janie. However, I want to dig deeper into Nanny's implicit meaning. If we really believe that Nanny *pretends* here, then the charade begs the question what feelings of eroticism does the "Dis Love" speech mask? Why bother masking them in the first place?

However subtly, Nanny's foisting her dreams onto Janie through "realism" and "conformism" speaks directly to Nanny's personal experience with desire. Revealing her own desires, Nanny interprets Janie's marital wealth and high social standing to be the optimal reason to love a man. In total, her perspective on the merits of marriage combines material comfort and physical protection; these two issues embody the optimum desirable qualities. Projecting her desires onto her granddaughter, Nanny wants Janie "to school out and pick from a higher bush and a sweeter berry" in the marriage market (Hurston 12). Her reaction to Janie's need for sensuality "questions [Nanny's] romantic notion of love and marriage"; in Nanny's opinion, a sensually based relationship "is filthy and corrupt" (Hajjari et al. 42) . The makeup of husband material is irrespective of sensual desire in Nanny's view. Notable, too, is how the particular

value of material comfort persists for Nanny. Protection from life's difficulties - at least in part - is the desired "sweeter berry" Nanny wishes for Janie. Harjjari et al. note the specific connotations within Nanny's configuration of "protection": "Friendliness and equality are not inherent in Nanny's word, protection; the word in its communal and economical senses signifies superiority of the one who protects over the one who is protected" (Hajjari et. al 44). The desired "sweeter bush" of provisions and protection has a distinctive twinge of proprietorship.

To answer for this aftertaste, Janie points us to Nanny's upbringing. Janie confides in her friend Pheoby, "She was born in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn't sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat's whut she wanted for me — don't keer whut it cost. Git up on uh high chair and sit dere." (Hurston 109). Janie sees her grandmother's ambitions for her as inextricably linked to her former life in slavery. Nanny's totalizing values that prize "material possession instead of free exchange of love" eerily mirror chattel slavery's discursive connections between human beings/possession and freedom/love. Both Nanny's thinking and the ideology that upholds slavery value certain human relations primarily in terms of ownership and material gain. Similarly, relation among and between all classes of society within the network of chattel slavery lose hope of "freedom"; as Ann duCille notes, even between African Americans, relation corrupts under the logics of slavery, making another "peculiar institution" out of marriage and family itself (duCille 6). Further, as her former enslavement attests, "Nanny is actually the product of a value system that defines a Black woman as subservient to her male partner," and, as such, her desires - both experienced personally and projected onto Janie - speak in the terms of that "value system" of her past (Hajjari et al. 43). Using Nanny's ambition for Janie as a foray

into Nanny's own desires, Janie gestures to the idea that Nanny's ideas about desire are grounded in an antebellum backstory.

Nanny offers exactly that in a monologue. Sinking back into memory, she reasons, "Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed" (Hurston 16). Nanny offers her memories as a warning and for the purpose of shaping Janie's desires after her own. Her story is not merely a cautionary tale of a more difficult life; it is Nanny's opportunity to pass on the "high ground" she "dreamed" having to Janie who might just achieve it. Nanny lovingly displaces hope for her own subjectivity and projects it onto Janie; when she looks at her granddaughter, "[i]t is not Janie in her unique individuality that she sees. She sees a younger version of herself" (Hajjari et al. 43). Offered up as inspiration for Janie, Nanny's backstory reveals how the desired but elusive "high ground" manifests for that younger version of Nanny in the structure of her former plantation and how desire became such a thing of fear.

Nanny tells a story of her enslavement steeped in violence - discursive, brutal, and sexual. Hortense Spillers's thinking offers a framework for approaching the dynamics of sexual subjectivity in the context of American chattel slavery:

> Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived 'pleasure' from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not 'pleasure' is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom for both or either of the parties has not been settled. Indeed, we could go so far as to entertain the very real possibility that 'sexuality,' as a term of implied relationship and desire, is dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate to any of the familial arrangements under a system of enslavement, from the master's family to the captive enclave. Under these

> arrangements, the customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are thrown into unrelieved crisis. (Spillers, "Mama's Maybe" 67).

The institution of slavery throws relation as a whole into an ever-unfurling discursive dilemma. Investigating, instead of obfuscating, enslaved characters' desires and sexual subjectivity is not a task this project takes lightly. The task should be taken up, though because, the inability to locate and name in discourse these a person's subjectivity risks a doubled displacement of subjectivity. Unable to name those locations where characters like Nanny actually and with purpose gesture to their desire, sexuality, et cetera continues boxing the legibility of their subjecthood out of the discursive framework, similar to the way the discourse of slavery denied them of their personhood. Nanny offers up a testimony of her own experience with a purposefulness we cannot ignore. The urgent, "unrelieved crisis" of what slavery has done to relation for black women informs why Hurston writes a testimony of slavery into a text entirely about desire, sexual subjectivity, and (im)possibility.

Uncovering Elusiveness: Nanny's Allusions and Retreat

Nanny's recounting starts with her last encounter with her slaver, referred to as "Marse Roberts," before he left to join the Confederate effort in the Civil War:

> They was all cheerin' and cryin' and shoutin' for de men dat was ridin' off…But pretty soon he let on he forgot somethin' and run into mah cabin and made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done, and was gone after de rest lak lightnin'. Ah heard 'em give one last whoop for him. Then de big house and de quarters got sober and silent (Hurston 16).

The scene Nanny illustrates for her young granddaughter is one of sexual violence. Holding in mind the violence inherent and unalienable to the enslaved/slaver relationship, note also the

diction Hurston uses to illustrate the encounter. Nanny's choice of words is not explicitly violent - a quality dissimilar to other illustrations of antebellum life in her monologue. For instance, Hurston invites a direct comparison between this description and a conversation between Nanny and the plantation owner's wife. Immediately following the slaver Roberts's departure, his wife finds Nanny in her quarters, catching sight of Nanny's baby daughter who is fathered by the plantation master. The encounter is explosive, and Nanny lends vividly explicit language to help explain the event to Janie. To Nanny's recollection, the plantation mistress hurls a verbal assault, "Look lak you don't know who is Mistis on dis plantation, Madam. But Ah aims to show you"; issues lashings that "burnt me lak fire"; and promises further brutalization threatening "One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo' bare back. Ah'll have you whipped till de blood runs down to yo' heels! Ah mean to count de licks mahself" (Hurston 17). The conflict culminates in another type of threat - one that promises goes beyond punishment: "And if it kills you Ah'll stand de loss. Anyhow, as soon as dat brat is a month old Ah'm going to sell it offa dis place" (Hurston 17). The encounter prompts Nanny to flee under the cover of the night.

Similarly, as Nanny describes the eventual loss of her daughter later in the chapter, she does not shirk from explicit language: "Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he had done raped mah baby" (Hurston 18). Retelling her personal history, Nanny does not mince words with her young granddaughter because her purpose is to warn. Janie (who is mature enough for marriage in Nanny's eyes) needs to hear the extent of the dangers of the world and where they lurk. In firsthand testimony, Nanny does not spare Janie the gruesome details; Nanny believes imagery of herself "whipped till de blood runs down to yo' heels" serves an educational purpose (Hurston 17). Secondhand testimony demonstrates how Nanny is

understanding of and unafraid to use the word “rape” (Hurston 18). Why, then, the sudden ambiguity for Roberts?

He “let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done.” While the scene is sexually exploitative and undoubtedly violent, metaphors and ambiguity shroud the specificity of Nanny’s relationship with Roberts. Nanny’s way of describing it opens room for attentive interpretation beyond the immediate inferences drawn from their sociohistorical subject positions as white male enslaver and black female enslaved (C. Kaplan 140). Nanny’s verbiage, the way she tells her own story, reveals details regarding conceptualizations of safety and sensuality.

To account for Nanny’s idiosyncratic linguistic choice, one must read between the lines. Recall the scene of Mistis’s visit to Nanny’s cabin, and broaden the focus. A wider frame reveals, importantly, the players in this brutal scene are more than the mistress, Nanny, and her young daughter. The encounter is made possible by Roberts - not by his actions, but by his absence. The mistress waited until a specific moment of her husband’s wartime departure to confront Nanny and her new baby; Nanny waited until that point to run, undoubtedly having sensed the mistress’s suspicion before this encounter. For both Mrs. Roberts and Nanny, the question of ‘why now’ can be answered by the master’s absence. Just as his leaving the plantation shortly precipitated Nanny’s own departure, his presence offered a layer of protection from many, specific forms of violence. This protection in Nanny’s enslaved life is of obvious value. Given his, for now we’ll call it, unique relationship with Nanny, Roberts keeps Nanny off the “whippin’ post,” away from his wife’s wrath, and with her daughter in her care. Reading Roberts’s absence reveals his value to Nanny in terms of offering relative protection. The value of protection, especially in the

context of coupling, persists for Nanny, even outside of slavery, and is revealed to be at least an aspect of her desire.

Within the bounds of her captivity, Nanny strategically (and with a faint suggestion of desire) elects for the respective protection of being Roberts's enslaved mistress. For its relative safety amid subjection, the relationship between Nanny and Marse Roberts is reminiscent of the fungible subjectivity rendered in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, an autobiography of fugitive slave Harriet Jacobs who used the narrative pseudonym of "Linda Brent" (Snorton 57). C. Riley Snorton's book *Black on Both Side* takes stock of the "fungible fugitivity" Jacobs/Brent embodies throughout her tale (69). Snorton's analysis contends with the "fungibility" of Jacobs/Brent's sexual subjectivity, which proves especially illustrative in Nanny's case. Snorton takes up the process of Jacobs/Brent's escape from her cruel enslaver Dr. Flint as an entry point for theorization. As many scholars argue, Jacobs/Brent "determines [to have] sexual relationship with Sands," a white slave master relatively kinder than Dr. Flint; Jacobs/Brent herself claims that being with Mr. Sands is the "less degrading" alternative to "submit[ting] to compulsion" with Dr. Flint (Snorton 68; qtd. in Snorton 68). But, as Snorton points out, this alternative "came with little measure for protection" for Jacobs/Brent (68). Eventually, Sands decides to cast his and Jacobs/Brent's daughter as his wife's personal slave, and the betrayal prompts Jacobs/Brent's escape (Snorton 68).

Indeed, a more freeing exercise of fungibility comes with those sites Jacobs/Brent terms her "loophole of retreat" (Snorton 53). These sites are what Saidiya Hartman defines as a "space of freedom that is at the same time a space of captivity"; they manifest in Jacobs/Brent's narrative as finding sanctuary hiding from her enslavement in her grandmother's attic (qtd. in Snorton 68). While her chosen sexual arrangement with Sands offers little in terms of practical

protection, Jacobs/Brent's active uncovering of a "loophole of retreat" crafts a small space of freedom amongst her social unfreedom. The attic of the "sympathetic" white woman shelters Jacobs/Brent from her and "her daughter's imminent life in captivity"; yet, "Brent's dependence on the unnamed white woman" tugs her subjecthood back into a state of unfreedom (Snorton 68). Snorton attends to the loophole of retreat as black subjects' active seeking of spaces that inflame tensions between freedom and unfreedom amid a backdrop of absolute subjection (53).

Within the bounds of her captivity, Nanny strategically elects for the respective protection of being Roberts's enslaved mistress. Nanny's sexual relationship with Roberts offers the protection Sands could not and aligns more closely with Jacobs/Brent's loophole of retreat. In a transactional fashion, Roberts's presence (and Nanny's proximity to him as his chosen enslaved mistress) protects her from the physical violence of his wife and from the abduction of her child. Unfreedom persists, though, for Nanny/Roberts since, under the prescriptions of American slavery, the relational freedom of their coupling "is [only] dubiously appropriate, manageable, or accurate" (Spillers, "Mama's Maybe" 78). Slavery's process of objectification throws into crisis the very essence of human relation. As Jacobs/Brent writes, "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (qtd. in Snorton 68). It follows, then, that there is something decidedly unfree about Nanny's predicament, even as it offers a small "space of freedom." With Roberts/Nanny's relationship functioning as "retreated" space for Nanny, Hurston pushes the ambiguity of desire further in the diction she gives Nanny to voice her experience.

Nanny's choice of words narrating her backstory attenuates the "dubiousness" of thinking about desire between herself and Marse Roberts. As Nanny's testimony regarding Roberts is markedly vague, closely attending to the language she does provide offers a more intimate entry

point for investigation. When Nanny says Roberts "made me let down mah hair for de last time. He sorta wropped his hand in it, pulled mah big toe, lak he always done," Nanny takes up the same metaphor Janie uses to convey her own sexual freedom - letting down one's hair (C. Kaplan 131). Hairstyles, Janie's specifically, mark one's ability to embrace her sexuality and experience fulfillment. Repressed by her second husband Joe Starks, Janie's "hair was NOT going to show" in public since Joe decides "Janie was there… for *him* to look at, not those others" (Hurston 51-52). Notable, too, is the timing with which the hair metaphor comes to light; its full depth of meaning surfaces at about Chapter 6. However, Hurston covertly recycles Janie's signature metaphor here, in Chapter 2. Thus, the full meaning of letting one's hair down, especially as it pertains to Nanny, is available only at a second glance.

With a reflexive reading, Hurston parallels the two women's experience of sexuality through the symbol of hair. Again, the difference between Nanny's and her granddaughter's deployment of the hair metaphor lies in the specificity of Nanny's diction. Janie lets her own hair down. Feeling liberated immediately after Joe Stark's passing, "[s]he tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair" (Hurston 83). Her husband's jealousy, alongside the townspeople's expectations, kept Janie's hair (read as sexuality) restricted. Ultimately, when the possibility for sensual fulfillment reemerges, Janie does the honors. She lets her own hair down. For Nanny, the situation is the opposite. Roberts wants Nanny's hair down, and he "made" her do it. The simplicity of the juxtaposed power dynamics is deceiving. As another comparison of hair metaphors reveals, desire in Nanny's case is more tangled than the simple configuration of Nanny as the desired object and Roberts as the desiring subject.

Hurston returns the hair metaphor in Chapter 11 to display how hair-touching engenders relationality. Janie is only able to come to a full appreciation of her "hair" through relation with her final lover Tea Cake:

> "Why, Tea Cake? Whut good do combin' mah hair do you? It's mah comfortable, not yourn.'
>
> "It's mine too. Ah ain't been sleepin' so good for more'n uh week cause Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair…"
>
> "Umph! You'se might easy satisfied. Ah been had dis same hair next tuh mah face ever since Ah cried de fust time, and 'tain't never gimme me no thrill."
>
> "…Umph! umph! umph! Ah betcha you don't never go tuh de lookin' glass and enjoy yo' eyes yo'self. You lets other folks git all de enjoyment out of 'em 'thout takin' in any of it yo'self"" (Hurston 99).

Tea Cake aims "tuh git [his] hands" in Janie's hair. In doing so, he pushes her to take pleasure in herself. He is, as he says, "de Apostle Paul tuh de Gentiles. Ah tells 'em and then agin Ah shows 'em" - that is, he is *relational* (Hurston 100). He, as Kevin Quashie theorizes, embodies an "I-Thou orientation" which "is not about two coming together, but instead resides in the preparedness of the one to meet the other one" (Quashie 73). Quoting Martin Buber himself, an I-Thou relationality describes "the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another" (Quashie 73). Declaring himself a prophet of relationality, Tea Cake stands ready to tell Janie the good news of her "one active existence" as much as he is ready to share in it himself. Engaging with Janie's "hair," Tea Cake approaches Janie as a Thou and, relationally, instantiates the fullness, the oneness, of her sexual subjectivity in his pursuit. The act of "getting his hands in her hair" exemplifies, as Quashie would explain, "how the one is

instantiated as a one" through "whatever she becomes through the call to relation" (Quashie 73). In perhaps the most incisive example of possible, generative relationality that the book offers, Hurston, through Tea Cake, reorients Janie toward *herself* in the call to relation. In his hands, Tea Cake conjures a genuine, reciprocal I-Thou relation between himself and Janie that makes space for "the integrity and essentiality of the one" (Quashie 73).

Crucial to his appropriation of Buber's *I-Thou* philosophy, Quashie notes that instantiating a "self-centeredness" - an active existence as "a one" - ultimately "ensures that the ideological pursuit" of coupling, relation, and sexuality "doesn't reify the logics that would erase black femaleness from that pursuit" (Quashie 73). In other words, the inviolable "oneness" in I-Thou relation makes possible black women's inclusion in the discourse of what it means to be "a one." Given the role of relation in validating subjectivity, seeing Janie/Tea Cake's hand-in-hair moment recreated for Roberts/Nanny is peculiar. Mirroring Tea Cake, Roberts takes a handful as well - "sorta wropped his hand in it." Considering the relational meaning of Janie/Tea Cake's hand-in-hair scene, Roberts's effect and Nanny's pleasure come into question. Surely, accounting for the characters' differences, Nanny's experience of sexual fulfillment is not the same as Janie's, even with Hurston employing the same figure of speech. However, Hurston draws a careful parallel that nudges readers, however uncomfortably, toward imagining what pleasure might mean in Nanny's circumstance. Hurston reaches toward something relational by "wropp[ing]" Roberts hand in Nanny's hair. With a reflexive reading, the image invites the notion of pleasure on Nanny's part and the inviolable "oneness" of her sexual subjectivity. Yet, this determination seems counterintuitive. Nanny is enslaved - caught in the social machine that "sever[ed] the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (Spillers, "Mama's Maybe" 67). For the black female subject, the institution of slavery spells the utter obliteration of

discursive subjectivity, pleasure, and possibility. For the possibility of Nanny's sexual subjectivity, Hurston's hair parallel proposes a contradiction. How can it be both instantiated or utterly impossible?

Nanny's own testimony does not provide an easy answer. Beyond Nanny's "loophole of retreat" found in the staging of her position as Roberts's enslaved mistress, the vagueness of Nanny's language in retelling her story finds her retreating still. Employing uncharacteristically figurative language to describe her relationship with her former enslaver, Nanny retreats from defining in-post her sexual subjectivity as possible or impossible. "[He] made me let mah hair down for de last time" and "He sorta wropped his hand in it" is language so steeped in metaphor that it resists binary classification. The metaphorical meaning of hands-in-hair is yet to surface for the reader or for Janie, Nanny's audience. Upon reflexive consideration, both the pain (slavery's denial of subjecthood, sexual coercion) and the pleasure (implied relationality, eroticism) are evident. Neither pain nor pleasure triumphs over the other in Nanny's brief statement. So, Nanny forces those listening to deal with its ambivalence. The "retreated" linguistic move performed for her granddaughter reflects how even a generation removed from her own captivity, Nanny's sexual subjectivity idles still in a place that is both free and captive. Thus, her testimony attests to a sexual subjectivity that is (im)possible.

Foreclosing Ambivalence in the End

Still, Nanny's reckoning with this (im)possibility later in life and in her raising Janie suggests a less harmonious understanding. Nanny's staunch "realism" juxtaposed to and "tempering" Janie's romance-driven perspective is unable to balance (im)possibility and find peace with its paradox (Howard 413). As such, Nanny reads the contradictions within her subjectivity to mean utter impossibility. Illustrating the finality of Nanny's utter impossibility, the

ending to Nanny's backstory is damning. Just as she makes her escape from the plantation following her confrontation with Mistris, Union victory in the Civil War closes in. Freedom finds her the very next morning, eyes fixed toward the sea, where she could "see uh big ship at a distance" (Hurston 18). Men on the shore confirm what the sight suggests: "Sherman was comin'... and all us slaves was free" (Hurston 18). The scene, apparently jubilant, takes an ominous tone filtered through Nanny's perspective. Her exact phrasing - "ships at a distance" - echoes verbatim the modality of masculine dreaming from the first line of the book. A legal end to slavery may have come, but the ships she sees never "come in with the tide" (Hurston 1). Indeed, Nanny turns her "eyes away" before they can (Hurston 1). Of course, Nanny cannot realistically wait on the beach to watch boats come to shore, but therein lies the problem - or at least the difference between her and Janie. Ever faithful to "realism," Nanny accepts the terms of life as given; for her, "Life is given, not made" (Wolff 29). The problem with accepting what is "given" is that the normative discourse of sexual subjectivity is *especially* troubled "for the black female subject, whose access to ideological oneness is rendered impossible in the logics of antiblackness and patriarchy" (Quashie 68). Thus, Nanny's desires are flung past the masculine horizon of "impossibility" and toward an utter impossibility uniquely accessible to the black female social subject. The sight of ships that inaugurates Nanny's legal freedom from slavery spell discursive impossibility amid her experienced ambivalent (im)possibility. This early moment in Nanny's life foreshadows that "Dis love!" will remain ever a problem for Nanny.

As much as Nanny's testimony echoes a picture of impossibility in the novel, the utility of her story echoes the broader problem for black women's sexual subjectivity. Revealing her desires and contending with their unfulfillment, she explains, "Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman ought to be and to do. Dat's one of de

hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'" (Hurston 15). Cast to the margins, beyond horizons, rendered utterly impossible in discourse, the lived experience of desire and sexuality *persist*. At the same time, ever "wishin'" and ever unseen, Nanny represents a sexual subjectivity unable to reckon with the ambivalence of (im)possibility.

Case Study 2: Great Gram

Unlike Hurston's character, the cast of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* makes tradition out of outwardly acknowledging sexuality's interconnectedness with a history of bondage. Jones's novel centers on a family of four generations: Great Gram/Dorita, Grandmama, Mama/Irene, and Ursa. Behind them all is Old Man Corregidora, a Portuguese plantation master who enslaved, sexually abused, and prostituted Great Gram and Grandmama (Great Gram's daughter by him). The enslaver goes on to father Irene with his daughter, Grandmama.

In terms of family dynamics, Old Man Corregidora is the family's reigning patriarch, even in the century after his lifetime. In his absence, he remains a powerful male influence for the family of women; he is upheld as the embodiment of "hate" and each woman's stand-in "lover" (Jones 97). Great Gram is the family's matriarch - the first and longest-suffering of Corregidora('s) women. The story is set in Kentucky in the middle of the 20th century, but the family's history in 19th-century Brazilian slavery pervades the present narrative atmosphere like a thick fog. With all members of the family sharing a collective memory of trauma, they set about on a sacred mission; with official documentation of their Brazilian enslavement burned, "so it would be like they never had it," the family determines the "The important thing is making generations" (Jones 20). They craft a legend out of their family history; "They can burn the papers but they can't burn conscious, Ursa. And that's what makes the evidence. And that's what makes the verdict" (Jones 20). *Corregidora* tells the story of Ursa who, after undergoing a

hysterectomy resulting from a violent incident of domestic violence, must learn how to live a life of her own and self-define purpose (apart from "leaving evidence" of enslaved racial and gender trauma) and sexuality apart from having children (which she can no longer do).

The Fractured Subjectivity of a Woman in Parts

Great Gram's testimony, like Nanny's, is an entry point for investigation. Using Great Gram's perspective as a lens, this analysis seeks out the limits of and investigates the conditions for possibility within the Corregidora tradition of an inextricably intermingled configuration of pain and pleasure. Jones exercises what Toni Morrison terms "rememory": "a form of memory that is both 'emotional' and embodied"; It is "what the nerves and skin remember as well as how it appeared" (qtd. in Setka 130-131). The effect of rememory - the flattening of time, the entrapping circularity of trauma - haunts the entirety of Jones's writing. However, Jones brings the specter into full view when she writes in italics, intercutting the story's main plot with a visually distinctive alternate narrative. These instances of italicized rememory float through the novel like an electric undercurrent. The story starts in the hands of Ursa Corregidora, but as the first instance of rememory breaches the narrative surface, Jones anchors a story three generations old to the present moment. Here, Ursa and Great Gram's voices speak in unison:

"A Portuguese seaman turned plantation owner, he took her out of the field when she was still a child and put her to work in his whorehouse while she was a child…There were other women he used like that" (Jones 8). The voices continue, now venturing beyond simply relaying facts, "She was the pretty little one with almond eyes and coffee-bean skin, his favorite," this time offering a more sensory engagement (Jones 8). Finally, another voice joins in: "A gold little piece. My best," the suddenly undead Portuguese enslaver whispers. He continues, renaming Great Gram (who is legally enslaved to him at the time of speaking), "Dorita. Little gold piece" (Jones 8).

Old Man Corregidora's private conference with Great Gram echoes through time and directly into Ursa's ear.

Dorita's "Little gold piece" title is complicated. Old Man Corregidora's pet name for "his favorite" enslaved prostitute/concubine signifies the doubled objectification of her subjecthood - black female body as sexual object and black body as enslaved commodity. Providing a sociohistorical context for 19th-century Brazilian slavery, Sara Clarke Kaplan calls to mind that Dorita's descriptors - coffee bean and gold - are no facile metaphors; the items are the very commodities "on which Brazil's slave-labor mining economy, colonial plantation system, and eventual slave empire were built" (113). As Jones embeds these signifiers within Dorita's body parts, symbolically dismembering the whole woman into pieces of marketable flesh, she melds these key commodities with their cost in human labor - a combination on which "Brazil's wealth relied" (S. Kaplan113). The fullness of Dorita's humanity is subject to the specific conditions of her enslavement, and as such, in accordance with contemporaneous Brazilian law, she "did 'not possess a right to property, to freedom, to honor or to reputation'; her sole right was to 'the preservation and sustainment' of her body" (S. Kaplan 113). More narrowly, as a concubine and enslaved sex worker, her position "constituted a particular category of woman-as-commodity" (S. Kaplan 114). Really, "Little gold piece" suggests a status of being more distanced from humanity than the designation of "woman" suggest. "Little god piece" is not "woman-as-commodity"; it is female parts-as-commodity. Old Man Corregidora's "gold" does not reference the whole of the woman or even the whole of the body. Confronting her Great Gram in the surrealist space of rememory, Ursa clarifies just where exactly this "gold piece" lies on Dorita: "And you with the coffee-bean face, what were you?...You were sacrificed. They knew you only by the signs of your sex. They touched you as if you were magic. They ate your genitals" (Jones 56). Renamed,

Dorita is gold, but that gold refers to her genitals, not the fullness of her. “Little gold piece” is female-as-commodity: “signs of [the] sex” violently ripped from the humanized body. Dorita’s dismemberment echoes the mutilative nature and capitalist demands of her enslaved subjectivity. In his renaming and reducing of Dorita, Old Man Corregidora titles Dorita’s body (and sex) as valuable - but only so much as it can be used as capital. Dorita’s “gold” is her body as a commodity of reproductive and intimate labor at the economically plundered intersection of oppressed racial, gender, and civil status. Discursively constituted as the sum of her body’s economic value, Dorita endeavors to use her body to construct different meanings. Borrowing Glenda Dickerson and Breena Clarke’s “counterdiscourse of the black body,” Sara Clarke Kaplan argues that Corregidora(‘s) women, in light of destroyed archival evidence of Brazilian slavery and through the family’s impetus to “make generations” to pass down the legend of Old Man Corregidora, hold up their bodies as evidence of slavery (116). Adapting the Foucauldian reading of genealogy, Corregidora(‘s) women contort their bodies into “legible texts for a resistant genealogy written in lines of flesh and of blood, produced through violence and inscribed in pain” (S. Kaplan 116).

However, the body is not the only medium of counterdiscourse Corregidora(‘s) women construct. As important as “making generations” is to the mission of crafting a living legacy is act of storytelling. The Corregidora legend is lived experience transformed into story, transformed again into legend. These many transformations craft something entirely new out of a generations-old experience. The Corregidora family legend infuses varying perspectives and affective power to reanimate the passed-down story out of a fixed past. What emerges is a subversive counter-discourse from the perspective of black women. This counter-discourse, albeit

incomplete, points toward the need for a more workable logic in the discourse of pain and pleasure - one robust enough to contend with an ambivalence between the two.

The Doubled Diction in Dorita's Counter-Discourse

In the Corregidora legend, doubled meaning opens the door for Jones's broader investigation of pain and pleasure's ambivalence. Referring back to the novel's first passage of rememory, reading the doubled definition of body-as-commodity reveals pleasure (in addition to pain) on the other side of the words. Black feminist scholar Jennifer C. Nash coins a helpful phrase in "race-pleasures" for critically examining the connection between racialization and pleasure. Her book *The Black Body in Ecstasy* analyzes non-fiction works of racialized pornography against the grain of "black feminist theoretical archive" shifting away "from a preoccupation with the injuries that racialized pornography engenders to an investigation of the ecstasy" (Nash 2). She argues that "black pleasures can include sexual and erotic pleasures in racialization, even when (and perhaps precisely because) racialization is painful," (Nash 4).

As Nash reminds, "racial fictions" (stereotypes, taboos, etc) can shape both the imaginations of the oppressors and the oppressed alike, and they can function, "at least at times, as a powerful imaginative strategy" for black women (93). Having been taken into Old Man Corregidora's "whorehouse while she was a child," Dorita matured under specific social conditions. In this landscape, value is harvested from the fields ("They had coffee there") or unearthed by "mens working down in mines" (Jones 9). Within a capitalist calculus, a person's relationship with labor, key commodities, and ownership determined (in the time of Dorita's enslavement) the worth of an individual. When Old Man Corregidora names Dorita "Little gold piece" or refers to her as "the pretty little one with almond eyes and coffee-bean skin," he asserts her value within this calculus and aligns her among the class of the valuable. Simply put, the

comparison to so many empire-building commodities is likely the highest compliment this social structure can produce for a woman like Dorita. Because racial stereotypes, prescriptions, and fictions have a hand in crafting Dorita's imagination, the text opens the door for imagining Dorita's interpretation of her "Little gold piece" title as two-fold. First, she sees the words as evidence of the mutilating, dehumanizing experience of slavery. Secondly (a more taboo reading), she recognizes a level of intended endearment and erotic insinuation. Jones applies pressure to this secondary understanding as she writes Mutt, Ursa's lover, to invoke the same imagery. A character who has no memory of slavery or practice in settler-slave empire-building, Mutt employs an identical metaphor for Ursa later in the novel as he says, "Your pussy's a little gold piece, ain't it Urs?"; he then answers himself definitely, "My little gold piece" (Jones 56). Uncleaved from the immediacy of slavery's capitalist value system, the metaphor in Mutt's voice underscores the erotic and complimentary intention of the speaker - an intention the women recipients simultaneously reject and appreciate.

More than Dorita's contextual understanding motivates my assertion that pleasure exists on the other side of Old Man Corregidora's "Little gold piece" metaphor. For Corregidora('s) women, pain and pleasure are not distinct. At a glance, the distinction between pain and pleasure seems to be natural and immutable. And the traditional body of black feminist scholarship agrees with this distinction (Nash 149). Take, for instance, Patricia Hill Collins's argument that black women "have never been offered the opportunity to find pleasure in their oppression"; interpreting Collins's theoretical investment in "controlling images," Jennifer Nash submits that "the very idea that black women might locate pleasure of any sort - aesthetic, sexual, political, or racial - in controlling images is an impossibility for Collins" (34). The Corregidora family legend interrupts this thinking.

Using the Corregidora legend to think through “Grandmama's and Great Gram's” minds, Ursa finds that “Corregidora was theirs more than [her mother, Irene’s]. Mama could only know, but they could feel. They were with him” (Jones 97). Continuing, she investigates deeper, “What did they feel? You know how they talk about hate and desire. Two humps on the same camel? Yes. Hate and desire both riding them, and that’s what I was going to say” (Jones 97). Interestingly, the two camel humps ride the women, not the other way around. It is an aptly inverse arrangement for envisioning the cultural motif of the black women’s burden. Shouldering the weight of even a beast of burden echoes Nanny’s emblematic sentiment that black women are “de mule uh de world” (Hurston 14). In the tradition of metaphorizing black women as working animals, the image evokes a sense of subjection. However, it is crucial to resist assuming this means a complete lack of agency. Jones embeds this specific burdened black woman metaphor with a seemingly implausible level of influence. “Corregidora was theirs” (my emphasis); in an unforeseen twist, the proverbial beast of burden owns that which owns her. The seemingly paradoxical duality illuminates the meaning of the two-humped camel. Corregidora(‘s) women carry a beast with two backs (a play on how the true legacy of Corregidora is corrupted sexuality); those two backs - hate and desire; oppression and erotics; pain and pleasure - are separate as much as they are one.

Having lived with Old Man Corregidora themselves, Grandmama and Great Gram are especially agentive in this regard. The first matriarch of the Corregidora lineage, Great Gram holds the title of most fervent evangelical of the Corregidora legend. As such, an especially agentive power belongs to her. Dorita’s words, retelling her personal history, exhibit an extraordinary ability to affect. In the mouth of Dorita (and by extension, all Corregidora(‘s) women), history is reanimated; “in saying something [they] are doing something” (Austin 12).

The Erotics of Performative Re-Utterances

J.L Austin's definition of "performativity" provides a lens through which we can understand how words, meaning, and action relate. In his book How To Do Things With Words, Austin proposes that an "utterance" is language performing an act (5). An apology, a dare, a vow - utterances "do not 'describe' or 'report'" on the material world nor are they "true or false"; an apology, a dare, a vow - all bring something into being (Austin 5). They are words that, upon being spoken, "radically alter the social, the political, the interlocutory (I-you-they) space of our encounter" (Parker and Sedgwick 9). They are words that would ring hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy," given that they are made coherent through referencing the lived act of uttering, not performing an utterance itself (Austin 22). Such artistic renders are but illusions of performative utterances and are excluded from consideration. The Corregidora legend could convincingly be characterized as an artistically rendered oral history - a story subjectively ripped from its real-world grounding and thus outside the scope of J.L. Austin's consideration. However, the keeping of the Corregidora legend has a distinct utility. For the same reason Great Gram saves a photograph of the Portuguese slaver in her Kentucky home, Corregidora('s) women invoke the family legend to "know who to hate" (and, therefore, who to desire) (Jones 108). The words have a unique functionality upon invocation: instructing the formation of hate and desire for each new descendant. Scholarship on *Corregidora* tends to well appreciate the purposefulness of active retelling; especially attentive to Jones's production of "traumatic rememory," Stella Setka asserts that Ursa bears witness to her ancestors' traumatic past "through successive acts of traumatic rememory" (130). I want to put pressure on the act of retelling the Corregidora legend. For their doubled meaning in the realms of both hate and desire, the words - as acts, performative utterances - take on an additional

dimension: the erotic. Other than having a distinct utility in "leaving evidence," Great Gram's words invoke a sensory experience. Moreover, in addition to wielding a weapon of retraumatization for generations in perpetuity, her performative utterances manifest and employ an instrument for pleasure.

Repetition enables the affective quality of Dorita's utterances. Thus, a modification of Austin's term more aptly describes what Dorita does here. Dorita enacts what should be termed a "performative re-utterance." The words, in a vacuum, state facts, log events, and relay feelings. However, retold through a Corregidora woman's voice, the words become more than "saying." Witnessing this affective transformation, Ursa remarks, "It was as if the words were helping her, as if the words repeated again and again could be a substitute for memory" (Jones 8-9). "[M]ore than the memory," Great Gram's story spirals further and further away from its original circumstance with each iteration of retelling (Jones 9). "Repeated again and again" in the voice of Dorita (and her descendants) the spoken/remembered legend (the sign) supplants the experienced events (the signified). The "help" the newly empowered language offers is directly implied: retelling helps distance the speaker from her traumatic lived experience. However, this thinking quickly loses traction. The act of (re)telling is not necessarily distancing - a point the novel artfully belabors. Indeed, it is its repetition that keeps it alive and "further victimizes" those who must bear the pain of its "collective memory" (Setka 129). The "help" Great Gram receives from her repetitious storytelling is assistance fanning the legend's flame - keeping the bygone experiences burning in the present moment and just as tactile to behold. Re-utterance enables new generations the Corregidora('s) women not only to hear "collective memory" in legend but also sensually feel its effect.

As Ursa recalls playing audience to one of Dorita's performative re-utterance, she exposes most clearly their erotic underpinnings. Dorita would recite the old tale "[a]s if it were only the words that kept her anger. Once when she was talking, she started rubbing my thighs with her hands, and I could feel the sweat on my legs. Then she caught herself, and stopped, and held my waist again" (Jones 9). It is "only the words," Ursa reveals; only the words hold such a power. Divorced from the lived experiences they reference, Dorita's language paints a new picture with each re-utterance that is stained with trauma's effect. It is the words, then, agentive and empowered, that provoke thigh rubbing and sweat. Great Gram's re-utterances commit the act of reanimating rememory as a fresh instance of sexual trauma. Here, Jones makes clear that Dorita's re-utterances risk bringing into being the same incestuous, sexualized trauma Old Man Corregidora committed on the family of women so many years ago. It is telling that Ursa initiates describing her Great Gram's sexually charged movements by talking about her "anger." Jones signals that an invocation of anger is an equal invocation of its perceived opposite - desire. The instrument of re-uttering the story "kept" both. Corregidora-style re-utterances are designed with the intention of embodying that which keeps the legend perpetually present and sensual to the touch.

To comprehend fully the performance of eroticism in Dorita's re-utterances, we must decipher the terms with which she speaks. Jennifer C. Nash's term "ecstasy" charts the possibility of pleasure in terms of race and gender, taking into account the parameters of both "a phallic economy" and "a white-dominated representational economy" (2). Ecstasy takes the terms of a racist, sexist society as given and reads how black women move within that context. Particularly, it seeks "ecstatic possibilities of racialization" including pleasure that is "deeply personal (aesthetic, erotic, sexual) and deeply social" (crafting political communities and

identities) (Nash 3). Nash roots her investigation in black feminist visual culture studies, but the real-world social setting of Jone's novel fits nicely into the framework Nash lays out. Enslaved sex work corporealizes the "phallic economy" and literalizes the economy of white domination. During her time in Brazil, Dorita exists at the nexus of both of these social structures. Contemporary Brazil law classes Dorita in the unique social category of "woman-as-commodity"; this status exempted her from Portuguese legal protection that "criminalized concubinage" and sanctioned emancipation for slaves in cases wherein they were forced by their slavers to perform tasks considered "illegal or immoral" (S. Kaplan 114). By in large, the body of legal codes that governed 19th-century Brazil's settler slave society effectively functioned to minimize the legal definition of criminal behavior on the part of slave masters with regard to those they enslaved (ie. their legal property), but, with "no claim to legal subjecthood," enslaved women sex-workers held the least legal protection (S. Kaplan 115). Thus, to read for "ecstasy" in Dorita's character, these specific conditions of her enslavement must be taken up as her own terms - a vocabulary she augments to include her own perspective.

Dorita need not flashback to any explicit memory of a sexual encounter with Old Man Corregidora to inspire erotic feelings, she needs only to tell "the same story over and over again," making sure to use the right keywords. Using verbiage and imagery associated with the conditions of her former enslavement, Dorita "speaks race" - or adopts the language of "imagined differences" that construct the racialized, settler slave world - as "a strategy to name a set of longings and to describe a set of cravings and desires that she might not otherwise be able to voice" (Nash 94). Dorita's memorializing the circumstances of her past life in "insistent rhetorical gesturing toward blackness" and femaleness is a key conceit of her eroticism (Nash 94). When she returns her hands to Ursa's waist after letting slip an outward expression of

arousal, Dorita picks the reutterance back up with a physical description of the man who is simultaneously the image of evil and her "lover" (Jones 97):

> … He was a big strapping man then. His hair black and straight and greasy. He was big… Yeah, I remember the day he took me out of the field. They had coffee there. Some places they had cane and then others cotton and tobacco like up here. Other places they had your mens working down in the mine. He would take me hisself first and said he was breaking me in (Jones 11).

Notice how Dorita arranges the details of her story. The object of her hate and desire, Old Man Corregidora both precedes and punctuates mention of two telling commodities: coffee and gold, prized metaphors for the face ("coffee-bean skin") and genitals ("Little gold piece") of the story's narrator. The enslaver and the disembodied symbols of the enslaved - like the implied sensuality and brutality - are situated right next to each other. As Dorita restrains her hands at her young great-granddaughter's waist, her pattern of speech reveals that another outburst of erotic feeling bubbles beneath the surface. The very bedrock of Dorita's conceptualization of pleasure rests in her performing, through language, her own commodification.

Impossibility Suspended Between Hate and Desire

The liberatory merits of Great Gram's "performative re-utterance" are dubious. Although the Corregidora legend is performed by her and for her own pleasure, does Great Gram's race-pleasure only confirm the anxieties of traditional black feminist scholarship? That is, does it ultimately serve the purpose of "mak[ing] racial inequality look sexy" (Nash 7)? Nash argues the black feminist merits of any instantiation of race-pleasure hinges on its capacity to transform (94-96). Both the practice of "speaking race" and an understanding of disgust and desire as inherently intertwined must be employed toward the act of "conversion" - a forward momentum

that decays the destructive powers of speaking race directly toward a narrative that enables the possibility of pleasure. The evoking of pleasure via "speaking race" must, as Foucault would propose, enhance the "possibility for creative lives" (qtd. in Nash 106). Liberation lies in the act's capacity to transform, empowering the actor's ability to create anew.

We can think of this dynamic as akin to a "tightrope" (Nash 6). On one side hate, disgust, and pain; on the other, desire, pleasure, and possibility. Speaking race is the vehicle of travel between either side. Using this vehicle, a black feminist praxis would see black women "putting to work the sexual stereotypes that often constrain them" to navigate a racist, sexist society from pain to pleasure. For Dorita, though, this is where impossibility seeps in. Her tightrope act has no forward momentum. Instead of navigating from one side to the next, she settles statically in the middle, torn between either end. Dorita's re-utterance evokes a feeling of eroticism, but that erotic is ultimately not transformative. The possessive nature of her words - that they "kept her anger" and pleasure - never permits change. In her case, "speaking race" is a vehicle with no wheels, unable to transform "anger" into pleasure without a profound and undoing rebounding effect.

The violence of the scene Ursa paints cannot go without saying. Dorita projects a sexual touch onto her own granddaughter, nearly reproducing the incestuous sexual violence she invokes for the sake of "leaving evidence" (Jones 11). Indeed, Dorita's entire project of "leaving evidence" contends upon transferring pain and violence as well as testimony. Tellingly, when Ursa, as a child, questions the "truth" of her Great Gram's story, Dorita responds by slapping young Ursa across the face. She explains her reaction as she scolds, "When I'm saying something don't you ever ask if I'm lying… I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence. And your children got to leave evidence too" (Jones 11). Story and body fuse

becoming “equal parts evidence and testimony” (S. Kaplan 117). In this way, re-utterances provide both a script for “testimony” and provoke sexually violent feelings as “evidence” on the body.

What this portends in terms of the possibility of sexual fulfillment is grim. Performative re-utterance catches Dorita in the webbing between pleasure and pain. Without a unidirectional momentum, Dorita configures easily into neither model of embodied sexual subjectivity Nash proposes to evaluate the productive capacity of racialization: not the “pleasurable black body” nor the body as an “instrument of pleasure” (103). Nash contends that the “pleasurable black body” is able to provide pleasure and “take pleasure in her own body” by deftly appropriating “speaking race” and embodying racialized cultural codes; in this form, “bigotry” must transform into “ecstasy” (91-92). The black body as “instrument of pleasure,” on the other hand, dehumanizes and uses the racialized body in the service of pleasuring another; the black body as an “instrument of pleasure” is not invested in co-opting the “linguistic, aesthetic, and sexual terms” of racialization toward liberatory ends. Dorita, as both a desired and desiring subject in relation to Old Man Corregidora, embodies the former; at the same time, as the commodified and coerced sex worker, she equally embodies the latter.

Dorita is both instrument and player of her racialized and gendered body. Envisioning such a contortion of the self along the tightrope between pain and pleasure paints a peculiar picture. Somehow, the gravitational pull of both ends creates an equilibrium that either suspends her indefinitely at the very center or boomerangs her back and forth in their orbit. Performing this feat, Great Gram embodies discursive impossibility. She is grounded in a space designed for liminality, where one becomes the other. As Spillers predicts, Dorita’s “enslavement” (and performative re-utterances thereafter) “relegate[s] [her] to the marketplace of the flesh” such that

she becomes “the principle point of passage between the human and the non-human world” (“Interstices” 155). Being pinned down in this passageway discursively renders Dorita simultaneously both and neither. Stuck in this position of indefinite liminality, completing a tightrope walk - to land in a space of pleasure, fulfillment, and productive erotic understanding - is utterly impossible.

Synthesis

It is hard to imagine Great Gram (*Corregidora*) and Nanny (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) in a room together. Outwardly, the two women have so much in common. Both are the central matriarchs of their respective stories, taking on the child-rearing of their female descendants. Both are former slaves; both, during their enslavement, had sexual relationships with their enslavers; and for both, these relationships house a significant part of their erotic understanding. Nanny and Great Gram are supporting characters of their respective stories, but their outsized influence in the texts displays the foundational nature of slavery for black women’s sexual subjectivity. Great Gram’s voice (spoken through Irene, Ursa’s mother) offers a hauntingly illustrative testimony in this regard: “all them beatings and killings wasn't nothing but sex circuses, and all them white peoples, mens, womens, and childrens crowding around to see” (Jones 119). Her succinct statement distills the essential union between racial and sexual violence that was forged in slavery and injuriously branded black women in the discourse of what it means to be human. A subjectivity founded in “sex circuses” is untenable as much as it is inhuman.

The constraints rendered for Nanny and Great Gram corroborate Hortense Spillers’s claim that “Slavery did not transform the black female into an embodiment of the carnality at all, as the myth of the black woman would tend us to convince, nor, alone, the primary receptacle of

a highly profitable generative act" ("Interstices" 155). In "an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome," slavery foisted the sexual subjectivity of black women into a space of discursive contradictory unintelligibility - "the principal point of passage between the human and the non-human world" ("Interstices" 155). Nanny and Great Gram's racialization and gendering discursively relegate erotic desire and fulfillment beyond the realm of possibility.

Of course, ambivalence appears in their lived experience (pain amid pleasure, "oneness" amid non-human status, pleasurable humanization amid pleasuring objectification), but (im)possibility is inaccessible in Nanny and Great Gram's personal conceptualizations. Nanny and Great Gram embody two distinct ways that contradictory opposites combust when they combine. However, as Michael Dango and Tina Post note in "An Introduction to Ambivalent Criticism," "what may seem a contradictory object may just be the projection of a contradictory subject." Here, black women's sexual subjectivity" is the contradictory object, and what defines possible and impossible subjectivity is the contradictory subject. Pressing black female sexual subjectivity through the filter of a binary conceptualization of impossibility/possibility is fatal. The result is utter impossibility. For marginalized people, subjectivity's impossibility exists, but that is not the end of the story. Contesting the line that distinguishes possibility from impossibility pushes against the absolutism of impossibility and better accounts for the full breadth of black female sexual subjectivity. It accounts for both sides of black women's many, discursive contradictions. Nanny and Great Gram's narratives not only exemplify how sexual subjectivity is rendered impossible but also attest to the consequences of not embracing ambivalence for the black female subject. As much as "sex circuses," so to speak, injured black

women's sexual subjectivity, "Dis love!" is uniquely problematic for the black woman subject living, desiring, and conceptualizing in a world of discourse without ambivalence.

Chapter 2: Approaching Ambivalence Through Alienation and Relation

Introduction

This chapter is about endeavoring toward ambivalence. It examines Meridian of Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Ursa from Gayl Jones's *Corregidora*. Through these characters, Walker and Jones weigh an essential paradox of black women's subjectivity; given the socio-historical legacy of trauma and our responsibilities to our communities, what is portable and what is not? How can black women contend with those parts of their subjectivity that portend "impossibility," and how can they find liberation amid this prescription? Walker and Jones position the main character of their respective novels between utter impossibility and realized ambivalence. Meridian and Ursa, then, embody the *approach*. They demonstrate why disillusioned impossibility is dangerous and the strain of reckoning with this oppressed position. Moreover, they gesture, in the end, toward a tenable embrace of contradictory opposites.

Instantiating an individual subjectivity for these black female characters is - perhaps unintuitively - a matter of relation. My application of "relationality" and its consequences for black female subjectivity takes its cues from Kevin Quashie's theorization in "To Be (a) One: Notes on Coupling and Black Female Audacity." Using Quashie's black feminist application of Martin Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy, this chapter finds that relation and its opposite, alienation, are key conditions for the viability of subjectivity. As Quashie theorizes, oneness and relation are conceptually dependent: "audacious inhabitances of self as immanence… make possible the transcendence of surrender and relation" (73). Full embodiment of the self "makes possible" relation. The inverse is true as well; an "I-Thou [orientation] is a capacity of oneness" (Quashie 73). This analysis finds that the necessarily oppositional tension between a "self-centered

subjectivity" and a subjectivity of "relational transcendence" emblematizes the conceit of (im)possibility.

The case studies of this chapter symbolize two distinct roles of the black female social subject and showcase how the demands of these roles problematize the work of relation, nullifying subjectivity in the process. The first case study Centering the character Meridian of Alice Walker's eponymously named novel, the first case study pinpoints the demands of community involvement, the burden of the black female activist, as a mechanism of alienation. The second case study centers on Ursa of Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* and identifies inherited trauma, a family legacy of slavery, as the primary mechanism stunting one's capacity for relationality/oneness.

Case Study 1: Meridian

Saint Meridian

Alice Walker's novel *Meridian* introduces its titular character walking a Christ-like path. Truman, the novel's male lead, finds Meridian in the middle of the action. A traveling circus containing an especially intriguing "mummy woman" has come to the town of Chicokema. Meridian's problem is that black children and a smattering of poor white children have just been denied entry - an issue that "the Civil Rights Movement [should have] changed" by now (Walker 3). Truman watches on as Meridian leads an eerily organized line of children through town toward the exhibit. The crowd of onlookers stands "still-as-death" as Meridian marches with a meditative focus and serene resolve (Walker 6). Between Meridian's quiet army - who Walker depicts like disciples - and the circus wagon sits "a phalanx of police, their rifles," and a tank positioned to defend the exhibit from the coming assault of child guests (6). Nearing the barricade, Meridian steps to the tank, unbridled as its muzzle "settled directly toward her chest"

(Walker 7). Going farther, "she stepped lightly, deliberately, right in front of it, rapped smartly on its carapace - as if knocking on a door - then raised her arm," and without conflict, the children walked right through the barricade into the circus. The onlooking townspeople breathe a sigh of relief; "God!" Truman remarks "How can you not love somebody like that!" (Walker 7). Walker notes that Truman speaks here "without thinking," so a local, old man can respond smartly, "Because she thinks *she's* God" (7). Meridian opens with its main character trekking a solemn journey, prepared to make a righteous sacrifice of her body. We later learn that such a procession is a habit of hers. While she is physically unharmed in the novel's first scene, her habitual cross-carrying, so to speak, takes a major toll on Meridian's capacity for relation and the discursive possibility of her subjectivity. The formation of such a burden has everything to do with loving "somebody like that."

Charlotte Zoe Walker, in an essay entitled "A Saintly Reading of Nature's Text: Alice Walker's *Meridian*," appraises the novel's religious iconography through an ecofeminist lens. Zoe Walker asserts, "Meridian, indeed, seems to have many of the characteristics of a saint in traditional hagiography" (Zoe Walker 44). This is a claim evidenced by the first few scenes of the book. Zoe Walker continues, arguing that Meridian's "reading of the divine book of nature" creates "a powerful form of resistance" for the activist protagonist (Zoe Walker 55). Despite acknowledging the influence of the natural world and Meridian's "overwhelming sensitivity to the sacredness of life in all its forms," Zoe Walker never problematizes Meridian's "saintly" role (Zoe Walker 44).

Sainthood hyperbolizes black women's social archetype as caretakers of the oppressed community. The role is culturally familiar - dramatized in the Mammy minstrel caricature and the "Strong Black Woman" stereotype (Mitchell 18). Womanist scholar Tamura Lomax outlines

the limitations of this particular social prescription in her book *Jezebel Unhinged*. Defining one's subjectivity by its resistance to oppression "places black women and girls in constant misery, where the only way to escape is by dismantling the object of criticism: white supremacist ideology" (Lomax 75). This thinking constricts black women's subjectivity into "a permanent stance of oppression, resistance, and survival" (Lomax 76). In this way, conceiving of a multi-layered human subjectivity is only possible *after* community work is done. The problem is that "dismantling the mass-mediated force of white supremacist ideology is an overwhelming and ongoing task"; the labor required for black women merely to embody an individual, agentive subjecthood is boundless (Lomax 75). Of course, "that is not to say that criticism, resistance, and protest are futile" - an especially relevant caveat for Meridian, a dedicated activist (Lomax 75). It is to say, however, that "mak[ing] oppression categorically characteristic of black women's experience" through the community caretaker trope facilitates mistaking trauma and oppression for states of "being" instead of lived "experiences" (Lomax 79). The hyperbole of sainthood illustrates the consequences of making such a mistake.

Sainthood, ostensibly, is an honorary title, bestowed onto worthy models of the faith. Really, sainthood is constructed as an example - a symbol referencing something beyond the person themselves. Sainthood is meant to inspire the living, not to be lived in. Meridian does, in truth, embody "characteristics of a saint in traditional hagiography," but her story does not serve the same purpose as those in hagiographical tradition. Watching Meridian *live* as a saint, as opposed to *being memorialized* as a saint, does not inspire emulation. Indeed, her story offers a compelling argument against saintliness, showcasing the burdensome alienation - the impossibility of relation - of such a position.

Embodied Empathy - The Price of Living Martyrdom

Invariably, saints are two things: perfect and dead. Measuring the moral and ethical "perfection" of Meridian's actions is a task for another project, but the purity of Meridian's heart is difficult to argue against. Her most striking characteristic is her near-mystical embodiment of empathy. Meridian questions the ethics of her contemporary social movement with such persistence and urgency that her reflections resemble a theologian in a crisis of faith:

> She must also answer the question "Will you kill for the Revolution?" with a positive Yes. This, however, her tongue could not manage. Through her mind was running a small voice that screamed: "Something's missing in me. Something's missing!" And the voice made her heart pound and her ears roar. "Something the old folks with their hymns and proverbs forgot to put in! What is it? What? What?" (Walker 14).

Her words quake with a biblical-level drama. The weight of the questions she ponders, the suffering in the world around her: Meridian *feels* with unmatched acuity. Flashbacks to scenes of racial violence cause "the majority of her waking moments to seem fragmented, surreal"; "battle fatigue[d]" from her mere survival, she "burst into tears whenever something went wrong or someone spoke unkindly or even sometimes if they spoke, period"; she sobs while "canvassing, talking at rallies, tying her sneakers, laughing" (Walker 95, 82). Symptoms of her heartache manifest as "[t]he shaking of her hands, or the twitch in her left eye" (Walker 82). As Meridian matures, the visceral character of her emotional trauma intensifies. Occasionally, she would "be sure she'd heard a shot and feel the impact of the bullet against her back; then she stood absolutely still, waiting to feel herself fall" (Walker 82). Merely catching sight of Wile Child (a neglected, homeless, pregnant 13-year-old) knocks Meridian "into a corpse-like coma" for days on the floor of her college dorm (Nadel 61). This is where Meridian's embodied empathy

escalates to complete the conditions of sainthood. The toll of her embodied empathy amounts to lived experiences of death.

Walker details Meridian's condition of embodied death in the immediate aftermath of Meridian's introductory protest scene. Laid in her home after collapsing, Meridian's face is "wasted and rough, the skin a sallow, unhealthy brown"; her eyes "glassy and yellow and did not seem to focus at once"; and "[h]er breath, like her clothes… sour" (Walker 10). Truman holds Meridian's "ice-cold hand in his," and the longtime friends converse:

> "I was waiting for you to come home—lying out on the porch—when I saw these people coming carrying a body"—Truman smiled— "which turned out to be you. They carried you straight as a board across their shoulders. How'd they do that?"
>
> Meridian shrugged. "They're used to carrying corpses."
>
> "Ever since I've been here people have been bringing boxes and boxes of food. Your house is packed with stuff to eat. One man even brought a cow"…
>
> "They're grateful people," said Meridian. "They appreciate it when someone volunteers to suffer" (Walker 11).

For her community, Meridian embodies a living martyr - a paradoxically constructed undead saint. The "boxes and boxes" at Meridian's door are more than community care; they are offerings, for her continued suffering - that is, her continual "volunteer[ing] to suffer." Crucial to note is the source of Meridian's suffering. Alan Nadel argues that "Meridian makes clear…social conditions, not social protest, have caused her illness"; "the protest is part of the cure" (61). The character seems to argue as much to Truman as she recovers from political conflict:

> "They didn't touch me," she said.
>
> "You're just sick then?"

> "Of course I'm sick," snapped Meridian. "Why else would I spend all this time trying to get well!" (Walker 10).

It is easy to read this exchange as a clear proclamation that Meridian's activism is her "trying to get well." If shouldering the collective suffering of an entire community through embodied empathy causes Meridian such physical pain, then it should follow that protesting oppression is the only holistic treatment. However, on this issue, the arguments of Meridian (the character) and *Meridian* (Walker's text) disagree. The text challenges the distinction between the pain of embodied empathy and the pain of sacrificial protest. Here in the first chapter, Meridian sees her activism - her living martyrdom - as a means to ease the world's suffering - felt acutely through her embodied empathy. By the novel's end, however, Walker changes the character's tune: "For she understood, finally, that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own" (Walker 219-220). Meridian's civil disobedience takes the form of self-sacrifice; she intervenes in the community's oppression by jumping on a grenade (or, more aptly, absorbing the blow of a tank). Protests and empathy have admirable aims, but Meridian's self-sacrificial approach, as the novel contends, defeats the purpose. In this way, Walker suggests that any work toward respecting "the sacredness of life in all its form" must also include respecting one's own - lest those works are dead (Zoe Walker 44).

Within the world of the novel, self-sacrifice is not a character trait unique to Meridian. "Her mother's life was sacrifice" too (Walker 74). Meridian's mother, Mrs. Hill, painfully sacrifices herself for her motherhood, and the act irretrievably suppresses her independent subjectivity. Mrs. Hill " was not a woman who should have had children" (Walker 40). For whatever reason, Mrs. Hill's care for her children overwrites her ability to "enjoy" herself; for

"in her first pregnancy she became distracted from who she was. As divided in her mind as her body was divided, between what part was herself and what part was not. Her frail independence gave way to the pressures of motherhood" (Walker 42). Mrs. Hill's motherhood is not relational; instead, it is "a stellar example of the destructive result of motherhood on a woman's life," manifesting oppressive "patriarchal society dictates" (Chavan 194). The consequences are dire. "In the ironing of her children's clothes she expended all the energy she might have put into openly loving them" (Walker 76). As the child wearing those loveless, ironed clothes, Meridian finds her primary example of sacrificial subjectivity in her mother. With this inheritance, Jones connotes that the impossibility of subjectivity due to sacrifice is a uniquely feminine burden.

Going from family care to community care, living martyrdom heightens the paradox of feminine self-sacrificial subjectivity. Interestingly, Walker compares Mrs. Hill's suppressive motherhood to "a person who is being buried alive, walled away from her own life, brick by brick" (Walker 42). A subjectivity marked by self-sacrifice is, in Walker's illustration, utterly isolating even from one's "own life" and stuck between being dead and being alive. Meridian's living martyrdom exacerbates this undead alienation to the extremes of contradiction. For Meridian, a living death is more than a patriarchal demand; it is a compulsion. Starting the chapter "The Recurring Dream," Walker pens a haunting refrain: "She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end" (Walker 121). Walker repeats the sentence verbatim twice more in succession, echoing the dream's incessant recurrence. It is an unnerving refrain. How can a "problem" be both "insoluble" and possess a solution "at the end"? Why does the finality of "death at the end" in this refrain feel at odds with its circular recurrence? Dreams, especially recurring ones, urgently appeal for interpretation; what does Meridian's nightmare *mean*? With

"The Recurring Dream," Walker poses a riddle for living martyrdom. The "problem" being truly "insoluble" and "death" its true solution portends an endless feedback loop; a "solving" death must recur and recur and recur into oblivion. Walker's riddle presents a cruel irony embedded in the logics of living martyrdom: healing "the problem" of ubiquitous, oppressive suffering demands perpetual killings of the oppressed.

The paradox of living martyrdom has troubling effects on the construction of Meridian's identity as an individual. The first part of Meridian's "Recurring Dream" prompts another disquieting question. "She dreamed she was a character in a novel…" (Walker 121). Meridian *is* a character in a novel, but how can she know this? As Meridian unknowingly flirts with breaking the fourth wall, Walker draws attention to the fractured ontology of the living martyr. The living martyr attempts to be both living and dying - a position as existential, uncomfortable, and implausible as being simultaneously an agentive human being and a character in a book. It is no wonder, then, that the chapter goes on to track the fractured sensory experience of living in pieces.

Awake between dreams, the connection between Meridian's mind and body fractures. "The Recurring Dream" chapter continues, Meridian "felt as if a small landslide had begun behind her brows, as if things there had started to slip" (Walker 121). With that slipping, Meridian senses "a physical feeling" that she pays "no mind" (Walker 121). The contradictory states of being of living martyrdom demand a fragmentation of the self. For her own bodily sensations - those ones not immediately tied to witnessing (then empathically embodying) someone else's suffering - Meridian's consciousness is "described in terms of a mind/body dichotomy" (Nadel 61). In her inability to think about it - to name visceral sensation in her mind - Meridian's embodied experience exemplifies Elaine Scarry's proclamation that pain - torture

specifically - “inflicts a bodily pain that is itself language-destroying” (17). When she encounters Wile Child, Meridian’s empathetic response manifests as paralyzing pain in the body, but in speech, Meridian could “not respond to anything; not the call to lunch, not the phone, nothing” (Walker 24). On another occasion, when her peers ostracize her for her religious agnosticism, Meridian internalizes that alienation as “headaches that were so severe they caused her to stutter when she spoke” (Walker 94). Emotional suffering, written on the body in pain, directly incapacitates Meridian’s ability to express, regardless of whether the injury is directly felt or indirectly (empathetically) absorbed.

Critically, Scarry notes that “in order to express pain one must *both* objectify its felt-characteristics and hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics” (17). Characteristics of sensation (ie pain that is throbbing, aching, shooting, et cetera) and visible referent (ie pain stabbing like a knife or a headache that beats like a drum) are “deeply problematic” criteria for expressing pain, as Scarry admits (17). However, the “inherent instability” of giving language to pain does not flatten the benefits of the practice; nor does it mitigate the urgent necessity of putting words to painful sensation, lest torture ensues. As Walker demonstrates, given Meridian’s acute sensitivity and extraordinary empathy, wedding words to pain is impossible. What Walker shows instead is internal warfare, where pain cannot be given an external referent nor objectivity in felt characteristics. Instead, Meridian’s body fashions a physical weapon out of emotional effect and uses that weapon against itself. Meridian’s ailment is injury internally sourced and internally felt; both its signifier, the weapon, and signified, the pain itself, are locked in the paralysis of Meridian’s body. Such paralysis interrupts her ability to externalize, or express with words, her pain. The paralysis and near-death Meridian chronically experiences are akin to Scarry’s configuration of torture.

If torture is "bodily pain that is itself language-destroying," doesn't the inherent outspokenness of protest support the argument that it is a "cure" (Nadel 61)? In Meridian's case, no. Meridian's activism is more than an exercise of "using her voice"; Walker's illustration of Meridian as an activist is authorized by the physical and affective toll of the work, not the spoken or cerebral exercise of protest justification. Alan Nadel astutely connects Ann Rosalind Jones's definition of the French feminist concept "Écriture féminine" directly to Walker's illustration of Meridian's embodied experience. Nadel posits that the commentary Walker offers through Meridian is "writing located in and authorized" by Meridian's gendered body, and in reading that bodily text, "a powerful alternative discourse seems possible" (Rosalind Jones 252). Walker's depiction of protest through Meridian's body goes against the grain of typical protest-equals-empowered-voice thinking. The "alternative discourse" Walker etches in her character's body about activist-martyrdom tells a story of unending violence, not healing.

The suffering Walker highlights in Meridian is overwhelming to the point of incapacitation, reflecting the "insoluble problem" of shouldering an entire community's burden as one individual. When Meridian "began to take chances with her life," she "go[es] alone to small towns where blacks were not welcome on the sidewalks after dark" to just "stand waiting, watching the sun go down" (Walker 122). She does not march through the sundown town in protest, ready to use her voice to rid the world of racialized suffering. She walks the sidewalk silently and alone - ready to make a passive sacrifice of her body if any townspeople catch sight of her trespassing. Walker does not lend language to Meridian's internal experience, but the character's history offers enough to make an educated guess: Meridian stands on the sidewalk of that segregated town in unspeakable pain. Failing to articulate the extent of that pain to the

audience or in Meridian's own thoughts, Walker emphasizes the point: unspeakable pain is utter isolation - even from the self.

The logic of unspeakability for black women's pain is deeply rooted in the violences of slavery. The difficulty (paradox) of speaking pain is well-researched in black studies. Toni Morrison's lecture "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" problematizes the silences in the American literary canon around the issue of slavery. As Morrison notes, "In 1850 at the height of slavery and burgeoning abolitionism, American writers chose romance," but the idyllic literary escapism was pervasively haunted by the shadow of slavery's violence (137). When the unspeakability of racialized violence reverberates in the canon of American romanticism, "how heightened the one rendered the other" is an absolute marvel (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things" 140). A line in Morrison's seminal slavery novel *Beloved* succinctly illuminates the astonishing paradox of unspeakability: "It was not a story to pass on" (323). The story of racialized violence is as important to remember ("pass on" to the next generation) as it is impossible to speak (a story to "pass on" over, unacknowledged). Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* meditates on the (im)possible constraints of remembering trauma's legacy. In this literary tradition, Alice Walker illustrates Meridian's chronic pain. Meridian's pain internalizes a community burden of systemic oppression. As she loses the ability to speak her pain, Meridian symbolizes an issue facing black women's subjectivity at large: how do we navigate a pain that is "not a story to pass on"? How can Meridian contend with the work of embodied empathy, if it enables both protest and pain? How could Meridian choose between shouldering speech-annihilating community care and the individual need to express one's pain? Living martyrdom sides firmly on the extreme of community care. It casts Meridian in the reductive black female trope of being an unhuman "objects of communal recuperation" (Quashie 70). As unspeakability extends beyond external

communication and encroaches on Meridian's ability to conceptualize her pain in thoughts, her subjectivity strays from embracing ambivalent (im)possibility into utter isolation.

Meridian in Relation: The Problem with Passivity

Naturally, Meridian's chronically unspeakable pain problematizes relation. By making Meridian's painful self-sacrificing the root of her isolation, Walker illustrates the urgency of Kevin Quashie's claim that "self-centeredness [is] an essential component of black female relationality" (73). As an activist, especially one who refuses to kill for the revolution, access to relationality is absolutely essential. Relationality - enabling community love, healing, and growth - is that missing ingredient that Meridian complains "the old folks with their hymns and proverbs forgot to" name explicitly (Walker 14). Relationality is that which escapes her in argument ("Something's missing in me. Something's missing!") as members of The Movement pressure her to pledge that she "will kill for the Revolution" (Walker 14). As Meridian absorbs the burden of her kinfolk and community, attempts to heal it, and ultimately isolates herself, she forgets the key caveat for successful relationality; relationality must affirm the "integrity and essentiality" of she who accepts "the call to relation" (Quashie 73). Quashie's appropriation of Martin Buber's philosophical calculus in *I and Thou* to account for the black female subject notes that the "I-Thou" orientation makes possible a "meeting [of] every other person or object as if each is worthy, full of thrill and surprise, capable of producing transformation" (73); Quashie emphasizes for his subject of interest that Buber describes "the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another" (qtd. in Quashie 73). As much as Meridian accounts for marginalized children's right to visit a mummified woman in a traveling circus, she must also account for herself. Half of the I-thou relation, she must embody "one active existence" herself; otherwise, any attempt at relationality is thwarted. Crucially, this "one

active existence" runs antithetically to the inert existence of a saint. The power of Meridian's embodied empathy utterly flattens in her inability to inhabit the "self as immanence that make[s] possible the transcendence of surrender and relation" (Quashie 73).

As Meridian's affliction alienates her body (in pain) from her mind (ability to describe in language), she alienates herself from others. Inundated with the unidirectional relation of embodied empathy, Meridian alienates herself from her personal embodied experience. Alienation from the self - an utter lack of a "self-centered subjectivity" as Quashie would put it - makes relationality impossible. A self-centered basis of relation is the act that lifts black female subjecthood into the realm of humanity. As Spillers's notes, black women's subjectivity was cast long ago as "the principal point of passage between the human and non-human world" ("Interstices" 155). The "transcendent human subjectivity of relation" levers black women's subjectivity out of such a lowly immanence (Quashie 69). Without this, we make objects out of ourselves - weapons for the revolution, lifeless vessels for our children and partners. In this vein of thinking, self-centeredness is a responsibility to others too.

Failing the fundamental requirement of "active existence" in the "call to relation" informs how Meridian approaches sexuality. True to form, Meridian approaches sex, physical relation, through alienation. In her saintly guise, it might be assumed that Meridian lacks any sexual inclination. However, *Meridian* details a number of sexual encounters driven by its protagonist. Yet, even in the most intimate space, Meridian brings her "living martyr" subjectivity to relation. For instance, in her first marriage to Eddie (with whom she describes sex as something she "endured" in exchange for "the warmth, the lying together, the peace"), Meridian takes to sex like a willing victim (Walker 61). Walker's tone is casual and resigned as she describes "[o]ne night as he climbed over her—because he could only make love to her by beginning his *assault*

from her left side" (60, my emphasis). Meridian "endures" Eddie's habitual "assault" without protest or even explanation. Critically, Meridian does not think to tell Eddie that she is not "interested in sex" ("[n]or could she imagine why any woman *should*" be) directly; instead, she opts to "put the blame on any handy thing" for her lack of enthusiasm (Walker 61). More damning, though, is her rationalization: "But had she lost interest in sex completely? She didn't know. It was simply that sex was now something that she knew and thought she understood. Before it had been curiosity about her body's power" (Walker 61). Curiosity, on its face, is not an incriminating motivator. It is natural - expected even. But when curiosity replaces, as opposed to accompanies, the intent of sincere relation, problems arise. As a standalone motivator, using sex to fulfill a curiosity rings a bit exploitative.

However, Meridian's approach to sexual relation is more nuanced than "uncomplicated" exploitation (Walker 61). Notably, Meridian's curiosity is "about her body's power." Consider, then, the specificity of black female relationality: "self-centeredness [is] an essential component black female relationality" (Quashie 73). Could, in fact, Meridian mime embodied relationality to relate more closely with herself? Could her exploring the fullness of "her body's power" in sex be her foray into a self-centered relation? In weighing these concerns, the rigor of having an I-Thou orientation must be front of mind. Encounter is no facile regard for another person. In Buber's words, it is "the genuinely reciprocal meeting in the fullness of life between one active existence and another." Meridian discovers for herself the "fullness of life" in "her body's power," but has no intention of sharing that knowledge with Eddie. Likewise, she is uninterested in anything he could offer her in relation: "sex was now something that she knew and thought she understood." Meridian may approximate a self-centered orientation in sex, but the boundaries of her "curiosity" weigh her down. Having learned everything she deems worth

knowing, Meridian feels "[s]he would have been just as happy, happier, without it" (Walker 61). Meridian goes as far as refusing to discuss her disinterest in sex honestly, cavalierly displacing "blame [for her disinsterest] on any handy thing." Therefore, the "it" she claims she would be happier without is not sex itself but any genuine attempt at relation. Meridian is content never to elevate her self-centered immanence to the "audacious subject position" of relational transcendence (Quashie 76). Of course, one must consider that, for all her exploring, Meridian never finds "her body's power" in sex; disengagement with the act could engender more power for Meridian than a relationship with Eddie. However, Meridian's disengagement with sex still lacks a relational approach. Content to use sex to satisfy her own "curiosity" and to be used as an unresponsive object in bed with Eddie, Meridian does not express her "lack of interest" in sex by approaching Eddie as a "Thou."

Logically, never is there a more urgent, imperative call for an I-Thou orientation than in sexual encounters and romantic partnerships. Meridian's unenthusiastic response is rooted in an insidious passivity. Similar to her living martyrdom in public protest, Meridian fashions herself as a willing victim in private relation. On the one hand, Meridian's various partners - Eddie, Daxter, The Assistant, Truman - are no savants of relationality. Exploitation, abuse, and unredeemed self-centeredness exist on their ends in spades. Yet, Saint Meridian's passivity is the sin she commits unto others as well.

Meridian's most illicit and arguably most exploitative relationship illustrates the sin of passivity in relation most clearly. George Daxter is a middle-aged funeral home owner and "had been after Meridian since she was twelve years old" (Walker 62). Meridian would stop by the funeral home every Saturday afternoon "as everybody did," and Dexter "gave her candy for a swift, exploratory feel" (Walker 62). As she gets older, about "fifteen or so," the exchange

intensifies: candy becomes cash Daxter leaves on the sofa, and the "feel" becomes more than "swift" and "exploratory." More to the point, "[w]hen Daxter was not around she allowed herself to be chased around the embalming table by his young assistant" (Walker 62). For how many years these rendezvous continued, Meridian leaves unclear, but they end sometime after "she became involved" with the man who would later become her husband, Eddie.

Meridian is a child for most of the time she was with Daxter and The Assistant, and, as a result, guilt for abuse lies with them. These men's relationship with Meridian is violent and predatory. This point cannot be understated. Walker emphasizes their perversion using grotesque imagery. Meridian determines that Daxter's "obesity, in the end, was distasteful to her" and "imagined [his] penis to look like an English walnut" (Walker 62). As for The Assistant, he is "an almost handsome man," but that near-handsomeness "dissipated… with a face that - as the saying went - *begged* for pussy" (Walker 62). Walker leaves The Assistant unnamed. Depersonalizing the character further, Walker separates the man from his words. Instead, "The Voice" (Walker's capitalization) seduces and performs sexual acts "expertly, like a machine" (Walker 64). As permitted by the point of view in Walker's descriptions, easily, "the readers can see that the sexual beast is not the girl but the Assistant" (Gheytasi and Hanif 178).

Walker writes Daxter and The Assistant through Meridian's eyes. A similar gaze pointed toward Meridian in the funeral home scene is nearly imperceptible. Moreover, a cursory read would assume Meridian's choice is also absent. To locate Meridian herself in these relationships, note who Walker grammatically positions as the actor. Daxter "had been after Meridian… would entice her into his office… gave her candy" (Walker 62). Introducing The Assistant, Meridian "allowed herself to be chased around" (Walker 62). Instead of saying he *chased her around* - an equally accurate description of the action - Walker elects to describe using the reflexive tense.

Here, actor and acted-upon are the same, letting slip Meridian's participation and state of mind. In truth, "She hated him but she was fascinated" (Walker 63). Walker discloses the extent of Meridian's agentive actions shortly thereafter:

> Of course, she had given up Daxter and The Assistant when she became involved with Eddie—well, not just at first. She was guilty of having tried to use them to discover him, what he wanted from her; and yet their pawing over her and her refusal to do anything more than tease them had seemingly separated her from her young husband forever (Walker 64).

Meridian "gives up" Daxter and The Assistant, and Walker illuminates an unforeseen agentive capacity in Meridian's relation with these two men. Moreover, Meridian's agency gestures to a level of ownership Meridian has over these men. They were hers to "have" as much as they are hers to "give up." And Meridian's "having" them is more than a romantic euphemism. She flexes her ownership "to use them" as pawns "to discover [Eddie], what he wanted from her." It is an unexpectedly skillful manipulation from a character who is otherwise positioned to have so little power in the relationship. *Letting* The Assistant chase her, Daxter entice her, and both men abuse her is a means to an end for Meridian. Passivity is a choice, a strategy, even, and as an activist, Meridian well knows this. The choice to remove one's agency is, of course, an ultimately paradoxical logic. Passivity is superficial; at the end of the day, the choice *not to choose* is an active decision.

As Walker reveals, the decision on Meridian's part has violent effects. Her agentive use of these men, disguised in passivity, and her exploitative exploration, misnamed as "teasing," makes objects out of Daxter and The Assitant as much as they make a victim out of her. At the end of the affair, Walker indicts Meridian: "She was guilty" of compounding the scene's

dehumanization. Her behavior "separate[ing] her from her young husband forever," Meridian is guilty of eviscerating her own capacity for relation even beyond the scenes of the funeral home.

Really, the intimacy of sexual encounters and romantic relationships is a literalization of Martin Buber's philosophy - a praxis of relation embodied. Ironically, Meridian, who embodies empathy like a saint's stigmata, is incapable of it. A lacking relational capacity speaks directly to the issue of Meridian's sexual subjectivity. Choosing a strategic passivity in her partnership with Eddie and her relationships with the men of the funeral home, Meridian fails to embody the "one active existence" outlined in Buber's description of an I-Thou orientation and emphasized in Quashie's calculation of a liberated and distinctively "black female relationality" (Quashie 73). "Relation is the capacity of unfurling, of becoming more and more in/through the tension with another," but Meridian does the opposite, closing herself off from relation and shrinking herself down in passivity. Meridian's strategic passivity, ultimately, harms herself. As Spillers contends, the issue facing the discourse concerning black women's sexual subjectivity is, at least in part, passivity: "black women are the beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" ("Interstices" 153). Agentive naming and doing separate the "haves/have-nots" in the discourse of sexuality, and black women, in the Western imagination, epitomize those who "have-not" ("Interstices" 158). In Quashie's words, an I-Thou orientation, emphasizing an active self-centeredness, "ensures that the ideological pursuit of a human ideal doesn't reify the logics that would erase black femaleness from that pursuit" (Quashie 73). In neither actively accepting nor rejecting sex, Meridian rejects the *active existence* of those called into relation. In reducing *the fullness of life* within her upon the call to relation, she effaces the possibility of her own sexual subjectivity.

Meridian's life is an example of black women's unique trouble with relation and alienation pushed to the extreme. Her narrative's conclusion banishes black female relationality to the realm of the impossible. Now "strong enough to go" and move away from the community she just saved, Meridian speaks her final words in the novel to Truman. Their last farewell signals the finality of Meridian's isolation:

> "I hate to think of you always alone."
>
> "But that is my value," said Meridian. 'Besides, all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth."
>
> She hugged him...and then she went, walking as if hurrying to catch up with someone (Walker 185).

Meridian is intensely lonely, but her loneliness is an unalienable condition of her subject position. Cast as the living martyr, alienation "is [her] value." Alienation is the hallmark of bodies sacrificed for the revolution, of folk martyrs for the community, and of black women boxed outside the logics of relationality. In this way, isolation is her value so much it can be exchanged in transaction - a life for the cause, a figurehead for the group, a subject to define in discourse "what a human being was *not*" (Spillers. "Interstices" 155).

The sight of Meridian turning to leave reminds Truman "of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help" (Walker 185). Truman is right; Lazarus is not an adequate comparison. We need a human religious figure who "volunteers to suffer" - one who sacrifices themselves and resurrects themselves, all without the transcendence of relation. No such figure exists. To imagine one, even, produces a paradox in logic. The martyr

dies for a mighty cause, often so that someone else may live. The *living* martyr asks to share in the relationality of the living while alienating themselves in their deaths.

"How can you not love somebody like that!" Truman asks at the novel's opening. The answer: "Because she thinks *she's* God," and a god cannot enter into equal relation with another person. They can only understand the language of sacrifices. Unable to inhabit the human *I*, there can be no "I-Thou" orientation, only an outwardly facing "Thou art." Still, Meridian, of course, is not a god. Her failure at both sides of the "I-Thou" orientation expresses the extreme-most case of how black women's subjectivity can be configured away from relationality and toward the oppressive, normative understanding of "black femaleness as abject, as the nonideal human subject" (Quashie 73).

Meridian's role in her community obscures her relational capacity and throws her sexual subjectivity into crisis. In short, Meridian of Alice Walker's novel is "[s]uspicious of pleasure" (Meridian 64). The same could be said of Ursa Corregidora of Gayl Jones's novel. Through her matriarchal line, Ursa Corregidora inherits a unique way of experiencing pleasure. The Corregidora method of pleasure is thoroughly comingled with family history, slavery, and pain. This traumatic inheritance makes pleasure (and more broadly, sexual subjectivity) a dubious pursuit for Ursa. Gayl Jones writes *Corregidora* in circles of memory. Ursa is the main character but the configuration of her subjectivity has everything to do with that of her foremothers. The voices and histories of three generations back combine in Ursa's perspective such that knowing Ursa is unfeasible without also knowing the women before her. Therefore, this project takes up Ursa Corregidora as a discrete case study only so much as the text allows. Here, the project analyzes Ursa's subjectivity with and through the necessary addendums of other women in the story.

Case Study 2: Ursa

On Subjectivity - The Shapes of Sexuality

Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg asserts that Gayl Jones's novel *Corregidora* "traces the legacy of slavery through the lives of four generations of women" (446). Indeed, matrilineage and the legacy of slavery catalyze the plot, but Goldberg's summary paints a slightly misleading picture of how these two issues function. The legacy of slavery does not move from one generation to the next linearly. Instead, Jones places the traumatic legacy of slavery at the center of the women's familial and personal identities; she structures the narrative to reflect this circularity. A "form of memory that is both 'emotional' and 'embodied'," "rememory" is something Corregidora('s) women gather around like a fire, not something one generation hands off to the next (Setka 130). Scholarly efforts to map Jones's narrative structure categorically embrace the story's circularity. Janice Harris envisions that "The form of Jones' novel is circles within circles-memories within memories" (Harris 2). Jones's interwoven episodes of "traumatic rememory" reel with a circular momentum (Setka 129). The past collapses onto the present as the Corregidora legend "reanimat[es] the sexual violence experienced" generations before (Setka 129). As most of the mentioned injury happens long before the plot begins, whiplash is the most predominant form of violence within the book.

Whiplash is a trap. As Stella Setka notes, "traumatic rememory entraps Ursa Corregidora in the past" (129). When the past collapses onto the present - when the Corregidora legend "reanimates" memories of bygone trauma - it quakes with the violence of its initial inception. Ursa's movements are forced to sway with these violent reverberations. The affective nature of Corregidora "re-utterances" lead the footsteps of even the women who never met the Old Man enslaver. As Ursa explains, "My great-grandmama told my grandma the part she lived through

that my grandma didn't live through and my grandma told my mama what they both didn't live through and my mama told me" (Jones 7). All the women after Great-Gram carry that which they did not directly "live through." The word "through" subtly implies some sort of narrative linearity. In personal experience, Great Gram temporally "lived through" her Brazilian enslavement. For everyone else, experience is not a determining factor of subjectivity - narrative is. The women after Great Gram are commanded to recite, carry, and embody a narrative they cannot "live through" from beginning to end. Instead, they are condemned to live *around* the legend. Manifested in "re-utterances," their lives must orbit around the Corregidora oral history that has no beginning and no end.

Jones illustrates trauma through shapes to caution against their danger. As Setka evaluates, the essential mission of the book is Ursa's attempt "to break the cycle" handed down to her in rememory (129). Ursa endeavors to "break the cycle" to discover the possibility of desire and to find a sexual subjectivity not entirely burdened by a history of slavery or sexual violence. Through Ursa's struggle, Jones illuminates the discursive peril for black women's sexual subjectivity found in both linearity and circularity. The best example of these extremes exists in Irene, Ursa's mother, and May Alice, Ursa's childhood friend. Irene (who, like Ursa, has no personal history with Old Man Corregidora) embodies a closed-circle configuration of sexual subjectivity, and May Alice (who, unlike Ursa, embodies a striking lack of historical/familial context) embodies a linear configuration.

Trapped in a familial past, Ursa's mother struggles to contend with her personal past. As she tells her daughter the story of Ursa's father for the very first time, she struggles, sounding "almost as if she were speaking in pieces, instead of telling one long thing"; melding her history with a more ancient one only moments later, Irene "kept talking until it wasn't her that was

talking, but Great Gram… she wasn't Mama now, she was Great Gram talking" (Jones 117). Easily, Great Gram's spirit possesses Irene; the Corregidora legend barrels forward in an unbroken monologue while Mama's personal history sputters out in fragments weakly and uncertain. Irene's inter-spliced testimony showcases the compulsion of the family's imperative: "*I'm leaving evidence. And you got to leave evidence too. And your children got to leave evidence. And when it come time to hold up the evidence, we got to have evidence to hold up*" (Jones 11). Sara Clarke Kaplan explains the multivocality of Irene's testimony saying, "Despite her inability to express, "[t]he trauma to which Mama testifies" accounts for both the "individual" and "collective"; Irene offers testimony individually "for the captivity, rape, and abuse that Dorita and her daughter suffered at Corregidora's hands" and speaks collectively to "the incessant production and reproduction of the Black female as both a void of subjectivity and a surfeit of sexuality" (126). Still, neither of these modes makes space for the *personal* to emerge. Great Gram's story instantly overwrites Irene's more recent, personal history representing the way the past hijacks the present in a closed-circle narrative. Juggling the individual experiences of her ancestors and the collective disembodiment of black women's subjectivity leaves no room for Irene to contend with her personal experience. Irene is alienated from herself; her subjectivity is lost in the translation of a more ancient script. The discursive closed circle of Corregidora sexual subjectivity entraps Irene but leaves her personal subjectivity out. "Oneness" (to borrow Kevin Quashie's term) is an impossibility amid the demands of Corregidora circularity.

Having firmly adopted a circular subjectivity, Irene is stuck. Ursa knows her mother "wouldn't have left that house. Too many memories… more her own, than theirs. The life lived, not the spoken one" (Jones 102). Interestingly, Irene's entrapment is mirrored in her stasis in the

family home. Quashie notes the "limits of domesticity as a basis for conceptualizing black freedom," asserting that domesticity "reifies black women and children as objects of communal recuperation" (70). The counter-discursive imperative to "*leave evidence*" finds praxis in making bodies into "objects of communal recuperation" (Jones 11). An "object" of recuperating evidence that was burned in documents, Irene is not a person entitled to individual subjectivity. She is entitled to "[t]he life lived," but "not the spoken one," the one accessible in Corregidora counter-discourse. "The spoken one" refers to the family's re-uttered oral history, but the statement also highlights how Mama's life is expressly unspoken. Irene's life can only be "lived through" – not discussed or preserved in legend. The Corregidora legend takes up so much space that there are no words left to remember or process a newer history. Irene's entrapment in the Corregidora family house metaphorically parallels her being trapped in the Corregidora closed circle. Even as new memories form, they cannot expand beyond the boundaries of Corregidora property, only compounding the intensity of her confinement. Irene's individual sexuality is unable to mature in this space. Staying within the Corregidora house and by extension its circularity, she knows she cannot be "with any man," refusing to sleep with Ursa's father Martin while they were together and under Great Gram's roof (Jones 115). Instead of "making generations" by accepting new men into her life, Irene's sexuality is replaced by a Corregidora sexuality.

Reflecting on her mother's near-mystical stasis, Ursa ponders, "I never saw my mama with a man, never ever saw her with a man. But she wasn't a virgin because of me. And still she was heavy with virginity. Her swollen belly with no child inside" – pregnant and sexless at the same time (Jones 95). Ursa's mother's air of virginity should mean no pregnancy; likewise, Ursa's existence should negate Irene's virginity. Indeed, Irene carries "no child inside"; instead,

she is full of Corregidora. Where a true pregnancy implies potentiality, a Corregidora pregnancy is indefinite. Where a true pregnancy implies sexuality, this phantom pregnancy robs Irene of an independent sexual subjectivity. Just as Corregidora counter-discourse robs Irene of embodying the self as immanence, the phantom pregnancy robs Irene of encountering the transcendence of relation (Quashie 76). Because "audacious inhabitances of self as immanence…make possible the transcendence of surrender and relation," circularity alienates Irene from both herself (her subjectivity) and others (her relational capacity) (Quashie 74). Revealing what occupies the cavity of her relational capacity, Irene asks Ursa, "Corregidora's never been enough for you, has it?" as if the memory of Old Man Corregidora is the automatic "partner" of any Corregidora woman (Jones 105). Thinking back to her relationship with Martin, Irene remarks, "Corregidora is responsible for that part of my life. If Corregidora hadn't happened that part of my life never would have happened" (Jones 105). One reading of that statement suggests that Irene sees Old Man Corregidora in Martin, and by extension, she sees Old Man Corregidora as having impregnated her with her necessary and inevitable female child. Irene is filled, always, with Corregidora: the immutable patriarch of the family and the phantom partner who has always been "enough" for her.

Critical scholarship places much emphasis on the novel's circularity, but Jones makes clear that linearity is not a solution just because it is its opposite. May Alice's characterization demonstrates a linear sexual subjectivity. Her explanation of the sensation of sex makes clear her adoption of linearity's unidirectional momentum: "[I]t hurts for a little while, and then all the hurting goes, and then it feels good" (Jones 138). With her firsthand testimony, "May Alice offers a traditional story: a painful loss of virginity followed by sexual pleasure. This story is linear and teleological" (Ziering 96). Unlike Ursa, and even more dissimilar to Irene, May Alice

can move through pain and into pleasure. For her, the two need not comingle in sex; much less must one overwrite the other. In other words, May Alice asserts that "pain and pleasure can be neighbors," close but still discretely separate (Ziering 96). Sensation moves from one to the next, without the complication of conflation. It models, as Frederick Engels would suggest, a discursive rendering of "absolutely irreconcilable antitheses" (Engels). May Alice's pleasure without pain (and vice versa) seems like a compelling alternative to Irene's depersonalized circular entrapment that tangles the two sensations. However, Engels's analysis also reveals that the "commonsense" of this thinking is but a flimsy veneer that "sooner or later reaches a limit" (Engels). "In the contemplation of individual things," linear sexual subjectivity "forgets the connection" between pain and pleasure, personal experience and familial history, and individual instance and cultural context.

May Alice's sexuality is entirely her own, and it heeds no warning from others - a striking dissimilarity from her friend Ursa who is "taught to want" in a family tradition of "What all us Corregidora women want" (Jones 19). Despite her young age, "May Alice has, perhaps, the clearest understanding of sexuality in the novel," a knowledge that can be attributed to her close attention to what she *feels* (Ziering 96). Her testimony to Ursa is exceedingly straightforward: "May Alice told me it would feel good" (Jones 131). A simple (linear, individualistic) recognition of "good" feelings steers May Alice to have frequent, casual sex with her schoolmate Harold. When Ursa warns, "You know what'll happen if you don't stop," May Alice dismisses her sticking out her tongue and retorting "I can take care of myself" (Jones 133). May Alice's childish assertion of autonomy emblematizes her naive approach to sexuality in general. In her mind, "taking care of herself" entails following, above all, that which *feels good*, without regard for the dangers that impulse-driven sex can produce. Basing itself on individual

impulse, a linear sexual subjectivity is one completely unrooted in a family history and social context.

This lack of attachment spells utter isolation. Distinct from the familial influence of Ursa's characterization, Jones's construction of May Alice's character is exceptionally independent. May Alice's mother, for instance, is only referenced indirectly: when she discovers May Alice's pregnancy by interpreting laundry stains, when she conferences with Harold's mother (the details of which remain undisclosed), and when she moves with May Alice to Georgetown, Kentucky. Jones does not lend May Alice's mother any dialogue or description beyond this. Even beyond her family ties, May Alice's character is utterly alone. Harold, the boy who impregnates her, abandons her ("He won't come see me… Ursie, go tell him I'm sorry. He's mad at me. I know he is"), and Ursa, her "best friend," distances herself following May Alice's pregnancy ("Why do you hate me… Yes, you do. You ain't been to see me") (Jones 135, 139). May Alice's impulsive sexuality, embodied in her early pregnancy, alienates her from those with whom she is closest. This alienation extends to herself as well. May Alice's sexual experiences are riddled with patriarchal violence that isolates her from the fullness of her own desires. Ursa and May Alice's argument about who initiates "quitting" sex is especially illustrative in this regard:

> "May Alice, you better quit"
>
> She said nothing.
>
> "He ought to quit if you won't," I said.
>
> "You know a boy won't quit."
>
> "Why not?"

> She laughed. “Anyway,” she said, “they be after it till you tell them to stop. But then after you start giving them some, you wouldn’t feel right to tell them to stop. I mean, you wouldn’t feel you had any right to tell them to stop” (Jones 133).

Goldberg posits that *Corregidora* speaks to “the strained impossibility of women's desire…within the racist-heterosexist-patriarchal containment of (Black) Woman as ground of male desire, Woman as lack” (446). For this assertion, Goldberg specifically references Ursa’s “frustrated” sexuality and inability to express desire; however, May Alice’s perspective aligns with Goldberg’s reading of “impossibility” just as well. Her argument with Ursa about “quitting” sexual promiscuity plainly showcases a gendered double standard and a dubious understanding of consent. Constructed in contrast to a Corregidora sexual subjectivity, May Alice’s “linear” sexual subjectivity is equally “impossible” for its crushing dependence on patriarchy. May Alice’s desire is only possible insofar as it does not restrict the sexual desires of a male partner. Regardless of what she wants, May Alice does not have “any right to tell them to stop.” In this mode, male desire always supersedes female desire. Thus, her female sexual subjectivity is aptly defined as “Woman as ground of male desire.” More damning, May Alice’s testimony reveals that male desire gives shape to her own. Describing what “feel[s] right” in this instance mirrors her earlier description of what “feels good” sexually (Jones 131, 133). The barometer of May Alice’s sensual feeling measures the desires of a male partner principally, then considers May Alice’s own desires. Confessing she “wouldn’t *feel right* to tell them to stop. I mean, you wouldn’t *feel* you had any right to tell them to stop,” May Alice constructs her sexual subjectivity as an empty vessel for the desires of others - a construction of “Woman as lack.”

Jones casts May Alice’s impossible sexual subjectivity on an ill-fated trajectory. As Anna Ziering notes, Gayl Jones opens part 3 of the novel by juxtaposing “a violent murder and the

excitement of May Alice's eroticism" (Ziering 96). The first conversation Jones presents between the two girls centers on "the Melrose woman": "Did you hear what happened to the Melrose woman?" (Jones 129). The body of a woman in her twenties, "one of Mr. Melrose's girls," was found dead in a local alleyway (128). Police closed the case declaring it a suicide, to the dissatisfaction of the townspeople: "they don't put it in the n****r file, they put it in the n****r *woman* file, which mean they ain't gon never get to it" (Jones 128). The details of the crime remain unknown, but one fact is abundantly clear: "Had to been some man… I ain't never known a woman take her life less it was some man" (Jones 127). In an eerie parallel, May Alice's narrative arc concludes with the same comparison as Ursa thinks, "somehow I'd kept tying [the Melrose woman] and May Alice together. I don't know why I did. And it was always May Alice laying up there in that alley" (Jones 138). The woman who Ursa only knows by her demise bookends May Alice's life story in Ursa's imagination. Fatal sexist violence haunts May Alice's character from start to finish. In this way, Gayl Jones writes May Alice's life as entrapped by futurity. Her rapid-paced maturation (her early pregnancy and implied early death) contrasts again with Corregidora subjectivity. Linearity, as Jones illustrates it, is crushingly overdetermined by its destination. We cannot relish in May Alice's life because her linear sexual subjectivity leads straight to death.

Circularity, as demonstrated by Irene, and linearity, as demonstrated by May Alice, are equally untenable. Both are alienating, overdetermined by time, and subjectivity-nullifying. Together, Irene and May Alice construct an argument for the importance of approaching sexual subjectivity with critical ambivalence - a thinking that acknowledges both linearity and circularity without succumbing to the dangers of either. Essentially, Ursa's journey endeavors to find this middle ground. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg sees this incessant ambivalence as deeply

problematic: “by structuring her novel in a pattern of traumatic repetition, Jones offers neither the satisfactory closure of a linear narrative (of either progress or decline), nor the redemptive healing of a circular narrative recalling ancestral strength” (446). Detailed in her essay “Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones’ *‘Corregidora,’*” Goldberg asserts that the novel’s ambivalent qualities instead attest to “the traumatic impossibility of female desire, and therefore of full female subjectivity, resulting from torture's legacy” (446). Interestingly, Goldberg only acknowledges the positive aspects of linearity and circularity. However, as seen in May Alice and Irene, Jones makes visible the perils of fully adopting either shape of subjectivity. Still, Ursa’s ability to see the shortcomings at both extremes of the shapes of sexuality does not rescue her from a unique alienation along the way.

Alienated into Ambivalence

Womblessness is Ursa’s primary form of alienation, but this alienation is ultimately her key to salvation. For better or for worse, the Corregidora women craft a counter-discourse of their bodies; it comes to define “[w]hat all us Corregidora women want. Have been taught to want. To make generations” (Jones 19). Jones opens the novel with Ursa falling down a flight of stairs because of a violent encounter with her husband Mutt. The physical result is a loss of pregnancy and a hysterectomy. The discursive result is that womblessness flings Ursa outside of the counter-discourse her foremothers built for her to sustain. As demonstrated in Irene, the Corregidora counter-discourse constructs a closed-circle shape of sexual subjectivity. Here, isolation from oneself and others is inevitable, and the potential for relation to those outside the circle is impossible. Ursa’s womblessness, then, compounds this isolation. Recovering from the incident, Ursa ponders, “I lay on my back, feeling as if more than the womb had been taken out” (Jones 4). She is right. Ursa’s hysterectomy displaces her subjectivity, once from normative

discourse and again from Corregidora(‘s) counter-discourse. Doubly displaced, Ursa must now pave her own way. Womblessness ultimately prompts Ursa’s ability to craft a sexual subjectivity of her own shape.

Womblessness may separate Ursa from her family’s imperative (making generations), but her condition is not so distinct from that of other Corregidora women. Sara Clarke Kaplan notes in *The Black Reproductive* that Ursa’s “own injured and excised uterus” and “her mother’s empty womb” and phantom pregnancy both “echo the ‘wombsickness,’ or hysteria, experienced by Dorita and her daughter during their years as Corregidora’s captives” (119). The whole of Kaplan’s chapter “Hysterical Bodies as Embodied History” makes a robust theoretical foundation for thinking through “the strategic political deployment of the logics of Black reproductivity as a response to slavery’s sexual violence and dispossession” (112). Carving counter-discourse out of flesh, “Corregidora women deploy their bodies as both evidence of and sites from which to testify to sexualized injury” (S. Kaplan 115). Attending to those body parts enrolled in “reproductivity” specifically deepens the site of traumatic injury to the most intimate level.

Hysteria is a term rooted in medical and psychoanalytic discourse, “a disease of the wandering, or starving, womb” (S. Kaplan 121). Psychologically, hysteria describes “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena,” (S. Kaplan 120). “Trauma” bears a theoretical resemblance; similarly collapsing history and repetition, it is understood as “a symptom of memory” (qtd. in S. Kaplan 120). Kaplan traces the roots of the terms across medical and psychoanalytic discourse, concluding their principle function lies in the “discourses of gender differentiation” (120). Where discourse implies that

trauma is a discretely "masculine disorder," hysteria is, primarily, a vehicle for the pathologizing and regulation of women's bodies, sexualities, and reproductive processes (S. Kaplan 121). *Corregidora* takes up this "malady of womanhood" explicitly as Ursa ponders, "How many generations? Days that were pages of hysteria. Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria" (Jones 55). For its uniquely gendered prescription, "hysteria" connects Corregidora('s) women's psyche to the womb and posits that their trauma - experienced, remembered, and embedded in the body - has everything to do with their gendered subject position. Importantly, hysteria "was uniformly understood as a problem whose solution lay in the social and physiological fortification of 'proper' femininity" - an especially elusive remedy for the black female subject whose racialization further distances her from normative ideals of "proper femininity" (S. Kaplan 121). Noting this addendum brings the family's racialization into frame as well. The Corregidoras are a lineage of people who are both black and woman. With the material evidence of their primary injury (enslaved concubinage) "*burned*," their lives - their "Days" - stand in for those destroyed documents; their bodies become living "pages" of evidence (Jones 68). The metaphor fuses evidence of trauma ("pages") with embodied experience ("Days"). Put simply, Jones inscribes evidence of trauma in the flesh of Corregidora('s) women, but evocation of "hysteria" deepens the injury. "Days… were pages" the same way hysteria inextricably ties together the psyche and the womb. Hysteria, "an embodiment of past sexual trauma," discursively embeds "an embodiment" in the site of female reproduction (the womb) specifically. As Kaplan expresses, *Corregidora*'s "correlation of hysteria with sexual trauma and sexualized violence with visible injury goes beyond positing a legitimate wounded subjectivity for enslaved and unfree Black women"; indeed, the novel argues the "centrality of sexuality in all of slavery's practices of racial terror and brutality" (S. Kaplan 124). With a vow to "*bear witness*" kept "*as*

visible as our blood," Corregidora('s) women craft a counter-discourse that articulates the specific discursive trouble for black women's subjectivity and translates sexual and racial violence as inseparably enmeshed (68 Jones).

Evoking "hysteria," however, the family is subject to more than the meanings they construct in counter-discourse. Michel Foucault's theorization in *The History of Sexuality* explains how power articulates sexuality, as a discursive object. Specifically examining the "hysterization of women's bodies," Foucault describes,

> a threefold process by which the feminine body was analyzed— qualified and disqualified—as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality, whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it; whereby, finally, it was placed in organic communication with the social body (whose regulated fecundity it was supposed to ensure)... the Mother, with her negative image of 'nervous woman,' constituted the most visible form of this hysterization (104).

"Hysterization" constitutes one of the "specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex" conceived and deployed to exert "biopower" over the female social subject (Foucault 103). Kaplan extends Foucault's thinking to consider the biopower of hysterization on black women; she assesses that hysterization is similarly a method of racialization: "a redeployment of the discursive strategies by which Black women were constructed as pathological and uncontainable hypersexual creatures devoid of higher reasoning" (S. Kaplan125). Beyond their womanhood and their exacerbating blackness, the Corregidora family maps onto Foucauldian hysterization in "the most visible form": motherhood. The Corregidora family is, principally, a matrilineage. Traumatic legacy passes from mother to daughter in a succession so tightly knit that new relations cannot form (especially romantic relations with men). Directly preceding her

declaration of "pages of hysteria," Ursa lists out the generations of Corregidora women starting with Great Gram, the founding matriarch: "I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter's father. The father of her daughter's daughter. How many generations…" (Jones 55). The first sentence describes Great Gram who testifies early in the text to "*sleeping with her and him*" (Jones 11). Only a fragment, the next statement appears to modify the sentence before it, but something is off. Only Great Gram attests to sleeping with *both* Old Man Corregidora and his wife, and Gram (her daughter) was fathered by the Portuguese enslaver, not Great Gram. Exactly who Ursa references in this second phrase, and in the phrases that follow, is muddled in a dizzying vagueness. Jones links together the identities of the Corregidora mothers like a continuously looping chain - hypnotically circular, repeating, imperceptibly transitioning from one to the next. The Corregidora's tight-knit (closed circle) family structure - the thrice compounded mother figure - exacerbates the hypervisibility Foucault imagines for the "Mother" archetype. The "nervous woman"/Mother is the premiere conceptualization of the female hysteric, and Corregidora('s) women are a superlative manifestation of this caricature. As such, they face a superlative vulnerability to biopower's subjugation as well.

Hysteria is oppressive for its discursive pathologizing of women's bodies, yet hysteria is liberatory for evincing traumatic violence that is uniquely feminine. For all its discursive baggage, Ursa's self-ascribing "hysteria" is surprising if not altogether disconcerting. Voluntarily embracing and being jostled by the discourse of hysteria is a "strategy [that] is necessarily double-edged," mirroring how Corregidora('s) women are simultaneously "claiming the past" and "being claimed by it" - both "possessing and possession" (S. Kaplan 130). The trope of the female hysteric is one *Corregidora* both problematizes and champions. As Kaplan writes, "For

the Corregidora woman, hysteria is both symptom of and salvation from the sexualized violence of enslaved and unfree concubinage" (S. Kaplan 132). Jones deploys hysteria for its ambivalence, an ambivalence the family relies upon: "Their survival depended on suppressed hysteria" (Jones 55). "Their survival" evokes more than its literal, physical meaning. With "their bodies… the legible texts for a resistant genealogy," *survival* entails the continuation of trauma's legacy. Above all, the story (inscribed in the body) must survive. This survival of embodied evidence is contingent upon "suppressed hysteria" – that is, suppress*ed* hysteria not suppress*ing*. Jones's choice of verb tense illuminates the object and subject of this "suppression." "Their survival" leans not on the women's continuous suppress*ing* of hysteria. Corregidora hysteria is acted *upon*, suppress*ed* by an outside force. Though "suppressed hysteria" enables "survival," Jones's syntax insinuates a non-consensual restriction. Hysteria - that black feminine embodied testimony of trauma, that contradictory ambivalence that is both possessive and possession - is ultimately muzzled by a power beyond what Corregidora counter-discourse can conjure. Scholarship on Jones's novel generally deduces that, in the end, traumatic rememory is a "psychological paralysis" (Setka 129). Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg asserts that "survival in Ursa's context becomes an endless testimony to the impossibility of desire, and of pleasure" (466). Sara Clarke Kaplan concludes her analysis of the novel by ceding that "As Ursa comes to realize, however, neither the knowing nor the telling of her family's history produces resolution" (138). The defeat of Corregidora counter-discourse can, perhaps, be explained in the fact that "hysteria" is "suppressed." Discursively oppressive and liberatory, hysteria emblematizes ambivalence. Moreover, hysteria patently concerns illogics and the embodiment of uncontrollable energy; suppressing it is antithetical to its nature, paralyzing that which is meant to move. If suppressed hysteria enables the continuance of psychologically paralyzing traumatic

rememory, then the solution entails a release. Hysteria's (seemingly paradoxical) ambivalence must be embraced, not suppressed.

Directly, Ursa's case of "wombsickness" (hysteria embodied in her womblessness) enables her to imagine options for herself. Jones's enunciation of hysteria crafts an argument for the release of hysteria, an embrace of ambivalence; Ursa's womblessness enables her to see this argument clearly. Ursa's hysterectomy prompts her to ask the question, "But I *am* different now… And even if I still had my womb, even if the first baby had come - what would I have done then? Would I have kept it up? Would I have been like her, or them?" (Jones 57). As Ursa weighs the choices – would she "have kept it up" or would she have abandoned "suppressed hysteria survival" entirely – her list of questions implies an unspoken one. Is there a way to embrace a middle ground, a way to experience hysteria unleashed? As Ursa's particular case of "wombsickness" differentiates her from Corregidora('s) women of the past, it enables her to consider a subject position of ambivalence.

Displaced from counter-discourse, Ursa nears the start/close of another Corregidora circle differently than her foremothers. Jones illustrates this unique positioning in a dream sequence wherein Ursa births Old Man Corregidora, the circle's generations-back starting point:

> *I dreamed that my belly was swollen and restless, and I lay without moving, gave birth without struggle, without feeling. But my eyes never turned to my feet. I never saw what squatted between my legs… I felt a stiff penis inside me. "Those who have fucked their daughters would not hesitate to fuck their own mothers" … "Who are you?" "You don't even know your own father?*" (72).

Tasked with "making generations," Corregidora('s) women never actually make anything new; their labors are reduced to the rebirth of Old Man Corregidora. However, Ursa's rebirth of Old

Man Corregidora goes beyond symbolizing the cycle of "traumatic rememory." Body and psyche collapse in an impossible vision, marking a defining moment for Ursa. In the tradition of her foremothers, Ursa directly takes on the role of the "female hysteric" as her dream birth scene "signif[ies] the inextricability of body and psyche" and "is not just a witness to but also an embodiment of the past sexual trauma" (S. Kaplan 137). However, Ursa's embodiment differs from those of her foremothers for more than her labors being a dream. As Janice Harris assesses, "the beauty of this birth is that it does not avoid but encompasses her ambivalence" (4). A Corregidora('s) woman's birth initiates the restarting of closed circle sexual subjectivity; it "avoids" dealing with "traumatic rememory" to restart the cycle of violence for the next generation. Enabling Ursa's defining difference to come to the fore, the dream birth confronts ambivalence head on. The sequence synthesizes the paradoxes that pervade Jones's text, Corregidora's legend, and the family's shared rememory. Ursa births without a uterus; she becomes both daughter and mother; she can feel as much as she is numb. Ursa's being both mother and daughter encapsulates the circularity of Corregidora and represents a confrontation with its contradiction.

Resisting Foreclosure

Ursa's birth sequence showcases her approaching the start/end of Corregidora('s) circularity, and the moment is crucial. Here, she must make a different choice or risks an entrapment similar to her foremothers'. "In their own hysteria, Great Gram and Gram, too, ceaselessly reiterate the foreclosed historical trauma through which they were engendered" (S. Kaplan 127). In contrast, Ursa's hysteria (manifested in the dream birth) *resists* foreclosure. Here, having a man to confront instead of a daughter to burden, Ursa rebukes, "*You are not my father. I was never one of your women… No!*" (Jones 72). Moments later Ursa confronts the

Corregidora matriarch, Great Gram. After Ursa tells Great Gram that their Corregidora-inflicted suffering is identical, Great Gram instinctually asks, "*Where's the next generation?*" (Jones 73). Ursa responds "*Hush*" (Jones 73). With this word, Ursa silences the ancestral refrain that passes on the traumatic legend keeping Corregidora('s) women in circularity. Shouting "*No!*" Ursa cries out for ambivalence. She refuses to take up the circular subjectivity that entraps the women before her, but she also insists on recognizing the painfulness of her begging. Asserting her desire for an independently forged sexual subjectivity, Ursa concludes the dream birth sequence by stating "*I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes… I found* [the past] *on my mother's tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music…I will pluck out their eyes*" (Jones 73). Ursa concedes that embodied pain of trauma's legacy (hysteria) composes her very being, but she resists its ability to "pollute" her any further. Fittingly, Ursa locates the embodied evidence in her eyes. With sight, eyes "bear witness" to painful history, but hers are composed entirely of "tears," the body's evidence of inflicted pain. The specificity of the eyes, in their function and composition, references the female hysteric as both a "witness to but also an embodiment of the past sexual trauma" (S. Kaplan 127). Ursa embraces the trope of the female hysteric; in the same breath, she resists its totalizing definition. Ursa is a blues singer above all else. A subject of scholarship, "Ursa's singing of the blues is understood as a tool that helps her understand and articulate her own desire" (Ziering 88). Evoking the blues, Gayl Jones calls upon what Hortense Spillers pinpoints as the one instance "sexual experiences are depicted… by the subject herself" ("Interstices" 153). Blues music, by Spillers's calculation, plays in a "self-contained accent"; definitionally, it is a sound of self-authorization ("Interstices" 153). When Ursa vows to "[*I*]*et no one pollute* [*her*] *music*," she proclaims the integrity of her individual sexual subjectivity. She protects her blues song as her creation and legacy, rebuking the way her "mother's milk" -

Irene's creation and motherly relationality - has been corrupted by the legacy of trauma. Still, refusal is not enough. Ursa must define a tenable sexual subjectivity in its stead, preferably one that balances linearity and circularity.

Spirals - Prospecting Possibility for Future Relation

As Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argues for redemption within the binary of linearity and circularity, this project sees the merits of ambivalence. Siding with neither linearity nor circularity means Ursa, herself, gets to craft the shape of her own sexuality, an agentive rendering that absolutely makes possible Ursa's "full female subjectivity" - even if subjectivity's impossibility persists as well (Goldberg 446). The problem with demanding "redemptive closure," as Elizabeth Goldberg suggests, is that it asks for a closing of the very circle that entraps the Corregidora women. For Corregidoras, closed circularity does not redeem; "traumatic rememory" eternally entraps them. Closing the circle of this narrative would be to initiate the cycle's repetition. "Making [another] generation" completes the inherited mission, passing down the onus to another Corregidora woman and starting the process over again. Instead of "redemptive closure," Ursa opts for a redemptive opening.

While the dream birth of Old Man Corregidora represents Ursa approaching the close/start of the Corregidora's circular narrative, the novel's final scene demonstrates Ursa veering off the Corregidora women's trajectory and opening the circle into a spiral. Ursa and Mutt sexually reunite after more than twenty years. The finale of *Corregidora* is a return – a return to Mutt and a return to a position that mirrors her Great Gram with Old Man Corregidora. Ursa relates, "it was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora" (Jones 176). The traumatic past invades a present moment of sexuality. Ursa, for the first time, performs oral sex on Mutt, and the couple's new sexual configuration

unearths a secret of the past. Exactly what prompted Great Gram to flee from Old Man Corregidora's plantation so many years ago has been a mystery to all in the family but Great Gram herself. "It had to be something sexual that Great Gram did to Corregidora," Ursa ponders, "What is it a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" (Jones 176). It dawns on her between Mutt's legs: "In a split second I knew what it was, in a split second of hate and love I knew what it was" (Jones 176). She whispers her violent realizations to Mutt, "I could kill you…I could kill you" (Jones 176). With their sexual contact completed, Mutt holds Ursa tightly, and the couple speaks a refrain: "I don't want a kind of woman that hurt you," "Then you don't want me" (Jones 176). The call and response echoes twice, until Ursa confesses her own desires: "I don't want a kind of man that'll hurt me neither" (Jones 176). Finally, Ursa "accomplish[es] subjectivity by articulating her own pain and desire" (Ziering 97). Importantly, this moment of instantiation makes possible and is made possible by relation. As Kevin Quashie predicts, "the one is instantiated as a one by whatever she becomes through the call to relation" (73). Ursa's sexual subjectivity "becomes" its own shape when she answers "the call to relation" with Mutt.

Revelation is born out of the conflated feeling of "hate and love," but a relational subjectivity is accomplished at the equilibrium of repetition and dissonance. Using her collective memory, Ursa visions "a moment of pleasure and excruciating pain at the same time, a moment of broken skin but not sexlessness, a moment just before sexlessness… a moment that stops just before it breaks the skin: I *could* kill you" (176, my emphasis). The moment is revelatory primarily because Ursa can now see into Great Gram's undisclosed past and secondarily because it gives Ursa a "could" - a choice. Both indicative of future possibility and the past tense of the

word “can,” “could” collapses the future and past suddenly making available the present moment. With the future (agentive possibility) and the past (traumatic repetition) equally available to Ursa, “I could kill you,” is a revelation of ambivalence toward temporality. Ursa “*incorporates* pain and trauma” of her ancestral past as knowledge that enables her to envision the expanse of her options: violence and repetition or release and futurity (Ziering 88). Standing on the precipice of pain/pleasure and past/futurity unveils a hopefulness for Ursa’s sexual subjectivity.

My analysis distinguishes this hopefulness from absolute possibility - or absolute impossibility, for that matter. *Corregidora’s* final scene has inspired much critical debate for what it says about the possibility of black women’s sexual subjectivity. As Anna Ziering notes, “Ursa’s offering and performance of oral sex during this scene has most often been read from an early feminist perspective that identifies fellatio as inherently disempowering” (Ziering 88). Ziering goes on to argue that Jones absolutely makes possible subjectivity and “sexual fulfillment” in the book’s final moments; her essay“‘Hurt You into Tenderness Finally’: Erotic Masochism and Black Female Subjectivity in Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*” provides a subversive lens that explores how subjectivity can be achieved without suppressing the experience or acknowledgment of pain. “Erotic Masochism” is a conceit with space for ambivalent sensation, “a tool that, for Ursa, incorporates pain and trauma, as pleasure, into a fulfilling sexual and erotic life” (Ziering 88). In contrast, Goldberg asserts that Ursa’s “heterosexual relationships are reenactments of Corregidora's sexual tortures … even the desire which she can imagine outside of this heterosexual frame is either violently effaced or takes brutal form” (463). Indeed, the scene does not escape being a “reenactment of Corregidora’s sexual tortures” as traumatic rememory relentlessly invades the erotic present for Ursa. Ursa’s return to Mutt, for Goldberg,

evidences the permanent, painful problem for black women in relation; Jones's ending illustrates the finality of "brutal heterosexuality" wherein "the violent penetration and consumption of female genitalia characteristic of rape" characterizes heterosexual relation for black women subjects and declares that "achieving full female subjectivity will remain… impossible" (Goldberg 451). The breadth of controversy surrounding *Corregidora*'s finale is unsurprising; the scene is ambiguous because Jones refuses to write in absolutes. Textual evidence for both Ziering and Goldberg's arguments are abundant; somehow, Jones's ending posits both.

Refusing to conclude in absolutes pain or pleasure is a statement in itself, not necessarily a capitulation to contradiction-induced impossibility. When the final scene resists "narrative closure in its call-response blues structure" and "the novel is left suspended in the troubled narrative time of historical legacy," Jones halts "the process of eliminating pain by expressing it" (Goldberg 469). Goldberg sees this capitulation to ambivalence as damning for "desiring subjects and subjects who desire" (469). Really, the rigidity of Goldberg's underlying logic is what is damning. Goldberg assesses that possibility is rendered only when "moving again out of its pained past-present and into a future" (469). In other words, sexual subjectivity is only possible when pain is entirely absent - a high standard particularly unfriendly to marginalized subjects. Ending the novel on a note of ambivalence, Jones asserts that "eliminating pain" is not a cure-all for achieving pleasure. Similarly, Gayl Jones opens space for Ursa's sexual subjectivity but does not entirely alleviate the burden of traumatic rememory. As Sara Clarke Kaplan suggests, Ursa "cannot forget, nor forgive, the violence of her lover that has rendered her incapable of making generations; nor can she separate it from the transgenerational sexualized violence passed down by her foremothers," but she can move forward (119). Illustrated as a shape, Ursa's sexual subjectivity is a spiral. Ursa's "spiral-shaped" sexual subjectivity balances alienating rememory

with her desire for relation, holding space for the (im)possibility of both pain/pleasure and past/future. Opening a "spiral-shaped" subjectivity for Ursa embraces how her subjectivity is as possible as it is impossible.

Optimistically, Ursa's ambivalence unparalyzes Corregidora('s) women's impossible circular entrapment/traumatic rememory and deploys her familial inheritance generatively as education. In the final scene, Ursa falls into the same sexual position as her Great Gram, even questioning the degree to which "what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, [was] any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other" (Jones 176). Ursa acknowledges her foremothers' lives reflected in her own and chooses to pave a new path for herself. Recalling her family's legacy of trauma, here, appears to be a generative exercise, not just a deterministically painful one. Thinking through trauma's legacy allows Ursa to evaluate the relationality between her and Mutt: was it "any worse" than the violences of the past? Despite the pain of "traumatic rememory," Ursa *refuses* to forget as much as she refuses rememory's determinism; "To forget, Jones seems to suggest, would require effacing how their own lives continue to be shaped by racism and patriarchy" (S. Kaplan 129). It is a liberated rememory, enabling a subjectivity where the past informs the future and alienation informs one's approach to relation. Ursa draws out a sexuality of her own, between linearity and circularity. Imagining the shape of Ursa's found sexual subjectivity as a spiral embodies embracing a necessary ambivalence, balancing pain/pleasure and past/future. Finding a future, Ursa cannot entirely abandon the past. The spiral shape paves a future yet is guided by the past, allowing for growth amid contraction – expansion among introspection.

Corregidora ends with a new beginning for Ursa. For most of the novel, Ursa's subjectivity dwells in paradox, displaying instead the violence, fractured subjectivity, and

suppressed hysteria of insoluble contradictions. Jones does not offer *Corregidora* as an example of living in critical ambivalence or instruction on how to sustain this critical ambivalence. Instead, the novel attests to the fraught journey black women, burdened with generational trauma, take to get to a place of critical ambivalence, or more fittingly, hysteria *unleashed.* By arriving at a critical ambivalence at the end of Ursa's narrative arc, Jones directs readers to imagine futurity amid return.

Ursa's futurity amid return - her spiral shape - illustrates a tenable ambivalence for dealing with the traumatic legacy of slavery. A prompting similar to Alice Walker's Meridian, Gayl Jones writes Ursa's narrative arc investigating a question posed to black women everywhere and best asked by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*: "it was not a story to pass on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 323). Morrison's famous double-entendre cuts right to the essential paradox of trauma's legacy. We cannot remember as much as we cannot forget; we must remember as much as we must forget. Navigating this issue is a tumultuous oscillation between the two sides. Yet, Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* argues the urgency of settling in between. (Im)Possibly, Jones's finale captures how Ursa both cannot and must, with hope. Achieving (im)possibility, Ursa repositions her black female subjectivity. Contradiction is no longer crushing; it is an *unleashed* ability to embrace ambivalence.

Synthesis

Despite the alienation that pervades both texts, both *Meridian* and *Corregidora* resist foreclosure in the end. Walker and Jones both write endings that are energized with a sense of futurity. The struggles of paradox burden Meridian and Ursa throughout their narratives, but Walker and Jones devote the characters' final moments to fixing their gaze forward, inviting readers to imagine possibility and relationality for these characters. As Meridian says farewell to

Truman for the final time, ambiguity structures her departure. Meridian, who is "always alone," ventures off "as if hurrying to catch up with someone" (Walker 242). Will she make it in time for that day the lonely people of the world "gather at the river" in perfect communion? Once *Corregidora* finally cracks open a "spiral-shaped" sexual subjectivity for Ursa, what relational capacity can the protagonist muster now? Purposefully, the authors never answer. For the subjectivities of their main characters, both *Meridian* and *Corregidora* conclude with an implied ellipse, submitting that opening the ability to imagine possibility (amid impossibility) *is* the point.

Alan Nadel asserts that Walker's *Meridian* poses an issue "of reconciling the individual and tradition, which means both finding a tradition and breaking with one" (54). Nadel states it plainly - the resulting conceptual conflict is a "problem" of "impossibility" (53-54). How does one balance community care with care for the self? How could one choose between family legacy and personal futurity? The roles black women are given - community caretaker and carrier of traumatic legacy - portend alienation on either side of this decision. It is an impossible choice. In the end, Walker and Jones's novels do not capitulate to disillusion or choice. Instead, they relish this "impossibility," leaving questions open instead of foreclosing ambivalence with the given options. The answer they do provide embraces a multiplicity of meanings. For Meridian and Ursa both, theirs "is not a story to pass on" in every sense of the phrase.

Chapter 3: (Im)Possibility Through Paradox

Introduction

Thinking through the bipartite demands of a "subjectivity that is at once of immanence and of transcendence," Kevin Quashie wonders, "I am struck, always, by the repetition of self-centeredness as an essential component of black female relationality" (76, 73). Quashie goes on to list examples of such an "audacious subject position" "from Lucille Clifton's invitational untitled poem that begins 'come celebrate with me' to June Jordan's closing line 'we are the ones we have been waiting for'... " (73). Admittedly, I read Quashie's list expecting to see a quote by Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, or Alice Walker in the mix. While these authors' names never appear, their omission only further proves Quashie point: self-centeredness at the heart of black female relationality is as customary as it is distinctive. While the fiction writers of this project could easily be added to Quashie's roster, as could many of their characters. Namely, Feather Mae from Walker's *Meridian* and Janie from Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* achieve an audacious subjectivity that equally embraces impossibility and possibility and (im)possibly configures a subjectivity that is both self-centered and relational. Alice Walker, through Feather Mae, and Zora Neale Hurston, through Janie, offer exemplars of the practice of critical ambivalence.

Case Study 1: Feather Mae

Counter-Discourse Rooted in the Body

In Alice Walker's novel *Meridian*, Feather Mae is Meridian's great-grandmother on her father's side. Feather Mae is "a woman… of some slight and harmless madness," who ran "very hot" in temper and fought fiercely to protect the "Sacred Serpent mound" - an Indigenous

American burial ground (Walker 50-51). Meridian never meets this ancestor in life, but Feather Mae's legacy leaves a hefty imprint on the lives of her descendants.

By all accounts, Feather Mae was a formidable woman. Hers was a self-authorized feminine subjectivity. According to legend, Feather Mae independently blossoms into her womanhood, a maturation catalyzed by a rootedness in the natural landscape of the Sacred Serpent mound. The Sacred Serpent is a patch of land that was given to Meridian's great-grandfather after the Civil War. The land was "too rocky for plowing" and "too hilly to be easy to sell," but the difficult terrain served a more spiritual purpose long ago (Walker 48). The Sacred Serpent was a Cherokee burial site before it fell into the hands of Meridian's kinfolk, and its spiritual resonance resounds throughout the lineage of its new owners. In an act of solidarity, Meridian's father eventually sells the land back into the hands of Cherokee tribe member Walter Longknife (who eventually sells it back to Meridian's father), and Meridian's great-grandmother Feather Mae, who witnesses the family's acquisition of the property, sensually connects to the spiritual knowledges embedded in the land.

> She had liked to go there, Feather Mae had, and sit on the Serpent's back, her long legs dangling while she sucked on a weed stem. She was becoming a woman… Meridian's great-grandmother dreamed, with the sun across her legs and her black, moon-bright face open to the view (Walker 51).

Walker describes Feather Mae coming into her adult female subjectivity but interrupts her description with an urgent clarification: "She was becoming a woman —this was before she married Meridian's insatiable great-grandfather—and would soon be married, soon be expecting, soon be like her own mother…" (51). Crucially, Feather Mae's blossoming occurs irrespective of Feather Mae's partaking in the gendered institutions of marriage and motherhood. Instead, what

she “dreamed” prompts and defines her maturity. Walker’s deployment of dreaming for Feather Mae is reminiscent of Hurston’s dreaming framework in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Here, too, desires define gendered subjectivity, and what a woman can dream constructs her reality more than social constraints. Before marriage and children, dreams make the woman.

Becoming a woman on the Serpent's back, Feather Mae’s body takes cues from the landscape. Nature seems to charge Feather Mae’s body which then inspires her dreaming. “[W]ith the sun across her legs and her black” face now glowing “moon-bright,” Feather Mae absorbs the natural resources around her to initiate a transformation. The Serpent’s coiled tail pit is the epicenter of this natural force. There, Feather Mae feels transformation most acutely, for “[w]hen she stood in the center of the pit, with the sun blazing down directly over her, something extraordinary happened to her” (Walker 51).

> She felt as if she had stepped into another world, into a different kind of air. The green walls began to spin, and her feeling rose to such a high pitch the next thing she knew she was getting up off the ground. She knew she had fainted but she felt neither weakened nor ill. She felt renewed, as from some strange spiritual intoxication. Her blood made warm explosions through her body, and her eyelids stung and tingled (Walker 51).

Alan Nadel contends that Meridian’s characterization evinces Walker’s use of “*Écriture féminine*” - “writing located in and authorized by fundamental female experience” (60). Walker’s style, in this regard, certainly extends to Feather Mae as well. In the depth of the Serpent's coil, Feather Mae’s “body is the site where the political and the aesthetic interpret the material” (qtd. in Nadel 60). Taking input from the natural “material” surrounding her, Feather Mae offers an “interpretation” deeply rooted in sensory feeling. When Feather Mae faints, Walker is quick to explain how Feather Mae’s body uniquely and unexpectedly interprets the fall. She faints but not

out of feeling "weakened nor ill"; quite the opposite, her fall is a symptom of an overwhelming feeling of renewal. As Walker grounds Feather Mae's tale in the character's body, she fulfills the promise of *Écriture féminine* as Ann Rosalind Jones prescribes: "to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse seems possible: to write from the body is to recreate the world" (252). Just as Feather Mae assigns new meaning to fainting, the world is made anew. Walker suggests that Feather Mae's body guides her toward meaning so subversive - so saturated in her signature "slight madness" - that embracing her sensations means "stepp[ing] into another world, into a different air." Writing authorized by Feather Mae's body "becoming a woman," as Rosalind Jones anticipates, allows Feather Mae to "recreate the world."

In this new world, Feather Mae reforms spiritual institutions for herself. Feather Mae authoritatively takes up the ethos of "Écriture féminine" to suggest that bodily experience and epistemology are inextricably tied. Her experience inside the Serpent's coil is at the same time rooted in sensuality and concerned with spirituality. Feather Mae's body faints out of "some strange spiritual intoxication." Indeed, the sensation is as much spiritual as it is erotic. The spiritual force of the Serpant's coil initiates Feather Mae's blood to make "warm explosions through her body" as "her eyelids stung and tingled." The two aspects of experience - body and spirit - exist in symbiosis, each one authorizing the other. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise when "[l]ater, Feather Mae renounced all religion that was not based on the experience of physical ecstasy" (Walker 51). Rejecting established religious custom was "shocking [to] her Baptist church and its unsympathetic congregation," but the move perfectly reflects Feather Mae's audacious endeavor toward a sensuality-authorized counter-discourse of spirituality (Walker 51). Disaligning her beliefs with the customs of her Baptist church, Feather Mae brings

into question "the validity of the dominant discourse's rules and regulations" about faith and "aims at reconstructing a counter-hegemonic discourse" (Gheytasi and Hanif 176). Feather Mae resists cultural and community pressures to redefine spirituality using her own definitions.

A Case for Sainthood

Grounding her newfound faith in "physical ecstasy," Feather Mae authorizes a new meaning of sainthood. Reading saintliness in Meridian through an ecofeminist lens, Charlotte Zoe Walker posits that "In traditional lives of the Saints, and in literary versions of them… the Saint seems to be inspired, not only by a transcendent spirituality, but also by reading the divine in the book of nature" (54-55). Having spiritually ascended "to such a high pitch" in the basin of the Serpent Mound, Feather Mae takes inspiration from both "transcendent spirituality" and "the divine book of nature." Walker writes, "near the end of her life she loved walking nude about her yard and worshiped only the sun" (51). Nature as a divine source of inspiration is a mission Feather Mae takes quite literally. A feeling of transcendence and nature seem to be the solitary factors of Feather Mae's counter-normative religion. However, the "traditional lives of the Saints" demand more than using nature as a source of spirituality.

Saints must embody an idealized morality, and they must be dead. Dealing with the second criterion, a cursory reading would agree that Feather Mae fits the bill. *Meridian* takes place three generations away from Feather Mae's life. In the narrative, she is dead but remembered. In fact, Feather Mae's audacious, erotic subjectivity "becomes Meridian's model for resistance" (Gheytasi and Hanif 178). Like a religious idol, Feather Mae serves as Meridian's inspiration and example for emulation. However, "Feather Mae is evoked as a very young woman," not merely as a memory (Zoe Walker 48). Walker emphasizes her vitality, as opposed to her stagnancy as a figure of the past. Meridian wrestles with this uncannily persistent life force

as she explains, “Her father said the Indians had constructed the coil in the Serpent’s tail in order to give the living a sensation similar to that of dying: The body seemed to drop away, and only the spirit lived, set free in the world. But she was not convinced” (Walker 53). Meridian’s sensation in the Serpent coil tells her otherwise: “It seemed to her that it was a way the living sought to expand the consciousness of being alive, there where the ground about them was filled with the dead” (Walker 53). Despite her literal death and generations-past placement in the chronology of the novel, Feather Mae, for her connection with the Serpent mound, evokes immediacy and emphasizes *living*. Following Meridian’s feeling more alive among the dead, Walker continues, “It was a possibility they discussed, alone in the fields” (Walker 53). A possibility, Walker writes, of death accentuating life. The debate between Meridian and her father - whether the Serpent coil evokes a feeling of dying or of being more alive - likely holds equal merit on both sides. Similarly, Feather Mae, all about life and the authority of sensual feeling, is indeed dead and exists in memory. However, the effect of the Serpent mound, corporealized in Feather Mae, unsettles the mutual exclusivity of life and death. Feather Mae embodies, instead, an ambivalent (im)possibility in the face of death. For the way she represents vitality (and more to the point, un-absolute death), Feather Mae augments the meaning of a saintly death.

As for the saintly criteria of idealized morality, Feather Mae cedes no ground to compromise in living out her erotic spirituality. By the end of her life, Feather Mae is perfectly aligned with her convictions. Taking things to the extreme, she walks around “nude about her yard and worshiped only the sun.” No sneers from her former Baptist congregation nor social etiquette concerning outdoor nudity could stop the old woman at this point. Feather Mae’s audacious defiance could be explained through Audre Lorde’s definition of “the erotic,” from her

famous essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” In touch with that “deeply female and spiritual” power, Lorde testifies, “I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me” (58). Feather Mae’s erotic connection forged in the Serpent’s coil progressively makes her unwilling to accept anything less than the “fullness of this [erotic] depth of feeling and recognizing its power” (Lorde 54). Charged by the resources of that rooted place, Meridian’s great-grandmother “dreamed,” and that dream becomes a nonnegotiable standard for living life.

Some readings are not as optimistic about the discursive possibility Feather Mae endeavors to embody. Sampada Chavan posits that Feather Mae’s dreamy description of “becoming a woman” on the Serpent mound “is evocative of a naive woman who has spent her youth drowning herself in her surroundings to escape her inevitable future of marriage and motherhood” (Chavan 192). Walker does interrupt describing Feather Mae’s dreaming for what sounds a lot like a reality check: “—this was before she married Meridian’s insatiable great-grandfather—and would soon be married, soon be expecting, soon be like her own mother, a strong silent woman who seemed always to be washing or ironing or cooking or rousing her family from naps to go back to work in the fields” (52). Chavan contends that the possibilities Feather Mae dreams are undercut and rendered impossible by her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Ultimately, Feather Mae does fall in line with the tradition of women “who have sacrificed their own wishes in order to dedicate themselves to the roles of wife and mother assigned to them by patriarchy” (Chaven 190). Chavan’s analysis is correct, for all her dreaming, Feather Mae does not break out of her socially prescribed roles. However, neither her marriage nor her motherhood supersedes her legacy. Those are not the parts of Feather Mae that live on and continue to inspire.

A Foremother of Relation

Despite the ways she eventually conformed to patriarchal norms, Feather Mae leaves a legacy centered on her identity as an individual. Feather Mae's subjectivity "as a one" is so prominent in her memory that it rings through time. Separated from Feather Mae's life by three generations, Meridian is caught in the rapture of her great-grandmother's self-centered immanence. Having traveled to the depths of the Sacred Serpent herself, Meridian "had contact with no other living thing; instead she was surrounded by the dead. At first this frightened her, being so utterly small, encircled by ancient silent walls filled with bones, alone in a place not meant for her. But she remembered Feather Mae and stood patiently, willing her fear away. And it had happened to her" (Walker 54). The memory of Feather Mae emboldens Meridian out of fear and prompts her to have her very own erotic encounter in nature. First, Meridian encounters Feather Mae's audacious and enduring individual subjectivity, and "[t]hen the outward flow, the rush of images, returned to the center of the pit where she stood, and what had left her at its going was returned. When she came back to her body—and she felt sure she had left it—her eyes were stretched wide open, and they were dry, because she found herself staring directly into the sun" (Walker 54). By spiritual influence, Feather Mae - specifically her legacy as a self-authorized woman - orients Meridian toward a black female subjectivity similar to her own. Feather Mae invites Meridian to partake in the sublimity of the sun - Feather Mae's most holy object of erotic worship. It is an offer to come into contact with Meridian's erotic nature - to instantiate, boldly, the possibility of her own subjectivity.

Feather Mae's invitation to Meridian is a reminder that "oneness is a relation" (Quashie 73). Applying Kevin Quashie's philosophy of black female relationality reveals the mechanics and profundity of Feather Mae's (im)possible subjectivity and relation. The act of transforming

Meridian and filling her eyes with the sun showcases "that transcendent human subjectivity of relation" (Quashie 69). An exemplar of "black female oneness, a philosophy of audaciousness," Feather Mae's act is two-fold (Quashie 69). The bold immanence of her own erotic subjectivity harkens to Meridian directly, gesturing at Feather Mae's perpetual openness to relation, even after death. Similarly for the inverse, the transcendence of Feather Mae's I-Thou orientation endeavors to instantiate the "fullness" of Meridian's life, enabling Meridian to encounter herself as a "one" erotically. In the case of Feather Mae, as Quashie would put it, "It is a subjectivity that is at once of immanence and of transcendence" (76).

In and through her "audacious inhabitances of self as immanence," Feather Mae takes up the call to relation in order to bring Meridian into a similarly audacious self-centered subjectivity (Quashie 73). Ultimately though, Feather Mae's efforts are unsuccessful; Meridian's moment of contact in the Serpent's coil is not enduringly transformative like her ancestor's was. Plagued by self-sacrifice, Meridian flounders in the praxis of relationality all the way through her narrative arc. Indeed, after the government seizes the Serpent mound to create a public park (prohibiting the admission of black tourists, of course), Meridian loses contact with the source of erotic inspiration buried in the land. Even "[w]hen blacks were finally allowed into Sacred Serpent Park, long after her father's crops had been trampled into dust, she returned one afternoon and tried in vain to relive her earlier ecstasy and exaltation" (Walker 54). The loss parables the role social subjectivity plays in access to the erotic. The scene demonstrates the injurious social mechanism of racism; as the government expropriates the family's land, the injury is compounded by the irony of their being locked out of the Serpent Park's public use as black citizens. Once Meridian returns back to the site after so many years and so much injury, she observes a palpable change in the atmosphere of the once sacred space: "there were people

shouting and laughing as they slid down the sides of the great Serpent's coil. Others stood glumly by, attempting to study the meaning of what had already and forever been lost" (Walker 54). Racism bulldozes the land and its spiritual meaning, and Meridian cannot unearth the land's/Feather Mae's erotic inspiration beyond the setting of the ancient, uncorrupted space. This marks the difference between Feather Mae and Meridian. Unlike her ancestor, after her initial encounter, Meridian does not carry the erotically charged, self-centered subjectivity where she ventures outside of the Serpent mound. Essentially, an heirloom power lies inside the Serpent mound. As Chavan notes, "This genealogically inherited quality makes Meridian wish to be spiritually one with nature, but an accidental pregnancy soon burdens her with the societal demands of motherhood" (192). For Chavan, in addition to the strain racism places on the spirituality of the Serpent mound, the patriarchal demands foisted upon Meridian in motherhood obliterate her abilities to sustain the erotic connection and subjectivity that the heirloom landscape inspires. While this pressure may negatively impact Meridian's sense of individual subjectivity, motherhood works differently for Feather Mae. Her unique approach to motherhood may explain how she can so masterfully incorporate erotic encounters into her lifestyle and answer why her audacious subjectivity reverberates in the Serpent's coil as loudly as the spiritual power that was there before her.

Feather Mae's memory is an example of emulation to Meridian, guiding her to encounter a spiritual and erotic awakening. While Feather Mae cannot *force* an erotic transformation onto her great-granddaughter, she can "mother." Audre Lorde endows "mothering" with a specific relational connotation in her essay "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" (72-80). Borrowing Lydon K Gill's analysis of Audre Lorde's theory of "mothering," "we come to recognize Lorde's concept of 'mothering' as a paradigm through which to describe our

relationship (when we are at our best) to each other as human beings, our relationship to ourselves, and perhaps our relationship to the living, breathing natural world through which we move" (qtd. in Quashie 72). Lorde's configuration of motherhood does not portend a loss or degradation of the self. Indeed, Lorde's relational mothering "is a praxis that informs, sustains, and materializes a woman's capacity to be engaged in (her own) becoming" (Quashie 72). Given the possibilities Lorde proffers around the relation of motherhood, I would not be so quick to dismiss Feather Mae's eventual marriage and motherhood as some painful and "inevitable" acquiescence to gender roles "assigned to [her] by patriarchy" (Chavan 192). The self-centered relationality Feather Mae embodies, when directed toward guiding her descendants, more so aligns with Lorde's conception of motherhood. Her connection with her kin embedded in the Serpent Mound landscape reifies the oneness of her being as much as it affirms the integrity of theirs.

Motherhood and marriage are relations. Of course, patriarchy and other oppressive social constructs often warp these practices into mechanisms of repression for women. Feather Mae is not exempt from this pressure, but she configures a way to deploy her traditional, feminine roles toward a liberatory end. Indeed, the often repressive gendered role of "wife," for Feather Mae "turns into a kind of subjectivity whose power can control even her husband" (Gheytasi and Hanif 178). When Meridian's great-grandfather and Feather Mae's "insatiable" husband "wanted to flatten his part of the burial mound as well and scatter the fragmented bones of the Indians to the winds," Feather Mae protests: "It may not mean anything to you to plant food over other folks' bones…but if you do you needn't expect me to eat another mouthful in your house!" (Walker 50-51). Feather Mae's protest is more than an effort "to save the snake" for its natural landscape; her approach attempts to preserve its *meaning*. Interestingly, Feather Mae is not

concerned with convincing her husband of the meaning she sees in the snake. She easily accepts that "It may not mean anything" to him, but his lack of understanding does not lessen her ability to comprehend its meaning or perceive its importance. Feather Mae makes legible a counter-discourse for the Serpent mound. To her, and to all those her spirit touches, the landscape means more than a plot for commercial agriculture or a public park for manifesting the nation's racial hierarchy. Instead, she is interested in asserting the fullness and value of alternative meaning.

For her descendants, Feather Mae makes legible and keeps sacred counter-discourses proffered by marginalized subjects. Giving birth to alternative sight, "the legends of Feather Mae enable [Meridian] to present the blacks and the Natives as victims of the same hegemonic process" (Gheytasi and Hanif 178). Feather Mae, a foremother of relation, makes legible the shared struggle of Indigenous and black Americans for Meridian and her father. Clarifying the connection between these two communities lays foundations for a relational disposition. Indigenous Americans, like any marginalized group, are no longer the "Other" as normative discourse would prescribe. Feather Mae's descendants can hold an empathetic space for different people, no longer constructing identities purely through antithesis, now appreciating their "fullness of life" as a "Thou" to their "I" (Quashie 73). For instance, an urgent compassion overtakes Meridian's father, who "shared the peculiar madness of" his audacious ancestor (Walker 53). He pleads with his wife, "The Indians were living right here, in Georgia, they had a town, an alphabet, a newspaper. They were going about their business, enjoying life ... doesn't this *say* anything to you?" (Walker 16, my emphasis). To Meridian's father, evidence of Native Americans' "fullness of life" creates a perspective-shattering contrast with normative discourse's depiction of Native Americans as sub-human stereotypes. This evidence may not "*say* anything"

to his wife, but Feather Mae's legacy makes the alternative meaning of this information entirely legible to Meridian's father. He concludes, "It was a life, ruled by its own spirits" (Walker 16). There, the counter-discourse is written. Racial identity, Christian religion, and socioeconomic status may "rule" life in *his* culture, but reading counterdiscourse of a different culture (approached as a "Thou," not as an "other") reveals that there exist more possibilities for the meaning of life.

Feather Mae's influence works through the memory of her self-authorized subjectivity, the counter-discourse she opens up, the material landscape of the Sacred Serpent, and her relational marriage/motherhood. For a woman "whose access to ideological oneness is rendered impossible in the logics of antiblackness and patriarchy," her audacious inhabitance of self as immanence generates liberation amid oppression. Feather Mae embodies a realized subjectivity of ambivalent (im)possibility (Quashie 68). Fully and equally, Feather Mae epitomizes what it means to be self-centered and relational; liberated and constrained; culturally aware and counterculturally invested; dead and full of life.

Case Study 2: Janie

Relation of "Marriage!" as a Worthy Discourse

The final case study of this project centers on Janie of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: the heroine of her novel and the youngest descendant of this project's first case study, Nanny. Like Feather Mae, Janie's sexual maturation happens organically. The novel's arguably most iconic scene offers a lyrical celebration of that very moment of erotic awakening:

> [Janie] was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom;

> the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (Hurston 10-11).

The passage bursts with a rhapsody that is both dynamic and enduring. Enduring, yes, as "one of the sexiest passages in American literature," but also enduring for the novel's heroine (C. Kaplan 115). The magic under the pear tree permanently changes the world of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and just like that, the romantic vision of nature solidifies for the remainder of the novel as Janie's "true drive and inspiration in a quest for love and marriage," (Hajjari et al. 36). However, Janie's episode under the pear tree does not merely mark the young protagonist's independent sexual awakening. Her "revelation" has everything to do with relation. The lyrical "panting breath of the breeze," the "dust-bearing bee sink[ing] into the sanctum of a bloom," "the ecstatic shiver of the tree," its branches "creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight" - "this was marriage!" The sight is not Janie's arousal, not the circle of life, not even sex - *marriage*! Hurston's specificity here should not be overlooked. Indeed, under the pear tree, Janie's "quest is set" for the rest of the novel; but, to interpret the gravity of this foundational scene as proclaiming all of "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* [as] the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm" grossly misconstrues Hurston's engagement with eroticism, relation, and subjectivity of the one (C. Kaplan 115). The meaning of marriage as a social construct is far more complex than that. As Kevin Quashie contests, marriage, "for all its modern trappings, is really a social rendering of ideas about being, relationality, and oneness" (69). In this case, the information detailed in the sub-pear tree scene is *Janie's* rendering. The sub-pear tree vision outlines what

"marriage!" means for Janie specifically - a thoroughly naturalistic and erotic definition that contrasts normative meanings and meanings foisted upon her by Nanny.

Their Eyes Were Watching God has long been chastised by literary critics and black feminist scholars alike for its overwhelming attention to marriage. Take, for example, Jennifer Jordan's indictment echoing many of the sentiments thrown at the book during the second-wave feminist movement and black women's literary renaissance of the late 20th century: "[Janie] never defines herself outside the scope of her marital or romantic involvements and, despite her sincere relationship with her friend Pheoby, fails to achieve a communal identification with the black women around her or with the black community as a whole" (108). In a way, this project does not argue with Jordan's claim that "Hurston does not give Janie a fully fleshed-out character independent of her role as lover" (114). Indeed, the novel tells Janie's life story in terms of her relations. Instead of condemning, though, this analysis celebrates Hurston's choice to attend so intimately to romance and sex, both being practices of relation. It is funny, really, that Jordan censures Hurston for such a move. Many of the issues plaguing black women's subjectivity have everything to do with their troubled access to "the discursive landscape of marriage" (Quashie 69). Indeed, this particular issue for black women is age-old; as Ann duCille attests, "marriage and family become peculiar institutions under two hundred and fifty years of chattel slavery" ("Marriage, Family"). Black women face unique challenges in the practice of relation (marriage, sexual fulfillment). Thus, taking on marriage and sexual fulfillment to explore a black female character's subjectivity is no superficial assignment. These issues of relation speak right to the meaning of what it means to be "a one in and through black femaleness" (Quashie 87).

Janie in Relation

The novel is as much about Janie's self-actualization as much as it is about her romances. Hurston leans on this ambivalence, positing the two issues are not so easily untangled. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* centers the constraints of relation in contact with black female subjectivity. Hurston leans into this ambivalence, positing the two issues - relation and oneness - are not so easily untangled. Thus, I (for different reasons that her book argues) agree with duCille's vision to "read this not as a failure in Hurston's fiction, as some critics do, but as its force" (121). The same "force" that makes Hurston's novel so poignant, drives its protagonist's journey throughout the novel. In the middle of the narrative, Janie explains the motives of her mission plainly: "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her" (Hurston 85). Hurston's italics highlight the operative word. *People* carry with them unique perspectives, agency, and will. Compare these characteristics to the opposite Hurston provides in the next line: "But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*" (85). The path toward people and the path chasing things take entirely different shapes. For one, *people* are sought out by another person; *things* are pursued by a "cur dog" whipped into action. Hurston's analogy mirrors Quashie's formulation of relationality as it pertains to black women's uniquely troubled subjectivity. Historically cast outside the discursive frame of what it means to be human, capable, and worthy, black women engaged in an *I-Thou* orientation invite a reciprocal recognition of humanity; self-centered subjectivity paired with a capacity for genuine relationality deconstruct "the logics that would erase black femaleness from [the] pursuit" of "a human ideal" (Quashie 73). Janie's thinking reflects this doubling effect. The pursuit of *people* instantiates personhood. People are to person as things are to animal: Hurston's succinct analogy is a striking synopsis of the humanity at stake in *I-Thou* relationality. Her phrasing also stealthily

spotlights the unique imperative for black women. Outside of relation, one is "whipped like a cur dog." Hurston deploys the image of the beaten working dog - a beast of burden, an alternative iteration of Nanny's "de mule of de world" (14). With an all too familiar metaphor for black women's oppressed subjectivity, Hurston shifts black women to the center of her *I-Thou* analogy. Generalizing in her discussion of all "people," Hurston's analysis stresses the humanity at stake for all those called to relation but rearranges the crowd, making black women's subjectivity the central-most example.

Black women's subjectivity moving from margin to center offers a lens to read perhaps the novel's most obscure metaphor. Soon after Janie talks of her mission to meet people, her lyricism becomes more opaque. Hurston writes,

> She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait. When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine (86).

This metaphor is seldom approached in criticism, but having thought through Hurston's allegiance to conceptualizing Janie's journey through relationality, provides a possible explanation. Janie's "jewel"/"mud-ball" is a manifestation of what Ann duCille might call "a black feminine ego" (duCille 4). It is Janie's audacious insistence on this innate, human,

beautiful center of the self that plants her deeply in inhabiting the "self as immanence" (Quashie 73). All the more compelling, Janie envisions the same glittering immanence existing in everyone around her. She is eager to shine and to be shone upon. Through the mud, through being forced to "the market-place" where "she had been set" to sell (a likely reference to slavery, where Spillers contends "the marketplace of the flesh" indelibly stained black women's subjectivity), Janie holds, with conviction, "not just her capacity to meet others but the imperative to meet herself" (Spillers 155; Quashie 80). This is relationality. This is Quashie's "black female audacity" (81).

The issue for many is Hurston's insistence on the "fullness of life," as Buber would say, of both the person seeking and the *people* sought after. The logic that motivates Janie's journey emphasizes the pursuit of relation as a practice of restoring humanity. Restoration of one's humanity entails first becoming and then affirming again and again. That first step - becoming - is ever an issue for black women subjects especially. Quashie emphasizes as much stating, "Relation is the capacity of unfurling, of *becoming* more and more in/through the tension with another" (73, my emphasis). Hurston does not let up on that last part. The tension of becoming, the push and pull between the will of one and the will of another, necessarily shapes the trajectory of a person's journey. Consequently, this text by Hurston is notoriously difficult to read as an enactment of Janie's liberation. Critics Mary Helen Washington and Anna duCille concur that, for its many issues, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can hardly be read as an "expression of female power" (qtd. in duCille 121). The narrative oscillates, in many ways, between realized subjectivity and subjection, but perhaps that ambivalence aptly captures the negotiation inherent to relation. Recall, "relation is not ever perfect mutuality but the capacity of the one to be oriented toward more and more mutuality" (Quashie 81). The "*people*" Janie chases shape her

"*becoming*" as much as her individual desire and will - a necessary caveat for those called to relation.

Janie's relationship with Vergible Wood a.k.a Tea Cake, the novel's romantic hero and "the realization of Janie's youthful romantic vision of the marriage of the blossom and the bee," exemplifies the flexible mutuality of relation most directly (Hajjari et al. 46). Although the novel emphatically "*protects* Tea Cake from being viewed as an unsympathetic character," this project has no such agenda. Reviewing just the facts of his relationship with Janie (not the tilt with which Janie describes it), Tea Cake's flaws are abundantly evident. Tea Cake is a far from perfect partner: he willingly participated in a flirtatious affair with Nunkie (a child); he beat Janie (like Nanny and Jody before him) as a performance of ownership for the other inhabitants of the Muck; he took her emergency savings without asking (spending it to throw a big party to which he failed to invite her); and, to top it off, he gambled with the remainder of her funds (to try to make up for the party's cost). Nevertheless, Janie sees something special in Tea Cake - something, evidently, relational. Maria Tai Wolff points out that Tea Cake stands out from Janie's other relationships because, instead of "telling her what she should be," he "tells her only what she is capable of becoming"; seeing her potential, Tea Cakes says "... you got good meat on yo' head. You'll learn" (Wolff 31, Hurston 92). Wolff's further analysis is more suggestive: "It seems that Tea Cake is not part of the outside world, but part of [Janie's] own, personal being" (Wolff 31). The difference and profundity of Janie's relationship with Tea Cake lie in what effect Tea Cake has on Janie's selfhood. The effect prompts the provocative declaration that punctuates the end of Chapter 12: "He drifted off into sleep and Janie looked down on him and felt a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (122). (Im)Possibily, her soul emerges from its crouched cave, and, yet, she is crushed. Some interpret Tea Cake's impact on

Janie's selfhood liberally: "He takes her out of the stagnating conventionality and deadening patriarchy, the two oppressive forces that held the (African American) women in place and subjected them to oblivious stillness," (Harjjari 47). However, given their relationship's ambivalence, Janie's absolute liberation through Tea Cake is difficult to argue. Instead, the brilliance of their relationship lies within its stunning capacity for relation. Tea Cake approaches Janie - unlike anyone before - as a *Thou*. And Janie, within that newly opened space, can "crawl out of her hiding space" - becoming. "[P]erfect mutuality" is never the assignment of relation (Quashie 81). But, in relation as a practice of progressive becoming, Janie and Tea Cake excel.

Janie as a One

Relationality is a practice, not a state of being. Janie and Tea Cake's miraculous pairing would not have been possible had Janie, alone, not first conceived of herself as a "being of relationality" (Quashie 80). Janie's persistent openness to relation informs how she takes to all manner of life - romantic partnerships and more.

In the days before Tea Cake, Janie's open and hungry pursuit of relation is itself a source of revelation. At the genesis of Janie's "lifelong romantic mission" under the pear tree, Hurston notes the effect of Janie's revelation that is both relational and, in the tradition of Audre Lorde's classic theory of the erotic (Hajjari et al. 42). Leaving the pear tree, Janie finds the entire world varnished with new meaning; everywhere she looks, "[s]he was seeking confirmation of the voice and vision, and everywhere she found and acknowledged answers" (Hurston11). In Janie's adulthood, she provides a key detail of her "beglamored" outlook; a misogynistic comment from her second husband Joe Starks prompts the retort "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business…" (Hurston 70). That "inside business" - knowledges "God" entrusts to women - is written in the natural world but seen only through the

eyes of people like Janie - people who have seen the erotic vision and been changed for it, or, to use Janie's words, "[gone] tuh God" and "[found] out about livin' fuh theyselves" (Hurston 183). Much critical thought on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* charts Hurston's conflation of God and nature. Connecting these two lines about Janie's augmented perspective, however, offers insight into how Hurston characterizes this esoteric knowledge as both divinely attached and distinctly feminine. Janie accesses a divine "voice and vision… everywhere" because God "talks His inside business" with "us womenfolk" specifically. Hurston's conceptualization, then, is a perfect alliance for Lorde's calculation of "the erotic" - that ineffable "resource" rooted "in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (53).

Lorde's erotic, so evidently present for Janie, suggests a deep intimacy with the self. Lorde's erotic is "self-affirming"; in touch with it, "we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" having (57). Such a motivation easily explains why the heft of Hurston's plot comes from Janie's relative satisfaction in her relationships. Indeed, "Janie never does acquire a voice" throughout the novel, "but had one, in fact, all along" (C. Kaplan 118). Janie *knows* what she wants from the start, from that moment of erotic instantiation under the pear tree. Her marriages - Hurston's chosen "life-pursuits" for Janie - work or fail because they either fit or do not fit, respectively, a pre-established vision. Tea Cake, Joe, and Logan's fates rest in their ability to acknowledge and complement the fullness of Janie's "capacity" to feel and relate. Janie's demand for recognition of her own "fullness" in relation is key. The move is emblematic of the self-centeredness essential to black female relationality (Quashie 74).

Janie's self-centered subjectivity composes the backbone of relation, to be sure. But, we should pause to appreciate the audaciousness of such a position. Janie, at the end of the day, is

not “willing to accept” “resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial” (Lorde 58). Her unique “erotic guide” is the compass of Janie’s pursuit of relationality (Lorde 58). It serves as a powerful guide from relationship to relationship, but also (and most astonishingly) it casts a new meaning on the whole of the environment she occupies and moves through. The erotic guides internal knowledge as well as affects external, lived experience. Hurston catalogs this effect immediately, in the same scene as Janie’s sub-pear tree revelation. Immediately following the blossoms and bees, “through pollinated air [Janie] saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes” (Hurston 11). Both, “his rags *and* her eyes” - not “his rags *in* her eyes” - transform. Manifestly, the declaration of the novel’s opening paragraph holds up: The dream (in the eyes) is the truth (the external effect) (Hurston 11).

Janie’s Affective Power

Criticism has a tendency to dismiss Janie’s romantic point of view as utterly quixotic and resultingly untrue. Lille P. Howard writes that Janie’s perspective of “romanticism” needs “tempering… with some much-needed realism” (Howard 413). Barbara Smith cites Hurston’s dubious reputation noting that the writer “can fairly be described as individualistic and conservative” with regard to racial politics (26). Surely, a cursory reading of Janie’s easy individual-belief-prompts-worldly-effect falls in line with accusations of conservative individualism. While this project does not endeavor to defend the reliability of Janie’s narration, it does assert that the *truth* undercutting her words should not be so readily overlooked. Here, the project takes sincerely Janie’s purported effect on her environment. Doing so does not promote

using Janie's erotic effect as a model for emulation. Instead, its capacity and limitations serve as an exemplar of a critical ambivalence for black women's subjectivity.

First, let's look more deeply into Janie's affective power. With Janie having a novel's-worth of experience under her belt, the fulfillment of her character arc is the best place to start. Because of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*'s nested story structure, her maturity is on display in the very beginning. Before Hurston introduces Janie via a narrator's visual description or Janie's own voice, she illustrates the main character through the eyes of others. After living the story about to be told, Janie returns home to Eatonville at sundown. "Seeing the woman as she was," a chorus of porch-sitters "sat in judgment" as she walks past (Hurston 2). "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty" (Hurston 2). Then, "A mood come alive. Words walking without masters" (Hurston 2). For the rest of the page, their words sound with abandon and without a named character's mastering attribution: "What she doin' coming back here in dem overhalls? Can't she find no dress to put on? - Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in? Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her…" (Hurston 2). Everything readers first learn about Janie, the porch-sitters supply through their public speculation. Hurston builds the setting of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* through the words of a peanut gallery.

In "Performance and Performativity," Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgewick ask, "When is saying something doing something?" (1). Beyond aiding the fiction writer's task of world-building, the porch-sitters' words at the novel's opening evidence a unique collision between perspective and affect. At the outset, the chorus seems merely to "describe some state of affairs": Janie's current outfit, a previous one, her wealth, et cetera (Parker and Sedgewick 3). However, Hurston takes pains to turn these descriptions into something more. The porch-sitters'

specific utterances “made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs.” This language does more than artistically illustrate the injury of mean words. The gossip *creates* something - something wholly separate from the people who spoke it. It is not just the opinion of its speaker, especially not in this instance of group-speak; wherein their utterance “walk[s] without masters.” It “accomplishes, in [its] very enunciation, an action that generates effect” (Parker and Sedgewick 3). Albeit often unfairly, gossip has the effect of *constructing* its subject’s character.

Hurston grants Janie a potent defense. As Janie passes where her audience sits, she greets them with “speech that was pleasant enough”, and “[t]hey scrambled a noisy ‘good evenin’’ and left their mouths open and their ears full of hope” (Hurston 2). Janie’s brief verbal greeting offers nothing in terms of affect. Her cordial greeting creates nothing new in the world. Yet, after she passes, “[t]he porch couldn’t talk for looking” (Hurston 2). The affective ability of Janie’s mere presence completely neuters that of the porch-sitter’s utterances. Taking the words out of their mouths, she “left their mouths setting open and their ears full of hope.” Janie’s walk works like a strong gust of wind that knocks something out of place. Just like that, Hurston displaces the scene’s affective power. Passing the porch, the ball is now in Janie’s court. In this way, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers a meditation beyond the “simple level of authorship” granted by Janie’s narration; it operates “on the more complicated level of self-authorization” (McCredie 25). Janie’s presence asserts a full, erotically charged self-authorization. Almost miraculously, Janie deposes the effect of performative utterances in the formation of her own identity by quieting porch-sitters’ still “setting open” mouths.” Also attending to their ears, Janie clears space to *input* information about her identity as well as deflect others’ output. In the same moment of quieting tongues, Janie leaves open ears and mouths. The act repositions those

previously on the offense to a posture of receptiveness. Ultimately, what this means for Janie's subjectivity sets her apart from other characters this project studies. In her affect, Janie is self-authorized, audaciously so.

What to Make of the Ending - Illustrating (im)Possibility

Still, the limits of Janie's practice of self-authorization are dubious. The story's ending tends to leave critics in anxious debate about the book's merits as a work of black feminist literature, a study of black women's subjectivity, and an argument for or against liberation. Ann duCille suggests that its "implications for Janie['s realization] are potentially lethal" (123). Jennifer Jordan asserts that "[t]he imagery of the ending of the novel connotes the very opposite of activism and involvement" (114). Lille P. Howard sees "the end result of Janie's own life proves the old woman [Nanny] to have seen clearer and farther in the wisdom of her knowledge than Janie, in her blindness, is ever able to see" (114). This project does not seek to absolve the novel totally from some of these claims. I am not arguing that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* delivers a fully liberated self-realization or possible sexual subjectivity for Janie. Instead, I question our need to conclude the novel where Hurston resists doing so.

Janie ends her narrative alone and with her adventures firmly behind her. Janie returns home to Eatonville alone following the death of her one true lover Tea Cake. In the final scene of the novel, "Hurston presents [Janie] as a woman whose life has passed, who has seized one bright moment by surrendering herself to the right man, and who will end that life commemorating that brief happiness" (Jordan 115). However, Janie's descriptions resist the totality of her isolation and the finality of her adventures. With the same breath, the woman who readily admits she is now content to "live by comparisons" preaches agentive adventure to her friend Pheobe saying "you got tuh *go* there to *know* there" (Hurston 184). Janie returns home

alone following Tea Cake's death, but somehow, Tea Cake's presence surrounds her still. Hurston writes, "then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees" (183). Evoking Tea Cake as simultaneously present and absent, "dream and truth merge for the last time in the image of Vergible (Truth) Tea Cake Woods" (duCille 123). The new, undead Tea Cake wears "the sun for a shawl," and his existence persists at the whim and power of Janie's dreaming: "Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (Hurston 183). After his death, Tea Cake, like Janie's fulfillment, is (im)possibily configured - equally possible and impossible. Tea Cake's death does not nullify Janie's ability to bask in his relation; likewise, her insisting that "of course he wasn't dead" does not negate the fact that Tea Cake *is* actually dead, and their marriage is over. For Janie's disposition, the novel's ending is not one of total disillusionment, nor does it, for its explicit isolation, typify a romantic "happily ever after." The ending lands Janie somewhere in the middle.

In truth, Hurston does not choose romance and marriage as drivers of the plot to prove the possibility of relation for black women. Neither does the book appear to argue for its opposite, impossibility. As Ann duCille reasons, "*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, then, is for me a novel as much about powerlessness as about power… It is a text as much about submission as about self-fulfillment, as much about silence as about voice" (122-123). Considering the novel's structure, William M. Ramsey contemplates that the novel is "neither an evasively nostalgic, pastoral folk romance, nor is it wholly a feminist text. It is an ambivalent and contradictory text reflecting tensions Hurston felt both in love and in her rural South" (qtd. in duCille 122-123). From its organization to its themes - ambivalence touches every part of the novel.

Hurston initiates her novel with binary opposites: masculine dreaming and feminine dreaming, symbolizing impossibility and possibility respectively. Throughout the story, the limits of logic for both sides come to the surface. By the end, Hurston does not find a resolution on one side over the other. Opposing tensions remain as Janie pulls off the improbable: "She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net" (191). This symbol of impossibility - achieved horizons - Janie gets to wear: "Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder." In her final trick, Janie yanks that pesky prescription of utter impossibility out from the world's normative discourse. Wearing the horizon like a cape, Janie champions parenthesized (im)possibility. As it drapes her shoulders, Janie embraces a mutually inclusive ambivalence toward possibility and impossibility.

Their Eyes Were Watching God centers the constraints of relation and desire in contact with black female subjectivity. The novel is as much about Janie's self-actualization as much as it is about her romances. When Hurston leans on this ambivalence, she posits the two issues are not so easily untangled. Embracing ambivalence, as Hurston argues, offers the only tenable resolution.

Synthesis

Taking (im)possibility in stride, both Janie and Feather Mae embody a self-centered subjectivity that makes "possible the transcendence of surrender and relation" (Quashie 73). Janie is perhaps a prototype for Feather Mae's relationship to self, nature, and dreaming - an unsurprising assumption considering Alice Walker's affinity for Hurston's literature and legacy[1]. Both texts seem to argue for the importance of an independent sexual maturation rooted in nature. Feather Mae takes to the Sacred Serpent like Janie takes to the pear tree, and their

[1] Alice Walker is credited with instantiating Zora Neale Hurston's place in the modern American literary canon, having "rediscovered" Hurston in the late 20th century after Hurston's name and writings fell into obscurity following her death (Mehren).

experiences in these natural landscapes directly inspire self-ascription of their subjectivities. Feather Mae "was becoming a woman" while she reclines "on the Serpent's back" just as "dust-bearing bee sink[ing] into the sanctum of a bloom" tell Janie that "this was marriage!" Uniquely attuned to the spiritually erotic script of nature, Feather Mae and Janie stand alone in their respective novels as women characters able to achieve a sexual subjectivity, especially one that is distinctly audacious, self-authorized, and entirely ambivalent.

Conclusion

Like Hortense Spillers's "Interstices," this project is not interested in "addressing the black female in her historical apprenticeship as an inferior social subject, but, rather," this project attempts to unravel black women from "the paradox of non-being" (156). Impossibility is a desperate prescription for black women's subjectivity, but it is crucial to point out. The prescriptive terms of normative discourse "are markers so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried beneath them to come clean" (Spillers, "Mama's Maybe" 65). Digging black women's subjectivity out requires attending to that which enables "impossibility." Womanist theorist Tamura Lomax contends that, for both academic scholarship and culture at large, a uniquely persistent "challenge lies in locating possibilities for divesting the discourse on black womanhood" of injury (50). Although impossibility persists, it cannot totalize critical engagement with black women's sexual subjectivity. Jennifer C. Nash highlights the consequences of a one-sided recognition in discourse. The tradition of black feminist scholarship labors valiantly to evince the violence of normative discourse for the black woman subject, but those labors risk reproducing another type of violence, "effectively rendering black female pleasures invisible and making impossible the conceptualization of black female pleasures from within black feminism" (Nash 149). To intervene in this theoretical inclination, I proffer the conceit of (im)possibility.

To address the broader aims of this project, starting at the end feels most appropriate. This entire project was inspired by Janie of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston's seminal novel has been an absolute favorite of mine since I first read it in a high school English class. Something in Hurston's illustration of Janie and her world (the world of *TEWWG* indeed is

Janie's) felt utterly unique and absolutely revelatory. Initial questions in the conception of this project endeavored to understand why. Ambivalence lay at the heart of my answers.

Meridian, *Corregidora*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrate the discursive issues plaguing black women's subjectivity in a threefold approach echoed in the three chapter themes of this paper. First, Nanny and Great Gram manifest the stain of discursive impossibility, representing its perils and its concretization in the institution of slavery. The daughters of this founding generation are the subjects of this project's second chapter. Moving out of a discursive configuration of "utter impossibility," Meridian and Ursa showcase the difficulty of the approach. They lay plain what obstacles arise when black women contest the prescription of impossibility. Together, Alice Walker and Gayl Jones prompt the familiar, impossible question facing black women at large; when "this was not a story to pass on," what choice do you have? To answer, they suggest a method for navigating the paradox; when a contradiction presents a choice between restrictive opposites, resist foreclosure. Chapter Three reads Feather Mae and Janie Stark of *Meridian* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* doing just that. Theirs is a sexual subjectivity of embraced ambivalence, self-authorization, and affect. Their discursive liberation is, evidently, rooted in erotics.

In their imaginings of black female sexuality subjectivity, the novels of Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker have too many parallels for this project to address. (Im)Possibility, as a conceit of critical ambivalence, endeavors to describe what these texts have in common. Together, these writers all seem to proclaim that liberation lies in embracing ambivalence. Because of the "dramatic character of sexuality as human potential and discursive possibility," this project aims to bring to light these authors' urgent renderings of (im)possible sexual subjectivity (Spillers, "Interstices" 173). The discourse of sexual subjectivity, specifically,

reaches to the root of what it means to be human and defines the limits of what we can imagine as possible. Beyond addressing sexuality, my mission has always been this: addressing that most basic yet so unaddressed black feminist commitment the founders of the Combahee River Collective set out in 1977. “Black women are inherently valuable” (31). At the most basic level, this project hopes to uplift that pronouncement - making personhood legible *through* paradox, not only around it.

My project grounds its analysis primarily in black feminist theory and affect theory, but its disposition of critical ambivalence enthusiastically invites engagement from more theoretical angles. Further research could productively evaluate the conceit of (im)possibility through the Marxist approach of Louis Althusser's “Contradiction and Overdetermination” or the postcolonial frame of Homi Bhubha’s “The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse.” The task of unraveling the complications of subjectivity is too vast for one project. It will require multiple voices and, likely, many years to heal these wounds that are centuries old. This project hopes to offer a modest reframing of persistent issues in the spirit of restoring nuance and humanity to black women’s subjectivity.

Works Cited

"A Black Feminist Statement: The Combahee River Collective." *Monthly Review: An Independent Socialist Magazine*, vol. 70, no. 8, Jan. 2019, pp. 29–36. *EBSCOhos*t, https://doi-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/10.14452/MR-070-08-2019-01_3.

Austin, J. L. *How To Do Things with Words*. Edited by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà, 2nd ed., Harvard University Press, 2009.

Chavan, Sampada. "Natural Woman, Unnatural Mother: The Convergence of Motherhood and the 'Natural' World in Alice Walker's Meridian." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2015, pp. 188–99.

Dango, Michael, and Tina Post. "An Introduction to Ambivalent Criticism." From Issue 8: Ambivalent Criticism, Post45, 18 Oct. 2022, https://post45.org/2022/10/introduction-to-ambivalent-criticism/.

duCille, Ann. (2009). Marriage, Family, and Other "Peculiar Institutions" in African-American Literary History. American Literary History. 21. 10.1093/alh/ajp016.

duCille, Ann. *The Coupling Convention Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 1994.

Engels, Friedrich, and Friedrich Engels. "Part II: [Dialectics]." *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1974. *Marx/Engels Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1880/soc-utop/ch02.htm.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1, Pantheon Books, 1976.

Gheytasi, Sajjad, and Mohsen Hanif. “Strategies of Cultural Resistance in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Alice Walker’s Meridian.” *British and American Studies : B.A.S*, vol. 28, 2022, pp. 171–80, https://doi.org/10.35923/BAS.28.18.

Goldberg, Elizabeth Swanson. “Living the Legacy: Pain, Desire, and Narrative Time in Gayl Jones’ ‘Corregidora.’” *Callaloo*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2003, pp. 446–72. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3300872..

Harris, Janice. “Gayl Jones’ ‘Corregidora.’” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1980, pp. 1–5. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3346500.

Hajjari, Leila, et al. “The Legacy of Romanticism: The Pear Tree and Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.” *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2016, pp. 35–52. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/44508163.

Howard, Lillie P. “Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet? (A Look at Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God).” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1982, pp. 403–14. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2783985.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God: a Novel*. Perennial Library, 1937.

Jones, Ann Rosalind. “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of ‘L’Ecriture Feminine.’” *Feminist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1981, pp. 247–63. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/3177523.

Jordan, Jennifer. “Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1988, pp. 105–17. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/464063.

Kaplan, Carla. “The Erotics of Talk: ‘That Oldest Human Longing’ in Their Eyes Were Watching God.” *American Literature*, vol. 67, no. 1, 1995, pp. 115–42. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928033.

Kaplan, Sara Clarke. *The Black Reproductive: Unfree Labor and Insurgent Motherhood*. University of Minnesota Press, 2021. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1ns7ndt.

Lewis, Heidi R., and Roland Mitchell. *Beyond Mammy, Jezebel & Sapphire: Reclaiming Images of Black Women*, Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation, Portland, OR, 2018, pp. 17–19.

Lomax, Tamura A. *Jezebel Unhinged: Loosing the Black Female Body in Religion and Culture*. Duke University Press, 2018.

Lorde, Audre, and Audre Lorde. “Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response .” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, Berkeley, CA, 2015, pp. 72–80.

Lorde, Audre, and Audre Lorde. “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press, Berkeley, CA, 2007, pp. 53–59.

Lorde, Audre, and James Baldwin. "Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde & James Baldwin." *Mosaic Literary Magazine*, no. 39, Fall, 2016, pp. 42-52. ProQuest, https://login.proxy.library.emory.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/revolutionary-hope-conversation-between-audre/docview/1868053685/se-2.

McCredie, Wendy J. “Authority and Authorization in Their Eyes Were Watching God.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1982, pp. 25–28. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904269.

Mehren, Elizabeth. “The Rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 7 Apr. 1991, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-04-07-bk-93-story.html.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2010.

Morrison, Toni. “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature.” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1989, pp. 1–34.

Nadel, Alan. "Reading the Body: Alice Walker's Meridian and the Archeology of Self." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 34 no. 1, 1988, p. 55-68. Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/mfs.0.0162.

Nash, Jennifer C. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography*. Duke University Press, 2014, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822377030.

Palmer, Tyrone S. “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect.” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017, pp. 31–56, https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.2.0031.

Parker, Andrew, et al. “Introduction.” *Performativity and Performance*, Routledge, New York City, NY, 1995, pp. 1–16.

Quashie, Kevin. “To Be (a) One: Notes on Coupling and Black Female Audacity.” *Differences (Bloomington, Ind.)*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2018, pp. 68–95, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-6999774.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World.* Oxford University Press, 1985.

Smith, Barbara. “Sexual Politics and the Fiction of Zora Neale Hurston.” *The Radical Teacher*, no. 8, 1978, pp. 26–30. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20709120.

Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, pp. 65–81. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/464747.

Snorton, C. Riley. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Truth, Sojourner. “Ain't I a Woman?” Women's Convention. Women's Convention, Dec. 1851, Akron, *Modern History Sourcebook*, Ohio, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp.

Walker, Alice. *Meridian*. A Harvest Book, 2003.

Walker, Charlotte Zoë. “A Saintly Reading of Nature’s Text: Alice Walker’s Meridian.” *Bucknell Review*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2000, p. 43–55.

Washington, Mary Helen, and Mary Helen Washington. “‘I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands’: Zora Neale Hurston's Emergent Female Hero.” *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, Doubleday, New York, NY, 1988, pp. 237–250.

Wolff, Maria Tai. “Listening and Living: Reading and Experience in Their Eyes Were Watching God.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1982, pp. 29–33. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904270.